

Why Others Stand as Well

In an interview entitled “Why We Stand,” published on the Web site of the Diocese of Pittsburgh, former church history professor the Rev. Dr. Leslie Fairfield describes his view of the present division in The Episcopal Church. In doing so, he presents a fair view of his own faith position, but he paints a barely recognizable picture of those with whom he disagrees. As one of those, I would like to take this opportunity to offer an alternative portrayal.

Fairfield dates the origin of our present division into “opposing camps” to the early nineteenth century, and the introduction of biblical criticism—with its scholarly examination of Scripture, leading to conclusions that challenged ideas such as Moses’ authorship of the Pentateuch, and developed theories about how the Gospels were composed. However, he might as easily have traced this stream of critical thinking back to the time of the Enlightenment, or even earlier to the Renaissance, when thinkers such as Erasmus began to grapple with the text of Scripture in critical and scholarly ways. Which is not to say that even earlier scholastics and theologians of the Patristic era did not also engage in a critical examination of the texts, using the reasonable tools at their disposal to harvest the benefit of close inspection. The Church has been wrestling with Scriptures for as long as those texts have been in its keeping.

Fairfield, however, loses this long historical view of the Church’s theological richness, and instead focuses on what he calls “Modernism.” Unfortunately, he then proceeds to attribute to this movement a whole range of opinions (as “logical conclusions”) that few, if any, of those who consider themselves progressive would think either logical or defensible.

Fairfield produces Bishop James Pike—last century’s favorite whipping boy—but fails to acknowledge the origins of Pike’s doubts in his own personal loss, and the extent to which Pike was seen as a peripheral and tragic figure, allowed to keep his seat in the House of Bishops more out of charity than conviction. Bishop Pike no more represented the mainstream of Episcopal thought then than Bishop Spong does now.

On the contrary—speaking for myself, but knowing that I represent a goodly number of those tagged “re-appraisers”—I can affirm each and every statement that Fairfield describes as “Classical Biblical and Anglican theology” and reject the doctrines he attributes to Modernism.

It is often said that you can only have a reasonable discussion with those with whom you disagree when you can state the opposite side’s case in language they recognize and affirm. Fairfield—who feels “there is no halfway point ... between these two opposing religions—has instead created not simply a straw man but a straw church against which to argue. This is tragic, in that it obscures the things about which we really do disagree—which have little or nothing to do with his caricature of Modernism, in which few progressive Episcopalians will recognize themselves portrayed.

Rather, we will stand upon Christ’s Gospel—which teaches us that we are to love God and our neighbor as ourselves; which means, in part, to give to every human being the respect and dignity worthy of one who bears the image of God; to take the Scriptures seriously and as authoritative indications of God’s will—but as inspired, not dictated, and requiring the employment of the wealth of rational and spiritual tools at our disposal in order to, as Richard Hooker said, “reap by the Scripture’s perfection that fruit and benefit which it yieldeth.”

Here we stand—ready to worship the One God—in Trinity of Persons, Incarnate in Jesus Christ for the salvation of the world—with any who will stand with us on the basis of this Faith.

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