

WE'VE HAD DESSERT.

Biblical Malnutrition & Today's Episcopal Church



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“Slats Slaton is simply so right about the Church in its current sorry state. The clergy got themselves snookered by the Zeitgeist, and the laity were too cowed and passive to speak out. We need Mr. Slaton times ten thousand!”

– The Very Rev. Dr.theol. Paul F. M. Zahl

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For those Christians who are struggling
in the Episcopal Church – and for those
Episcopalians who are not being taught
what it means to be a Christian.



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preface

There is an old story about a man who accidentally fell into a deep pit when wandering in a field behind his home. Unable to climb out on his own, he was stranded there for more than two days and nights before someone finally happened by and saved him. Though the event had been somewhat traumatic, the solitude he experienced had been quite fruitful. For it was in that dark pit that he pondered and prayed and came to know the living God. On the day of his rescue, he came out of that hole a new man. His mind was renewed; his soul refreshed; and his perspective was Spirit-filled. Immediately, he became convinced that such divine understanding was meant to be shared. And so he began a new mission. Each week, so that others might deepen their own relationship with God, he would take someone to that field behind his home – and push them into the pit.

Unlike the man in the story, I do recognize that no two people experience God in the same way.

So, my objective here is not to push others into my pit – but to point out the fact that even though our lives are varied, God and God’s word have always remained the same.

I have been a member of the Episcopal laity for many years – well entrenched in its style of worship. Certainly, there is not a more beautiful expression of the Christian faith found in all the world. The Anglican tradition has been described as the perfect balance of Scripture, Sacrament and Ceremony. However, right now, there is great apprehension about what is happening to that balance. While of course this does not apply to each and every parish, indeed many have lost their way under misguided leadership.

The concern is not solely about the recent ordination of a practicing homosexual as Bishop of New Hampshire – and that is not the focus here. Gene Robinson’s consecration was only a symptom of a much larger problem in our church that points to a significant shift in theology. This new religion conveniently dismisses portions of Scripture, and seemingly accommodates all of our choices – regardless of what they entail. In an effort to “respect the dignity of every human being,” we are now apparently moving toward validating their every notion and appetite. The growing claim is that this level of tolerance is our Christian obligation. However, by doing this, we bring God to the level of man, rather than the other way around.

Whether you realize it or not, history is in the making. In February 2005, the Primates of the Anglican Communion (our global church) held an unprecedented meeting in Belfast, Northern Ireland. The purpose of this monumental gathering was to discuss the autonomous directions taken by the American Province (the Episcopal Church) and the Church of Canada. The result was a formal statement from the Archbishop known as the “Communiqué.” It basically calls for repentance from both churches and insists that they fully adhere to traditional doctrine. Otherwise, it suggests, these two provinces should “walk alone.” The Communiqué also suggests that these churches voluntarily withdraw from the Anglican Communion for the next three years until the next Lambeth Conference scheduled for 2008. Of course, this is no small thing. But based on comments made by our Presiding Bishop following this meeting, many predict that little will change and that gridlock will most likely continue for some time. While there is some debate about the authority of the Anglican Communion in this matter, it is clear that if the Episcopal Church is no longer welcomed by Anglicans, then it simply no longer belongs.

Tired of the politics and dead-end reprimands, a number of American parishes have already left the church. A few are fighting for buildings and property while others gave that up, turned in their keys, and left it to diocesan officials to sort out. These are sad events for families on both sides of the issue – some

of whom have been a part of their parish for generations. But more splits will surely follow. Many choose to stay and do so out of allegiance and obligation to their church home. That is certainly understandable. However, I suspect that the majority of those who leave do so out of principle. They feel defiled by mere association, and are simply unwilling to belong to a church that blatantly goes against Scripture. Some parishes have lost the majority of their membership. These particular groups left to form new churches under the jurisdiction of an Anglican Archbishop. Though these new bodies are not considered Episcopal, they are entirely Anglican.

Your parish may or may not speak much of it, but you need only do a little online research to discover that the global Anglican community is in turmoil, and the American Province is at the heart of the problem. ECUSA faces much opposition. Last year alone, over 35,000 active parishioners left the Episcopal Church to join other denominations.

Throughout all of this, there has also been growing support for the newly formed Anglican Communion Network (“The Network”), along with a host of other alliances that are striving to uphold the church’s Biblical foundation. The objective of The Network is not to “split” the church, but rather to foster the needed reform within the ECUSA. At last count, the membership of The Network included nine dioceses, six convocations and some 160,000 Episcopal Christians in more than 750 congregations. And the number of associated parishes grows weekly.

Even though this organization is gaining such considerable strength, it is estimated that within the national church, these concerned orthodox Christians actually represent a relatively small percentage of the total roster. On the other hand, the “liberal” Episcopalians – those who welcome revisions to our faith – also make up a small percentage. It is the greater majority of the membership that warrants our concern – the ones who are uninformed of the controversy, and those who are simply indifferent. They are largely the ones for whom this little book was written.

Offered in a spirit of humility, these pages are an effort to point out the severity of the situation and focus on the importance of Biblical truth. It is essential that basic Christian beliefs be understood so that the counterfeits may be spotted when they come from our own pulpits, programs and classrooms.

In this day and age, we are all desperately looking for the truth. Now it seems our church may prove to be of little help to us, since apparently it has joined in on the search as well. So we have begun to cobble our own individual versions, and this has us all at odds. As long as we each act as our own authority, these homemade renditions of truth will forever undergo our revision. The real risk is that this will continue until our children ultimately surmise that there’s really no such thing as truth at all – and therefore, no difference between right and wrong.

I am only one member of the laity, but I suspect many others share my views. As for those of you who do not,

I ask only that you read this short booklet. It is an honest effort to present truth as it is stated in the Bible. Accepting such a thing will not make you a fanatic, nor will it rob you of your compassion. The acceptance of Biblical truth can only end our wandering – and bring us each face to face with the one, true living God.

Charles W. "Slats" Slaton, Jr.

May 2005

chapter one

GRACE-OHOLICS

*What shall we say, then? Shall we go on
sinning so that grace may increase?*

– Romans 6:1 (NIV)

Guilt had been accumulating for some time. I was 31 years old and had strayed far from my Christian upbringing. It wasn't that I was committing any of the major sins – just the ones that everyone else was committing. But I knew enough to know that change was in order, and indeed that change came when a friend of mine introduced me to the Episcopal Church.

Were it not for this institution, I might have lived my entire life and never learned the true meaning of grace. I remember when I finally “got it.” How incredible it was to suddenly understand that my Creator looked upon me with favor and mercy – despite my inability to live as Christ lived. Given my lifestyle at the time, this was indeed “Good News.” But there was more. Not only was I the beneficiary

of this amazing gift, it also came with no strings attached... or, at least, none that I could see. In my new circles, I was frequently reminded of my access to unlimited pardons from God and of His “unconditional love.” So I concluded that my behavior was not the problem at all, but rather, it was my lack of information. Grace, I determined, had been my missing link – and I was thrilled to have discovered this tolerable side of God. It seemed I had stumbled upon the ultimate gift. One that would keep on giving – no matter what I did.

Years passed, and the more I read my Bible and studied the actual teachings of Christ, the closer I came to a more comprehensive view of God’s grace. I’m not exactly sure when I began to doubt the version that had exonerated me in my youth; but as a grown man, I found that I was very suspicious of it.

Even before my doubts had set in, I could see that grace – and often grace alone – was the repeated message in the church. This one-sided theology is still prevalent today. While we may hear an occasional reference to the importance of obedience – rarely do we delve into the matter. Many of the clergy see no need to remind us of our vulnerability to everyday sin. We are, after all, educated people. So a word like “repentance” is rarely presented to us for serious consideration. Such is the domain of revival tent preachers – not of Episcopal priests. Their focus is more on “love,” “humility” and

“forgiveness.” These are the things that make a congregation feel good. These are the things that keep us coming back.

For probably 30 years or more, revisionism has been at work in the Episcopal Church. This has to do with the paring down of the Bible so that it becomes more palatable with our modern times. This is especially noticeable when we are confronted with the sayings of Christ that the first disciples called “hard teachings.” These are the troublesome passages from Scripture. Troublesome only because they are abundantly clear. For example, take the following excerpt from Luke:

“Someone asked him [Jesus], ‘Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?’ He said to them, ‘Make every effort to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to. Once the owner of the house gets up and closes the door, you will stand outside knocking and pleading, ‘Sir, open the door for us.’ But he will answer, ‘I don't know you or where you come from.’” (Luke 13: 23-25; NIV)

Revisionist clergy struggle with passages like these. Especially when it is the scheduled reading in the Lectionary (universal throughout the church) – and it's their time to preach. Here, they are faced with having to expound on a selected Gospel that they personally have rejected. In such cases that I have witnessed, the congregation is presented with

alternate, more subliminal interpretations that water down these harsh truths. If you've never seen it done, a priest publicly challenging the words of Jesus Christ is a performance to behold. After the reading of the Gospel, the Scriptures are lifted towards Heaven and the congregation proclaims in unison, "The Word of the Lord!" And then the following sermon is expended trying to say, "Don't worry. He didn't mean it *that way!*"

And they think they're doing us a favor. This is in stark contrast to sermons in other denominations that actually embrace the words and commandments of our Lord – sermons that teach and encourage obedience to Scripture. Just think of the lives and families made better because they heard the Word as it was intended and decided to obey its bold truth. All because someone was brave enough to stand up and put God ahead of the sensitivities of their audience.

As channel-surfers, most of us have caught at least a glimpse of wrestling on television. In 1988, media mogul Ted Turner made headlines when he purchased the WCW. Reportedly, Turner soon contacted Vince McMahon, the notorious owner of the well-established WWE, to warn him that he was now in "the wrestling business." McMahon is said to have replied, "Glad to hear that, Ted. But I'm not in the wrestling business. I'm in the entertainment business." Well, it's the same in many Episcopal parishes today – what is often presented to us as Christian teaching is merely just crowd-pleasing.

Universalism is another underlying message in our

church today. This is the belief that repentance is not necessary for salvation and that none will be lost. The corollary is that all roads lead to the same place – that any path you choose will ultimately lead you to God. Such flies in the face of the foundational truth of Christianity as proclaimed by Christ himself: "No one comes to the Father except through me." (John 14:6; NIV) An idealistic priest may suggest that there is no consequence for the unrepentant – which implies that there is really no need to change the way we live. "You need only to believe," they will say. They will tell you that this one simple step is all that is required. But don't be too sure – and be warned. To be a universalist, you must first be willing to reject a fair amount of Scripture, including some pretty explicit teachings of Jesus. How can anyone rationalize such a thing? It's like the fellow who told his universalist priest after the sermon, "I like that about us all going to heaven, no matter what we do. But I need you to be sure about that Preacher. 'Cause there's a bunch of us depending on you." Sure, you can hope that your clergy's theory is correct, but a more sound judgment would have you stick with Jesus Christ and the written words of the Bible.

Something else we hear a lot about today is God's "unconditional love." But where did this come from? It's not Biblical. The Bible provides us with abundant references to God's unfailing, covenantal love – but it is worth noting that the phrase "unconditional love" is nowhere to be found in Scripture.

There is a wonderful little children's book by Shel Silverstein titled, *The Giving Tree*. Simple illustrations and brilliant short sentences take you through the different stages of a boy's life as he repeatedly returns to his friend, a tree – each time with a need. On every occasion, the tree happily gives from his bounty so that the boy's needs may be met. With the fulfillment of these requests, the tree is always made happy – despite its sacrifices. Over a long period of time, the boy selfishly (though selfishness is not a focus of the story) takes and takes from the tree until it is all but gone. At the end of the story, the tree has nothing left to offer the boy except its stump as a place to sit and rest. And so the boy – now an old man – sits and rests. And once again, the tree is made happy.

I adore this little story. Were I a child, and able to manufacture my own god, he would most certainly be a "Giving Tree God." My GTG would exist only to satisfy my every need. It would be about me; never about him. He would not heap any responsibility upon me, and there would be nothing that I could do that would ever disappoint my GTG. He would always tolerate my intolerable acts and excuse my inexcusable behavior. All the while, he would hold me blameless – because he loved me "unconditionally." And when I was through living out my self-centered life on my own terms, my GTG would then welcome me into his kingdom and continue to provide for me throughout all eternity.

But the fact is, this is not a picture of our God – the God of Abraham. Nor is it one of Jesus. This god is a fabrication. However, he is alive and well in many churches throughout the land – churches that ignore sin, but guarantee salvation. Men and women need to know that this god may be the star of best-selling modern fiction, but he is powerless to bring change to their lives and deliver on that salvation.

With respect to Silverstein’s lovely and poignant children’s story, I realize that it was never meant to be a theological treatise. However, I use it as an analogy to point out a neglected truth. That truth is that there is more to the story of our faith than God’s unwavering love for us. What is clearly not being discussed or emphasized enough is our role in the story and what He expects of us. By this, I do not mean good works. Because true Christian works are really just a byproduct of our devotion. No, I mean the admission of our sinfulness and our attempt to live according to God’s law. These are essential to the Christian walk. Otherwise, God is reduced to a mere stump, void of beauty and power.

There is no doubt that our Heavenly Father loves us intensely. After all, we are His creation. However, He *does* impose conditions on us. Time after time throughout the Gospels, Jesus Himself states a variety of conditions for man’s salvation. For instance, in Luke’s Gospel, Jesus tells a crowd: “but *unless* you repent you will all likewise perish.” (Luke 13:3; NKJV). This particular passage is

Jesus clearly saying that if you do not turn from that sin that you know you are committing, then you will not enter into eternal life. That sounds pretty conditional to me.

The reality of the matter is that we all want to claim Jesus as Savior, but few are willing to accept him as Lord. What we need to understand is that His conditions are not burdens, but *gifts*! Don't let anyone present them as shackles to a life of fearing punishment – because in fact, they are vessels to peace. God gave them to us for our own good – just as a parent sets rules for the child. So, rather than redefining God and setting our own guidelines for living, we should accept His Word and trust that He knows what is best for us, and then obey. We don't obey out of fear. We do it out of respect for His majesty and dominion. And when we (inevitably) fail, we should admit our sin as sin; ask forgiveness; and then keep trying. As long as our efforts are sincere, we always get to try again – that's part of the gift.

So, grace is not God's permission slip to disobey Him. It is what happens to us as we grow in our submission to God.

One could rightly challenge the title of this chapter, "Grace-aholics," by asking: "Are we not all in constant need of God's mercy?" Yes, we are. Not one of us will ever reach a point in our life where we have sin conquered. Because as children, we never get it right, and we will always need forgiving. My title is

intended to speak more to the ABUSE of that forgiveness. This is when we don't even acknowledge our sins and make no attempts to live according to the law. I am referring more to a presumption of grace, where the mindset is: "Hey, no big deal. The blood of Jesus will cover that." Or rather, we tell ourselves that what we are doing is not even sinful, and therefore there's no need for forgiveness. All too often, the following words of the apostle John are conveniently dismissed:

"If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives." (1 John 1:8-10; NIV)

This brings us to Gene Robinson. Rather than altering his lifestyle to work within the guidelines of Scripture, he and others are suggesting that the church simply reinterpret God's word – so that their lifestyles may be accommodated. They see this as a justifiable request. Our compassion is implored and we are told to understand that these sexual desires are innate – and that there's no need for repentance or counseling, because they were born with these inclinations. Of course, this opens the door for the heterosexual man to ask his church to permit the lust and fornication in his life – because these instincts were born in him as well. The truth of the matter is that it is up to the man or woman to

honestly search the Scriptures and reconcile their issue with God. Appealing for a change in church policy is not the answer. Sin will always be sinful. No amount of cultural or scientific evidence can ever change that.

In 1993, President Clinton appointed a woman named Joycelyn Elders as Surgeon General. Only a few months later, she sparked controversy with a personal opinion that legalizing drugs in this country could bring about a reduction of crime. In other words, if we all got together and decided that drug trafficking and drug use were not criminal, then those offenders would not have to be factored in when calculating the national crime rate. Thus, we could all enjoy a safer America. Interesting logic. That's like proposing a cure for cancer by bringing it to a vote and deciding that cancer isn't a disease. But it just doesn't work that way. Crime, disease and sin are all alike in that they each must be confronted and examined before we can ever hope for them to be eliminated.

For years, orthodox, Bible-believing Episcopalians remained silent and assumed that homosexuality was not really a church problem. But before we knew it, this lifestyle was being discussed as if our tolerance of it were a vehicle to become more like Christ. Then suddenly, the diocese of New Hampshire ordained a man who outwardly rejected what the Bible had to say about it – and the church essentially said that was fine. Don't get me wrong. It is not that Robinson

should be denied God's love. Christianity has always been inclusive of sinners. But now, with this ordination, we seem to be embracing the sin as well.

During this time, I was serving on the department that advised our diocesan Camp & Conference Center. It was there that I made a disturbing discovery: This Christian camp was routinely providing weekend accommodations and meeting facilities to gay, bisexual, transgender and lesbian organizations. This, I later learned, had been going on for some time. The camp's position is that this open-door policy rightly projects an inclusive love for all. But they know full well that by accommodating these groups, they are indirectly validating their lifestyle and their teachings – and thus contributing to the advancement of the homosexual agenda. To date, nothing has changed and these groups still gather at our camp annually to confirm their lifestyle and proclaim the underlying revisionist theology.

Our Bishop is well aware of this situation but has taken no real position. He tells the diocese that the Episcopal Church has not arrived at a theological consensus about homosexual orientation and its ministry to gays and lesbians. It is noteworthy that he has also served as the Eucharistic Celebrant at an Integrity regional convention. (Integrity is a national organization within the ECUSA that defends the lifestyle of gay and lesbian Episcopalians through revisionist teachings.)

This Bishop has also endorsed the idea that Anglicans should “welcome many of the insights of Biblical criticism, science, archaeology, and theological development” to assist us in our understanding of God and Scripture. Of course, this approach only makes God more indefinable and guarantees the impossibility of His absolute authority. At a recent diocesan convention, “ambiguity” was proclaimed as the guiding belief of the church. The Bishop goes on to say, “It is well to remember that the church is a hospital for sinners not a fortress for the righteous.” Well, if the church is a “hospital” - then where, may I ask, are the doctors? Where are the clergy whose job it is to speak against sinful behavior? I tell you where they are... They are all hiding safely behind Biblical criticism, science, archaeology, and theological development.

For me, all of this was conclusive evidence that the problem was not just in New Hampshire. I realized that “my own” Episcopal Church had lost its way.

Understand that my purpose here is not to debate human sexuality. Both Old and New Testaments say that homosexual behavior is a sin. But as we know, others say the Bible “got it wrong.” For thoughtful and intelligent perspectives on the subject, I would encourage you to read the conclusions of Dr. Robert Gagnon.

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For straightforward questions and answers on how the homosexual issue is affecting our church, you can also visit the Anglican Communion Network at:

www.anglican-mainstream.net/resources.asp

Needless to say, I am frustrated with this encroaching humanistic version of Christianity. As a husband and father, I want so much more from my church than God's tolerance without Christ's Cross eliciting repentance and transformation. I want His instruction. I want Christian tools for leading my family. I want God's boundaries. And deep down, when I know I'm wrong, I want His correction.

I remember one night, speaking with a lady who had recently left the Episcopal Church. When I asked what led to this decision, she looked me in the eye and said plainly, "They don't preach the full Gospel! For years all I ever heard in that church was 'Love and Forgiveness' – and little was told about the true Bread of Life. My family and I need to be fed!" And then very politely, she leaned forward and said, "We've had dessert."

My sentiments exactly.

chapter two

BRAIN, MEET BIBLE.

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

– 2 Timothy 3:16-17 (NIV)

Mark Twain once said, “Most people are bothered by those passages in Scripture which they cannot understand. But I always noticed that the passages in Scripture which trouble me most are those that I do understand.” Truer words were never spoken.

It is fair to say that in the Episcopal Church, The Book of Common Prayer is more familiar to us than the Bible. Some actually think the two are interchangeable. Of course, they are not. But because it is so beautifully composed and it does contain portions of Scripture, the Prayer Book is commonly viewed as a worthy substitute. Certainly, it is safer and easier to administer – because many parishioners just aren’t quite sure about that other book referred to as the Bible.

When confronted with the complete content, some challenge the Scriptures with comments like, “That was thousands of years ago! We know more today!” Or they may say sarcastically, “Like all those outrageous stories really happened!!” I have a friend who shares this skepticism, and he suggests that common sense be our guide when reading the Bible. More than once, he has said to me, “God gave you a brain – use it!” And *that* comment always reminded me of my brother-in-law.

My wife’s older brother is most energetic. There is a healthy restlessness about him in that he is always the first up for hiking, skiing, hunting – or whatever – as long as he can put his body in motion. One day he and I were on the subject of horseback riding. I forget how it came up, but when it did, I was surprised to hear him say, “You won’t ever catch me on the back of some horse!” Now, this comment was totally out of character for such an avid outdoorsman. But when I questioned it, he told me, “I don’t ride anything with a brain!”

Planes? Sure. Boats? Fine. Some free-thinking animal? No thank you. It was a matter of trust. Because at times, we all know that the brain has the capacity to throw us.

Most of what we believe is tied to the logical and the reasonable. In a learned and sophisticated society, we hesitate to even question the findings of our modern age – scientific, sociological or otherwise. In the areas

where we are ignorant or uncertain, we rely on the intelligence of others. Thus, we anchor our personal beliefs and opinions on conclusions that we ourselves have not confirmed. We all do this. C.S. Lewis called it, “believing things on authority.” He said, “Believing things ‘on authority’ only means believing them because you have been told them by someone you think trustworthy.” More interesting, however, was his estimation that “Ninety-nine percent of the things you believe are believed on authority.”

All of this prompts Pilate’s famous question: What is truth? Is truth the intelligent answer of the day? Make no mistake, our definition here is important. If we seek truth in morality and law – and our authority is only each other – then we are doing nothing more than just comparing standards. And human standards, as we know, can erode over time (Look at what happened to television). The problem with relying on our individual sense of truth is that it is always subject to change. And there will always be an absence of absolute authority.

Now suppose the truth I seek is about which jacket looks best on me – the blue one or the brown? I can certainly live with differences of opinion, or even with an inaccurate consensus. But let’s say the question is weightier, and my very salvation depends on the correct answer. Well then, I want the absolute truth.

So if Lewis is right, and I am subject to believing

things “on authority” – then on what authority do I believe? Does my priest or bishop hold that authority? Certainly not – especially since so many now have been ill-educated in the revisionist tradition. The sanctity of apostolic succession seems to have ended in the Episcopal Church. That chain was clearly broken somewhere along the way, and so it can no longer claim to be a guardian of truth. We can only look to the Scriptures for that. Not some of them. Not the ones that sound reasonable to us, but the complete, immutable and enduring words of the Bible. If, in fact, we are to know the absolute truth, then this is our only source.

In an effort to dilute the Bible’s authority, the revisionist reminds us that the Church was not founded on Scripture – but that Scripture is, in fact, a product of the Church. This is true in a sense. The Word of God actually began with God; it was then given to His chosen people (the Church) – and they wrote it down as God inspired them. However, revisionists will also have you believe that the Bible is riddled with the misguided words of man. As they see it, God may have inspired these writings, but man apparently got a lot of it wrong. And sadly, God only managed to make a few points of His own. So in the minds of the revisionists, we are to take it upon ourselves to decipher what is divine and what is human error. This is what is happening in our church now, and it is a fatal path. It is no surprise and certainly no coincidence that this authority we are

crafting for ourselves allows for our own sinful nature. This “humanization” of God should be so obvious and yet to many of us, it is not. We should all take issue with the notion that man inherits the right to update and revise Scripture as he sees fit. This is what the revisionist movement is all about: Changing God to accommodate man.

In recent years, many Episcopalians have been guilty of reducing the Almighty God into a sort of one-dimensional beacon of love. We have summarized what little we have been taught of the Scriptures, and incorrectly concluded that love is all that really matters – that this is all that God expects from us. Basically, the new theology is that God is love, and we should try to be like God. End of story. People don’t want to get bogged down with a lot of Scripture or be “preached to” and told how to live. It is easier to just love people.

Others take a broader view and rightly proclaim the necessity of obeying God’s direction for their lives. However, these people are often regarded as unenlightened Christians who are needlessly obsessed with behavior. So often, they are dismissed and lumped in with the Pharisees and Sadducees – whom Jesus scolded for their arrogance and blind preoccupation with the law. Of course, it is true that keeping God’s law does not save us – nor is it meritorious. This is because grace is free to those who follow Christ. But for us to outwardly reject and

defy Jesus' directives as a *means* for experiencing grace is to fall into a state known as "antinomianism" (meaning anti-law). The apostle Paul spoke directly against this. He also wrote: "Indeed I would not have known what sin was except through the law. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, "Do not covet." So, if we are not aware of what is sinful, then it is impossible for us to live rightly – and therefore impossible for us to repent and experience grace when we fall short.

I would submit, however, that a preoccupation with either side of this issue is dangerous. Yes, we can focus too much on the rules and miss God's purpose, but it is also quite possible to sin against God in our distorted attempts to show reverence to man. Certainly, we are commanded by Christ to love one another – but just because we do something in the name of love does not necessarily mean that it is a Christian act (Dr. Kevorkian proved that point). God is love. And God is also law. Jesus stated this best when He said: "If you love Me, keep My commandments." (John 14:15; NKJV)

Revisionists often attempt to discredit one passage of Scripture by citing another that makes it appear contradictory or suspect. For instance, in an effort to defend homosexuality, I have heard more than one reference to the Book of Deuteronomy. Some will say that if we were to take that particular set of doctrines seriously, then none of us could eat pork. The reference here is the verse where Moses tells the

Israelites of God's proclamation of the pig being unclean, and that they were not to eat its meat. This line of Scripture seems to be a staple in the revisionist's arsenal. It is frequently used to defend and condone a host of modern day sins. However, to compare the moral prohibition of male-male intercourse to a dietary rule of the time is completely disingenuous. When presented by clergy, such correlations are irresponsible in that they only confuse lay people and further increase their own doubts about the overall reliability of the Bible. In an effort to defend worldly causes, the priest here ends up calling *all* of Scripture into question. This is a big part of our problem.

Incidentally, Jesus often quoted Deuteronomy as authoritative (for example, Matthew 4:4, 4:7 and 4:10). And in the New Testament, there are almost 100 quotations from, and allusions to, Deuteronomy. To challenge this book's authority is to once again challenge the Founder of our faith.

A complete and thorough understanding of the Bible is still our best road map for living. However, some might say that only a "fundamentalist" would claim such a thing. We don't like this label. But Christians should know that the term "fundamentalism" actually originated with a series of pamphlets that were published in the early 1900s. They were authored by leading churchmen of the day (some of whom were Anglican Bishops) and were circulated among clergy and seminarians. Entitled "The

Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth," these booklets simply expounded on five basic beliefs of Christianity: 1) The infallibility of Scripture; 2) The virgin birth and the divinity of Christ; 3) Atonement through the blood of Christ; 4) The Resurrection; and 5) Jesus' miracles and His ultimate second coming. Today, these same beliefs are widely taught and accepted throughout the Christian world.

Still, people regularly use the term "fundamentalist" as an assault on others they perceive to be too serious about their walk with God. Granted, there are Christians who misinterpret the Scriptures. These are the people who might physically follow through with Jesus' command to gouge out and throw away their eye because it caused them to sin (thus making a strong case for NIV footnotes and Bible study guides). So, our process of reasoning when interpreting Scripture *is* crucial. But we should always guard heavily against moderate translations and the propensity to re-write it to our own way of thinking.

In a speech on Constitutional Interpretation and the dangers of "evolving standards of decency," U.S. Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia argues that there's really no such thing as a moderate interpretation. He asks his audience, "What is a moderate interpretation of the text? Halfway between what it really means and what you'd like it to mean?" The truth is, most Scripture that is contested today is clear and requires no interpretive skills whatsoever. If we are honest about it, we know that it

is less about interpretation, and more about looking for loopholes.

When reading the Bible, I always start with the assumption that it means what it says. Frankly, I struggle with some of the Scriptures, especially with God's wrath found in the Old Testament. But I choose to believe it happened. If I begin to reject any part, my mind is led to the thought of, "What else requires my editing?" So mentally, I always close the door of doubt when I open my Bible – and I find I learn more. When I do this while reading the passages of wrath, I always gain an increased sense of gratitude for Jesus' sacrifice and His new covenant with God's people.

Many stories found in the Bible are difficult for us to fathom: Noah's Ark; the parting of The Red Sea; Jonah and the Whale; and so on. Again, I choose to believe they happened. However, someone once said that even if these were myths within the Scriptures, they were God's chosen myths – because they came from God's chosen people. The conclusion here is that whether these things took place or not, God must have intended them for our hearing and, thus, for our learning.

For many who struggle with these stories, probability becomes their focus. And because of this, they miss the point entirely.

A few years after starting my career, a college friend called me at the office one day. Bob and I had been

fraternity brothers, but it had been a while since we had talked. I was telling him the latest news on the guys that I had kept tabs on, when finally he asked, “What about Tim? How’s he doing?”

Well, there was much to tell about our friend, Tim. He was married and his wife had just recently given birth to triplets. But even more recent at that time was the news that he had been involved in a pretty bad automobile accident. The factual bits and pieces that I had been able to assemble were akin to a script for television drama. It happened on a rainy morning and involved a tanker truck, a lot of State Troopers and a rescue team. Tim was driving on the interstate and lost control of his vehicle. He then rammmed into the back of a large 18-wheeler and his car slid around, and ended up going down a steep embankment. When everything came to a stop, he found himself injured and stuck at the bottom of this wet ravine. Amazingly, after they finally pulled him out, he had escaped serious injury. There were some broken ribs, a few cuts and bruises, but he ended up spending only a couple of days in the hospital.

When I finished telling Bob the drawn-out details of our good friend’s real-life rescue story, he was speechless. Then finally, after a considerable pause, he said: “*Triplets!?*”

A funny story, but isn’t this exactly what happens with the Scriptures? They tell us that a child was born unto a young virgin, and that He grew up to be the

Savior of the world. And to this, we say: “A child born unto a *virgin!*?” And the story stops there – and we miss the most exciting part. You see, we distract ourselves questioning things such as the likelihood of a virgin birth, and we get stalled. And in that process, we abandon the God of miracles and the transforming power of His word.

It seems that many people have a real need to make total sense of God before they invest in a relationship with Him. This, of course, is impossible. Jesus tells us that we must “seek *first* the kingdom of God” – and only then do we discover that it is through our initiation and our submission, that we can begin to understand Him.

So don’t strap your idea of truth on the back of what society is telling you. To turn a friend’s phrase, “God gave you a Bible – read it!” Pick it up and allow the Holy Spirit to show you real truth. Yet, it requires that you take the initiative. It’s like God is saying, “Trust me, and I will give you the truth.” But He is also saying, “You go first.”

chapter three

FENCE-RIDING INJURIES

But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.”

– Matthew 7:26-27 (NIV)

There is an inclination to blame the clergy for the problems in the Episcopal Church. After all, it was their permissiveness and flawed sense of duty that got us into this trouble. But if I am honest with myself, I know that this is not really the case. We are in this mess because I failed to speak out those many years ago when I first suspected a problem. It is my fault – and it is your fault too. In grand unison, you and I fell victim to a new code of silence. And the other side took full advantage of it.

I have decided that there are three basic categories of people in this world. To illustrate my theory, let's suppose a friend of yours enters a crowded room uninformed that his fly is down. We'll call him "Bill."

How you respond to Bill's situation determines your particular category.

PEOPLE CATEGORY NO. 1: After a casual approach, you whisper in your friend's ear and say, "Hey, Bill. Your fly is down."

PEOPLE CATEGORY NO. 2: You are well aware of Bill's embarrassing oversight, but you pretend not to notice. Acknowledging it – or heaven forbid, mentioning it – would simply be too awkward for everyone involved.

PEOPLE CATEGORY NO. 3: You look up, laugh out loud, and point wildly across the room and yell: "Hey look, everybody! Bill's fly is down!!"

Sadly, there are lots of No. 3's out there. However, most would agree that the qualities seen in the first category are the most admirable. Even though the situation is an uncomfortable one, you discreetly diffuse it by coming to the rescue and fulfilling your obligation as a true friend. However, the second category is who we are fast becoming. More and more, society opts to say nothing – fearing that People Category No. 1 is equally as inappropriate as People Category No. 3.

Where there is respect, there is a tendency to avoid conflict. However, worse than avoiding conflict is another inclination that is born out of respect – and that is to affirm wrongdoing. The popular Seinfeld phrase, "Not that there's anything wrong with that!"

has become the knee-jerk response to a lot of our society's ills. This non-position may preserve your friendship – but only at a cost to your friend.

Sin corrupts our life and separates us from God. When the church ignores our offenses, we lose the opportunity to be free of them. If we are repeatedly offered pardon without correction, then we will not be moved toward change. And we miss out on becoming the “new creation” that God calls us to be.

In the Episcopal Church, the Gene Robinson ordeal was a landmark event. It is estimated that there are many thousands of laity who disagreed with what took place. But political correctness has shamed most of them into silence. Meanwhile, most of the clergy are secure in their ambivalence about it – while the very liberal even celebrate it.

Many Episcopalians already see no real hope for a harmonious restoration of the church. I say *harmonious* because harmony is really an essential element to the stability and longevity of any organization. When it comes to core elements of our faith, we should reject the notion that we are to embrace the “different views of faithful people.”

When asked about the extreme differences of opinion within her parish, I heard one woman say: “Well, a church is kind of like a family. And families often disagree.” She then smiled and shrugged off the question, as if the preservation of “family” held priority. While it is true that families disagree at

times, we would do well to remember that the settling of disputes is part of the father's inherent authority. Speaking metaphorically for the Church, the old adage that "Father knows best" certainly applies here. But Jesus' words are more to the point: "Every kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and every city or household divided against itself will not stand." (Matthew 12:25; NIV)

The prediction is that there will ultimately be two "Episcopal" churches. I have heard it said that what is actually taking place now is just a prolonged choosing of sides. ECUSA will most likely hold its ground and drift away from the Anglican Communion. The orthodox membership will continue to plant new parishes and will probably band together in time, adopting a new leadership that stands for a truer expression of Anglicanism.

But this all could take years. Whether or not such predictions will come true is yet to be seen. In the meantime, we have families to raise and God's work to do. And there are things that the orthodox laity can do:

- 1) Find out where your parish stands on these issues. Meet with your clergy and compare their position to traditional Scriptural teaching. You might even ask some basic questions about his or her personal beliefs (The answers you get may surprise you).
- 2) Always challenge any ambiguous or inaccurate teachings that are contradictory to the Scriptures.

Complaints matter to people in charge. Generally speaking, a leader without Biblical conviction can be given that conviction if enough people offer it to him.

3) Restrict or redirect money, gifts, tithes and offerings. Give only to organizations that proclaim the true Gospel. Earmark your pledge so that these gifts do not reach unorthodox administrations. This would definitely include the ECUSA – or perhaps even your own parish or diocese (do some research and find out where they stand).

4) Return to the basics. Systematically study your Bible – individually and in small groups.

5) Teach your children. Take on the responsibility to study the Bible with them so that they are presented with an accurate view of God's Word.

6) Connect with other orthodox Christians in your church and community and establish ways to keep in touch. Inform and encourage one another. Then grow with that group to share the Gospel.

7) If you are still active in your parish, look to the future. Nominate – and use networking to elect – orthodox Christians to your vestry. A common misconception is that a diverse vestry is a good thing. While certainly a variety of talents are desirable, democracy is not the goal. This is God's house – not a homeowners association. It is not about honoring a cross-section of opinions and making sure everyone's voice is heard. It is about God's voice being heard. So, make it a goal to assemble a vestry that hears and understands the same voice.

I used to worry a lot about losing this church battle until I attended a recent conference for concerned Episcopalians. There, we were reminded that this conflict has long been in God's scope, and that we should not be surprised by it, or feel defeated by it. One of the speaker's key points was that victory should not even be viewed as the primary goal. Because it really is not about our winning a battle, but rather more about our engagement in that battle.

Once, I had a friend named Ted. He was the one who brought me to the Episcopal Church those many years ago. Though nearly twice my age, he was best man in my wedding, and a spiritual advisor of sorts. Ted died a few years back – and I miss him a great deal. He was a rock, and I really valued his counsel. Whenever trouble would arise, he would say in his gruff voice, “It's not a problem. It's an opportunity for service!” I never really stopped to think through what that meant, but sitting there in that conference room, I heard him say it again. This time, it made perfect sense.

We are to speak out and fight against this thing because it is before us. Speaking out is the right thing to do. In the end, our reward will not be a saved institution. Because one day, that fancy Anglican tradition that we all cherish won't amount to a hill of beans. The only prize to hope for is that God's name be glorified in our lifetime. Can we get truth back in the process? I don't know. But we need to try – because this is our opportunity for service.

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