

Diocesan Convention Address 2024

The following is an edited version of the address given by Bishop Chip Edgar at the 2024 Convention of the Anglican Diocese of South Carolina on Friday, March 8, at the Chapel of the Cross Schools in Bluffton, SC.

Don't you hate it when, preaching or teaching through an epistle, especially—but not only—the Pauline epistles...

[For what it's worth, I persist in Pauline authorship of Hebrews. I'm an outlier, I get it. But most everybody in the first few centuries of the church—except Origen... a few others—do, too. The very early Chester Beatty Papyrus (P46, circa 200AD) includes Hebrews in the *corpus Paulinum*. Anyway...]

...and you've done the fun stuff—the sweet doctrinal stuff like the glory and majesty of Jesus, the Son of God, creation, the reality and depth of our sinfulness, our inability to solve the problem of our sin for ourselves, our dependence on the work of Christ on the cross, the resurrection, justification by grace through faith...AWESOME STUFF to preach and teach.

But that stuff wraps up... and you come to that last little bit where it seems like Paul went, "Whoa! 22 pages already?!?!? I've still got a list of things these folks need to work on; I'll just drop 'em in right here and wrap this thing up!"

To me, that's how the transition from chapter 12 to chapter 13 feels: The theological, life of faith stuff comes to an end; in fact, it comes to booming crescendo at the end of chapter 12 with a quote from Deuteronomy: "Our God is a consuming fire!"

Then, it feels like a break; "Take 5, and we'll be back with some helpful tidbits..."

That may be how it feels, a list of rules—do this; don't do that; but if we read it that way, we might miss a vital and enduring theological truth.

In fact, these instructions, and the ground for those instructions, together paint a beautiful picture of how the church should live until we finish the race of faith (12.¹) and enter the Heavenly City (12.²²⁻²⁴).

So, in our reading today we find six basic instructions for members of Christ's body.

The first three commands concern hospitality...

love of fellow-believers, those who share in the Body of Christ;
love of the outsider, the stranger, the foreigner;
and third, love of the suffering, the imprisoned, the mistreated.

The early Christians—many of whom had left father and mother and sister and brother to follow Jesus—were to be for each other a family—heirs (sons and daughters) of God, and joint-heirs (brothers and sisters) with Christ. So, we are told, "love each other."

Sadly, we're not always great at that: we let internecine disputes convince us that we can withdraw from each other, impugn each other with bad motive, speak poorly of each other. But the command remains: "Let brotherly (family) love continue."

Then that first imperative is extended outward in love for strangers, too.

This, actually, is the heart of biblical hospitality. Go all the way back to Genesis 12, when God calls Abram to make from him a people for himself, an integral part of that initial call is this: in you, all the families of the world will be blessed. If we are true to our nature as the people God has called to himself, keeping our blessings to

ourselves is not an option. It's no wonder that an allusion to the story of Abraham caring for three strangers (who turned out to be angels!) invites us to imagine what might be in store if we do!

And not just the stranger, but our hospitality is to extend to the hurting, the oppressed, prisoners and ones who are mistreated.

Here—given what's already been written in Hebrews about the mistreatment, suffering and imprisonment that come to followers of Jesus; combined with the phrase “you are also in the body,”—makes me think the focus is on imprisoned and mistreated *believers*.

But does that mean this advice stops there?

At CotA we used to participate in the cookie drives for Kairos weekends in the Broad Street Correctional Institute. A few times a year, we were asked to help provide something like 1,600 dozen cookies (19,200 cookies!); a dozen for every single inmate, not just the one's participating in the program.

Once, a mom told me about baking several dozen cookies with her kids, praying, as they wrapped each dozen, that the inmate receiving those cookies might somehow know the love of Jesus. “Mom,” her child asked with some concern, “we're making these for the nice prisoners, aren't we?”

“We're making them for all the prisoners; nice or not, God loves them, too.”

After those first three, outward focused, hospitable commands, the next one really puzzles those of us who so separate our private lives from our public lives that we can't imagine how it shows up in this list. The fourth command is that marriage should be honored and sexuality in marriage should be undefiled, because God will judge the adulterer and fornicator. Why is that in this list?

GK Chesterton notes that in all fairy-tales—which he sees as instruction and encouragement for life—you observe that,

“one idea runs from one end of them to the other: the idea that peace and happiness can only exist on condition... This idea,” he writes, “is the core of ethics. The whole happiness of fairyland hangs upon a thread, upon one thread. Cinderella may have a dress woven on supernatural looms and blazing with unearthly brilliance; but she must be back when the clock strikes twelve. The king may invite fairies to the christening, but he must invite all the fairies or frightful results will follow. Bluebeard's wife may open all doors but one. A promise is broken to a cat, and the whole world goes wrong. A girl may be the bride of the god of love himself if she never tries to see him; she sees him, and he vanishes away. A girl is given a box on condition she does not open it; she opens it, and all the evils of this world rush out. A man and woman are put in a garden on condition that they do not eat one fruit: they eat it, and lose their joy in all the fruits of the earth. This great idea, then, is the backbone of *everything*—the idea that all happiness hangs on one thin veto; all positive joy depends on one negative.”

You see, there are no private lives. All that we are and all that we do, even in our most private moments, implicates the way we live our lives publicly, as well.

We're told to be content. The word here is potent: *aphilarguros* literally means “anti-love of money.” The emphasis is on accepting what God has provided.

George Macdonald writes, “Let me, if I may, be ever welcomed to my room in winter by a glowing hearth, in summer by a vase of flowers. If I may not, let me think how nice they would be and bury myself in my work. I do not think the road to contentment lies in despising what we have not got. Let us acknowledge all good, all delight that the world holds, and be content without it.”

The final command urges us to remember our leaders, those who brought the Good News to us, and lived it out for us to see, they deserve to be honored.

So, those are the commands. But they aren't simply a list of rules. They're grounded in three theological ideas: two from the Old Testament; and one, a stand-alone, seemingly interposed, statement about Jesus. They serve as the foundation for these commands, but also for the entire letter of encouragement to the church that Hebrews is.

After the first several—love each other, love the other, love those in trouble and need, honor and protect marriage, and be content—we're reminded that God has made a promise to us again and again, "I will never leave you nor will I forsake you." Jesus, reiterated that promise himself when said to his disciples, "I am with you, always, even to the end of the age."

If that's true? We have nothing to worry about, nothing to fear. We belong to God in Christ Jesus—even if things go terribly wrong as we step outside of ourselves for others; we are safe, for eternity, in the strong, loving hand of God.

The second comment offers our proper response. Hebrews offers a myriad of biblical citations, but this is the only time the Scripture is put in our mouths, because it's our proper response; it comes from Psalm 117. "Since the Lord is my helper, I can live my life for others knowing that there is nothing that can harm me."

In a letter written in the midst persecution, with the threat of more persecution for Jesus' followers looming, just like their forebears in the faith had done, this word reassures that we can live in faithful accord to God's call.

Here we come to the money quote. Having established the truthfulness of the promises of the gospel previously in the letter on the basis of Jesus' overwhelming superior glory to everything they'd ever known as God's people—Moses, the covenants, the sacrifices. Having been encouraged by the faithfulness of the exemplars of the faith, again, Jesus' faithfulness to us is even greater: He is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

This truth bolsters the high view of Jesus that Hebrews has established. He is the Son of God; his strength, his dependability, his ultimate triumph is certain.

Jesus is the same, yesterday, today and forever.

That reality—is our theme this year.

The perfect, reliable, unchanging, dependable Jesus calls us as his people to join the task—only to be brought to perfection at his coming, but our call nonetheless—of the renewing of our world. And that calls us to live pure lives of gratitude and hospitality.

As we look to the future year, I want to revisit the priorities I laid out in my first address last year:

our churches,
rebuilding the diocese,
and the strengthening of our clergy.

Those things haven't changed.

To state the obvious, before I was ever made a bishop, I pastored churches. I served four churches, in three dioceses, and any number of configurations of networks, regions, jurisdictions, whatever... as the renewal of the Anglican church in America unfolded. As a parish priest it was my conviction that diocese ought to serve parishes, not the other way round; and as bishop, that conviction has not changed:

A diocese can never be healthier than the churches which comprise it.

And we are healthy, and vibrant, and growing. We don't know the numbers for 2023 yet, those reports are still coming in and being compiled, but in 2022 we rebounded significantly from 2021—COVID—and in fact were a bit higher than the beginning of 2020, before COVID hit.

But for our churches to continue to be strong and to grow stronger, our commitment to hospitality must grow. In part, because our opportunity for hospitality continues to grow.

People by the thousands continue to move to South Carolina. Much of it has been to the coast, but as that growth continues and the challenges of infrastructure make life harder, we are already seeing growth moving inland. Last fall I learned of a large development of 750 new homes over the next few years in rural Clarendon County as well as another 750 homes between Santee and Elloree. I believe we'll be seeing many of our communities that have been in decline for the past 20 years begin to grow again.

Hospitality requires that we be ready.

Those folks moving to South Carolina? Many are unchurched, and study after study suggests that unchurched folks are more likely to visit a church plant than an established church. But many are churched, too, and churched folks are more likely to look for...churches. To be hospitable, we have to both strengthen our existing churches and plant new ones.

So I propose three things to the convention this year: 1) that we continue to encourage deaneries to work together to strategize church planting, and we set the goal for ourselves to add a new congregation to our diocese each year going forward; 2) we reestablish our Congregational Development Committee to help our existing congregations, and that 3) we, as a diocese, continue to raise up and emphasize the ministry and work of deacons in our diocese.

If you look at Acts chapter 6, what results from the establishment of the diaconate? Both the word of God (which the Apostles were freed to focus on) and the number of the disciples... increased. A strong, engaged, active-in-ministry-outside-the-walls-of-the-church diaconate will only serve to strengthen the church. So clergy, just like the apostles did, look for folks who are "full of the Spirit and of wisdom" and call them to this ministry.

Biblical hospitality, of course, tills the soil for evangelism. As we love others, we'll love to share the Good News of Christ Jesus with them as opportunity presents. The art of neighboring, which was a focus of a convention before my time, continues to bear fruit in our neighborhoods. And there are ministries in our diocese that have been proven to be the strategic places where evangelism happens.

I'm thinking first of our college ministries. Late last year I heard the director of a college ministry talk about students on campuses these days. I admit I was ready for a litany of bad things. What he emphasized surprised me: this generation of students are a blank slate when it comes to the gospel. This is a hurting, anxious and alienated generation who've never belonged to a church or heard the gospel. These students, he said, are wide open, the fields are ripe for harvest.

The work being done on our campuses, is seeing incredible fruit; our newly established work at the College of Charleston has already seen a student embrace the faith. And 22 students were baptized this year through St. Alban's ministry at the Citadel. Twenty-two. Think about that. These are good works, and I challenge you all to support them with prayer and financial contributions.

Taking campus work as an inspiration, would it be too much to ask that all of our congregations pray that the Lord would lead them to at least one adult baptism a year?

Another opportunity for hospitality and evangelism comes to mind as I turn our attention to my third priority, rebuilding the diocese, I want to offer two things. First, many of our churches are actively preparing for, currently involved in, or have recently finished capital campaigns. I'm amazed at the good work that's being done, and the stunning generosity of God's people. Land has been purchased, buildings are being built, long neglected buildings are being renovated—evidence of new and renewed life is evident all around our diocese.

And the promise of a new camp property is right before us. Having done such an amazing job of reestablishing a diocesan camp—and extending the draw beyond our diocese—I had imagined a season of time—perhaps 5-7 years—where our churches could raise their much-needed funds and do their much-needed work before we turned our attention to securing a new camp property.

It seems God has other plans. He placed a choice piece of property, perfect for a camp and conference center, in front of us. Our camp team went to work, but with a significant rein on their efforts. I would not allow them to interfere with the fundraising of our parishes. In spite of that limitation, we've made good progress toward the finish line of purchasing that property.

We need a camp. It's been said, and I very much agree, that for generations camp has been the evangelistic engine of the diocese: the number of folks whose lives were turned ever more to Jesus there is staggering. As to hospitality, our previous property contributed in a myriad of ways to making our diocesan life strong and deeply interconnected. Time will tell if we are able to accomplish this goal in time we have, but I can't stress enough how important a place apart has been for our diocese in the past, and will be for the future.

As to strengthening our clergy, perhaps the most rewarding times for me—in addition to the delight of visiting our churches each week—were the Deanery prayer and study days. As we spent our mornings together, the clergy and bishop of our diocese together in prayer, I found so much encouragement and strength. In fact, each time I did that I became more convinced that there is nothing more important that we can be doing together. Therefore, we'll be repeating those again this year, this time with Tim Gombis' book, *Power in Weakness*. Clergy, I want you to prioritize those deanery days, especially. I will be loath to allow you to miss them.

I've gone on a bit here, but there is one more thing I must address: I—all the diocesans in the ACNA—returned from our January College of Bishops meeting with an assigned task. We were told to prepare our dioceses for the possibility that any of us might be elected as Archbishop in June this year. While I don't think my being elected is a real possibility—Good Lord, deliver—if I were to be elected we would need either an Assisting Bishop or to elect a Suffragan. Even in the great likelihood that I am not elected, this exercise in preparation has demonstrated the need we have for an Suffragan or an assisting bishop. Fifty-six parishes for a diocesan, and a Bishop Emeritus who would be delighted to have more free Sundays in his retirement, is well, a lot. So, as I end my homily and address, I am calling on the diocese to begin the process of calling a Suffragan, or, if a good candidate for an Assisting Bishop can be found, an Assisting Bishop.

As we take up these great tasks, looking outside of ourselves in service to the gospel and others, we always remember that our Lord has promised to never leave us or forsake us. So we step out in faith, without fear, confident that God is our helper, and that...

...Jesus is the same, yesterday, today and forever.