

April 2002

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When the Church Lacks Authority

"Dare to be a Daniel, Dare to stand alone! Dare to have a purpose firm! Dare to make it known!"
--Old Sunday School song

Last week, a woman with a pleasant voice called our office with information about a series of public hearings being conducted by Pierce County officials on the matter of civil rights associated with sexual orientation. More disappointed than frustrated, she relayed how her parish and even the Archdiocese views the forums and the topic as political and not of interest to the Church. She had expected a different response.

In light of shocking revelations that more than 80 priests in northeastern precincts of the Roman Catholic Church are accused of sexually abusing young boys, I suggested to her that perhaps the Catholic Church is not in a position at this time to speak with authority in the area of sexual sin. Recent surveys suggest that as many as one-in-four priests are practicing homosexuals. The meaning for the Church is obvious. Its own house is not in order.

Protestant clergy, too, seem reluctant to call either the Church or the culture on the carpet for indulging in forbidden sexual fantasies and perversions. But, again, there is probably good reason. According to Joe E. Trull, co-author of *Ministerial Ethics*, more than a third of ministers of all denominations admit to having extra-marital sexual relations.

In a survey of 1,200 ministers, conducted in 1984 by Fuller Theological Seminary, one-in-five theologically conservative pastors admitted to having sexual relations outside of marriage. For moderates, the numbers were two-in-five, and for liberal pastors, approximately 50 percent acknowledged illicit sexual activities.

To be sure, where there are problems in the pulpit, there are problems in the pews. Statistically, pollsters find little difference in the attitudes and sexual mores of professing Christians when compared with the public in general. Fornication, adultery, and divorce, is as prevalent in the Church as it is among those who profess no particular beliefs at all.

Alas, it is not unreasonable to conclude that local shepherds would be reluctant to instruct city fathers on moral behavior when it appears their own sheep aren't listening.

But, as individuals, we cannot presume that a compromised or lukewarm local church relieves us from our work in the "salt and light" business. History is rich with the testimonies of many heroes of the faith who accomplished mighty things—not because of the local congregation—but in spite of it!

At the height of the British Empire, England had become financially dependent on the huge revenues received from transporting Africans to the West Indies to be sold into slavery. Two-thirds of the British economy was in some way linked to the fleet of small ships that cruelly dehumanized its human cargo.

Each ship was loaded beyond reasonable capacity with 600 men, women and children, chained together in pairs in 18 inches of headroom - lying in their own waste. The stench stretched a mile wide on the ocean, attracting frenzied schools of shark that were regularly treated to the corpses of the more fortunate who had mercifully succumbed to death through madness or disease.

The Church was deeply divided on the matter of the slave trade. While Christians were certainly not supportive of slavery itself, many church members had jobs and businesses to consider. Some did not feel the Church should become entangled in the affairs of this world.

However, William Wilberforce, a young, but highly visible Member of Parliament, saw things differently. Soon after receiving Jesus into his life, he wondered if he should resign his seat and become an evangelist. His good friend, John Newton, a former slave ship captain who wrote the hymn *Amazing Grace*, impressed him to remain in his position of influence and work to put an end to slavery. Following that advice, he called together a few friends who were influential members of London society to ask for their help. He believed in his heart and convinced his companions, that with God's blessing, slavery could in fact be abolished.

Numbering about a baker's dozen, the group became known as "the Clapham Sect." Clapham was a village south of London where many of the residents were regarded as "evangelical" Anglicans. Though the members were professionals who were all very busy, they devoted a portion of their time to Christian action and generously supported worthy causes.

According to the *Christian History Institute*, "They combined their efforts to create public opinion and exert pressure on the government. They educated the public by issuing a journal, writing letters, spearheading petition drives, distributing pamphlets, speaking, and making every effort to persuade those with whom they had personal influence."¹

Although the dream of the Clapham Sect took many years to be realized, the group experienced some rather remarkable accomplishments along the way. The Claphams successfully worked to ban bull fighting, suspend the lottery, clean up prisons, and improve working conditions for factory workers. They raised support for schools, formed Bible tract and mission societies, and overcame much opposition to open up India for Christian missionaries.

The little group of Christian activists found that their endeavors required not the speed of a sprinter, but the endurance of a marathon runner. And, their perseverance was eventually rewarded. In 1833, news came to the gravely ill Wilberforce, now 74, that England had just emancipated all slaves. Three days later he died—ending 50 years of public lobbying on behalf of those in chains. In the early years, he was one of the most despised men in all of the British Empire. When he died, he was known as "the conscience of a nation."

Our friend in Pierce County is also moved by compassion for slaves—those held in homosexual bondage. She well understands their fear, hurt, anger and depression, and knows that they have been greatly deceived. She knows these things, because at one time, she too, was in their prison. But no more. Like Captain John Newton, she was blind, but now can see.

Rick Forcier

Executive Director

¹ Christian History Institute, [The Clapham Group: They set out to change their world](#), Issue #87