

**BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION AND
THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH:
A PROPOSAL FOR A RETURN TO
A CONSERVATIVE HERMENEUTIC**

A Dissertation Presented to
The Graduate Committee of the
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by
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ABSTRACT

This dissertation investigates the history of biblical interpretation from an Anglican perspective in an attempt to respond to many of the claims of modern liberal scholarship. The study will evaluate liberal historical-critical approaches to biblical interpretation as compared with the more conservative hermeneutic, which is evident in the writings of the early church divines, the early Anglican divines, and many modern evangelical scholars. The term *conservative* will be used to identify the hermeneutical approach that affirms the verbal inspiration and infallibility of the Scriptures.

The intended result of this study is to develop a manuscript that will be the foundation for a book to provide the Episcopalian, both clergy and lay person, with evidence to support a high view of Scripture. With such a view elevated, the church member would then have confidence to trust the Bible as an authoritative rule of faith in day-to-day living. In the shadow of the great Anglican three-legged stool of *Scripture, tradition, and reason*, a case will be made for the authority of Scripture in the Episcopal Church in line with the traditional understanding of each leg of this authoritative stool.

This work will begin with an examination of the current condition of the Episcopal Church, especially as related to confusion over biblical interpretation. The effect modern biblical criticism has had on the Episcopal Church's view of the Bible in areas of doctrine and morality will be reviewed.

Holding to the principle of *apostolic succession*, Anglicans claim to have an unbroken lineage back through the early church fathers to the apostles of Jesus' first church. Therefore, this study will examine how early Anglican divines regarded the principles of biblical interpretation exercised by the early church fathers. A case will be made, based on a survey of the pre-sixth century church fathers, for Anglicans to return to their historical heritage rooted in a conservative interpretation of the Bible.

This study will present a historic Anglican defense of biblical authority and interpretation utilizing the writings of such Anglican divines as Thomas Cranmer, John Jewel, and Richard Hooker. It will also incorporate responses by conservative scholars to the charges and claims of modern liberal scholarship (like the Jesus Seminar). The study will give specific examples of how both the liberal and conservative perspectives affect the way the Christian faith is lived out in Episcopal churches. For example, the issue of homosexuality is prominent in the church today and will be addressed in the context of the biblical interpretation and theology of both perspectives.

The dissertation will conclude with a modest proposal promoting a conservative interpretation of the Bible and theological outlook in the spirit of Anglicanism's historical understanding of Scripture, tradition, and reason. It is hoped that this work will give the average Episcopalian a way to "give an answer to everyone who asks you the reason for the hope that you have" (1 Peter 3:15 NIV), by offering a scriptural, historical, traditional, and reasonable defense of a conservative interpretation of the Bible.

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Major Question

The Episcopal Church has suffered declining membership rolls for almost four decades. Some of this decline can be traced to a lack of evangelism in the church during this time. This is symptomatic of a real problem. If one were to survey a number of Episcopalians, there is a great likelihood that those surveyed would reflect an uncertainty about whether God has spoken to humanity and whether God has spoken in Scripture. If those surveyed were convinced that God has spoken, it might well be that they are not convinced that what God has spoken in Scripture is still relevant and applicable today. In light of the current Jesus Seminar, many Episcopalians have been led to question not only the Old Testament and Epistles, but the Gospels as well.

Episcopalians have been fed a steady diet of skepticism from scholars, books, and clergy calling into question the “Word of God, written.” One is looked upon as a fundamentalist if that person has any inclination toward a straightforward reading of Scripture. The rise in liberal scholarship in the area of biblical studies has not only served to weaken the laity’s confidence in the Bible, it has formed a new Gnosticism in which only the elite with special insight can properly interpret the Bible.

The major question to be considered in this dissertation is—has the Episcopal Church departed from an historic understanding of scripture, the tradition of the early church, and a reasonable approach to the faith? Is there a response to many of the

challenges of liberal scholarship? Is there a sufficient rationale for a conservative approach to biblical interpretation and a call for the Episcopal Church to return to such a position in today's modern world?

The Rationale for the Project

It is hoped that this work will present a foundation upon which the Episcopalian can stand with confidence, without having to resort to the extremes of fundamentalism or the subjectivity of theological liberalism. Bringing together the three hermeneutical streams of the early church, early Anglicanism, and modern conservatism will conclude this study. These streams will be shown to be compatible with one another and with the spirit of Anglicanism's unity in diversity. This compatibility will allow the church to maintain a commitment to the truth that God gave, once for all, to his people through the Scriptures and the early church tradition.

Richard Hooker, one of the great Anglican divines, developed what has since become the Anglican mantra: "Truth founded upon Scripture, tradition, and reason." It is the assertion of this project that in recent years this statement has been wrongly interpreted as a three-legged stool with each leg being equal. This misinterpretation reflects the demotion of Scripture to a place of equal stature with tradition and reason. The result is that the Bible has lost much of its authority in the life of many Episcopalians.

Consequently, many contemporary Western European Anglicans and American Episcopalians find it difficult to draw theological boundaries. There are many reasons for this situation, but two issues seem to be especially important. First, many Christians have

been deeply scarred emotionally by people within the church who claimed to be on a crusade for truth. These self-proclaimed crusaders, under the guise of guarding the gospel from distortions, swayed the opinions of other people to capture positions of power and to banish all whom did not agree with them. Perhaps others were traumatized by overzealous defenders of righteousness who used the Bible only as a law book, devoid of grace. As a result, many such *afflicted* people often lash out and rebel against anything that smacks of a fundamentalist interpretation of the Bible. Second, the claim, made by some Episcopalians, that the Bible and church are repositories of truth about human nature, God, the human plight, and salvation is decidedly unpopular today. Many social theorists, political scientists, and theologians believe that claims of Christians to know the truth about these matters produced untold suffering in the past and pose a threat to the peace and stability of a free society in the present. They perceive these *literalists* (as anyone who takes the Bible at face value is often labeled) to be in agreement with the eighteenth-century philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau in believing that, “it is impossible to live in peace with those whom we believe to be damned.”¹

Conservatives respond to this statement by stating that it is possible to live in peace with those they believe do not know the Lord, and thus, are on the way to an eternity separated from God. This peaceful coexistence is accomplished by treating others with gentleness and respect, while at the same time, being willing to speak the truth of the Gospel in love. Those who utilize a conservative hermeneutic believe (although they may not always practice) that one can love people while disagreeing with their view of God, Jesus, the Bible, etc. In fact, the conservative believes that the greatest love one can show is to lead a person to the real Jesus, who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life (John 14:6).

The conservatives feel compelled to share this good news with others as Christ's ambassadors (2 Cor. 5:20). All of these actions come about as a result of the conservative's conviction that the Bible is true and that it continues to speak that truth today. This project is an attempt to demonstrate that the Bible can be trusted as the divine revelation it claims to be, and can be properly understood and interpreted using the discernment and guidelines established throughout the church's history.

The Uniqueness of this Project

This project will take the reader on a journey through much of the history of the church's approach to biblical hermeneutics. Unlike other studies of the history of hermeneutics, this work will show the interconnectedness between Scripture, the early church fathers, and the early Anglican divines. It will be shown that the conservative hermeneutic is neither a recent invention nor an outdated method.

The intent of the early church, it will be shown, was to faithfully pass on a specific understanding of Christian truth. This truth was grounded in an absolute belief in the authority and trustworthiness of the Holy Scriptures. The apostles and early church fathers intended to pass on their conservative hermeneutics to faithful bishops, priests, and deacons who would then pass the same on to others. The evidence of this intention will be seen in the examination of the early church fathers and early Anglican divines to follow.

The Method of this Study

The method of this study is to utilize the writings of the early church fathers and the Anglican fathers in order to get a perspective on how the church of the past viewed the Bible and how it was interpreted. The main focus will be on the ante-Nicene fathers,

but some post-Nicene fathers will be examined as well. No study of Anglican fathers would be complete without including a review of such greats as Richard Hooker, Thomas Cranmer, John Jewel, and others to accurately reflect how the Bible was viewed in Anglicanism's earliest days. These works will be examined to see if they reflect a conservative or liberal view of Scripture and hermeneutics.

The effect of the Enlightenment will be examined. As many people began to question the methodology of the old ways of interpretation, and because of societal changes and cultural changes within societies, many began to question the authority of the Bible to speak to matters of ultimate truth. This study will show how many in the scholarly fields began to attack the Bible and its claims. The authority and historical nature of the Bible were being challenged more and more.

Liberal biblical interpretation has evolved to the point that it is starting to break out of the ivory towers of academia and is starting to market itself as a rational, modern challenge to the old ways of looking at the Bible. Consequently, the latest challenges, such as the Jesus Seminar, affecting the people of the Episcopal Church will be explored. Marcus Borg is one Jesus Seminar scholar who has ties to the Episcopal Church. His writings, along with other founders of the Jesus Seminar, will be examined. Along with these, there are two others in the Episcopal Church who have gained some notoriety amongst the clergy and laity by employing modern liberal methodologies in interpretation. The views of such writers as Bishop John Shelby Spong, and William Countryman, a professor at the church Divinity School of the Pacific, will be probed.

There are some excellent responses to liberal scholarship by conservatives in the scholarly world. The assumption is made in some corners of the Episcopal Church today,

that only liberals can be scholars. In fact, there are many highly educated and academically recognized conservatives who believe the Bible is the Word of God, and is to be interpreted using a more conservative methodology. The works of Gary Habermas, J. P. Moreland, Gerald Bray, N. T. Wright and other conservative scholars will be considered. This examination of liberalism and conservatism is not intended to be exhaustive. It will, however, be representative of both hermeneutical methods.

Basic Assumptions to be Tested

This project assumes that the Episcopal Church of today has abandoned its roots founded in the early church and early Anglicanism. This abandonment has resulted in confusion about the Bible's role in the church and in the life of the individual Christian. As a result, the Episcopal Church has suffered the loss of the authority of and confidence in the Bible that it once had.

In the past three decades the Episcopal Church has arrived at a place where its clergy and laity are allowed to preach and teach practically anything, regardless of how it might deviate from the clear teachings of Scripture, and the tradition of early church. Some bishops and priests have gone so far as to deny the essential elements of the historic creeds of the church—all with impunity. Morality in the church has become a subjective opinion; meaning one can do virtually anything one pleases (in the area of doctrine, morals and ethics) without fear of ecclesiastical reprimand. The defining axiom seems to be “does it hurt anyone (especially the disenfranchised)?” If not (according to the definer's view), then it is a matter with which the Episcopal Church need not deal on an authoritative basis.

This ambiguity of authority in the Episcopal Church takes place because there is no longer an agreed upon source of truth or final court of arbitration. Even when the church's governing arm, the General Convention, makes a decision, that decision is quite often circumvented or ignored by the clergy and laity. The best example of this circumvention is the General Convention's proclamation that it recognizes only marriage between males and females. In spite of this proclamation, some bishops and priests have been blessing same-sex unions in "marriage ceremonies."

Many come to the local church asking, "What do you believe (what is your statement of faith?)." The Episcopal Church has to admit that it is hard pressed to definitely answer that question in a denominational sense. As a consequence, the question ends up being answered according to the predilection of the person in charge of an individual congregation or diocese. The Episcopal Church, some say, seems to hold no *official* position on pertinent theological issues. Some might appeal to the creeds as a statement of the church's official position, but this appeal is spurious because clergy and laity are allowed to deny belief in these creeds without official reprimand or punishment. Even when the General Convention acts and speaks on a particular doctrinal or moral issue, its action or voice is often ignored, or interpreted as meaning something quite different from what Convention has actually said. General Convention becomes a dispenser of advice rather than making laws or affirming the already established laws.

The problem comes back to this: Is the Bible reliable and the ultimate authority in the Episcopal Church, as its tradition has pointed to, and its documents (prayer book, *Thirty-nine Articles of Faith*, etc.) have affirmed? Most Episcopalians have been taught that the Bible is full of errors, borrowed from other ancient sources, incorrectly

interpreted for almost four thousand years, and a compilation of ignorant men and women who were devoid of scientific understanding.

Another teaching that has consciously and subconsciously affected Episcopalians is the idea that church tradition and reason, should have equal standing with the Bible as sources of truth. Consequently, the Episcopal Church today seems to be saying that church tradition and understanding (reason) have changed so dramatically because of science and cultural/sociological advances that one *cannot* understand the Bible as speaking to the church in the same way that it spoke to others in the past. In other words, there is very little which would fall under the category of being applicable for all times, peoples, and places. The recent questions raised in the Episcopal Church regarding the Bible's reliability and authority can be traced back to Episcopal seminaries and from them to liberal scholars like those involved in the Jesus Seminar and their predecessors. They have trained the deacons, priests, and bishops of the church, thus making the possibility of changing the way the Bible is viewed and interpreted very difficult. This project assumes that there is a reasonable defense of a traditional conservative biblical interpretation guided by early church and early Anglican tradition, along with modern conservative scholarship. It will give the layperson in the pew a "reason for the hope that they have" (1 Pet 3: 15).

This project will examine and test a number of assumptions concerning the Episcopal Church and its view of Scripture, tradition, and reason. In order to return to the historic faith, begin to grow, and impact society as in the past, the Episcopal Church must implement the following actions:

1. The Episcopal Church must return to a conservative, evangelical faith based upon the Bible as the ultimate authority, under the direction of Jesus Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit. The Bible must be returned to its place of ultimate authority in the Episcopal Church. A competent defense of the reliability of Scripture can help convince the Episcopalian of the need for this return. Early Anglican / Episcopal leaders and scholars affirmed and practiced a much more conservative interpretation of Scripture than do many modern-day Episcopal clerics and scholars. The term *conservative* will be used in this study to identify the hermeneutical approach that affirms the verbal inspiration and infallibility of the Scriptures. The general rules of interpretation that are applied to all other literary and historical documents are to be applied to the Bible.
2. The Episcopal Church must reject traditions that deviate from Scripture and the witness of the majority of the early church fathers.
3. The Episcopal Church must reject truth claims based on esoteric experience, anecdote, societal norms, or new teachings when found deviating from scriptural norms.
4. The Episcopal Church must not view the ever-changing understanding of the sciences as having ultimate authority over the revelation of God in Scripture.
5. The Episcopal Church must hold to the defense of and belief in the supernatural aspect of God's nature and actions as paramount to a proper and historical understanding of the Bible and its relationship to humankind.

The Intended Outcome

The intent of this project is to examine the research of eminent scholars, theologians, and historians to show the influence of liberal theology today, and the possible problems with the liberal hermeneutic. Reasons will be offered for the average Episcopalian to have confidence in the Bible, and his ability to interpret it. By having confidence in the Bible and elevating Scripture to its rightful place of authority in their lives, the believers can then allow God's Word to "dwell richly in their hearts." Conservatism teaches that this indwelling Word will impact believer's lives and will guide them into lives of righteousness, justice, peace, and truth. This project will try to provide tools church members can use to call fellow members and, indeed, the whole church, back to a biblical understanding and worldview. This biblical worldview will reflect the real *via media* quality of Anglicanism.

It is the intended outcome of this project to be an instrument to move the Episcopal Church back to an historic conservative view of Scripture and its authority in the life of the church. It will provide answers to some of the liberal hermeneutics abounding in the Episcopal Church.

Basic Issues

The basic issues to be covered in this project center on the authority of Holy Scripture. From this center branches a number of supporting issues. How one views the authority of Scripture affects the way the Bible is interpreted. Liberal and conservative approaches to hermeneutics will be explored. The implications of each of these styles of

biblical interpretation will be presented. Various questions related to this issue will be examined. Such issues as, “Does history, as it has been understood through the tradition of the church, make any difference in how the Bible is to be interpreted in later times?” “What role does reason play in how one is to interpret Holy Writ?” “Do any of the historical documents of the Episcopal Church (the Creeds, *the Thirty-nine Articles*, etc.) carry any weight in the process of interpretation?” “How does the modern Anglican/Episcopal Church compare to the church at its earliest times? And if the Episcopal Church has adopted modern hermeneutical methodologies, are these changes good, reasonable, and justified?” “Are there problems and difficulties with the Jesus Seminar?” “Is there any reason to hold to a conservative interpretation of the Bible?” “Can one be conservative and an Anglican without losing the ethos of the denomination?” These are the basic issues to be addressed in the project. The desire of this work is to provide an overview on some of the main issues facing the Episcopal Church today. The answers to the above questions, by and large, can help determine how Episcopalians will interpret the Bible.

Foundational Definitions

Anglicanism refers to a worldwide fellowship of churches that looks to the Archbishop of Canterbury as its titular head. The Church of England is the mother church for Anglicans located around the world (including the Episcopal Church). Anglicanism traces its roots back to Augustine, Ambrose, Alban, and Aidan, and others, but was officially established around the Reformation period and the reign of Henry the VIII.

Authority refers to a norm, a yardstick, a rule by which all that is taught must be tested; it is the unique right of something, someone, or some group to receive the obedience, affection, trust, submission, loyalty, and devotion of another. The churches within the Anglican Communion have not attempted to prescribe with the same exactness, as have some of the confessional churches, what their members are to believe. There are, however, certain foundations of belief and practice commonly accepted by Anglicans. These are: the Bible as the basis of the Christian message; the three ancient creeds of the church—the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed and the Athanasian Creed; the doctrinal statements propounded by the four Councils of the early church—Nicaea, Ephesus, Constantinople, and Chalcedon; the *Thirty-nine Articles of Faith*; and the *Book of Common Prayer*.

Biblical Interpretation relates to the careful comparison of texts and traditions in an attempt to piece them together in a way that is coherent and meaningful. One seeks to gain an understanding of what God was saying to those when the Bible was written, and to humankind since then.

Canon relates to the list of inspired books recognized by the church to constitute the Holy Scriptures.

Conservatism refers to a methodology in biblical interpretation and theology that is related to traditional orthodox beliefs. Adherents stand for historic Christian positions in dogmatic and moral theology. Conservatism has the basic notion that faith rests on truth revealed, and that truth is binding on all human beings of all times. It believes in the verbal inspiration of Scripture, meaning that both divine and human elements are present in the production of Scripture. The entire text of Scripture, including the very words, is a

product of the mind of God and expressed in human terms and conditions. Traditional conservatism holds to the infallibility of Scripture. Infallibility means that the Bible is completely infallible in what it teaches about God and God's will for human salvation, but not necessarily in all its historical or scientific statements. Correct biblical interpretation takes into account such things as authorial intent, literary types, and colloquial expressions.

Early church Fathers refers to many of the recognized authorities in the early church from just after the apostles to around 400 A.D. They are sometimes called the ante-Nicene fathers.

Episcopalian refers to a member of a church in the Episcopal denomination.

Evangelicalism refers to a modern movement in Christianity that transcends denominational lines. Evangelicals emphasize the gospel of forgiveness and regeneration through personal faith in Jesus Christ, and affirm orthodox doctrine and the truth of historical biblical Christianity. Evangelicalism regards the Scriptures as the inspired Word of God for every generation, and believes in the urgency of missionary outreach.

Exegesis refers to a method of attempting to understand a Bible passage. The reader of Scripture studies the word meanings and grammar of the text to discern what the Holy Spirit was communicating, drawing the meaning out of the text rather than reading what he wants into the text (eisegesis). This is done with an eye on trying to determine what the passage meant to the original writers and readers.

Fundamentalism refers to a modern conservative Christian movement that emphasizes adherence to certain fundamentals or basic doctrines of Christianity. They believe in the inerrancy of Scripture and active evangelism among other things. They

seek to prove that Modernism and post-Modernism are incompatible with the system of biblical Christianity. They lost the English Reformers (dissenters) because they failed to develop an affirmative worldview. Some believe that because of this failure the fundamentalists converted from a religious movement to a religious mentality. It tends to be highly ideological. Certain forms of fundamentalism can be intransigent and inflexible, expecting conformity, and fearing academic liberty. It sees heresy in untruth, but is sometimes accused of the heresy of unloveliness. If it has the most truth, it can have the least grace, since it distrusts courtesy and diplomacy, or in modern terms being politically correct. True fundamentalism, correctly practiced, bears little resemblance to the way it is often defined.

Hermeneutics refers to the art and science of the study and interpretation of Scripture, the branch of theology that prescribes rules by which the Bible should be interpreted. Biblical hermeneutics strives to formulate guidelines for studying Scripture that helps recover the *meaning* a biblical text had for its original hearers. It is an art in that the more one practices it the more proficient one becomes. It is a science in that it is regulated by established rules.

Inerrancy refers to the doctrine that the Bible, in all it teaches, is free from error. The whole of Scripture and all its parts, down to the very words of the original manuscripts, were given by divine inspiration. That inspiration applies only to the autographic text of Scripture, which, in the providence of God, can be ascertained from available manuscripts with great accuracy. This doctrine does not assert that no errors in the copies were transmitted through history, or that one does not have to study the text carefully in regard to textual problems and interpretations.

Infallibility refers to the idea that the Bible is completely truthful in what it teaches. Conservatives hold differing views regarding infallibility, saying that (a) it relates only to biblical teaching on matters of faith and practice, or that (b) it extends to all the teachings of Scripture, including matters of scientific and historical details. Both views agree that correct biblical interpretation takes into account such things as authorial intent, and literary types of colloquial expressions. For the purpose of this study it will refer to both (a) and (b).

Inspiration refers to the Holy Spirit's action on the writers of the Bible in a way that protects the truth of its message, making it the Word of God (2 Peter 1:20-21; 2 Tim 3:16).

Jesus Seminar refers to a group of mostly theologically liberal scholars who meet to attempt to determine who Jesus was, and what he actually said and did.

Liberalism in this context refers to the rejection of traditional and orthodox methods of biblical interpretation and theology. It designates the spirit and attitude of those who seek to incorporate in Christian theology, the values of freedom of thought, tolerance, and the humanitarian motives found in modern Western culture. Theological liberals have always asserted the claims of reason against a petrified orthodoxy, and have sought freedom for diversity of belief in the church. Theological liberalism emphasizes the need to establish the relevance of Christian faith to the scientific and rational understanding of life. It tends to utilize a demythologizing, anti-supernatural approach to its interpretive method. It tends to approach with skepticism the historic aspect of Scripture.

Literalism refers to keeping to the literal meaning in translation or interpretation when reading the Bible. It involves taking words in their usual meaning, without exaggeration or imagination.

Orthodox refers, in this context, to a belief in or acceptance of the truth of doctrines taught in Scripture and conforming to the essential doctrines held by the early church. Today the word is used synonymously with historical biblical Christianity and is in contradistinction to **liberalism** or neo-orthodoxy.

Patristics refers to a study of the early church fathers.

Reason refers to the third leg of Richard Hooker's three-legged stool of Scripture, tradition, and reason. When questions are encountered that are resolved neither from the Bible nor from the tradition of the church—questions such as those regarding quantum physics, automobile maintenance, nuclear fission, or even ethical propositions like cheap mass transit or the limitations of cloning—one submits his judgments to reason. Human reason can be used to establish and verify generalized results. Some believe that reason tends to keep tradition in balance.

Tradition refers to the teaching and practice of the church, both universal and denominational. Tradition refers to persistent, public expressions of the faith through which that faith is not merely preserved, but actively transmitted. Where Scripture does not speak unequivocally, or where it does not speak at all (i.e., of the proper use of music in worship which is a secondary matter), those in the church submit their ideas to the authority of tradition. The tradition of the church has developed, as well as sometimes ruled out, understandings of God and Christ that are implicit in the Bible but not fully developed there; or application of Christianity to situations that did not exist in biblical

times. Tradition is the interpretation of Scripture over time, resulting in insights, some of them hopefully inspired by the Holy Spirit of God that have endured and become full membership in the Christian church almost on par with the unique historic revelation of the Bible itself.

Via Media refers to the idea that the Anglican/Episcopal Church and its beliefs offer a middle ground between the Roman Catholic and Protestant churches. It has most recently been viewed by some in the Episcopal Church as meaning that one is to tolerate and allow to reside in the church, all beliefs and diversities regardless of their relation to the Bible.

CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this chapter is to review literature relevant to the areas of the subject to be examined. The review will focus on six areas that roughly outline the structure this project builds to reach its conclusions. The works referred to will reflect the following: (a) the influence of the Enlightenment and science on biblical interpretation; (b) theological liberalism and the Jesus Seminar; (c) the early church fathers and biblical interpretation; (d) the early Anglican divines and biblical interpretation; (e) the conservative response to theological liberalism and the Jesus Seminar; (f) the case for a conservative biblical interpretive methodology in the Episcopal Church.

Resources used for this project include authors from both liberal and conservative perspectives. Some works are drawn from antiquity, others from throughout church history, and still others from contemporary writers. Information was gleaned from early Anglicanism's chief authors (in a number of instances, on site reading of rare and out of print books in England). Computer searches opened up other resources used in this work. The following resources made important contributions to the overall comprehension of the subject in this project.

Influences that Have Affected the Episcopal Church

The Influence of the Enlightenment and Science on Biblical Interpretation

In any study of the Bible and how it is interpreted, one must first examine the present state of hermeneutics in light of the influences of the past. In so doing, a clearer

picture emerges as to why interpreters do what they do, why there are conflicts between various schools of interpretation, and from where do the interpreter's presuppositions come. McGrath, in his *A Passion for Truth: The Intellectual Coherence of Evangelicalism*, describes how the Enlightenment indoctrinated the church and the secular world to a more rationalistic worldview. This worldview was tied closely with the rise of science. Morris describes how science has been influenced by the Enlightenment to adopt a rational skepticism towards anything having to do with the supernatural. His *Long War Against God* chronicles how many scientists went from believing in a Creator and Sustainer of the Universe to a belief that the universe, the earth, and humankind came about by random chance and long periods of time. Because of Darwinism and other cultural changes, the attack on the Bible and orthodox beliefs increased. Morris shows how pervasive this rationalistic influence has been. This influence caused many conservatives to vilify and turn against science in both the naturalistic and theological realms. Spong and Countryman demonstrate the Darwinian influence in their beliefs through their respective works *Liberating the Gospel: Reading the Bible with Jewish Eyes* and *Biblical Authority or Biblical Tyranny?*

McGrath uniquely tackles the charge (sometimes valid) that evangelicals are often hostile toward academic theology. McGrath works through much of the misrepresentation against evangelicalism. He then sets forth a plan to combat attacks by what he calls *post-liberalists* and *religious pluralists* on a conservative interpretation of the Bible.

The church has always had a standard against which teachings were measured. That which deviated from the standard was called heresy. Today many liberals

masquerade as orthodox Christians by using orthodox terminology and pouring different meanings into the words. Ross typifies this double speak when he says, “I am a heretic. I am stating that right from the start so nobody feels misled.” He proceeds to say that he is a Christian, nonetheless, even though he doesn’t believe much of what the church has taught as orthodox doctrine. His book, *Common Sense Christianity*, exemplifies the results of the disposal of orthodoxy. The results? A belief system devoid of absolutes (except that orthodoxy is absolutely untrue), full of uncertainty, and riddled with subjectivism is developed.

Rise of Modern Biblical Criticism

Theological Liberalism and the Jesus Seminar

There have always been challenges to the orthodox Christian faith. In the past these challenges have mostly been outside mainstream Christianity. With the rise of German scholarship in the nineteenth-century, skepticism toward the Bible gained an air of acceptability. Theological liberalism came into vogue and began to have an influence and impact on mainstream Christianity. Bray does an excellent job of outlining the nineteenth century liberal scholars. Habermas (*The Historical Jesus*) and Boyd (*Cynic, Sage or Son of God?*) do a good job of chronicling the various quests for the historical Jesus. They trace the way each quest for the historical Jesus builds upon the one before it, adding its own unique spin on the subject. The Old Testament’s reliability has been under attack by liberal scholars for a much longer time than has the New Testament. While this attack on the Old Testament has been troublesome to Christians, it has had nowhere near the impact of the recent attacks on the New Testament. These attacks most recently have

been aimed at the Gospels. The Jesus Seminar has been most visible and vocal in its attack on the Gospels. The Seminar's most famous work, *The Five Gospels*, is the culmination of the work done by the various participants in the Jesus Seminar. This work is an attempt of the Seminar's participants to come up with what they believe are the authentic words of Jesus. The Jesus Seminar scholars vote on the various gospel passages. Incredibly, they believe they have determined that less than twenty percent of what is attributed to Jesus was actually said by Him.

This crowning work of the Jesus Seminar seeks to put forth a new translation of the Bible with a commentary on the various aspects of their translation. The words of Jesus are reduced to a few pithy sayings and compassionate deeds while the rest of the gospel accounts are attributed to myth, legend, or early church invention. As with many of the individual author's own writings, *The Five Gospels* is indicative of the Seminar's admitted fear of and repulsion by the supposed threat of fundamentalism. A more detailed explanation for these findings are found in Borg's *Jesus and Contemporary Scholarship* and *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*.

Borg is one of the most prolific and visible of the Jesus Seminar writers. His significance is connected to the Episcopal Church because of his marriage to a female Episcopal priest. Borg is very detailed and comprehensive in making his case for a new paradigm in biblical interpretation. He uses a much less pejorative style and doesn't seem as antagonistic toward conservatives and fundamentalists as do Episcopal authors like Spong or Countryman. Funk's *Jesus for a New Millennium*, and Crossan's *The Historical Jesus* similarly define the reasons for the Jesus Seminar findings. Spong has had, perhaps, an even greater impact upon Anglican/Episcopalians. This prolific author has come up

with his own mix of liberalism and skepticism. He has managed to convince many Episcopalians that the Bible is full of errors, unhistorical and unworthy of the authority that the church has afforded it in the past. In his book *Liberating the Gospels: Reading the Bible With Jewish Eyes*; Spong seeks to call the church to a whole new way of understanding the Gospels. According to him the way the church has interpreted the Bible for almost two thousand years is wrong. The Bible is to be interpreted, he claims, mainly as symbol and story. This book appears to be a reaction against fundamentalism and conservatism in just about any form.

A similar reaction is seen in his *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism*. This work is part reactionary and part autobiography. It seeks to destroy fundamentalism or any of its offshoots in the Episcopal Church. Spong uses anecdotes and his own brand of biblical interpretation to make his case. Nowhere is the battle between the liberal and conservative view of the Bible better articulated.

Countryman, a professor at one of the Episcopal Church's seminaries, offers a different perspective of one in academia and yet in touch with real life issues facing Christians today. His desire to rescue *uneducated* Episcopalians is seen throughout his book *Biblical Authority or Biblical Tyranny*. He addresses biblical interpretation and authority of the Bible from decidedly liberal theological position. His goal is to point out the errors of fundamentalist inerrantists. In the process he ends up labeling most conservatives as fundamentalists. Countryman seems convoluted when he tries to defend a biblical authority while maintaining the Bible is full of errors and must not, for the most part, be interpreted literally.

Setting the Foundations: Tradition and Biblical Interpretation

Early Church Fathers and Biblical Interpretation

If, as this project asserts, the conservative approach to interpretation is the method that offers the best way to understand the Bible, then it would be necessary to see if this hermeneutic is a new phenomenon or if it has any connection with the earliest Christians. This would be important to discover because one may assume that the early church had as close to a firsthand knowledge of the apostles and how they interpreted the Bible as was possible. By comparing the earliest interpreters to modern day interpreters it is possible to compare the similarities and differences of hermeneutic methods. Bray, in his *Biblical Interpretation: Past and Present*, presents one of the most comprehensive books on biblical interpretation throughout the history of the Bible. This book traces the development of biblical interpretation. The uniqueness of this book is that Bray writes from a conservative perspective. As a result, there is a much more accurate portrayal of conservative scholarship, than in other books of this nature. At the same time it gives an evenhanded treatment of liberal scholarship. The author points out some of the fallacies of ancient and modern liberal scholarship. Especially helpful is Bray's treatment of the interpretive methods of the early church fathers.

One of the questions raised by liberal scholarship today is whether the New Testament of today is reliable. Along with that are questions of historicity, authorship, and canonicity. Comfort, in his book, *The Quest for the Original Text of the New Testament*, explores the wonder of Scripture by examining the reliability of Holy Writ from the standpoint of manuscript evidence. This is done by detailed research into some of the earliest manuscripts found. His point is that while the *Textus Receptus* (from which

the King James version of the Bible was taken) was good, it has its problems. The resolution of these problems has been aided by the discovery of newer manuscripts. The author affirms the reliability of the original manuscripts by some excellent textual criticism. Comfort's book is a more modern approach to Anglican F. F. Bruce's powerful defense of the Bible's reliability, *New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable*. Bruce's work remains one of the most logical and cogent defenses of the trustworthiness of the Bible. D'Anacona's *Eyewitness to Jesus* presents compelling evidence for the early authorship and reliability of Matthew's gospel. Although the focus of this project is not to defend the reliability and canonicity of the New Testament, an acknowledgment of that reality is an important foundation for what is to follow.

It would make sense that those closest to the apostles and to Jesus would have the best chance of knowing exactly how the Bible was to be interpreted and the authority that it was to have in the life of the church. When one reads the documents of the early church fathers one recognizes a reverence and a respect for the Scriptures that would indicate that they believed them to be the Word of God, and that those same Scriptures were to be the authority over the life of the church.

In works by authors and church leaders like Augustine, Irenaeus, and Tertullian in the *Master Christian Library* one finds a deep regard for Scripture and its authority in the church. A respect for tradition, as well as its subordination to Scripture is seen. Many of the earliest Christian authors wrote for two reasons—to build up the church and to combat heresy. Irenaeus' *Against Heresies* is a prime example of how seriously the early church fathers took correct, orthodox teaching. Most of the writings of the fathers were weighted heavily with Scripture as the standard against which heresy could be measured.

According to the fathers, when there was any uncertainty about what Scripture taught, one need only look at what has always been taught by the church (tradition).

Vincent of Lerins was, in retrospect, one of the great apologists of the fifth century. His work, *The Commonitory of Vincent of Lerins*, shows a depth of thinking not often associated with that era by people in modern times. It should not be a surprise that the early church had writers with great theological depth. St. Paul's letter to the Romans, for example, is as theologically deep as practically anything written since.

Kelly's *Early Christian Documents* provides an excellent historical perspective on the early church's understanding of authority as it related to the teachings of the apostles. Kelly traces the tradition of the church through the fourth century. He posits that the early church leaders knew the apostle's teachings; and that those teachings were firmly established in the traditions of the church. One can't help but be impressed with the diversity of the different writings of the fathers and yet their virtual unanimity around the essential elements of the faith of the apostles.

The task of evaluating how the fathers interpreted Scripture is a daunting one. Simonetti, in his *Biblical Interpretation in the Early church*, provides a valuable resource that gives a picture of the methods of interpretation used by many of the greats of the church in the first four centuries. Simonetti maintains that the importance of following proper hermeneutical procedures is vital to a correct understanding of Scripture. One can see, in the early church, a pattern emerging of just such a proper interpretative methodology. The author makes the case that these methods were passed on to the early church fathers by the apostles and their disciples. There is, he maintains, a real

connectedness between the ancient church and the church of today because of this hermeneutical tradition which was passed on.

For the early church it wasn't enough to simply employ the proper methods of interpretation, there must be some final court of arbitration. While Scripture was that court, the meeting out of the punishment for heresy was left to the church. Often such punishment was merely a written, or in some cases, public rebuke. At other times there was a full out ex-communication, as Turner's classic, *The Pattern of Christian Truth: A Study in the Relations Between Orthodoxy and Heresy in the Early church*, clearly shows. He succeeds in reminding the reader that there was and is actual heresy in the church. This tome traces the development of heresies from the beginning of the church to the present. The defining chapter of this book is a discussion of how heresy is to be understood. The author couches this definition in the light of Scripture, tradition, and reason.

Grant provides an overview that ties together the hermeneutic of the fathers with the rest of church history. His book, *A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible*, shows that the early church knew full well that there were essential theological elements in the Bible that formed the foundation for Christian belief. Those beliefs were codified in the creeds of the fourth century. The author presents a good overview of how the church's hermeneutic has changed from its inception to modern times. An excellent portrayal is given of the effect Rationalism had on biblical interpretation. This work attempts to help the student of the Bible to have a balanced approach to interpretation, avoiding the extremes of pietism and of pure scientific history.

The views of the early church fathers were not unknown to the great Anglican divines. Browne freely quotes from the early Anglican divines who, in turn, quoted freely from the fathers. In *An Exposition of the Thirty-nine Articles* Browne makes a compelling case for the possibility of a purer Christian doctrine the closer one gets to the apostles. At the same time he does not deviate from the ancient Anglican belief of the sufficiency of Scripture. The tradition of the early church took two forms. Shelly's book, *By What Authority? Standards of Truth in the Early church*, helps to clearly distinguish the difference between the two traditions. One aspect of the tradition was ecclesiastical. This had to do with church customs not specifically found in Scripture. The other aspect dealt with apostolic tradition. This aspect of tradition was most closely linked to Scripture and the teachings of the apostles. Shelly skillfully demonstrates the authority that the sacred writings (Scripture) had within the Christian community. The ecclesiastical tradition could be changed and adapted to the particular times and situations in which the church found itself. The apostolic tradition could not be changed regardless of the times or situations.

Was there actually a true teaching that was passed on from the apostles? And if so, was it passed on accurately? Milburn answers with a resounding, yes. Apostolic succession, he claims, was not simply a mechanical transference of authority, but rather it was initially seen to be the method through which sound doctrine would be faithfully passed down to future generations of the church. In his *Early Christian Interpretations of History*, Milburn equates this transmission of the Christian truth to the passing down of the history of Israel by succeeding generations of Israelites. It is no coincidence that the church took the passing down of the apostolic tradition so seriously. The apostles and the

fathers knew well the history of Israel. They believed there was an interrelation between their history and that of Jesus. Thus, they accorded Christian history and teaching the same reverence, as their Jewish forebears accorded Old Testament history.

Anglicanism and Hermeneutics

Anglicanism and the History of Biblical Interpretation

This project is intended mainly for Episcopalians. History and tradition have had an impact upon the ethos of the Episcopal Church. In order for Episcopalians to accept a certain form or method of biblical interpretation, quite often they want to see if that method has any connection with their Anglican roots. This would make sense in light of the fact that the Episcopal Church is part of the worldwide Anglican Communion. As with any organization it is important to be familiar with the beginnings of that organization. In so doing, one can have a better sense the original intention of the founders of that organization. It is in this trek back to the fathers of Anglicanism that one gets the clearest picture of how the founders of the Episcopalians' mother church interpreted the Bible. In the writings of the early Anglicans, one gets clues of the methodology utilized by these founders, their views of the Bible and how they viewed the early church fathers.

One of the better overviews of the history of the Anglican Church is found in Wakeman's *An Introduction to the History of the Church of England*. Wakeman does a masterful job showing the effect of the Reformation on the English church. He shows that there was diversity in the types of English churchpersons in its early history. He allows the reader to see how groups like the Lollards and individuals like John Wycliffe had

such an impact on the direction the Church of England was to go. Some writers make Wycliffe appear to be outside of Anglicanism. Wakeman shows that Wycliffe's view of the interpretation of the Bible was instrumental in a change within the Anglican Church in his day. Wakeman also highlights another giant in Anglicanism, Thomas Cranmer. Wakeman skillfully brings out the deep appreciation that Cranmer had for the early church. Cranmer, being the architect of the *Book of Common Prayer*, also developed what were to become the Articles of Religion for Anglicanism. This was to be the closest thing to a "confessional" aspect of the Anglican Church.

Griffith-Thomas' book, *The Principles of Theology: An Introduction to the Thirty-nine Articles*, would argue that while the *Articles* may not be confessional, in reality they were intended to have the same effect for an English church in much need of written standards of belief. Griffith-Thomas covers, in a comprehensive way, the relationship between the *Thirty-nine Articles* and teachings of the Anglican Church up to the 1900s. The premise of the author's work is that God has revealed himself and left his written Word by which all teachings of the Anglican Church are to be measured (including the *Articles* themselves). The *Articles* were seen as mere reflections of what Scripture clearly taught.

Kidd echoes how the earliest Anglicans viewed the Bible and the *Articles*. Kidd's book, *The Thirty-nine Articles: Their History and Explanation*, adds to the importance of the *Articles* by comparing them to that which was taught by the early church and Councils. Kidd presents a detailed description of the history of the *Thirty-nine Articles*. He gives a cogent rationale for the need of the *Articles* to combat heresies in his day. This work sets forth formularies of the faith that are still valuable to combat today's heresies.

Browne, whose work on the *Articles* was mentioned earlier, here provides ample evidence showing why the Church of England felt the need to make the statement of faith known as *The Thirty-nine Articles*. He also defends this document as one of the standards of authority (along with the Bible and liturgy) for the English church.

When focusing on early Anglicanism it is tempting to limit the focus of one's attention to Cranmer alone. This, however, would leave out many other great Anglican fathers who had a tremendous impact on the course of Anglicanism. Moore and Cross' *Anglicanism* is the penultimate book about Anglicanism. It takes the Anglican faith and uses the words of Anglicanism's most prominent sixteenth- and seventeenth-century authors to accurately define what is distinctive about Anglicanism. Authors Moore and Cross give a very detailed account of early Anglicanism's hermeneutical methods. It may or may not be the authors' intention to paint a conservative picture of most of the early Anglican fathers, but that was the result. Consequently, one would not be far off to say that the early Anglicans practiced a reformed, conservative interpretive methodology while holding on to the best parts of their Roman Catholic heritage.

John Jewel figured prominently among the early Anglicans. *The Works of John Jewel* and *An Apology of the Church of England*, both reveal Jewel as a staunch defender of the Bible and of Anglicanism. They also show the influence of tradition upon Jewel and his biblical interpretation.

Richard Hooker, after Cranmer, is perhaps the second most recognizable and influential Anglican divine. Hooker championed a strong conservative theological position. His defense of Scripture is helpful in giving an insight into the early history of the Anglican Church's interpretive methods. Hooker's *Treatise on the Laws of*

Ecclesiastical Polity has had as much impact on Anglicanism as practically any other book written by an Anglican. This book deals with both the theological and political considerations of his day. It is deemed a classic in Anglican literature and is still one of the most recognized works of Anglicanism.

Hooker is revered in Anglican circles as the architect of the Anglican Church's three-legged stool of Scripture, tradition, and reason. In his book *Richard Hooker and the Authority of Scripture, Tradition, and Reason*, Atkison shoots down the modern misconception that Hooker gave to tradition and reason an equal status with Scripture. This treatise gives powerful witness to early Anglicanism's evangelical and conservative ethos.

Keble, a nineteenth-century divine, in his book, *The Works of Mr. Richard Hooker*, acknowledged Hooker's influence on the Church of England, claiming that Hooker's *Laws* brought the Anglicans back to the primitive truth and apostolic order. Keble sought to make it clear that the Church of England, thanks to Hooker, could incorporate the truth of Scripture with the apostolic tradition passed on through apostolic succession.

Dawley's work, *John Whitgift and the English Reformation*, reveals the far-reaching influence of the Reformation upon the English church. He gives another example of the evangelical influence on Anglicanism by describing the life of this Archbishop of Canterbury. Whitgift's commitment to the authority of Scripture and the doctrines of the early church is especially powerful.

Bishops William Temple and Charles Gore are cited in this project as examples of the continued influence of evangelicalism. The influence of liberalism was beginning to

have a big effect upon the church after the time of the early Anglican fathers. In the books *Nature, Man and God* by Temple and Ramsey's *From Gore to Temple: The Development of Anglican Theology Between Lux Mundi and WW II 1889—1993*, Temple and Gore are shown to still cling to a conservative understanding of the Bible and its interpretation.

Zabriskie makes the strongest case for a conservative interpretation of Scripture in the Anglican tradition in his book *Anglican Evangelicalism*. This comprehensive work chronicles the evangelical movement within the Anglican (and to some extent the Episcopal) Church. Showing evangelicalism and conservatism to be vital parts of the life and growth of the Anglican Church, this book is indicative of the power and viability of such a position even today.

The Conservative Paradigm of Hermeneutics

Conservatism's Response to Theological Liberalism and the Jesus Seminar

Episcopalians are often misled to believe that there are no reasonable or scholarly responses to much of the media driven liberalism of today. Many believe that any response to liberalism is simply the knee-jerk reaction of fundamentalism toward what must be the truth. Conservative scholars are almost unknown to the average Episcopalian. When the media calls someone a scholar it is almost always directed toward a person who is theologically liberal.

A number of excellent books have been written by conservatives defending the orthodox understanding of the historical Jesus in response to the current quests for the historical Jesus. In his book, *Cynic, Sage or Son of God?: Recovering the Real Jesus in*

an Age of Revisionist Replies, Boyd approaches the problems raised by the Jesus Seminar by challenging the views of the two main proponents of that organization, John Dominic Crossan and Burton Mack. They view Jesus as a cynic philosopher. Boyd thoroughly demolishes their theories by presenting very compelling counterarguments. He makes a strong case for the historical Jesus by showing a depth of understanding of St. Paul's and the early church's view of Jesus.

As was mentioned earlier, much of liberal scholarship has been deeply influenced by the Enlightenment. Evans shows how that influence has affected the way liberal scholars tend to look at history. His book, *The Historical Christ and the Jesus of Faith: The Incarnational Narrative as History*, skillfully shows that historical knowledge of the gospel story is possible. He examines the nature of belief and its relation to history. He shows that the church cannot abandon history without abandoning the faith of the apostles and church fathers.

Another excellent response to the Jesus Seminar is seen in Habermas' *The Historical Jesus: Ancient Evidence for the Life of Christ*. This scholarly work is a conservative response to the liberal contention that much of what is known about Jesus is a creation of the early church. It answers many of the challenges of the Jesus Seminar and presents a cogent defense of traditional biblical interpretation. Habermas does so without throwing out the good aspects of biblical criticism. Listing many ancient sources, this book shows why the Bible accounts of Jesus can be trusted. Particularly helpful is an appendix containing an apologetic outline answering those who would seek to explain away the unique elements of the life of Jesus.

Johnson gives a scathing critique of the Jesus Seminar in his book, *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels*. This work challenges the methodology and the *unthinking reductionism* of the Seminar Fellows. Johnson's perspective is based on his experience in academia and scholasticism. His focus on the public relations aspect of the Jesus Seminar gives a fresh perspective on their motives and presuppositions. He helps to refocus the debate by posing fundamental questions about the relation between tradition, faith, and history.

Wilkins and Moreland have compiled a number of different scholars who respond to different aspects of the Jesus Seminar's challenges in *Jesus Under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents the Historical Jesus*. There are some excellent defenses of the supernatural nature of the Bible and the life of Jesus. This book soundly answers the charge that the early church *Christianized* Jesus. The scholars in this book thoroughly and convincingly expose the flawed methodology and unconvincing arguments of the Jesus Seminar.

The two works by Wright used in this project, *Who was Jesus?* and *The New Testament and the People of God*, are particularly valuable in this study since he is an Anglican scholar. Wright shows, in the former work, that questioning the historical Jesus is not confined to the Jesus Seminar. As an example, he thoroughly refutes what he calls Bishop Spong's reinvention of Jesus as the production of the rape of the Virgin Mary. In so doing, Wright shows Spong to be every bit the literalist that Spong so vehemently opposes. Spong's literalism is conveniently very selective, according to Wright. The later book sets out a detailed argument about the nature of history, first-century Judaism, and

early Christianity. He subtly undermines much of the foundation of the challengers of the historical Jesus by defining what history is and isn't.

Kee, another Anglican scholar, would not fully embrace a conservative position. However, in his book *What Can We Know About Jesus?*, he does offer a number of “evidences” for the existence of Jesus and much of his life. Particularly helpful are his references to the extra-biblical records of Jesus. These influences give more credibility to the reality of Jesus and His claims.

The Case for a Conservative Biblical Hermeneutic

It is the contention of this project that the best method of interpreting the Bible is found in a conservative approach. At the heart of this approach is the authority of Scripture. Craig is a master apologist who builds a strong case for the authority of Scripture in his book *Reasonable Faith*. Particularly helpful is his study of what can be known from history and how that knowledge applies to the reliability of the New Testament. He presents a cogent response to modern liberal scholarship by pointing out the many methodological problems associated with liberal biblical research.

From time to time conservatives are accused of bibliolatry, or Bible worship. This accusation does not easily prove itself out. One can mistake the conservative's devotion to the authority and reliability of Scripture with worshipping a book with words on pages. Boice's *Standing on the Rock: Biblical Authority in a Secular Age* answers this argument. He demonstrates why the Bible is worthy of the highest esteem by answering questions like “Why should I believe the Bible? The Bible has so many errors—how can it be reliable? Is there any positive evidence for the Bible being the Word of God?” Boice

shows the errors in systems of biblical interpretation that have led to uncertainty about the authority of Scripture. He provides the reader with the basic rules of biblical interpretation.

It might surprise some to know that many of the earliest Anglican divines held to the infallibility of the Bible. Reventlow reveals in his book, *The Authority of the Bible and the Rise of the Modern World*, that the great Hooker was one such Anglican. Reventlow's overview reveals that a remarkable number people in history, learned and unlearned, believed in the Bible's inspiration and infallibility.

Liberalism and some corners of conservatism have given up on the idea of the inerrancy of Scripture. In the process they have drifted off into a sea of doctrinal uncertainty. Wilson and Templeton's work, *Anglican Teaching*, reveals that a reason for this drift can be traced to the devaluation of absolute truth in favor of experiential subjectivism. This devaluation is seen in the tendency today to minimize the value of creeds and dogmatic statements of religious belief. These are replaced with an overemphasis on Christian character and conduct. In other words, how one behaves is more important than what one believes or professes. *Anglican Teaching* outlines the problems with such an emphasis. For the Christian it should not be an either/or but a both/and proposition. Behavior and belief should go hand in hand, according to these authors.

Conservatives have the tendency to both value the creeds and to make dogmatic statements of faith. At the same time Christian character and conduct are also important to the conservative. Both of these values are to be judged in light of Scripture. This emphasis on Scripture is the very thing that separates the liberal from the conservative. It

is these qualities of the conservatives that cause some liberals to label the conservatives as a fundamentalists. Packer claims that the word fundamentalist should not be viewed in a bad light or pejorative sense. He claims, in his book *Fundamentalism and the Word of God: Some Evangelical Principles*, that the choice between liberal and conservative is not a choice between scholarship and obscurantism or between insensitivity and sensitivity in biblical exposition. A far deeper issue is concerned here. It is an issue which critics of conservatism rarely seem to see, and if they do are reluctant to discuss it. Packer insists that there are two versions of Christianity. It is a choice between historic conservatism and modern subjectivism; between a Christianity that is consistent with itself and one that is not; one that is wholly God-given and one that is partly man-made. He does a masterful job defining and defending evangelical conservatism.

The Gospel in a Pluralist Society by Newbigin provides an excellent way to apply all that this project proposes. He shows how the proper view of hermeneutics found in the proper understanding of Scripture, tradition, and reason can effectively be presented to both the secular and religious worlds that are questioning the authority of the Gospel message and the reliability of the work that proclaims it. In a similar vane, Moore writes that for too long conservatives have viewed the liberal and skeptic as enemies rather than people for whom Christ died. He seeks to compassionately reach out to those who have dismissed or diminished the Bible. His book, *Disarming the Secular Gods: How to Talk so that Skeptics Will Listen*, gives reasoned responses to various types of skepticism in this world. In so doing he addresses many of the problems facing the Episcopal Church today. He traces the Episcopal Church's problems back to a weak theology of the Word (hermeneutics) and an excessive reliance on externals. This causes Episcopalianism to

degenerate into a religion of good taste. He states that Anglicanism is tastefully ceremonial, and often a bit childish in its dependence upon secondary matters. It does not have a firm grip on the really essential core of the Christian faith, what C. S. Lewis called *mere Christianity*, that irreducible minimum of theology and behavior without which one is not really a Christian at all.

All of the works reviewed help to give an overview of the benefits and historicity of a conservative hermeneutic. The liberal works reviewed give the reader a perspective that challenges conservatism. It is only in the light of these works that the conservative can make comparisons between models of hermeneutics.

CHAPTER 3 INFLUENCES AFFECTING THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH

The Typical Modern-Day Episcopalian Mindset

The Episcopal Church has been in a battle for its institutional life over the last four decades. Declining membership and a social and theological relativism have become hallmarks of modern Episcopalianism. The denomination seems to be, according to some, a ship without a rudder being “tossed to and fro by every wind of doctrine and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming” (Eph. 4:14).

The Episcopal Liturgy

The Episcopal Church’s Sunday liturgies are replete with Scripture. The Eucharistic services are mostly Scripture quoted and paraphrased. There are three readings from the Bible on most Sundays. The Episcopal Church has the tradition of Morning and Evening Prayer Lectionaries that, combined with the Sunday Eucharist Lectionaries, cover the majority of the Bible over a three-year cycle.

Bible Study

Most Episcopal Churches offer Bible studies and small group experiences centered on a biblical theme or passage. In spite of all this, Episcopalians, in general, are some of the most biblically illiterate Christians around. The joke is sometimes told which says, “What do you get when you cross a Jehovah’s Witness with an Episcopalian?” The Answer: “Someone knocking at your door with nothing to say.” For too long the average churchgoer not only feels uncomfortable sharing his or her faith, he or she has no concept of the faith that needs to be shared. It is tragic that the average Jehovah’s Witness can turn the average Episcopalian into a doctrinal pretzel in a matter of moments. This is especially telling in light of the fact that most Jehovah’s Witnesses are able to learn their organization’s repackaging of the ancient Arian heresy and other perversions of orthodox Christianity. Not only do they learn the Watchtower Organization’s interpretations (some say misinterpretations), they are able to articulate them to anyone who will listen.

Theological Education for the Laity

Underlying this problem is the fact that most Episcopalians are either cradle members who received their intense theological education at an early age (confirmation training is usually held around 12 years of age), or they come to the church to escape a perceived fundamentalism (or rigidity of belief) from a past church experience. Roman Catholics come to the Episcopal Church to escape the absolute authority of the pope to set rules and establish doctrines for the church. Some Protestants and unchurched people come to the Episcopal Church because they perceive it as being more tolerant and open-minded.

The Authority of Scripture

Most long-time Episcopalians, whether they admit it or not, have either consciously or unconsciously been influenced by the popular notions of liberal theologians. These notions include: the demotion of the Bible from a place of authority in the life of the church and the believer; a rebellion against absolutes or anyone claiming to have or know absolute truth; a moral laxity which is often manifested in unbiblical lifestyles, ethics, and communication; and depersonalization of one's relationship to God. As Don Cupitt, a Cambridge University theologian, notes:

Modern people want to live their own lives, which means making their own lives, which means making their own rules, steering a course through life of one's own choice.¹

Alister McGrath posits that the notion of authority, or of any limitations of options, is thus seen as repressive by the worldview that has been labeled *post-modernity*. The idea of one's intellectual options concerning, for example, the nature and purpose of God being limited or controlled by an external norm, is potentially in conflict with a worldview which places an emphasis upon autonomy, self-generation and self-validation—a worldview which has gained the power in most western universities.

The Influence of the Enlightenment

Virtually everyone in this country is indoctrinated with secular and naturalistic worldviews from childhood through college (and beyond?). This indoctrination can be traced back to the Enlightenment and the dawn of the Age of Reason. There has been a marked increase in challenges brought against the Bible and its reliability from that time until now.

The Enlightenment, which was destined to have a major impact upon Christianity, had as its primary feature, according to McGrath, its assertion of the omni-competence of human reason. Reason, it was argued, was capable of revealing everything believers needed to know about God and morality. The idea of some kind of supernatural revelation was dismissed as an irrelevance.²

The Influence of Post-Modernism

The rise of the movement, which is now generally known as *post-modernism* throughout the western world, is a direct result of the collapse of this confidence in reason, and a more general disillusionment with the so-called *modern world*. Post-modernism is the intellectual movement which proclaims, in the first place, that the Enlightenment rested on fraudulent intellectual foundations (such as the belief in the omniscience of human reason), and in the second, that it ushered in some of the most horrific events in human history—such as the Stalinist purges and the Nazi extermination camps. This new cultural mood that developed in the 1980s rebelled against the Enlightenment.

The Enlightenment has affected Episcopalians in much the same way. Certain central Enlightenment ideas appear to have been uncritically taken on board by some Episcopalians, with the result that part of the church runs the risk of becoming a secret prisoner of a secular outlook. Episcopalians are under an absolute obligation to ensure that their central ideas are Scripture-based, not the result of the influence of the Enlightenment. To fail to do so is to allow ideas and values originating from outside the

Christian faith to exercise a controlling influence within—and thus inevitably to increase the degree to which theology is culturally conditioned.³

Conservative Episcopalians are now beginning to urge the denomination to wean itself of the Enlightenment's dubious vestiges, and move towards a position that is much more sensitive to the nature of Scripture itself. For example, conservatives are urging sensitivity to the rule of narratives, particularly in the Old Testament, in which the biblical narratives can be seen to build upon one another to give a cumulative account of the nature and character of God. Instead of forcing Scripture into a mold dictated by the concerns of the Enlightenment, conservatism can dedicate itself to allowing Scripture to be *Scripture*.⁴

Yet the Enlightenment is over. Conservatives feel the need to purge rationalism from within their ranks. And that means recovering the relational, emotional, and imaginative aspects of biblical spirituality, which the Enlightenment declared to be improper. As Martin Luther constantly insisted, Christianity is concerned with *totus homo*, the entire human person, and not just the mind. In this Luther was doing nothing more than stressing the importance of maintaining a biblical understanding of human nature in every aspect of Christian living.⁵ This understanding is nowhere more important than in the area of science and its relationship to biblical interpretation.

The Influence of Science

As scientific knowledge has increased, the faith people are willing to put in science has grown. Some maintain that postmodern relativism has invaded science threatening to undermine the objectivity of the scientific enterprise. Science, some say,

demonstrates that nothing of a supernatural nature can happen on this earth.

Consequently, belief in miracles, healing, and even *supernatural* intervention into human history by God is dismissed as fanciful and mythological.

Scientific Naturalism

With the rise of modern science, and its accompanying naturalistic tendencies, the average person in the pews is finding it even more difficult to believe in a God who acts. Quite often people in the Episcopal Church start out with a high view of a Bible that testifies of such a supernatural God. Many become exposed to certain scientific naturalists who say that humanity lives in a closed universe. Being told that the laws of nature cannot be broken, many Episcopalians change their view of Scripture without even questioning these dogmatic statements. Very few realize that there is quite often, a very articulate and reasoned answer to the scientific naturalists who proclaim a godless universe.

Rejection of Absolutes

Underlying much of this confusion is the rejection of absolutes (except for the one that says there are absolutely no absolutes). Many attribute the rejection of absolutes to the rise of modern science. Modern science has, in the minds and subconscious of not a few Episcopalians, called into question not just the reality of God, but also the possibility that God (if He does exist) would intervene into the lives and nature of this world.

Episcopalians hope against hope that God can and does deal with humanity and creation, but scientific philosophy and rationalism have been involved in waging what

Dr. Henry Morris documents as a “long war against God.”⁶ The result of this war has been to cast doubt in the minds of some about the historicity and reliability of some, if not most, of the biblical accounts.

The Influence of Darwinism and Evolution

One of the chief players in this war was Charles Darwin. Darwin’s theory of evolution changed not only the scientific view of the origins of man; it helped formulate an entire worldview. This worldview was predicated on the idea that if humankind arose from primates then perhaps they could be traced back further—back, in fact, to what current scientific speculation calls a *primordial soup*.

Episcopal Proponents of Darwinism

Episcopal seminary professors like William Countryman are greatly influenced by Darwinism and teach this theory without even a casual glance at its severe problems. Countryman assumes Darwin’s theory to be true and categorically dismisses the biblical account of the first twelve chapters of Genesis. For example, he points to “not one shred of evidence to suggest that a worldwide flood took place” as described in Genesis 6-8.⁷ Global catastrophism, however, is a theory that purports to give just such an evidence by offering a scientific explanation for much of what is seen in the fossil record and the geological makeup of the earth’s surface.

Science and the Biblical Record

While Countryman may or may not be right, he does not seem to acknowledge two things. First, no one living today was there at the beginning of the world, or at the time of the purported flood. Secondly, what one does see are the intricacies of the living and non-living things all around which point to a Designer. Conservative Christians believe this Designer is God. They also believe God proclaims in his Word that there was a worldwide cataclysm. Some scientists, for example, have been bold enough to say that if there was a worldwide flood one would expect to find exactly what one does today—billions of dead things buried in rock layers, laid down by water, all over the earth. One finds fossil evidence of marine life on the highest peaks of the earth, vast horizontal strata (like the miniature version of the Grand Canyon created by the mudflows of the 1980 eruption of Mt. St. Helens), misplaced fossils, and other evidence that some scientists say could be explained by a global flood. Whether a global flood happened is not the subject of this project. It is merely used to demonstrate that people looking at the same evidence may come up with different conclusions.

The *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* admits that Darwin's theory was very wide and far-reaching in its application.⁸ There are many factors that enter into the method or methods, by which the results in this theory are obtained. The conclusions of theory of evolution may still be considered as under debate.⁹ So, too, are the theories of special creation. Conservative Episcopalians would echo the Prayer Book which describes God's hand in creation by saying, "At your command all things came to be; the vast expanse of interstellar space, galaxies, suns, the planets in their courses, and this fragile earth, our island home" (Book of Common Prayer, p. 370). God also created

human beings—“From the primal elements you brought forth the human race, and blessed us with memory, reason, and skill” (BCP, p.370).

Bishop John Shelby Spong asserts that because of Galileo, the Bible was immediately rendered all but unbelievable. Darwin, he maintains, destroyed the objective truth of the literal creation story. In so doing, Darwin forced the world to question whether human life was a special creation of God. Darwin, he claims, put an end to the idea that man started out in a perfect state only to fall from grace resulting in humanity being infected with original sin. Thus, there can be no fall from a perfect creation in the Garden of Eden if it has never been that way.¹⁰

Spong says he regards the creation vs. evolution debate as an irrelevant issue. But the issue is relevant enough for him to use evolutionary theories to dismiss the Genesis account as myth. He does not acknowledge the criticisms of the evolutionary theories that have been leveled by secular (and non-Christian) scientists like Dr. Michael Denton, Sir Fredrick Hoyle, Dr. Chandra Wickramasinghe, H. S. Lipson, and N. Heribert-Nilsson.¹¹

Historical Anglican Opposition to Darwinism

There was opposition to Darwin during his time on the part of some in the Anglican Church. For example, Bishop Samuel Wilberforce debated often with Darwin’s *bulldog*, Thomas Huxley. There were those scientists and clergy who opposed Darwin’s theories. Many of those creationists opposed what W. Taylor Stevenson (former editor of the Anglican Theological Review) called, “the totalitarian claims of Darwin’s theory.”¹² In spite of the opposition of some, the Anglican Church and its sister the Episcopal Church embraced Darwinism.

Micro vs. Macro Evolution

Stevenson further asserts that while few Anglicans are strict Creationists, most Anglicans feel the negative influence of evolutionary theory in general.¹³ Though he is far from a Creationist, Stevenson affirms what many Episcopalians, scientists, and mainstream Creationists would affirm—that there is concrete evidence of microevolution (evolution within species or as the Bible calls them *kinds*), but much more speculative evidence regarding macroevolution (transmutation of one type of organism into a more complex type of organism).¹⁴ Microevolution can be seen, for example, in the various kinds and varieties of horses. Macroevolution, perhaps not so convincingly seen, would be exemplified in the idea of a fish becoming a reptile, and on up the evolutionary line. As some would put it “molecule to man,” or “fish to Fred.”

Problems Inherent in the Theory of Evolution

The theory of macroevolution is fraught with problems. Such problems include: the statistical impossibility of life happening by chance; the lack of evidence that at every stage of animal or plant development there is anything but a complete and symmetrical organism without any indication of an everlasting progression from the less to the more complex; and the unbridged chasms between the various kingdoms in nature. These problems all point to some of the challenges facing the evolutionary model. A gradual transition from the inorganic to the organic, from the vegetable to the animal kingdom, from one species of plant or animal to another species, from the animal to man, is not clearly demonstrated in nature. In fact, the fossil record shows just the opposite to be the case. Scientists of repute acknowledge the huge gaps in the fossil record. They

understand that a species does not create a whole new DNA sequence necessary to form a different species. When one looks at man, one sees even more problems for the evolutionary model. Psychically man is akin to, yet vastly different from, animals. Consciousness, thought, language, morality, religion, cannot easily be explained under any theory of evolution. The recognition of moral obligations, the freedom of choice between moral alternatives, the categorical imperative of conscience, the feeling of responsibility, and the pain of remorse are unaccounted for by the doctrine of evolution.

Darwinism's Influence on Skepticism Regarding the Reality of God

Darwin and much of modern scientific rationalism have contributed toward a societal skepticism of anything having to do with the need for, or the reality of, a God who acts in His creation. These so-called modernist views present a whole new view of reality. Phillip Johnson, in his book *Reason in the Balance*, talks about the tension between the modernist views of reality and the orthodox Christian view, which he labels "theistic realism."¹⁵

While one's view of creation and evolution is not a test for whether one is a Christian or not, that view does have an effect on the way one lives his life. It also has an effect on how one interprets the Bible. Earlier in the last century skeptics rejected Christianity because "it wasn't true" and "miracles can't be." Today, skeptics reject Christianity because it even *claims* to be true.

Modernity (the mindset of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries) said that only human reason and research could discover absolutes (moral and truth claims).

Post-modernity now says there are no moral or other absolutes to discover. This only makes sense if one does not believe in a Creator and Sustainer of all things.

In the evolutionary view of God the world is essential and necessary to God's being; that in reality man has made God in his own image. That God only functions as a cog in the evolutionary wheel of human development. Conservatives respond, "But a God who needs the world is not a being worthy of human worship." Moreover, such a God can't really help humans during their times of need. When one is facing a crisis, why trust a God who merely tries (and often fails) to persuade?

Creation and the Revelation of God

Is it possible to know that there is a God? Is it possible to know this God, if he exists? The only way to know there is a God is for that God to be revealed to human beings in some way. Christians have believed that God has revealed himself in three main ways. First, God has revealed himself through his Creation. This is hinted at in Rom. 1:18-20:

The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—His eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.

One need only look at the incredible composition of the eye and the design involved making it work; or the intricacy of a plant along with all that works together to make it grow, to see a Designer behind it. Second, God has been revealed through the coming of Jesus Christ who is the "exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word" (Heb. 1: 3). "He is the image of the invisible God" (Col. 1:15).

“For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form” (Col. 2:9). Jesus himself claims, “he who has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). Finally, Christians believe that God has been revealed in the pages of Holy Scripture. That Scripture, according to the church, is “God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness” (2 Tim. 3:16).

In Bishop Frederick Borsch’s book *Anglicanism and the Bible*, one of the reasons for this struggle has been correctly identified. He maintains that the Anglican Church has often used the Bible divisively and as the basis for a new legalism. At other times, as in the present, it has been revered but given little heed. Most often, he claims, it has been used to maintain the economic status quo or mores of the dominant religious party.¹⁸

The Influence of Heresy

Anglicanism has long been thought of as being tolerant of other views. While that thought is not entirely true, the toleration being practiced by many in the church today has resulted (especially in recent years) in the Episcopal Church allowing bishops and other clergy to openly deny not only traditional biblical morality, but the very core doctrines of the creeds as well. This denial is seen, for example, in the charges that were brought against Bishop Walter Richter a few years back. He was charged with ordaining a non-celibate homosexual man. The charges brought against him were for violating his ordination vows by advocating erroneous doctrine. Because the Episcopal Church has, to a large extent, abandoned any set of doctrinal standards (like the *Thirty-nine Articles* of the Church of England) and does not often seek to discipline those who go against the clear directives of General Convention (which declared in 1979 that the ordination of

homosexual persons was not appropriate), church leaders like Richter can operate and spread what many orthodox believers would call heresy with seeming impunity (he was later acquitted of the charges).

It seems that many bishops in the Episcopal Church would refuse to accept the Bible as an absolute authority, but rather, view it as a guide which points the church to the discernment of the Spirit of God working within the community. In C. Randolph Ross' book *Common Sense Christianity* an accurate portrayal of the views of a number of clergy and laity in the Episcopal Church is put forth when he says:

I am a heretic. I am stating this right at the start so nobody feels misled. I am a heretic. In many of our churches this no longer has any meaning, but in centuries past this name would have brought disgrace, banishment, and all too often death.

What do I mean today by applying this word myself? Two things: (1) that I place myself firmly and staunchly within the church and the Christian faith; and (2) that I am firmly convinced that much of what the church has taught as doctrine for most of its twenty centuries, and much of what constitutes orthodox belief today, is just plain wrong.¹⁶

Within this startling statement one sees a reflection of today's Episcopal Church, which no longer defines right and wrong beliefs (except in extreme cases). Dioceses across the country allow their people to do away with traditional Christian doctrine and to redefine terms to suit their own purposes. In these dioceses an undercurrent exists that paints orthodox believers as misguided, faulty interpreters of Scripture.

The great Anglican writer W.H. Griffith-Thomas said that because Scripture had (in the early church) such a high place in the understanding and life of the church, every heresy in the early days claimed to be based on Holy Scripture. That same scenario is being played out today, with one big difference: Scripture no longer enjoys its former

place of high esteem in much of the Episcopal Church. Liberals, while not affording Scripture its traditional place of respect, still use it to justify heresy.¹⁷

How to deal with heresy has always been a challenge for the Christian church and the Episcopal branch of that church. It is the contention of this work that liberal theology is in many places infected with heresy. This heresy is defined by the Bible and described by the early church of the first five centuries.

Heresy in the Early Church

The root of heresy is sometimes described as a personal choice exercised in matters where it does not apply. The charge is often made that heresy arises from the dilution of orthodoxy with pagan philosophy. While it is true that some orthodox beliefs evolved until they were finally decided upon by majority vote in the fifth century, there was a general agreement about what constituted orthodox beliefs. The Christian faith of the early church can be characterized as an interaction of fixed and flexible elements, both of which were equally necessary for the determination of Christian truth in that particular age.¹⁸

Heretics in the early church claimed to be Christians, used Christian terminology, worshipped in Christian ways, and taught some things compatible with orthodox Christianity. When heretics deviated from the essential elements of the faith (whether it be in the *rule of faith* or the creeds) and apostolic morality, they were determined to be purveyors of heresy, and thus were rejected by the church. Heresy, in general, happened not only when the defined doctrinal forms were transgressed, but also when the specific

content of the Christian faith was substantially destroyed. The heretics came to Scripture not to learn its true meaning, but to find scriptural support for their own paradigms.

The Episcopal Church and Heresy

Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong, an outspoken critic of orthodoxy, epitomizes the Episcopal Church's relation to heresy as it has been defined in the past. He maintains that the Christian revelation is, in part, not true. More will be said about the Bishop later. The dramatic effect of this rejection of orthodoxy on the church can be seen not only in blatant denials of the tenets of the faith but in subtle ways as well.

In the following modern-day parable one can see how the effect of heresy is played out: On Easter Sunday morning, a priest who has been trained in and has espoused the views of modern liberal theology, preaches cheerfully about hope and perseverance and urges his (or her) people to keep on trying when things seem darkest. But the priest says nothing about whether or not Jesus' body remains in the tomb, and is saying indirectly what liberals like Bishop Spong say directly. While he may not mean to, this priest is still saying that Jesus' bodily resurrection does not really matter in any sort of tangible way.

The priest, who on moral questions appeals to a flexible general principle (*love*, usually) and avoids the specific instructions of Scripture, is treating the Bible the same as Bishop Spong. Even if the priest does not make the same radical proposals for changing Christian moral teaching, he (she) has rejected the crucial details of the revelation and is just as thoroughly proclaiming a godless universe.

Liberalism and Heresy

Even keen intellectual minds can fall into the trap of rejecting God's revelation. Such was the case of the philosopher G.C. Berkhouwer, whose earlier work on Scripture reflected the historic orthodox view of the inspiration, reliability, and interpretation of the Bible. Then, after reading Karl Barth, he changed his view and wrote his work *Holy Scripture* that takes a much more liberal approach to the Bible. A scenario such as this is descriptive of that which many Episcopalians have experienced. Quite often people who encounter authors that are more liberal in their theology tend to assume that these authors must be right because they are *critical* of historic Christianity. They are not blindly following tradition.

Many liberal writers and speakers sound correct; they may even sound orthodox in their beliefs. Some may even consider themselves to be defending and preserving true Christianity. They may use Christian terminology and make reference to orthodox tenets of the faith, but regularly pour a whole different meaning into the words. Many of the liberal scholars of today have radically changed the faith of the apostolic church because of the challenges of science and post-modernism. Contemporary Anglican Peter Moore echoes classical Anglican C.S. Lewis' view, that neither the theologian, nor indeed, anyone is free to alter the faith whenever it looks perplexing or repelling. Such a liberal Christianity is completely stagnant, according to Moore. When one tries to tamper with the hard aspects of biblical doctrine, he actually reduces the probability of anything new happening to his faith.¹⁹

Allan Bloom, author of the stunning indictment of American education entitled *The Closing of the American Mind*, says that one thing a professor can be absolutely sure

of is that almost every student entering the university today believes that truth is relative. The one value that dominates all others is openness. Paradoxically, as Bloom explains, such openness masks a much more fundamental closedness to anything claiming to be good or true. Bloom, though not a professing Christian, blames this on the disappearance of the Bible from the personal and corporate lives of society.²⁰ Not only has the Bible been removed from much of public and polite society, when the Bible is utilized it is often interpreted in light of various philosophies of knowledge (epistemology) and various metaphysical philosophies (ontology). These paradigms of interpretation have been largely influenced by secular culture.

Effects of the Evolutionary Paradigm on Liberalism

An example of this influence is seen in the evolutionary paradigm used in the late nineteenth century. This paradigm viewed Jesus as a model religious man, instructed by God and filled with God, who was to lead humanity out of the primitive and barbaric outlook of the Old Testament. The idea behind this was that the world itself is evolving from one degree of excellence to another. Of course, the World Wars of the twentieth century blew away this idea.

The currently held paradigm is that God, being finite and limited in what He can do, is working unsuccessfully so far, to bring everyone to the place of living in His will of love and liberty throughout the world. The role of humans is to help Him. This agenda grows out of a secular concern for human rights in a world order felt to be out of control. This paradigm has resulted in many Episcopalians believing that everyone should rely on

his personal judgment in determining how much of biblical teaching he should take seriously and how much of it reflects God's own thoughts.

This paradigm virtually guarantees that there will be a plurality of beliefs and purposes in the Episcopal Church. It also makes it impossible to affirm much of anything as either right or wrong. Doctrine becomes very relativistic and morality very subjective. Many people, including serious Christians, struggle to understand just why the Bible should have a place of authority and uniqueness as they try to formulate their religious and spiritual values. The truthfulness of the Bible seems to matter little since modern society views the Bible in a much more relativistic way.

The Influence of Relativism

Relativism is another influence that has affected the way the Bible is interpreted. This concept became widely accepted in the past few decades. Because all knowledge is relative to individual knowers, some think that it is impossible to tell which religious claims are true. They reason: "Only I can tell what is true for me." If that were the case then the statement, "All religious knowledge is relative," would be true only for the one who made it. Then it need not be considered true for all people everywhere.

This relativism has, at its heart, a desire to avoid judgmentalism. To say one is right is to risk making another feel bad. The Episcopal Church has been involved in a cultural war since the 1960's. The forces of the politically correct society that exists in America have caused many in the church to feel insecure about making dogmatic truth claims.

Consequently, when the Episcopalian is faced with the prospect of interpreting the Bible, that interpretation process goes through the subconscious societal filter that judges the interpretation not as correct or incorrect, but rather, as loving or unloving. For example, if a person interprets the Bible as saying that homosexual sexual relations are a sinful behavior, they are likely to be condemned not because they correctly interpreted the Bible, but because their conclusions were seen to be unloving and hurtful. Since society has changed its views about homosexuality, some say, then what the Bible says about the subject is relative to the time in which it was written, but not applicable today.

Relativism, however, simply cannot be the truth. But the element of truth in relativism is that many factors from one's cultural background condition his knowing processes. Observation of these factors is a sound descriptive procedure when referring to the origins of ideas. Whoever reduces all knowledge to these factors, however, commits a genetic fallacy. By such a reduction one thinks that a description of the circumstances of an idea's origin determines the truth or falsity of its content. While all ideas are influenced by the knower's background, not all are equally valid or invalid. All knowledge is interpretive, but some interpretations are better informed than others. Although all interpretations are influenced by the individual's environment, some are better informed than others.

Relativistic theories tacitly assume their own absolutism. If no propositions were changeless, no significant speech or biblical interpretation would be possible. Truth is always true. It is changeless. If one finds no difficulty admitting that all truth is relative to the rational structure of his own mind, then every form of authority that comes to him must justify itself by standards inherent in him and operative apart from the authority that

speaks. The highest of all ethical principles is love for others. If truth (and especially truth in the Bible) is relative, then there are no empirical *oughts*. When society knows nothing but the relativistic mores of different cultures, why ought one love and serve another?

Using a conservative hermeneutic one discovers that Scripture speaks plainly regarding matters of truths that are applicable for all times, places and people. These truths inherent in Scripture remind one of the changeless natures of God and Jesus. Verses like, “I the Lord do not change” (Mal. 3:6); “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, and today and forever” (Heb. 13:8); “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away” (Matt. 24:35); “Thy word is truth” (John 17:17); reflect this changelessness. Relativism’s influence on the Episcopal Church is a small part of the influence of liberalism in general.

The Influence of Liberalism

The writings of many theologically liberal clergy and scholars show a rejection of and disdain for anything that would smack of fundamentalism. Almost all of these writers seem to be reacting to a bad experience they have had with a fundamentalist church, parent, or upbringing. They often report rejecting what they deem repressive moral standards. Encountering difficult Bible passages or experiencing perceived or real judgmentalism in those situations, they rebelled against what they viewed as legalism.

Three major problems exist with their conclusions. First, truth can never be determined simply by looking at an anecdotal experience. It may be true that those who were too legalistic mistreated the above-mentioned authors, but it does not follow that all

people who take the Bible in its plain sense (within the context of proper hermeneutics) are to have their views summarily rejected.

Secondly, many theological liberals either do not even know, or reject out of hand, the many reasoned explanations to the vast majority of Bible difficulties that are raised. Questions like “What is the responsibility of the Christian towards the Commandments of God?” “Where did Cain get his wife?” “Why are there two different accounts of Creation?” and “How can a loving God send someone to Hell?” are credibly answered by Christian Apologists today (see Appendix A).

Thirdly, a problem with many of the liberal authors cited in this work is that they tend to lump all theological conservatives into the camp of fundamentalism. There are definite and different degrees of conservative biblical interpretation from the inerrantist fundamentalist to the moderate. It is much easier to vilify and use pejoratives to describe all conservatives as *right-wing fundamentalists* or the like. It is equally tempting for those of a conservative bent to automatically label all theological liberals as those who reject all aspects of sound and orthodox doctrine. Such is not the case. There are, for example, those in the liberal camp who deny the reliability of portions of the Bible in matters of history, but still believe in the foundational historical events around which the creeds are formed. The Episcopal Church runs the gamut of beliefs, from rabid fundamentalism to radical liberalism. True conservatives would decry the automatic labeling of someone in such a way as to dismiss rather than to engage. However, for the purposes of this study it will be necessary to label any deviation from traditional orthodox beliefs as liberal (understanding the previous disclaimer). Because liberalism has had such a pervasive

effect upon the Episcopal Church, that effect has spilled over into other more practical areas of its life.

Liberalism and the Growth of the Episcopal Church

How has the rise of theological liberalism affected the growth of the Episcopal Church? It cannot be stated categorically that there is a direct correlation between many in the church espousing a more liberal approach to Scripture and the steady decline in membership over the last twenty-five years. However, one need only look at many churches of other denominations that espouse a more conservative hermeneutic to see that statistically numerical growth is happening in conservative churches at a much more rapid rate. It must be recognized that there are a few liberal churches that are experiencing growth. On the other hand, there are conservative churches that are not growing either.

Various surveys of the Episcopal Church show a 31 percent decline in baptized membership in the last 20 years. There was a 30 percent drop in infant baptisms. A 62 percent decrease in the number of children enrolled in Sunday school over the past twenty-five years. The percentage of *practicing* Episcopalians is half what it was in 1970 despite a 29 percent increase in the United States population.

There are many factors involved in church growth. Sociological and cultural elements can affect church growth as well as theological issues. The testimony of many who have left the Episcopal Church often reflect a concern over a more liberal approach to the Bible taken by its leadership. Whether there is a correlation between membership decline and biblical interpretation is the focus for another study. There seems to be a

confusion amongst the rank and file of the Episcopal Church about how to interpret the Bible, and how the Bible is to be understood in the living out of one's day-to-day life. This confusion has caused not a few Episcopalians to seek out other denominations and churches that emphasize the authority of Scripture and practice a conservative hermeneutic. How one interprets the Bible doesn't concern some Episcopalians. These are they who might often be moved to say, "I don't know what to believe," or "I know what I believe (usually vague generalities), but I don't know why I believe it. I believe it because I believe it."

Natural and Conscious Literalism

Until perhaps a hundred years ago, most people living within western culture heard the Bible in what might be called a state of natural literalism. This natural literalism affirmed that the Bible was a divine product and was therefore true and authoritative. This view held that everything in the Bible was literally true, but not everything was true literally. It took for granted that what the Bible said happened really happened (unless the language was obviously metaphorical, such as "mountains clapping their hands with joy" or "his eyes fell to the floor," natural literalists could recognize and appreciate metaphor). Natural literalists believe that the Bible (and therefore Christianity) was uniquely and exclusively true. This way of seeing the Bible was dominant in Western Christianity until very recently. The nineteenth century gave rise to a new kind of literalism—*conscious literalism*. Conscious literalism became embodied in what is now known as fundamentalism.

The liberal scholarship (and even some moderate scholarship), in their resistance of conscious literalism, caused many to doubt the authority of Scripture. Conservatives have continued to argue that when the Bible is seen as an infallibly true divine product, then it becomes an authority standing over the church. That authoritative document informs the church what to believe and how to behave, regardless of whether these beliefs or codes of behavior fit in with the current societal beliefs or mores.

Liberalism sees things differently from fundamentalism. It views Scripture as ancient Israel's and the early church's witness to life with God. The significance of the biblical canon is that it affirms that these are ancient documents with which Jews and Christians are to be in a continuing conversation and dialogue. To take the Bible seriously, the liberal maintains, is to seek to understand what the church's ancestors in their tradition knew of God. How does one interpret the Bible today with such differing views of interpretation abounding? What sort of hermeneutic is employed? Does it make more sense to follow a liberal method of interpretation or a conservative methodology? Perhaps some other method should be employed?

It is the assertion of this project that the best methodology to be employed in biblical interpretation is a conservative hermeneutic. It will be shown that this hermeneutic best reflects the methodology most often employed by the early church and Anglicanism in its earliest forms. It will also be shown that this methodology is the most reasonable way to interpret Scripture.

The Struggle Between Conservatism and Liberalism

There has been a long struggle between conservatism and liberalism regarding biblical interpretation. McGrath points out that conservatism has long regarded liberalism

as a serious threat to Christian identity and integrity. The liberal strategy is to look outside the Bible for norms and sources of theological authority. In so doing, the ideas and values of the world are allowed to gain (some would say) an unmerited and unwelcome presence and influence within the Episcopal Church. Others have joined conservatism in a growing consensus that liberalism should be rejected because it is intellectually flawed and tainted.²¹

One of the problems conservative Episcopalians have with liberalism is its insistence that traditional Christian doctrines should be restated or reinterpreted in order to be in harmony with the spirit of the modern age. For liberalism, religion must be based on universal human resources, such as human culture or common experience. This is most clearly seen in liberalism's rejection of evangelism or mission as *theological racism* or *Christian imperialism*.

Conservatism insists that theology must be concerned with the question of telling the truth about God. That truth may take the form of a narrative (telling the truth) or a doctrinal framework (in which a narrative has been transposed into conceptual forms), or a simple affirmation. The conservative believes that through the truthfulness and trustworthiness of God, *Truth* in the New Testament is not abstract or purely objective, it is personal. It involves the transformation of the entire existence of those who apprehend it and are apprehended by it.

Christ as the Word and the Bible as the Word

The Episcopal Church has from its inception looked to the Bible as the ultimate standard for truth. It is not uncommon, however, to hear a theological liberal appeal to

Jesus, and not the Bible, as the ultimate truth. Conservatives insist that allegiance to Christ includes acceptance of His attitude toward Scripture. It is true to note that Christians are not those who believe in the Bible but in Christ for salvation. While this has some merit as a statement of priorities and emphasis, it nevertheless sets up a false dichotomy. It is not a question of either the Bible or Christ, as if they could or should be separated. There is an organic and essential connection between the two.

Scripture possesses a strongly objective dimension, in that it reveals the way things are. It also possesses a subjective component, through which it offers to transform the believer's inner life (Heb. 4:12-13). This transformation leads to emphasis upon evangelism as the means by which others might share in this same transforming friendship with Jesus. Even the call by liberals to focus on Jesus and not the Bible can lead to confusion about which Jesus one should focus on.

The Real Jesus

Both liberal and conservative scholars agree that there was a man named Jesus who lived in Israel and died on a cross around 33 A.D. They agree because a number of first and second century secular historians such as Josephus, Pliny the Younger, Tacitus, and Suetonius testify to the existence of Jesus of Nazareth. Even the traditions of the Jewish Mishna and Talmud refer to Jesus as a real person who existed in space and time.²² Any attempt to interpret the Bible (especially the New Testament) must begin with recognition of the reality of Jesus of Nazareth. The problem is not that Jesus never existed, but, rather, how does one understand what He did and said?

The challenge with which the Episcopal Church is faced is whether that question can be answered using the liberal hermeneutic. For non-conservatives, the rise of biblical criticism has raised a series of problems that call into question the idea of the authority of Scripture. These difficulties cannot be dismissed as artificial, arrogant or irrelevant. What then does the conservative make of modern biblical criticism? How does a theologically conservative person reconcile the view of Scripture as the Word of God with the ideas of the liberal critics? Is it really important to take what the Bible says at face value?

Liberal scholar Marcus Borg states that: “Christian faith does not mean believing certain statements to be true. Rather, it has to do with giving one’s heart to the reality (God) to which those statements point.”²³ If this is true, then conservatives must rethink their whole understanding of Scripture and its interpretation. Is there validity to the liberal hermeneutic? Has the church misinterpreted the Bible for all of these years since its inception? Is Jesus really who the church has understood the Bible to say about Him? Is there another Jesus that has been hidden until modern times? These are some of the questions that will be addressed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 4 THE RISE OF MODERN BIBLICAL CRITICISM

During the Easter season, in the year 1382, several copies of a very dangerous book were infiltrated into London. Since a book has to be written out by scribes, the number of copies was limited, but authorities were alarmed nevertheless.¹

This quote about the Bible from the novel *London* reflects a reality that not only existed in the fourteenth century, but exists today as well. The Bible continues to be a “dangerous” book. It causes controversy no matter in what century it is examined. This controversy is due in no small part to the rise of biblical criticism. In order to look at the effect of biblical criticism on the process of hermeneutics it will be helpful to get an overview of the traditional orthodox beliefs that liberalism so vehemently challenges.

When the Secret Service trains agents to recognize counterfeit bills, the trainers begin by becoming thoroughly acquainted with real currency. Only after becoming familiar with the true money do they begin to study the counterfeit bills. If, as this project maintains, liberalism is a counterfeit hermeneutic, then it will be imperative to first look at traditional Christian beliefs. In the light of this familiarity one can see the deviations and errors made by those counterfeiting biblical interpretation.

In the light of traditional conservative hermeneutics the deviations of the new liberal hermeneutical paradigm will be exposed. The flawed methodology and assumptions of liberalism will be explored by examining modern biblical criticism. This biblical criticism challenged the very core of a belief and knowledge that had been understood for almost all of the church’s two thousand year history.

Traditional Christian Beliefs

The Nature of God

Christianity, like Judaism (and to some extent Islam), is monotheistic. It believes in one God (Deuteronomy 6:4) who is Creator of the universe and sovereign over everything in the created order. Christianity is also scriptural. As was said earlier, Christians believe God has revealed himself and his purposes in a written text that can be read, studied, and applied by those who believe in him. This idea of having a divine revelation was unique to Israel; and even today is found only in those religions that rely upon the experience of Israel.

It is important to determine at the outset if there is a good likelihood that God exists. Conservatives in the past have appealed to three main evidences for the existence of God. First, a universe that shows signs of intelligent design, and which militates against the idea of everything evolving by random chance. Second, Jesus Christ is the greatest revelation of God. Christ gave ample proofs of his divine nature by his wisdom, by the miracles he performed, by the fulfillment of many ancient prophecies, and by the undeniable fact of his resurrection from the dead. Third, the human personality reflects a divine Creator. Other aspects of the human personality like conscience, the innate drive to understand the purpose of life, the existence of values, the ability to reason, the ability to love, also reflect a God who is beyond humanity.

The Person of Jesus Christ

The Christian understanding of God is that believers can have a living, personal relationship with that God. This relationship is accomplished by the Son of God, Jesus Christ, who became a man in order to live the perfect life, die on the cross in humans' stead, and for their sins. He rose again from the dead. By his resurrection Jesus overcame the power of sin and death, and gave his followers the power to become children of God (John 1:12) and inheritors of eternal life. This is accomplished and experienced by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:15-17), who comes to live in every believer (John 14:17; Acts 19:2; Rom. 8:9), and is present as the third person of the Holy Trinity. The Christian faith is therefore not primarily an intellectual ability or academic doctrine but an essential living experience with God, which can be had by anyone regardless of intellectual ability or academic achievement. The Christian faith is a mystical union between Christ and the believer through the Holy Spirit. That Spirit mingles with the human spirit, witnessing to God's presence therein. This inner witness of the Holy Spirit is fundamental to all true Christianity, but it is not the only way God speaks.

The Revelation of God and Its Authority

The Christian church in the past has maintained that God speaks to individuals, but what he says is consistent with what he has already said. In other words, He cannot contradict himself. The church's record of what God has spoken is contained in the revelation that the church calls Holy Scripture. The individuals through whom the revelation of Scripture was given were especially chosen, and had an authority that no Christian today can claim. Moreover, they functioned within a tradition that had its own

collegiality, so that what they said was part of a wider and more objective message. If this is in fact true, then Episcopal believers must test their experiences in light of the common witness of those earliest followers of Christ and submit to the authority of their witness.

Anglican scholar Gerald Bray says of the importance of this authority:

We have been warned that there are spiritual forces at work which will seek to pervert the truth, and so it is only as we reform our own opinions according to the collective witness that we will be preserved from error. The existence of such a witness thus becomes a matter of ultimate practical importance for the spiritual health of believers and of the community to which they belong.²

The Bible claims this revelation was provided to ancient Israel by a succession of prophets, priests, and kings (See Hebrews 1) to whom God gave his revelation. This process reached its pinnacle in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the great and final prophet, priest, and king. Its legacy is a collection of documents that are called the Bible (a word that means, *book*) or Scripture (meaning *writing*).

Writing as the Chief Means of Divine Revelation

Writing was the chief means of divine revelation and was accepted at least from the time of Moses, when he received the Ten Commandments on tablets of stone, engraved by the “finger of God himself” (Exod. 31:18). There is evidence that suggests that much of the Genesis account was based on earlier written sources. Writing was to develop a more sacred character at Mt. Sinai. This sacred character is seen reflected in the New Testament, where Jesus frequently refers to Scripture (“it is written”) as the authoritative Word of God, and even uses it to resist the devil in the pre-ministry wilderness temptation (Matt. 4:3 ff.). Some would point out that because a written text can function this way in spiritual warfare it is surely an indication of the special character that was attributed to it.

The logic and limitations of a written revelation can be understood if one looks at his or her relationship with God. Personal relationships have the unique character of being fully comprehensible and deeply mysterious at the same time. God does not reveal everything about himself or his being. There is a great deal that remains hidden from human understanding. The church has asserted that what God reveals through divine revelation is accurate, and therefore, *true* within the context of the relationship.

Communication Through Relationships

There is a difference between human relationships and a relationship with God. For example, God may be merciful because he has promised to look after his children, but he may not be merciful in the same way to those who have rejected him. This distinction is important, because without the relational context, it may be concluded that God is merciful by nature and will therefore show this mercy to everyone whether they have believed in him or not.

One of the central aspects of any relationship is communication, and the most basic form of communication is speech. So it makes sense that it would play a major role in one's relationship with God. According to the Bible, God created the world by speaking, and the same verb is used to describe the sending of his Son (Heb. 1:1). Conservatives would say it is no accident that God's revelation should be called his Word, or that this Word should be identified with God himself (John 1:1).

But this relationship with God is a two-way communication, which implies that there is a discourse between God and humankind. For this to be feasible, humans must be able to understand what God is saying clearly enough to make a coherent reply. If God

and humans could not communicate, revelation would be impossible and the Christian faith would be meaningless.

The Bible asserts that human beings alone, of all of the material creation, are made in the image and likeness of God (Gen.1:26), which means that those so created actually do have something in common with their creator. Persons communicate with each other most effectively in speech. That is, Christians claim, how God has chosen to reveal himself to his creation.³ While most Christians would affirm that God has spoken in a number of ways, more and more people in today's modern world are questioning whether God has spoken at all. Some of the most ardent skeptics are not necessarily found in the secular world, but in the church.

Doctrine of Scripture

Conservatives believe that God has spoken most clearly in the pages of Holy Scripture. The Logos through the divine Spirit gave the Holy Scriptures. Therefore it became necessary to fix the canon of Scripture. The very foundations of the church were threatened by the intrusion of the secret traditions of a group called the Gnostics. They asserted quite different teachings from what the biblical writings contained.

Thus, the decision to fix the canon arose out of the life and death struggle with Gnosticism. This meant that once the canon was established, it became the standard to which each successive generation of Christians must appeal for truth and authority. The church decided that what was written at that time is valid for all later times; any new revelation claiming divine origins or anything contrary to what has been canonized can never have the same authority as the original revelation given by God through Scripture.

By establishing the canon, the church recognized that tradition was no longer the criterion of truth and declared implicitly that from the time of canonization every subsequent tradition must be submitted to the control of the apostolic tradition contained in the canon of Scripture. A standard was established defining the tradition, which constituted the church. The church did not intend, thereby, to put an end to the continuing evaluation of the tradition. But by what might be called an act of humility, it submitted all subsequent traditions to be elaborated by itself to the superior criterion of the apostolic tradition, codified in the Holy Scriptures.

The establishment of the canon was equivalent to saying: "Henceforth our ecclesiastical tradition needs to be controlled. With the help of the Holy Spirit it will be controlled by the apostolic tradition fixed in writing. For the church is getting to the point where it is too distant from the apostolic age to be able to guard the purity of the tradition without a superior written norm, and too distant to be able to keep heresy from creeping in, and thus being transmitted and amplified."

It has been helpful to attempt to establish the existence and nature of God, the person and work of Jesus Christ, and the background and authority of Holy Scripture. It is against this backdrop of established Christian truth that the liberal hermeneutic can be evaluated. Modern biblical criticism has played a major role in the development of the liberal hermeneutic.

The Role of Biblical Criticism in the Development of a Liberal Hermeneutic

The rise of modern biblical criticism has focused attention on the Bible as a human book written by human authors. It has asked, and attempted to answer, many questions concerning the authorship, origins, and meanings of biblical texts. These questions have often caused church members concern and even embarrassment, as some critics' findings have often seemed to be irreconcilable with the view that the whole Bible is the inspired and reliable Word of God. Some critics have argued that the Bible is historically inaccurate, internally contradictory, and theologically mistaken. Many liberal authors speak of innumerable passages which are contradicted either by other passages in the Bible or by the assertions and probabilities of modern historical knowledge.

By comparison conservatives believe the Bible is the Word of God, and thus, being God's Word, must be free from error. The Bible, they assert, constitutes the only sure and perfect guide in a world of uncertainty and imperfection. On the other hand, if the Bible is not trustworthy, they maintain, not only then is there no sure guide in this world, but also then God is not trustworthy, and so not deserving of faith. Ross asserts that what they are really saying is: "I claim that the Bible is God's Word, and I mean by this that the Bible is literally true and without error. And if I'm wrong then I can't trust God."

The problem with this thinking, says Ross, is that if one makes a particular claim about the Bible, and then is shown to be wrong, this casts doubt on one's knowledge or trustworthiness in this field. He says being wrong in no way affects the trustworthiness of God. But all too often an insistence is made on believing what one wants to about God,

and any threat to one's own set of beliefs is seen as a challenge to God. Ross maintains that "to claim the Bible is perfect and infallible is to substitute it for God, to engage in idolatry, and to close ourselves off from real faith in God."⁴

Conservatives have responded to the challenges of liberalism and literalism in various ways. Some have bought in to the critical arguments and have abandoned the traditional Christian and conservative view of Scripture. They view the Bible as a fallible (though perhaps inspired) witness to divine revelation. Others have dismissed criticism as irresponsible and irrelevant, retreating into dogmatic and simplistic fundamentalism. The one reaction represents the triumph of criticism over tradition, and the promotion of reason at the expense of revelation; the other represents a retreat from reason and from serious engagement with modern thought.

The Changing Nature of Biblical Criticism

Anyone who ventures into the world of modern biblical criticism must do so with the realization that biblical criticism, like science, is an ever changing and evolving discipline. As an example of this changeable nature one can look back only a few years ago. Theories were being espoused as the *assured results of criticism*. Theories, such as the JEDP Multiple Author theory of the origins of the first five books of the Bible (Pentateuch), the two-source solution to the synoptic Gospel problem, or the controlling belief that Jesus' parables make only one simple point, are now seen to be at best questionable, and at worst definitely mistaken. The fluctuating nature of biblical scholarship will be further examined in later chapters.

Skepticism and Biblical Scholarship

At the heart of much of modern liberal scholarship is a built in skepticism that colors the liberal's perspective of the Bible. Skepticism about God and the Bible is nothing new. It has been around as long as has the Bible. It is, however, in the last two centuries that the Bible has come under such a widespread skeptical challenge.

Pre-Reformation Scholarship

Before the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century, biblical scholarship was carried out exclusively in service of the Christian faith within the framework of the canon (the official collection of biblical writings), the teaching authority of the church, and the creeds. Much of the patristic and monastic interpretation, in fact, took the form of homilies to be delivered at worship. When many of the radical theories of interpretation began to sweep the field of New Testament scholarship, scholars who defended the veracity of the Christian claims opposed these challenges. What went largely unnoticed, however, was that the grounds of the debate were entirely dictated by the challengers. Attackers and defenders of orthodoxy alike appealed to the evidence of history in support of their positions. The *historical-critical method* of interpretation was assumed to provide the only legitimate rules for debate. In the hands of conservatives this method yielded a picture of Christian development conformable to tradition. In the hands of liberals, it gave a history that called into question traditional positions. What had fundamentally eroded, however, was the framework of the canon, creed and church by which Christianity had defined itself in debates since the late second century. The creed was

under attack, the canon was challenged and the church's tradition was regarded as the problem.

Historical reconstructions are by their very nature fragile and are in constant need of revision. Conservatives say these reconstructions cannot sustain the commitment to the human heart and life. Furthermore, even the most casual survey of all the Jesus reconstructions offered just in the last twenty years, reveals a bewildering variety of conflicting portraits of Jesus, and a distressing carelessness in the manner of arriving at those portraits. The first challenge to be explored gets right to the very heart of the Bible itself.

A Brief History of the Challenges

There are many factors that make up the modern-day challenges to the Bible's reliability and role as the Word of God. Most of those factors will be briefly covered in order to give an overview of what has brought biblical criticism to where it is today.

Challenges to the Canon of Scripture

There have been many debates over the canon of Scripture since the time it was first compiled. Even the dates of the writings have come under great speculation. The early church was inundated with writings, much of which claimed apostolic authorship. The early church accepted the Old Testament without many disputes. This acceptance was so partly because both Jesus and the Jews had affirmed them as Scripture. Deciding which books and letters were to be considered the rule of faith or the official documents of the church was not so easily accomplished. As the church used the original documents

of what was to become the New Testament, it began to make copies that were then distributed and read in various local churches. Over time the church began to gravitate toward the books that were later to become canonized.

The Case for the Acceptance of the Canon of Scripture

The early church fathers gave an indication of which books were accepted as authoritative. Irenaeus of Lyons (c. A.D. 200) advocated a canon as a weapon against heretics.⁵ While there was not at first complete agreement about which books belonged in the canon of Scripture, the church did finally decide on the New Testament as it is now in about 400 A.D. It must be remembered, however, that most of the books of the New Testament were considered authoritative at the outset.

Phillip Comfort, in his book *The Quest for the Original Text of the New Testament*, describes the transmission of the Greek text of the New Testament as having several parallels with the history of the church:

The New Testament text was pure and untainted, then—generally speaking—went through a long process of textual corruption (during which time there were a few scribes who produced copies that preserved much of the original text), then began to be recovered and restored.⁶

Comfort claims the discovery of many early manuscripts in the past two centuries is an act of divine sovereignty because these manuscripts, being so much closer to the original autographs, have provided the means for scholars to recover a purer form of the original text.⁷

The preservation of the New Testament Scriptures is owed to men like Emeritus (a reader at his home church). During the Diocletian persecution Emeritus refused to hand over the Scriptures, saying he had “the Scriptures engraved on his heart.” Others

from Carthage shared the same sentiments. They were all imprisoned, but would never recant. Their attitude about the Bible (both Testaments) was firm: to alter a single letter of Scripture was sacrilegious and an insult to their author. It followed that “to destroy the Testaments and divine commands of Almighty God and the Lord Jesus Christ by handing them over to be burned merited everlasting damnation in inextinguishable fire.”⁸

There have been many modern-day challenges to the idea that the New Testament was transmitted in a reliable fashion before finally being canonized. Research done by Comfort, F. F. Bruce and others show that the New Testament documents are reliable to the point that 97-99 percent of the New Testament can be reconstructed beyond any reasonable doubt, and no Christian doctrine is founded solely or even primarily on textually disputed passages. Challenges to the Bible are not limited to the canon, and the focus of this work is not primarily in defense of the canon of Scripture. Others have done a much better job detailing the amazingly strong case for the reliability and transmission of the early texts (see Appendix A).

Challenges Based on Reactions to Sociological and Theological Concerns

Many challenges to the Bible’s reliability were reactions to what some liberals perceived to be a shift in society— taking place both sociologically and theologically. As was mentioned earlier, Borg sees a shift taking place away from natural literalism toward what he calls a new kind of literalism, *conscious literalism*.⁹ By conscious literalism, Borg means fundamentalism. As a reaction to this fundamentalism modern liberal scholarship has gone on a media campaign to try to discredit not only fundamentalists, but also virtually anyone with a conservative bent in biblical interpretation. An example

of this is seen in the common argument used which says that hardly an Episcopalian can be found who believes the whole Old Testament Law should govern society and daily lives. No ethical person, they say, would advocate executing a disobedient child or stoning an adulterous wife or putting a homosexual to death. In so misrepresenting the conservative understanding of biblical interpretation, liberals make conservatives out to be heartless killers or self-righteous Pharisees.

The new scholarship, which advocates a partial, if not complete, rejection of any kind of literal reading of Scripture, has caused the authority of Scripture to be diminished in the life of the church and the individual Christian. Borg understands very well the implications of taking the Bible in its plain sense. He asserts:

When the Bible is seen as an infallibly true divine product, then it becomes an authority standing over us, telling us what to believe and how to behave, regardless of whether these beliefs or codes of behavior make sense to us.¹⁰

Borg has rightly articulated the very core of much of modern liberal scholarship. That core is the belief that there should be no absolute authority to which one must be accountable, or objective standard against which one's behavior and belief should be measured. Reason has grown so much from its Enlightenment roots that it carries much more weight in liberal interpretation than does revelation. In other words, liberalism says, truth, doctrine and behavior are fluid things changing with the changing times. The Bible becomes simply a witness to the way God's people viewed reality in the past. Scripture, thus viewed, has no continuing authority over the church, but is merely a vehicle for continuing conversation and dialogue.

The Challenge of Fact vs. Belief

Another challenge presented by modern liberal scholarship is that historical knowledge of Jesus or biblical facts are not essential for Christian faith. Friedrich Schleiermacher, sometimes called the “father of theological liberalism,” lived in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. He defined religion not in terms of the doctrinal concerns of historical Christianity, but rather a feeling of absolute dependence. This principle allowed him to recast traditional Christian doctrines in terms of the relative God—or Christ consciousness of the believer.¹¹

For the liberal *belief* did not originally mean believing a set of doctrines or teachings, it meant to give one’s heart to. So, belief does not consist of giving one’s mental assent to something, but involves a much deeper level of oneself. In other words, believing in Jesus does not mean believing doctrines about him. Rather, it means “to give one’s heart to the ‘post-Easter’ Jesus who is the living Lord, the side of God turned toward us, the face of God, the Lord who is also the Spirit.”¹²

The problem with this view is this: How does one know which Jesus he is giving his heart to? The Jesus of liberal scholarship, by and large, is quite different from the Jesus understood by early Christians and early Anglicans alike. St. Paul warns the Corinthian church about this very problem when he says:

For if someone comes to you and preaches a Jesus other than the Jesus we preached, or if you received a different spirit from the one you received, or a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it easily enough.¹³

Nineteenth-Century Challenges

In 1860, the English publication by seven scholars (mostly from Oxford) of the collection of *Essays and Reviews* brought severe challenges to the old approach to

Scripture. No longer was it taken for granted that the Bible was to be understood by the natural literalistic approach. Now the critical methods of scholarly investigation that the *Essays* advocated were here to stay. The inerrancy of the Bible as a product of divine inspiration would no longer be taken for granted.¹⁴

Perhaps the father of modern Biblical criticism was Herman Remarus. His influence is still seen by modern day *Jesus Scholars*. First and foremost was his idea that there is a clear distinction in the New Testament between the “Jesus of History and the Christ of faith.”¹⁵ Remarus ushered in what might be called the quest for the historical Jesus.

The Quest for the Historical Jesus

The First Quest

In the nineteenth-century the *First Quest* attempted to carry on the Enlightenment’s interest in history and composed various lives of Jesus, in which the kingdom of God was seen as an ethical ideal, a symbol of personal fellowship with God, as exemplified in Jesus. Albert Schweitzer came along and began to change the First Quest. He focused on the *apocalyptic prophet* aspect of Jesus and resigned the teachings of Jesus to only first-century relevance.¹⁶

The Second or New Quest

Rudolph Bultmann and Karl Barth challenged Schweitzer and the First Questers to present a new way of looking at Jesus. Bultmann and Barth maintained that theology

had a life independent of the discovery of the historical Jesus. Schweitzer's criticism of the First Quest had not been radical enough, they said, since Schweitzer assumed the Gospels could reveal at least something about the historical Jesus.

They began to develop a methodology that would move them even farther from the Jesus of history. Form Criticism—that is, the search for early oral traditions of church narratives concerning Jesus—now became the primary goal of New Testament studies, and an interest in the faith of the early church, which told these stories, became the new focus.

Bultmann sought to *demythologize* the Bible assigning many of the supernatural elements of the Bible to myth. He believed, for example, that while the earliest disciples' faith in the resurrection was a historical fact, it was not important to know the cause of this belief. Thus, the historicity of the resurrection was rejected *a priori* as a myth, without any attempts to investigate the historical evidence. Even the importance of such historical research was rejected. Because, the thinking went, the early church was said not to have been interested in recording history, legend was mixed into the Gospel accounts. The result was that Bultmann thought there was much uncertainty concerning historical aspects of Jesus' life and teaching.

Historian A.N. Sherwin-White is one of many historians who challenged the unbalanced skepticism and fanciful theorizing of the form critics. He was amazed at their gloomy conclusion that “the historical Christ is unknowable and the history of his mission cannot be written,” while historians pursue with convincing optimism, the best-known contemporary of Christ, Tiberius Caesar.¹⁷

In 1953, Ernest Kasemann, a student of Rudolph Bultmann, launched the *New Quest* for the historical Jesus. Kasemann did not object to any significant feature of Bultmann's critical methodology or naturalistic worldview. But he wanted badly to avoid the devastating skeptical conclusions of the old quests and their desupernaturalized Jesus. At the same time he had a disregard for the earthly Jesus and his humanity.

This New Quest was birthed not primarily out of consideration for the historical evidence, or because new methods were developed. Where the old quests tried to find the discontinuity between the Christ of faith and the Jesus of history, the New Quest launched an attempt to locate the continuity between the two in the midst of an assumed discontinuity.¹⁸ The New Questers went on to say that the center of the Gospels was in the word, a word preached by an elusive historical Jesus, but a word that could still challenge today. They believed they could determine which sayings of Jesus were authentic.

The Third Quest

The last two decades have witnessed a veritable explosion of scholarly investigation of the historical Jesus. It is impossible to simply or neatly classify the amazing variety of conflicting theories and models being explored within Jesus research today. N.T. Wright, an Anglican New Testament scholar, calls the latest attempt to discover the historical Jesus, the *Third Quest*. One of the most significant hallmarks of the Third Quest is that a number of those within its ranks self-consciously moved beyond the methodological structures of the paradigm used by Bultmann.

The Third Quest has tended to emphasize the actions of Jesus and the proclamation of God's kingdom or rule as closely related to the Jewish community. Jesus is to be understood only in his particular society. Almost all of the Third Questers were unhappy with the New Questers fixation upon the words of Jesus alone, and upon the conflicting criteria used to get at the authenticity of these words. Many in the Third Quest were inclined to presuppose a great deal of continuity between early church traditions, found in the Gospels and the Epistles, and the life and teachings of the historical Jesus.

While there was no one theological *school* directing the investigations of the Third Quest, it was thoroughly liberal in its perspective. The Third Questers methods claimed not to be controlled by presuppositions that *a priori* dismiss the idea of the supernatural or miraculous elements of the New Testament. Few, if any, actually accepted the possibility of God's supernatural intervention into this world through word, action, or miracle.¹⁹ The Jesus Seminar is a current offshoot of this Third Quest.

The Jesus Seminar

At a time when churchgoers want to hear a clear word from God, scholars appear to be confusing issues and muddying the waters of biblical study to the point where even professional theologians find it difficult to follow what they are saying. With increasing frequency non-scholars hear the assertions of a group of scholars called the Jesus Seminar. Assertions like "the earliest followers most certainly entertained no concept of his (Jesus) resurrection,"²⁰ exemplify the titillating statements made by the Jesus Seminar. This group of *scholars* is gaining an ever-growing hearing in many sectors of Christendom. Many assume that since the word scholar is often prominently displayed in

publicity surrounding the Seminar, then its findings must be true. In reality, most Episcopalians who are exposed to liberal scholarship are not told, and have no concept of, those views in Jesus research. The Jesus Seminar paints a totally opposite perspective of the Bible and the life of Jesus from that of traditional orthodoxy.

Recent publications also indicate that more and more scholars are bringing their own fairly well defined agendas to the biblical text seeking to read out of it the ideas that in fact they are importing into it. Centuries of Christian tradition are ignored, unless that tradition can be made to provide support for some otherwise radically new opinion. There seems to be little concern to find an overall hermeneutical framework in which to place the latest findings of critical scholarship. An example of this new scholarship is seen in the writings of Jesus Seminar scholar, Marcus Borg.

Marcus Borg

Borg teaches in a secular university and feels the need to “find non-Christian ways of speaking about Jesus.”²¹ The Jesus Seminar, according to its proponents, contains views based on personal agendas and experiences. When reading the introductions to many of the Jesus Seminar authors’ works one finds their autobiographies tend to become theology. Such is the case with Borg.

Borg *learned* through his college and seminary experiences that the Christian tradition itself (including the Bible) is a historically conditioned and relative human product, not a divine product containing a unique repository of absolute truth. Thus, for Borg, there is no one-way of salvation, no one true church or any need for evangelism. Borg sounds more Unitarian than Christian in the following statement:

If it is true that the older understanding about evangelism generated by the popular image of Jesus—converting people to believing in Jesus now for the sake of heaven later—is no longer persuasive and compelling, what then can be the motive for our evangelizing and, for that matter, the motive for people to respond to our evangelizing...the motive for contemporary evangelism which flows out of recent Jesus research is the vision of life that we find in the message and mission of Jesus. We can see that vision of life by looking at three central and related features of the pre-Easter Jesus: his alternative wisdom, his relationship to the Spirit, and the alternative community which formed around him.²²

Robert Funk, one of the leaders of the Jesus Seminar, echoes Borg:

Since the symbolic world is crumbling or has crumbled, the times call for a wholly secular account of the Christian faith, not just for the sake of its appeal to the third world but primarily for the sake of those who inhabit the contemporary scientific-minded Western world.²³

To find this new non-Christian way of speaking about Jesus, writers like Borg use cross-cultural categories which make possible a perception of Jesus not directly tied to Christian language and not dependent upon explicitly Christian beliefs. This is just one example of how many of the Jesus Seminar scholars are deviating from traditional orthodox approaches to Scripture. While the Jesus Seminar is not monolithic in its methodologies, it is confined by certain basic assumptions that color the process whereby it reaches its conclusions.

The Jesus Seminar Defined

Just what is the Jesus Seminar? The Jesus Seminar advertises itself as “some two-hundred” scholars who first convened in 1985 under the leadership of Robert Funk and funded by the Westar Institute. The Jesus Seminar has, quite intentionally, received an unprecedented amount of media attention. Major newspapers around the country have thoroughly, and repeatedly, covered the Seminar’s controversial work. Their first major work was *The Five Gospels* in which these scholars, by a process of voting with colored

beads, determined that less than one-fifth of the sayings of Jesus are likely to be authentic.

The Jesus Seminar and its Place in the World of Scholarship

According to conservative scholar Luke Timothy Johnson, the Jesus Seminar is an effort by scholars to bypass the ordinary contexts of their activity in order to effect cultural changes by direct competition with conservative Christians. They use the ambiguous role of the media as the arena for this cultural battle. And most of all, they challenge the long-standing boundaries of true Christianity.²⁴

The Jesus Seminar is not affiliated with either *The Society of Biblical Literature* or the other international association for New Testament scholars, *The Studiorum Novi Testamenti Societas*. It, therefore, does not represent anything like a consensus view of scholars working in the New Testament field. In reality it represents only the views of a group that has been—for all its protestations of diversity—self-selected on the basis of a prior agreement concerning the appropriate goals and methods for studying the Gospels and the figure of Jesus.²⁵

When the Seminar advertises its *two hundred scholars* it should be remembered that when compared to just one of the above-mentioned scholarly organizations (over 3,500) the number of scholars is rather minuscule. Add to that the actual number of Jesus Seminar scholars at around 40 (the rest were adjunct and support staff), and one begins to get a better perspective on the significance of the Jesus Seminar.

The Underlying Plan of the Jesus Seminar

Even the reality of the size of the Jesus Seminar does not give the full perspective of the realm of biblical scholarship. Scholars tend to elevate their importance and impact far above what it should be. Tom Boomershire, who is trying to awaken the *Society of Biblical Literature* to the irrelevance and ineffectiveness of the Guild, says:

The basic paradigm of historical criticism that was generally accepted over fifteen years ago has been fractured. The multiplication of methodologies and research paradigms at an SBL meeting is incredible in comparison to meetings as recently as 1970. But, in spite of all our labor, the impact of historical critical study of the Scriptures on religious communities and the culture in general is minimal in comparison to the beginning of the century. But normal science goes on as if some formulas and patterns of research will have the same effect. We continue to undertake research projects and to publish books. *But increasingly we only write for each other and the results of our research are ignored even by the religious community. We write more and more with less and less effect. To put it simply, the existing paradigm is not producing the results it promised* (italics in original).²⁶

The Jesus Seminar has sought to address this ineffectiveness and to impact religious communities. It has succeeded in drawing attention to itself. It has drawn so much attention, not because of its innovative methodology, but because it seeks to provoke. The way the Jesus Seminar is conducted is what sets it apart from other scholarship. At each meeting scholars vote with red, pink, gray and black beads for their opinions related to the probability of a particular saying's authenticity.

Johnson says, "A no more effective way to draw attention could be imagined. Scholars are 'voting' on the contents of the Gospel!"²⁷ Funk tried to justify the voting as consistent with that which goes on in translation committees. As he noted, however, these votes are taken in private whereas the Jesus Seminar voting is totally part of the show.²⁸

In a *Christian Century* article (November 23, 1988) Funk admitted that the voting was fun because those who interpret literature or philosophy aren't used to making a

decision about anything. He described the scholars as exhilarated to be able to make up their minds about something. Funk's keynote address at the first Jesus Seminar meeting in 1985, gives a glimpse into the agenda of the gathering. He begins with a complaint against the established church when he says, "The religious establishment has not allowed the intelligence of high scholarship to pass through pastors and priests to a hungry laity." And he objects to the way television evangelists have "preyed on the ignorance of the uninformed."²⁹ He sees the work of the Seminar, therefore, as spelling liberty for millions.³⁰

Conservative New Testament scholar Ben Witherington writes of the Jesus Seminar:

The methodology of the Jesus Seminar, according to its founders, is not an indifferent net—it catches what it intends to catch. In many recent efforts to investigate the life of Jesus to see if there is anything unique or messianic to be found in Jesus, not surprisingly the answer has been largely negative. To a great degree this is caused by a failure to fish with a sufficiently large or multifaceted net.³¹

From the start, the Jesus Seminar has been a reaction against a theology focused both on the literal truth of the Gospels and the literal return of Jesus. Scholar James R. Edwards is even more direct:

What is new about the Jesus Seminar is not new methods or results, but a bent against the church and orthodox faith. Not unlike the infamous 'Re-Imaging Conference' in 1993 at which radical feminist theology was used to mock Christian dogma, the Jesus Seminar is not engaging in objective investigation but plying a theological bias that surfaces in undisguised iconoclasm towards church, faith, and creed. The church is stereotyped as a medieval instrument of inquisition and censorship. In contrast, the Scholars Version (*put out by the Jesus Seminar*) claims to be 'free of ecclesiastical and religious control' and 'not bound by the dictates of church councils.'³²

Conservatives say the most misleading (and some would say unscholarly) aspect of the Jesus Seminar is its blackout of any position but its own; leaving the impression that conservative scholarship has nothing to say about its *findings*.

Problems with the Jesus Seminar and Liberalism

While it is not possible for this project to fully address all of the difficulties with the Jesus Seminar and liberalism, it will be helpful to examine a few of those difficulties. Many scholars like Wright, Lightfoot, Bruce, Metzger, Brown, Luke Timothy Johnson, Boyd, Habermas, Wilkins and Moreland (see bibliography) and others, have studied and answered the methods and conclusions of liberalism in general and the Jesus Seminar in particular. In order to give the reader a flavor for some of the challenges of modern liberal scholarship, this work will cite two examples of the scholarship of Jesus Seminar Fellows and a conservative response to the assertions there made.

The Idea of Jesus as Cynic Sage

A common theme throughout the writings of Jesus Seminar Fellows is the idea that Jesus was a *cynic sage*. Crossan, in his book *The Historical Jesus*, describes this cynic Jesus as one who was a counter-cultural radical in the face of a radically oppressive culture. His role as a cynic went all the way to His traveling, preaching mission, and dress.³³

Boyd points out the problem with Crossan's concept of Jesus as a cynic sage by noting that cynics operated mainly in urban environments while Jesus operated mainly in rural settings. Cynics usually carried a knapsack, while Jesus forbade his followers to carry one (Matt. 10:10). Jesus performed healings and exorcisms, while cynics did not.

The Jesus Seminar and the Gospel of Thomas

Another example of the assertions made by the Jesus Seminar is the status to which they elevate the non-canonical book entitled *The Gospel of Thomas*. The whole church never accepted this book as part of the Bible; yet some of the Jesus Seminar Fellows give this book more credence and reliability than they do the canonical Gospels. *The Gospel of Thomas* was a document thoroughly influenced by Gnosticism. The Gnostics were those who believed that matter is evil and that emancipation comes through esoteric knowledge of spiritual truth (gnosis). *Thomas* contains glaring inaccuracies and a style that is much different from the canonical Gospels. In spite of this, *Thomas* appears to be the data pool out of which a number of the Jesus Seminar participants get their portrait of the historical Jesus. This Jesus, say conservatives, looks nothing like the Jesus portrayed in Scripture. It is curious that the Jesus Seminar scholars elevate *Thomas* to such heights, especially with the *feminist* leanings of the Fellows. In the midst of a citation from the *Gospel of Thomas* by Funk, et. al. in the major work of the Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels*, the following revealing and humorous words of *scripture* appear:

Simon Peter said to them, 'Make Mary leave us, for females don't deserve life.' Jesus said, 'Look, I will guide her to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every female who makes herself male will enter the domain of heaven.' (*Thomas* 114:1-3).³⁴

A glance at the ancient text reproduced above immediately tells the reader that the author knew little, if anything, of biblical teaching concerning the roles of men and women, and the fact that both men and women were created in the image of God. This extra-biblical teaching in *Thomas* comes plainly from Gnostic sources that vilified the body and exalted the spirit, and in the process often denigrated the feminine and exalted

the masculine. The early church struggled long and hard against the Gnosticism that constantly threatened it.

The Jesus Seminar scholars, by and large, believe that documents such as the *Gospel of Thomas* are far more representative of the actual teachings of Jesus Christ than the canonical Gospels. The unreliability of *the Gospel of Thomas* seems to matter little to the Jesus Seminar Fellows. Nor do they explore the possibility that the reason for the few similarities between *Thomas* and the canonical Gospels might be the reliance of the former on the latter. In fact, in an article on *the Gospel of Thomas*, K. Snodgrass makes the case for *Thomas* having its origins in the canonical Gospels.³⁵

The Jesus Seminar - Presuppositions and Methodologies

Funk has declared that one of the “seven pillars of scholarly wisdom” is that the Gospel traditions are unreliable unless proven otherwise. Working from this assumption—beginning at the conclusion—it is hardly surprising that the Fellows have determined that less than a fourth of the sayings attributed to Jesus in the Gospels are authentic.³⁶ Alan H. Brehm suggests that the very fact that the Jesus Seminar Fellows and other liberal scholars develop and use *criteria for authenticity* presupposes the inauthenticity of the Gospel traditions.³⁷

This view of inauthenticity is shared by most of the Jesus Seminar Fellows, who believe that miracles were not part of the church’s experience. Miracles are approached from the position of scientific naturalism. This group has a general skepticism that God intervenes through supernatural miracles. This would include the bodily resurrection of

Jesus Christ. Mack captures the general secular sentiment clearly when he remarks “scholars and miracles don’t mix well.”³⁸

If one rejects the historicity of all of the miracles of the Gospel narratives and labels them legendary, this in no way justifies rejecting outright the integrity of the work that includes them. One cannot dismiss out of hand everything that does not easily fit a twentieth century worldview of a closed universe. It seems quite presumptuous to self-consciously elevate one’s own worldview as the final arbiter of what could or could not have happened in history.³⁹

As New Testament scholar N.T. Wright has argued, “With what justification can we call our enterprise *scientific* if we do not even allow for the possibility that our own worldview might be incorrect?”⁴⁰ Whether it be miracles, or narratives about Jesus, or historical details of the Gospels, the Jesus Seminar declares that the burden of proof no longer lies with those who must demonstrate the Gospels to be non-historical, but now with those who must prove that they are historical at one point or another. Tradition and the Bible are, according to the Jesus Seminar, unhistorical until proven otherwise.

Perhaps the most important, yet most neglected, area of *alternative* scholarship that the Jesus Seminar camp fails to take seriously at a methodological level surrounds the issue of the reliability of the canonical Gospel traditions. Here one discovers most clearly the profound role presuppositions play in a scholar’s work, and one discovers it at precisely that point that is most crucial for any quest for the historical Jesus. How one evaluates the traditions contained within the Gospel narratives largely determines what kind of Jesus one’s scholarly research is going to eventually end up with.

The Burden of Proof

If one begins with a belief dictating that everything *must* be understood in terms of a natural law of cause and effect, then one *has* to adopt a radically skeptical stance concerning the trustworthiness of the Gospels. Such a stance characterizes the Jesus Seminar. Since, these scholars maintain, the Gospels *cannot* be accurately speaking about God working in history in unique and unrepeatable ways, they must be speaking about something different—about myths, social agendas and the like. Scholars who do not operate with these skeptical presuppositions, however, often come up with a very different estimation of the reliability of the Gospels. Having no *a priori* grounds for dismissing as a-historical what the Gospels speak of, conservative scholars argue that they speak of historical matters quite accurately.

Conservative scholars maintain that the general reliability of the canonical Gospels is quite strong. This implies that one should approach the Gospels with no more of a skeptical orientation than for other ancient works that are ostensibly concerned with historical matters. This entails that the burden of proof should not lie on the Gospels to prove in every instance that they are historically trustworthy; it should rather lie on the historian who in any particular instance wants to argue that they are not trustworthy. Such is the standard historiographical procedure adopted by historians in treating other texts and there is no convincing reason to prohibit its application to the Gospels as well.

The Jesus Seminar adopts a burden of proof argument, demanding that supposedly historical elements in the Gospels must be demonstrated to be so. In other words, all of the activities ascribed to Jesus in the Gospels are assumed not to be true until proven otherwise. Much more could be said about the Jesus Seminar and its effect

upon many Episcopalians. The work of the Jesus Seminar has had the effect of convincing many church members to reject the reliability and authority of Scripture. It has also given permission to those members who already wanted to reject these aspects of Scripture. Howard Clark Kee muses:

One can hope that the publications of the Jesus Seminar and others developing along comparable lines will be recognized for what they are—peripheral, prejudicial pronouncements—rather than being taken as a substantive development in responsible scholarly study of the historical Jesus.⁴¹

John Shelby Spong

One previously mentioned Episcopalian, who has been affected by liberalism, and has taken it to a whole new level, is a bishop formerly from New Jersey, John Shelby Spong. While not a scholar, or associated with the Jesus Seminar, Spong has had more of an impact on many in the Episcopal Church and their understanding of the Bible than practically anyone in the last thirty years. Spong has been able to parlay his radical liberal theology and his literary proclivity into a voice that has caught the attention of Episcopalians and non-Episcopalians alike.

In the book that best represents his mission, *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism*, Spong views virtually all evils in the religious world as related somehow to fundamentalism or a fundamentalistic view of the Bible. He attempts to categorize anyone who takes the Bible in its plain sense as those:

Whose religious security is rooted in a literal Bible (and) do not want that security disturbed. They are not happy when facts challenge their biblical understanding or when nuances in the text are introduced or when they are forced to deal with either contradictions or changing insights. The Bible, as they understand it, shares in the permanence and certainty of God, convinces them that they are right, and justifies the enormous fear and even negativity that lie so close to the surface in fundamentalistic religion.⁴²

In spite of his professed love for the Bible and desire to serve God through the Episcopal Church,⁴³ conservatives say the bishop is guilty of falsely associating a literalist approach to the Bible with a methodology not employed but by a few on the edge of the evangelical or fundamentalist universe. He tends to lump everyone from fundamentalists to evangelicals into one camp, even though there are significant differences between their interpretive methodologies.

For example, Spong mocks those who believe that Jesus actually said, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of the needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 19:24). His reasoning? He says the word camel and rope in Aramaic are almost identical, thus Jesus really said, *rope*. Of course, this does not take into account the very midrashic element of storytelling that Spong champions in some of his other works. Some scholars have suggested that there was a small doorway in certain gates in Jerusalem that were cut into a larger gate allowing humans to go through, but keeping larger animals out. The camel might not even be able to squeeze through were it to get on its knees and shuffle through (a very difficult task). It could even be that Jesus was using hyperbole in this passage to make a point.

Neither of these possibilities was even considered by Spong. When using his methodology, any verse he can't understand, or that doesn't seem to make sense, or seems contradictory is just further proof that the Bible is a completely human invention, full of errors, and not to be taken literally in any fashion. Spong's emphasis on midrash is key to understanding how he interprets the Bible.

Midrash

The Scribal concept of midrash (interpretation) involved the study of a text, including its content and purpose. The rabbis who practiced midrash believed that Scripture must be totally consistent within itself and inerrant. One part of the text could be interpreted in the light of any other part and harmonized with it, and any contradictions were apparent, not real. As time went on, the rabbis came to believe that Scripture contained different levels of meaning, so that a single passage could mean several different things at once. This idea of rabbinical interpretation was resisted before A.D. 70. It was resisted on the grounds that Scripture, being essentially a legal document, was unambiguous. Of course, what scribes took to be the obvious meaning of any given text could sometimes be very different from what a modern scholar would accept. Rabbinical midrash, in its concern to draw out the deeper meaning of the text to explain its obscurities and difficulties, and to apply it to the contemporary situation, was quite prepared to adopt methods of interpretation which went far beyond what the text actually said. Rabbis believed they were doing no more than bringing out its plain meaning.⁴⁴

They practiced this interpretive method partly by reading Scripture as a legal document, in which examples of behavior could be taken out of context and made to apply in ways that went well beyond anything the text actually said. Neil Fujita rightly defines midrash as predicated upon the belief that Scripture, as God's Word, must be relevant to people of all times. Because of this, Scripture is open to new understandings in all-new situations, adapting it to the present.⁴⁵ In this methodology one begins to see why Spong has such an affinity for midrash.

Richard Longnecker makes a point that while rabbis may have employed midrash, it does not seem to have been as highly emphasized in the preaching of early Christians:

In the preaching of the early Christians...one looks almost in vain for any clear consciousness of employing various methods of interpretation in quoting the Old Testament. The first Christian preachers seemed to have made no sharp distinction between literalistic treatments of the text, midrash exegesis, *peshet* interpretation and the application of predictive prophecies. All of these were employed and at times blended together. They did all of this from a Christian perspective.⁴⁶

Examples of Spong's Midrash

Wright says that the revisionists love to appeal to the use of *peshet* and midrash to do away with any notion of the historicity of an event or story in the New Testament. However, as he shares, they are quite willing to abandon these two things when they want to make a case for something outrageous. Such is seen in the idea proposed by Spong that Jesus was conceived illegitimately and quite probably by an act of sexual violence, i.e. rape. Ironically, a good deal of Spong's argument here consists of very literalistic readings of a few passages in the Gospels, like the wedding in Cana. Spong sets up a scheme of pseudo-midrash in which, as he admits, "the imagination is free to roam and speculate."⁴⁷

In another book, Spong declares that the use of the word *virgin* to describe Mary is wrong because of a mistranslation of the Hebrew word in Isaiah. In so doing he fails to take into account that the word for *virgin* he refers to does not always mean technical virginity (see Joel 1:8). Whereas the word used in Isa. 7:14, while it can mean young maiden, always implies that the woman is a virgin. The writers of the New Testament understood this and had no hesitation in calling Mary a virgin. Spong implies that far from being a virgin, Mary was actually a rape victim. Incredibly, according to Spong the

ideas of the virgin birth and bodily resurrection of Jesus did not appear before the ninth decade.⁴⁸ Scholars of all persuasions have soundly rejected this idea.

Spong's view of Scripture is further evidenced in his misrepresentation of Genesis 1 and 2, which he claims contain separate Creation accounts. Many have suggested that these are not two accounts of the Creation story, but rather a chronological account (Genesis 1) and a topical account (Genesis 2). The Bishop either does not know or ignores these as possible literary tools. One sees this sort of accounting reflected in the New Testament. For example, Matthew's account of the ministry of Christ is more topical, while Mark's record is more chronological.

The results of a changing worldview and the expansion of knowledge have, in the Bishop's view, caused Christians to have to "jettison the supernaturalism, the literalism, and the most obvious teaching of Scripture, and bow down to the Ground of Being ... the transcending reality present in the very heart of life (God)." This God can only be pointed to but can never be enclosed by propositional statements.⁴⁹ The reflections of this Episcopal bishop would be considered even by some liberal scholars to be radical. Spong's musings are not widely accepted even amongst those who interpret Scripture using a liberal hermeneutic.

Characteristics of Liberal Hermeneutics

Modern liberal scholarship's biblical interpretative methods have some distinct characteristics. James Montgomery Boice describes liberalism as having three main characteristics. First, humanism permeates much of their thinking. Liberal scholars tend to handle the Bible as if it were man's word about God, rather than God's Word to man.

Second, liberal scholars, by and large, view the Bible from a naturalistic perspective. This comes from a belief that the Bible is the result of an evolutionary process. In this view early and primitive understandings of God and reality gave way to later, more developed conceptions. From this follows the belief that so-called primitive ideas may be rejected in favor of more modern ones.

Third, liberal scholarship holds that if truth changes, as the evolutionary hypothesis dictates, then it continues to change; it has changed since the last books of the Bible were written; and consequently, one must go beyond the Scriptures to understand true religion.⁵⁰

Radical Subjectivism

Radical subjectivism is another aspect of liberal biblical interpretation. Subjectivism is the idea—not founded on fact or analysis—that Scripture can mean anything, depending upon the thoughts and needs of the one who reads it. This view is reflected in statements like: "Well, that's just your opinion; a person can prove anything from Scripture;" or "It doesn't matter what you believe as long as reading the Bible, hearing sermons, or going to church helps you cope with life."

This postmodern liberalism declares that all belief systems (except conservative ones) are to be regarded as equally plausible. Something is true if it is true for the individual. Christianity has become acceptable, because it is believed to be true by some—not because it *is* true. Two general principles can be seen as underlying this approach to the reading of Scripture. First, anything that is written will convey meanings that its author did not intend and could not have intended. Second, the author cannot adequately put into words what he or she means in the first place.⁵¹

In *Knowing Scripture*, scholar R.C. Sproul tells of a panel discussion in which he once participated with a group of Bible scholars. The panel discussed a particular New Testament passage, the meaning of which was in dispute. In his opening statement, one of the scholars said, “I think that we should be open and honest about how we approach the New Testament. In the final analysis we all read what we want to read into it, and that’s all right.”⁵²

The Importance of Defining Terms

When dealing with the Jesus Seminar, Spong, or liberal scholarship in general, one recognizes the importance of defining the terms that are being used. For example, in his critique of the debate between the liberal John Dominic Crossan and the conservative William Lane Craig, Borg makes the following observation:

About halfway through the dialogue section (of the debate), Crossan says to Craig, ‘I am not denying the resurrection. You just don’t like my definition of ‘resurrection.’ For Crossan and Craig the phrase ‘resurrection of Jesus’ means two different things. Thus it is not that one affirms it and the other denies it. Rather, both affirm it, but each means something different.’⁵³

Perhaps the real problem in dealing with the Jesus Seminar in particular and liberal scholarship in general is in the way conservatives have responded to these

challenges. Robert Thomas claims the problem starts with conservatives using the same methodology (with its incumbent terminology) as the liberals use and attempting to wring different results out of that methodology. It is futile for conservatives, he maintains, to respond to groups like the Jesus Seminar when they employ the same tainted methodology. Thomas asserts that when conservatives buy into the idea that the Gospels, for example, were dependent upon one another in some form, then immediately their reliability is called into question. Thus, the only way to objectify historical reliability is to accept the historical accuracy of Scripture throughout.⁵⁴

Liberals and conservatives start from a different theological historical key. Crossan's idea is that in this debate over the historical Jesus one needs to get his diversity out in the open and to see where theological agreement might be possible despite historical disagreement. Is this theological agreement enough to overcome the many objective differences between liberalism and conservatism? At the heart of this question is the role historical criticism plays in biblical interpretation.

The Benefits of the Rise of Historical Criticism

While this project is attempting to point out some of the fallacies of liberal theology (especially as it is exemplified in the Jesus Seminar), it must be stated that there are some benefits to the rise of historical criticism over the last fifty years. Bray lists the following benefits:

1. A Greek text, which has been reconstructed and is as close to the original manuscripts as it is possible to get. There may be new developments in this area, but at the moment that seems unlikely.

2. Through thorough study of the Greek language of the New Testament period, it can be determined that the New Testament was written in the common language of the day, but with a particular flavor all its own.
3. The entire New Testament must now be dated in the first century. This considerably reduces the time for oral tradition to have developed, and adds to the probability of having a greater historical accuracy of the text.
4. The make-up and content of the Gospels were strongly influenced by the needs of the early church, though it is not known exactly how.
5. The Gospel of John is distinct from the synoptics (Matthew, Mark and Luke), but this does not mean that it has no historical value. It may point to traditions which are older than those recorded in the synoptic Gospels.⁵⁵

Even if one acknowledges some of the positive benefits of historical criticism, the negative results of the liberalization of this tool are numerous and sometimes devastating. The effects of this liberalization can be seen in the views of Borg, Spong and other radical liberals. They continue to say the Nicene Creed Sunday after Sunday while denying the essential elements of the faith it proclaims. In fact, Spong says:

So being a disciple of this Jesus does not require me to make literalized creedal affirmations in propositional form about the reality of the theistic God who supposedly invaded our world and who lived among us for a time in the person of Jesus.⁵⁶

Paul's words to Timothy as he warned about unbelievers in the last days, "having a form of godliness but denying its power" (2 Tim. 3:5) seem to apply to Spong's views.

Borg reasons it this way:

I do not see it (the historical sounding statements of the Nicene Creed) as a statement of historical fact about Jesus that is to be believed but as a highly abstracted metaphor pointing beyond itself to the post-Easter Jesus of Christian experience.⁵⁷

Jewish scholar Jacob Neusner is quoted in the book *Jesus Under Fire* as questioning the scholarly agenda of the Jesus Seminar's reconstruction of the Jesus of history. He states that the Jesus Seminar is "either the greatest scholarly hoax since 'Piltdown Man' or the utter bankruptcy of New Testament studies—I hope the former."⁵⁸

A New Gnosticism

What much of modern liberal scholarship is saying today is not very different from that of the Gnostics of the early church. Gnostics were those who were in the church, but believed that there was a sharp distinction between matter and spirit. They claimed to have a secret knowledge of Jesus (given only to the initiated), and his secret sayings were not included in the accepted Scriptures.⁵⁹

The problem for the church posed by the Gnostics was in the realm of authority. The question was whether the Holy Scriptures were decisive when compared to the secret teachings of the Gnostics. The Gnostic teachers said that Jesus had passed on secret insights to them during the forty days after the resurrection, when he was together with his disciples. By rejecting the truthfulness of large portions of the canon of Scripture, the new Gnosticism of the Jesus Seminar and liberal scholarship is replacing the old Gnosticism of the early church.

Do conservative Episcopalians have a response to the Gnosticism, subjectivism, interpretive methods, and reinterpretation of Scripture by modern liberalism? The answer will be found in the remainder of this project by appealing to the revered three-legged stool of Anglicanism (Scripture, tradition, and reason).

CHAPTER 5 SETTING THE FOUNDATIONS

Tradition and Biblical Interpretation

Could it be that the Episcopal Church has been unduly influenced by liberalism to the point that it has neglected and misunderstood Scripture? Is the Episcopal Church, in fact, abandoning the tradition passed on by the writers of Scripture? Has the tradition of the early church fathers been abandoned as a means for determining the correct way of interpreting God's revelation and truth? These are the questions to be explored in this chapter.

The Development of a Paradigm for Biblical Interpretation Based on Tradition

It is not enough to simply point out the fact that modern liberal scholarship is in the spotlight today. Nor is it sufficient to show the trend in the Episcopal Church toward a more liberal interpretation of the Bible. It does not do much good to simply examine the fallacies and idiosyncrasies of the Jesus Seminar. Unless there is a better model, a more reasonable paradigm to follow, there is no reason to dismiss liberalism as an acceptable way of interpreting the Bible. If liberalism is more plausible than conservatism then it must be adopted. This project has attempted, thus far, to set forth a number of reasons why a liberal hermeneutic is implausible.

It is the contention of this work that conservatism offers a better paradigm for biblical interpretation. That paradigm has its foundation in the tradition of the church.

History has always been an important part of the life of God's people. Judaism and Christianity are first historical religions before they are philosophical religions. Dean Inge says, "For the Jews, faith always clothed itself in a historical dress."¹ Millar Burrows, one of the foremost American experts on the Dead Sea Scrolls stated:

There is a type of Christian faith...rather strongly represented today, [that] regards the affirmations of Christian faith as confessional statements which the individual accepts as a member of the believing community, and which are not dependent on reason or evidence. Those who hold this position will not admit that historical investigation can have anything to say about the uniqueness of Christ. They are often skeptical as to the possibility of knowing anything about the historical Jesus, and seem content to dispense with such knowledge. I cannot share this point of view. I am profoundly convinced that the historic revelation of God in Jesus of Nazareth must be the cornerstone of any faith that is really Christian. Any historical question about the real Jesus who lived in Palestine nineteen centuries ago is therefore fundamentally important.²

A cursory reading of church history, from the very beginning of the church through the great Anglican divines, will show that there has been a consistent and insistent appeal to the tradition of the early church as a line of defense against faulty or improper biblical interpretation.

Tradition Defined

Tradition would here be understood to designate an accepted doctrine or belief that reflects what Scripture clearly teaches as it was lived out in the life of the early church. These doctrines and beliefs would have been considered to be binding forces on account of their antiquity. This is not simply an uncritical sentimentality, a "we've always believed this," which can simply mean, "we've always been wrong." As the third-century writer Cyprian of Carthage pointed out, "An ancient tradition can be just an old mistake." Tradition is to be honored where it can be shown to be merited, and rejected where it cannot.

Many of the great authors in church history appealed to the early church or the fathers of the church to affirm a point of doctrine. By the *fathers* most writers mean the ante- and post-Nicene church leaders and writers from around the time of the apostles through the end of the fifth century. Robert Markus classifies the end of the early church as being the period between Augustine and Gregory the Great.³

The idea of *tradition* is of importance to modern conservatism. Evangelicals and other conservatives have always been prone to read Scripture as if they were the first to do so. They need to be reminded that others have been there before them, and have read it before they have. This process of receiving the scriptural revelation is tradition—not a source of revelation in addition to Scripture, but a particular way of understanding Scripture that the Christian church has recognized as responsible and reliable. Scripture and tradition are thus not to be seen as two alternative sources of revelation; rather they are part and parcel of the one revelation. Scripture cannot be read as if it had never been read before. The hymns and liturgies of the church constantly remind one that Scripture has been read, valued, and interpreted in the past.

Conservatives believe that the Holy Spirit has been active in the church from the first, doing the work the Spirit was sent to do—guiding God’s people into an understanding of revealed truth (John 16:13). The history of the church’s struggle to understand Scripture forms a commentary on the Bible that cannot, according to conservatives, be despised or ignored without dishonoring the Holy Spirit. The conservative says there is much to learn from the book of church history.

The Source of the Church's Tradition

Before the earliest books of the New Testament were penned, the apostolic teaching was transmitted orally. There is much evidence that elementary forms or summaries of Christian teaching were used in the church from the middle of the first century. Scripture uses such phrases as “what you have heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching”(2 Tim. 1:13). There are frequent references in the Pastoral Epistles to phrases like “sound doctrine,” “the deposit,” “the faith,” and “the excellent teaching,” all of which points to a definite and defined apostolic teaching. Similar allusions are found in other Epistles to “the faith once given to the saints,” and to “the confession”—all of which suggest a body of objective teaching that was used in giving instruction in the fundamentals of the Christian faith before any part of the New Testament was written. Some of these summaries of apostolic teaching were doubtless used in the instruction of adult candidates for baptism, in preaching, and in teaching from an early date.⁴

Some question why the canon of the New Testament should have been limited to works written in the first century. “Why shouldn't the Christian Bible contain the testimony of every succeeding generation of Christians to the power of the Risen Christ in his church?” When a question like this is asked, one might as well ask why the church should have a sacred Scripture at all.

The Testimony of the Apostles

The answer to the question is that the church and her faith are founded upon the historical redemption that God provided at a definite time and place in the world's

history. This is the testimony of the apostles who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the message (see 2 Pet. 1:16; 1 John 1:1-3). This testimony, the apostolic witness, is found in the New Testament—and nowhere else. Alan Richardson said of the New Testament:

New Testament documents are the only first-hand historical attestations concerning those events which provide the key to the Christian understanding of God and His dealings with our world. All later re-writings of the Gospel-story, and all subsequent re-interpretations of it, are dependent for their historicity and validity upon the witness of the New Testament.⁵

The Testimony of the Early Church

In the first few centuries after the death of the apostles, the literary efforts of certain esteemed leaders and teachers of the church served to communicate and defend the faith. These writings were held in high regard, often being circulated with the copies of the Scriptures themselves. They became an integral part of the spiritual literature of the growing Christian communities, and were frequently utilized in worship. These church fathers provide a valuable understanding of the history and development of Christian life, beliefs, and doctrine in a post-apostolic age.

The Formation of Christian Doctrine

Some of the more valuable insights from these writings relate to the formation of orthodox Christian doctrine, particularly as it developed in response to heresy. A study of the history and development of orthodox Christian doctrine reveals that several very important doctrines, such as the Trinity and the nature of Christ, were refined over an extended period. These teachings were to some extent implicitly understood by the early church, and later were more explicitly defined. Since false teachers distorted these and

other doctrines, the church fathers directed much of their attention to refuting these false teachings with apostolic teaching based on what would become the Scriptures. Hence, the writings of the church fathers provide an important resource for determining what Christians believed in the first few centuries after the apostles.

New theories and strange interpretations have been suggested by the thousands down through the centuries, most of them never to be propounded again. However, in every century there have been challenges to the Bible and its authority. Most often these challenges come in the form of biblical interpretations that bear no resemblance to anything that the church has ever taught or accepted. That the church has accepted it is no guarantee of the truthfulness or accuracy of interpretation. On the other hand, it is no small thing to simply ignore the wisdom of the church especially as one goes back toward the time of the apostles and Jesus. Moises Silva makes the observation that:

We can hardly claim to have developed a satisfactory approach to biblical exegesis if our exegesis is in essence incompatible with the way God's people have read the Scriptures throughout the centuries.⁶

Oscar Cullman remarks in his book *The Early Church*:

There is an apostolic tradition which is a norm because it rests upon eye-witnesses chosen by God, and because Christ speaks directly in it, and there is a post-apostolic tradition which is available help for the understanding of the divine Word, but it is not to be regarded as a norm. While accepting humbly the *exegetical and dogmatic directives* of the church and its teachers, we must be ready to set ourselves directly before the testimony of the Apostles, as the Apostles themselves were confronted directly with the divine revelation (Gal. 1:12), without any intermediate interpretation.⁷

Cullman maintains that the infant church (from apostolic times on) distinguished between apostolic tradition and ecclesiastical tradition, clearly placing the latter in subordination to the former.⁸

The Reformers and Tradition

It is often thought that the Protestant Reformation was a giant break with tradition. While there is an element of truth to this idea, the Reformers opposed the authority of tradition and of the church “only insofar as this authority usurped the authority of Scripture.” They never rejected the value of the church’s exegetical tradition when it was used in submission to the Scriptures.

Even Martin Luther could not have done the exegesis he did without the help of the church’s tradition. The tradition gave him a footing on which he could and did move and shift, but which he never lost. He believed that under this footing was the foundation of the Scriptures themselves. Luther claimed that by his exposition of the Scriptures he was a most loyal defender of the tradition.⁹

The father of Presbyterianism and a great Reformer, John Calvin, made many references to the church fathers. His position was to hold to the work of earlier interpreters. He saw himself indebted to the exegetical tradition of the church, above all the early church, especially Augustine. He was unwilling to give up the consensus of interpretation.¹⁰

Richard Pfaff states that Thomas Cranmer, one of the founding fathers of Anglicanism and of the Book of Common Prayer, as well as many other Anglican divines had a lot of exposure to the early church fathers. This can be seen not only in the fact that Cranmer had a least one hundred volumes of patristic writings in his library, but also in the various breviaries he used in daily prayer that contained readings from the fathers.¹¹ The men of the Oxford movement of the English Reformation received from the early church fathers a theological method, a specific sense of the very nature of theology, in

which the fathers were unanimous. They did not content themselves with reading and studying the fathers; they made the fathers' very approach to theology their own.

Patristic Theology and Interpretation

The patristic approach to theology was practical, not speculative. Any speculation that did occur was designed to redirect people's attention to the essential truth of the Christian faith that is Christ himself and the salvation offered in him. Another feature of patristic theology, closely linked to the previous one, is that for the fathers, theological thinking was no mere intellectual exercise. Patristic theology maintained that the intellect is incapable of turning to God without experience.

The early church developed a measure of unity in its biblical interpretation. While there was diversity in interpretation this unity was provided by the church's emphasis upon tradition. It was a tradition that was flexible, but ultimately derived from the apostolic age. This tradition was not, however, divorced from the known rule of faith. The tradition was expressed primarily in the forms of creeds and liturgies.

Tradition and the Rule of Faith

Julian Hills describes a *rule of faith* or *canon of truth* as lying behind these creeds and liturgies. The rule of faith was, in essence, an informal outline of Christian doctrine—often quoted or alluded to by early church fathers Irenaeus, Tertullian and their contemporaries.¹² The rule of faith was applied to check a teacher's interpretation of Scripture or apostolic teaching. It was used to corroborate the apostolic teaching, not supersede it. It was also used to hold the reins in on the use of allegory and to keep the church from losing the real sense of Scripture.¹³

Tradition and the Creeds

The creeds of the church have varied, as far as the details are concerned, but they maintained continuity with the major tenets of Christian belief reflected in such New Testament passages as 1 Cor. 8:6. The liturgies of the early church also varied, as far as details are concerned, but they maintained continuity with the baptism and the Lord's Supper of the apostolic communities. "The creeds represented the continuing church's judgments as to the essential theological contents of the Bible," according to Robert Grant.¹⁴ Richard Norris describes the creeds as more than words for intellectual assent—they are in fact declarations in which people identify themselves as standing in a certain relationship to God.¹⁵

The liturgies provided the contexts in which the spiritual meaning of biblical passages was to be understood. This is not to imply that individual students of the Bible could not attain a fresh insight into the meaning of the texts. It is to say that their insights should be checked with the traditional interpretations of the early church. These interpretations help reveal the contexts in which the texts were written, and give fresh insights into how various passages of Scripture were understood by the earliest Christians.

Only with the great doctrinal debates of the fourth and fifth centuries did the church take steps to *fix* the wording of the creeds. At the great Councils, attended by all available bishops, the precise wording was decided by majority vote. Their judgments were made on the following principles. The Creed must:

- Use biblical language wherever possible.
- Consist of controlled speculation on the *rule of faith*.

- Promote unity.
- Combat heresy.
- Seek to distinguish carefully between the attributes of the three persons of the Trinity.¹⁶

Whenever Episcopalians through the ages have confessed the words of the Nicene and Apostles' Creed such as "and was incarnate," they have believed that, as Christopher Bryan states:

The Christian religion has its origins neither in general religious experience, nor in some peculiar esoteric mysticism, nor in a dogma. Christian faith rests upon a particular event in history. This is Christian orthodoxy both Catholic and Protestant.¹⁷

Along with its appeal to the creeds and liturgies as sources to help understand the essential elements of the faith, the church has always looked to the early church fathers as another source to help in determining sound doctrine and correct biblical interpretation.

An Example of the Use of Tradition in Biblical Interpretation

This appeal to tradition is evidenced by a fifth century church father, Vincent of Lerins. Vincent emphasized the two main ways in which the church proved the true faith:

First, by the authority of the divine canon; then, by the tradition of the Catholic church. Not that the canon alone does not suffice for all things, but because many conceive various opinions and errors by interpreting the Divine Word according to their own private judgment; and thus it becomes necessary to fix the meaning of sacred Scripture by the one rule of the sense of the church.¹⁸

By the "sense of the church" Lerins meant the fathers of the church (which were before him). He speaks of the fathers not as individuals taken separately, but as taken all together. And therefore, no matter how many errors may have been detected in one or more of the fathers, and however they may disagree with one another (or at least may

appear to disagree), there are many things about which there is universal agreement with the fathers. A majority of them have given their united assent to the essential elements of true Christian faith.¹⁹

While there are many questions regarding the actual scope of Vincent's statement, nevertheless, the conviction of the Christian church through the ages is that there really was and is a "faith once delivered to the saints." The testimony of Scripture, while not always crystal clear or totally free of apparent discrepancies, has been clear enough to create a recognizable body of faith. The voice of the church, despite all of the conflicts, does have a certain unity, especially when it is carefully followed through the centuries. More will be said of Vincent later.

Tradition and Heresy

The traditional view of orthodoxy and heresy assumes the essential homogeneity of Christian doctrine throughout its early history. This uniform structure of central Christian doctrines (such as God, Trinity, Christology, etc.), while not fully developed, was thought to constitute the implicit belief of the main body of Christians from the earliest times. The details were worked out when challenges came from the heretics.

Walter Bauer advances the theory that the early forms of Christianity were quite diverse. He even posited that heresy represented a more authentic form of Christianity.²⁰ This view presents a completely different framework for the understanding of orthodoxy and heresy. Heresy, in this framework, is no longer the deviation from an already known truth, but rather is just an alternative movement that evolved, as did the church. Recent scholarship has cast considerable doubt on Bauer's thesis.

The fact that heresies existed in the early church indicates a reality that there was truth against which the heretics were in disagreement. The existence of heresy in Christianity presupposed the existence of a standard that might be challenged. Thus, in a sense, even when a teacher or preacher arrived at the point of denying certain fundamental assumptions of orthodoxy, heresy gave evidence for the fact that those assumptions existed, and that they were held to be fundamental. According to H.E.W. Turner, “The development of orthodoxy was not merely theologians’ business, it was the business of all in the early church.”²¹

A still more striking indication of the fact that the doctrines of historic Christianity were based on realities and are not merely intellectual theories is seen in the persistence and recurrence of major heresies. In many different centuries, in widely separated cultures, the same basic misunderstandings and misinterpretations of the person and work of Christ and his message appear repeatedly. An example of these misinterpretations is seen in the Arian heresy of the third and fourth centuries. These same errors have recurred in the modern Jehovah’s Witness movement.

The Development of Patristic Hermeneutics

The patristic period (100—451) was a time in which the church fathers established a basic doctrinal framework for Christianity. The initial stage of patristic interpretation was focused on battling heresies. Many of the early fathers such as Irenaeus, and Tertullian seemed to be much more literalistic in their interpretation of Scripture. This was needed to combat the attacks by the heretics.

The second stage of patristic interpretation began with Origen (185—254), Clement of Alexandria (200), and Dionysius (230—265). Origen was one of the church's rare students of Hebrew, and was extremely concerned with establishing the literal sense of the scriptural text as the basis from which to develop his allegorical exegesis. Clement sought to base the Christian faith on a secure scientific foundation. He did this for evangelistic reasons. Dionysius was a man of scholarly competence. While he was moderate and conciliatory, he was a staunch defender of orthodox truth. Origen, however, did regard the text of Scripture as an outward and perishable form that both concealed and revealed eternal spiritual truths. A fundamental separation between word and spirit was a characteristic of his interpretation, and distinguished it sharply from both the rabbinical and New Testament traditions.

During the period of 325—451 history reveals not only some of the great heretics of the church but also some of orthodoxy's staunchest defenders. One such heretic was Arius, a man who said Jesus was a created being. Arius applied a literalistic method of interpretation that failed to take into account the whole of Scripture. He resorted quite often to the *proof-text* method of biblical interpretation, which was unsatisfactory because it expounded verses out of their context and distorted their true meaning. Arius read Scripture with a wooden literalism that failed to take into account proper hermeneutics. Arius' erroneous method of interpretation was completely opposite to the method used by Origen. While Origen often ignored the plain meaning of a text in order to allegorize it, he always took into account the whole of Scripture instead of resorting to *proof-texting*. His allegorical style sometimes read into Scripture something it never intended to say.

His allegorizing was not meant to deny orthodox theology. In fact, Origen was a staunch defender of orthodoxy.

The Hermeneutics of Some of the Other Fathers

Athanasius (296—373), for whom the creed of the same title is named, defended the faith against Arius. He wanted the church to appreciate the whole sweep of redemptive history, which caused him to focus more on the historical than did Origen. Athanasius, however, did not interpret Scripture with wooden literalism. He clearly recognized that certain parts of the Bible were not meant to be taken literally. He was inclined to take Scripture in its plain and intended sense.

Cyril of Alexandria (444) was more literalistic in his interpretation, but was not opposed to appealing to the allegorical and typological exegesis of parts of the Old Testament. Gregory of Nyssa (330—395) followed a more literalistic exegesis. This was especially evident in his interpretation of Genesis 1 and 2. He did, however, resort to allegory in other places. Eusebius of Caesarea (263—340) followed the Origen school of interpretation in many ways, but was much more interested in historical and critical details than was Origen. Diodore of Tarsus (394) rejected the allegorical method of interpretation and stuck to the historical and grammatical. His main concern was to expound the sense intended by the original writer, not to find hidden meanings in the text. John Chrysostom (347—407) was a much loved church father who was known for the remarkable way in which he discerned the spiritual sense of the biblical text in its literal, rather than its allegorical meaning. He was a master at applying his interpretation to the immediate pastoral needs of his flock. Basil of Caesarea (329—379) turned away from

any kind of allegorical exegesis, and paid close attention to contemporary scientific thought in his exposition of Scripture (especially Genesis).

Jerome (347—419) was undoubtedly the greatest biblical scholar that the Latin church ever produced. Although best known for his Latin version of the Bible (The Vulgate), Jerome was also a respected interpreter. As his knowledge of Hebrew and Jewish exegesis increased, so did his disagreements with Origen's allegorical method. While not completely dismissing allegory he was much more inclined to point to a straightforward understanding of Scripture. This was especially true concerning doctrinal issues. Augustine of Hippo (354—430) was the most recognized of the Latin church fathers and was known more for his theology than for his exegesis. He interpreted Genesis first allegorically then literally. He rejected allegory as the main way of interpreting Scripture but continued to use it. He tackled problems and discrepancies by appealing to a literalistic point of view with occasional lapses into allegory.

The Goal of the Fathers in Interpretation

All of the great fathers of the church whether they be allegorists or literalists had as their underlying goal to maintain the unity of the church, as a living witness of the unity of the truth manifested in Christ. This meant that they had to provide a single, authoritative text of Scripture that would be accepted by everyone, as a prelude to formulating a single (and in practice, equally authoritative) doctrinal interpretation of it. The establishment of a fixed canonical text, which supported that doctrine, paralleled the establishment of a fixed doctrine in the great creeds.

Anglican Edward Browne, in his commentary about the *Thirty-nine Articles*, spoke of the relationship of doctrine to the Old and New Testaments. Whereas in science, he posits, one finds a regular advance from lesser to greater degrees of knowledge, the most recent findings and opinions quite often dispel the crude notions of the earliest science. But in the case of a divine revelation, this tentative process can have no place. The ones to whom the revelation is given to pass on are thoroughly instructed in its nature and its objects, and possess a knowledge that no inquiries of subsequent ages can improve. What they deliver is the truth itself, which is pure at its inception. It can become adulterated in its transmission to succeeding generations. As Browne argues:

The greater the distance from the fountain-head, the greater the chance that the stream will be polluted. On these considerations is founded the persuasion which has generally prevailed, that in order to ascertain what was the doctrine taught by the apostles, and what is the true interpretation of their writings, we ought to have recourse to the authority of those who lived nearest to their times.²²

Robert Finnerty relates that the church fathers frequently pointed to apostolic teaching as the source of their faith when he states:

Many patristic writers stressed the importance placed by the early church on gathering and preserving every teaching and saying of Jesus and the apostles. They constantly maintained that their beliefs originated from these sources.

Furthermore such claims did not occur in a vacuum. The early church fathers wrote in an environment where many were already familiar with apostolic teaching; many had been taught by disciples of the apostles or even the apostles themselves. Hence the introduction of non-apostolic doctrine would undoubtedly have raised much opposition from those who knew the truth firsthand.²³

B.J. Kidd states that the Anglican Church's general character of solidarity and stability during various storms in her history occurred because doctrinal standards were repeatedly reaffirmed in such a way as to secure a progressive continuity from the beginning. These doctrinal standards were not simply held by appealing to the authority of the Bible and the Bible only, but that of the Scriptures and the undivided church.²⁴

Development of the Authority of Continuing Apostolic Teaching

Apostolic Authority and Teaching Reflected by the Fathers

The preeminence of apostolic authority and teaching is seen throughout the patristic writings. For example, Irenaeus, speaking of Clement of Rome, said:

He had seen the Apostles and associated with them, and still had their preaching sounding in his ears and their tradition before his eyes—not he alone, for there were many still left in his time who had been taught by the apostles.²⁵

Matthetes, speaking to Diognetus, said, “I am not speaking of things strange to me ... for I have been a disciple of the apostles, and now I am becoming a teacher of the Gentiles.”²⁶

Even Origen, who was prone to much allegorizing affirmed, “The holy apostles, in preaching the faith of Christ, treated with utmost clarity certain matters which they believed to be of absolute necessity to all believers.”²⁷ Lest too glowing a picture of Origen is painted, it must be remembered that, while he had a high view of Scripture, he was not averse to saying that Scripture recorded things which either could not have possibly happened, or if they could, had in fact not been the case since they were unsuited to the characters concerned.

An example of this, what some would call faulty reasoning, is seen in his rejection of the literal “cleansing of the Temple” by Jesus. Origen believed that story to be allegory because it goes against the loving character of Jesus.²⁸ While Origen was a balance to a narrow literalism in his day, it was easy to throw out the baby with the bath water. The majority of the fathers avoided the narrow literalism of someone like Arius (who claimed Jesus was subordinate in nature to the Father). They also avoided the extremes of Origen.

A careful study of the fathers reveals that most practiced a conservative orthodox hermeneutic.²⁹

The early church recognized that God's whole creation consisted of both spiritual and physical. Often their music represented this two-dimensional world, sometimes reflecting the Origenistic view of Scripture speaking with human voice and yet allegorically. At other times the music of the early church reflected specific doctrinal beliefs spoken by God through his Word. Origen declares the whole scriptural record to be God's symphony, wherein the inexperienced listener may think he perceives jarring notes while the person whose ear has been well trained realizes the fitness and grace with which the varied notes are worked into one harmonious composition.³⁰

The Process of Doctrinal Formation

Eventually the church began the process of doctrinal formation, developing methods whereby allegorical interpretations were refined so that dogma and spirituality were not divorced. Spirituality was thus disciplined by the orthodox understanding of key texts. Even after the New Testament had been written, and was in the hands of all men, it was doubtless most important that bishops and churches should be rightly and soundly instructed in the truth and right meaning of the Scriptures. They should also guard themselves and their flocks against perverting the truth and falling into error. It is reasonable to assume, in view of the above, that when it comes to the essentials of the Christian faith, the church fathers are a good source for discerning apostolic teaching and doctrine. They can be immensely helpful in the hermeneutical process. One may look to

them for insight into what the first century church believed about Jesus Christ and the Christian life.

The Fathers' View of Scripture

Early Christians took from their Jewish heritage the conviction that the Old Testament Scriptures were inspired by God, through His Holy Spirit. Yet the apostolic fathers often attributed the authorship of all Scripture to Christ. By so doing they demonstrated their conviction about Christ's deity. As a result of this exalted view of Christ, the fathers held Scripture in the highest esteem.

Clement was convinced, with Philo, that Scripture cannot contain anything trite, and that every word was written with a precise intention, although this intention might not be perceptible.³¹ Athanasius calls the Scriptures divinely inspired and says they are in and of themselves sufficient to set forth truth.³² "The Scriptures are certainly perfect since they were spoken by the Word of God (Christ) and by His Spirit,"³³ Irenaeus said. In his defense of the main stream of Christian faith against able enemies, there was one standard of correct interpretation. The standard, as was mentioned earlier, was the rule of faith as preserved in churches in the apostolic succession. Irenaeus suggested that, if Christians can't find solutions for all the questions asked them about the Scriptures, they should leave such matters to God,³⁴ The teaching of the apostles, according to Irenaeus, was the true understanding of the Bible, and if anyone wishes to learn this true understanding he should, "read the Scriptures with the presbyters of the church (The church fathers), with whom is the apostolic doctrine."³⁵

Many early church fathers assumed that the scriptural uniformity opened the door for a combination of the historical and allegorical in interpreting the Bible. The church father Tertullian disliked allegory, fearing that it might dissolve the plain truth of Scripture into vague speculation. This was particularly true in the exposition of the New Testament where he believed that events like the final judgment must be taken at face value. Cyprian also, following Tertullian, used the Bible in an uncomplicated fashion, applying its literal sense, so far as he could, to the contemporary situation.³⁶

It was not so much that there was an anti-allegorical reaction in the early church, but rather there was a struggle to maintain the historical aspect of Scripture while trying to go beyond the normal literal reading applied to the pagan classics. All of the church fathers respected and preserved both the historical and the spiritual sense of Scripture.

Augustine and Interpretation

Augustine showed a positive attitude toward the literal meaning of Scripture, as long as Christians also accepted the spiritual or mystical sense.³⁷ He believed that because the Bible was the Word of God it could not have errors. Nonetheless, this did not mean there were no difficulties in it. Augustine maintained that if any apparent contradictions in Scripture are found, the author of Scripture was not to be blamed. Rather, it may be that either the manuscript was faulty, or the translation was wrong, or the reader has not understood. In other words, the mistakes are not in the revelation of God, but are in the misinterpretations of man.

Augustine put forth some rules to help in the exegetical process. In so doing he believed he was helping others to avoid common mistakes made in interpretation. His

task was to answer questions, and to solve apparent contradictions and other difficulties.

His rules of interpretation deal with the following common issues:

Authority—the authority of Scripture rests on the authority of the church. It was as the church received the divine text that it acquires its authority, so that books which are less universally recognized are correspondingly less authoritative. As he originally stated this, Augustine almost certainly meant to strengthen the authority of Scripture, not make it weaker. Only much later was his doctrine turned on its head, to be used by the Roman church as justification for its own claims to control the reading and interpretation of the Bible.

Obscurities—the obscurities in Scripture have been put there by God, and may be interpreted on the basis of many plain passages. This rule has continued to function as a main principle of biblical exegesis up to modern times.

Ambiguities—when Scripture is ambiguous, the rule of faith can be used to interpret it. Augustine mentioned the questions over the punctuation of John 1: 1-2 as an example of this. It could be construed to read: “... and there was God. This word was in the beginning with God,” giving an Arian interpretation of Christ. But it must not be read in this manner because the church’s faith says otherwise. The true reading is “... and the Word was God. This was in the beginning with God.” Tradition reveals the correct rendering of the passage.

Literalism—figurative passages must not be taken literally. In the debate over literalism, attention must be paid to the literary form of each text.

Letterism—(a word having only one meaning) – A word need not always have only one meaning. Meaning may vary with the context, as when the word *shield* signifies both God’s good pleasure (Psalm 5:13) and faith (Ephesians 6:16). Augustine said that because a word may have several meanings, it may be interpreted in a way that the author did not intend, but which is in line with what can be found in other parts of Scripture. Augustine believed that the Holy Spirit had already provided for this possibility, and warranted such a handling of the text.³⁸

Augustine taught that a blind literalism was not required to still maintain the authority and reliability of Scripture. The authority of the biblical books was derived from their acceptance by the successors to the Apostles. The rules he set up were to help assure the proper interpretation of the authoritative Scriptures.

Apostolic Succession Important in the Maintenance of Apostolic Teaching

As Augustine’s rule number one indicates, there was a general agreement amongst the fathers that only the catholic churches could truly claim to be historically continuous and theologically dependent upon the apostles. The fathers appealed to five proofs to show that catholic churches do, in fact, represent orthodox Christianity. First, churches in the apostolic line have the greatest authority in matters of doctrine and scriptural interpretation. Tertullian argued in his *Prescription Against Heretics* that the apostolic churches (those founded directly by the apostles, plus all churches springing

from these churches) possess true tradition; committed to the apostles by Jesus Himself, and therefore have divine authority.³⁹ He said the method of determining truth in doctrine was that:

.... All doctrine that agrees with the apostolic churches—those wombs and original sources of faith—must be reckoned for truth, as undoubtedly containing that which the said churches received from the apostles, the apostles from Christ, and Christ from God.⁴⁰

Tertullian went further in arguing that heretical teaching was not found in those apostolic churches; therefore, the heretics must be accounted as false teachers, non-Christian and, therefore denied the use of Scripture. Bruce Shelly maintains that Tertullian distinguished between two types of tradition—ecclesiastical and apostolic. Ecclesiastical tradition referred to church customs, not specifically found in Scripture. In his use of *apostolic tradition*, Tertullian never spoke as if it were accessible apart from the Christian writings (the Scriptures). These Scriptures spoke authoritatively within the apostolic churches.⁴¹

Second, Irenaeus argues that the demonstration of a historical succession of bishops from the apostles provided further proof that the apostolic churches were true witnesses to apostolic teaching⁴². Third, the Gnostic claim to secret tradition (gnosis) presented a major challenge to the church's basis of authority. Particularly troublesome was their belief that a secret tradition was necessary in order to understand the Scriptures, thus, avoiding any refutation of their doctrines from the Scriptures themselves. The visible tradition (based on Scripture and Apostolic teaching) was the final court of arbitration in the area of interpretation. Fourth, throughout the last part of the second century the church evolved a succinctly argued *rule of faith* that could be used as a test of orthodoxy. The *rule of faith* and the results of proper interpretation of the Scriptures were

considered the same. Fifth, Irenaeus argued that the fact that the churches share the same rule of faith and are consistent in their teaching is evidence that the apostolic churches have faithfully preserved the teaching of the apostles.⁴³ Many heretics claimed they had discovered unadulterated truth. R. L. P. Milburn says fathers like Irenaeus believed that, because of the apostolic succession of the church's bishops, the tradition of the apostles in the church and the preaching of the truth came right down to the church fathers. Thus, it was believed that the ordered succession of bishops ensured sound doctrine.⁴⁴

The Vincentian Canon and Tradition

The fight against heresy in the early church eventually led to the development of detailed guides to true Christian faith and belief. Vincent of Lerins, as was mentioned earlier, was especially helpful in this endeavor. He wrote a guide for the universal faith in an age when many competing ideologies attempted to infiltrate Christianity. One of the most repeated items within his guide was the "Vincentian canon," a statement intended to aid in the identification of Christian truth. He set up a hierarchy of determinants for establishing orthodox Christian teaching.

His first claim was that the ultimate ground on which Christian truth rests is Holy Scripture. Only if there were disputes as to the meaning of Scripture was the authority of the church to be used to assure correct interpretation. This authority was derived from the tradition of the church and was a major consideration in determining doctrine. Vincent taught that the *canon* was what has been believed everywhere, always, and by all. The trio of universality, location, and time was used to distinguish between the true and the false in the tradition of the church.

The importance of these ideas is that they are repeated over and over again in the Western church. The Anglican Church adopted the Vincentian approach when seeking to articulate the true faith and doctrine of the church. It also appears explicitly in Anglican Bishop John Jewel's great defense of the Church of England entitled *Apologia Ecclesiae Anglicanae* (1562). The Vincentian ideas were also expanded upon with brilliance by one of the young men Jewel mentored, Richard Hooker, in his *Treatise on the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*. This *canon* forms the foundation for the doctrine and morals of the Anglican Communion from its beginning. The Vincentian ideas are foundational because they clearly reflect an understanding of the faith by the apostolic church.

Tradition and Morality

It is through the study of tradition (through the first five centuries) that one also gets a clearer understanding of how the early church viewed moral and ethical questions. Again, as one gets closer to Christ and the apostles it is possible to get a better idea of how the early church understood the moral and ethical injunctions of the Bible. When, for example, one looks at the tradition of the early church he notices a regular appeal to sexual purity. Early church tradition is just as emphatic in its affirmation of heterosexual marriage as being the sole and proper context for sexual relations. There is a total absence of any affirmation of homosexual behavior. Such behavior was not seen as being in line with the will or Word of God. Church father John Chrysostom, an influential fourth century bishop and theologian, reflects this view. He declared that homosexual intercourse was a sin worse than fornication, worse even than murder.⁴⁵ While one may

or may not agree with his conclusions, Chrysostom's statement reflects the view of the early church regarding the immorality of this practice.

Many changes proposed in the Episcopal Church today go against the concepts of the Vincentian canon, as well as early church tradition. Instead of believing and following doctrines that have been believed "everywhere, always, and by all," many in the Episcopal Church propose to believe that which in the early church was believed nowhere, never, and by none. While some have tried to downplay the importance of the Vincentian canon, it remains a testament to the intellectualism of the early church fathers.

The Relationship of Tradition and Scripture

It is, however, a great mistake to think that the function of the church is to settle definitely every difficult question or issue as it comes up. No trace of any such view either in Scripture, or in the creeds, or in early church history can be found. Nothing would have been easier than for the church to summon a council and settle all disputes by a majority vote, but no such action was ever taken. On the contrary, it is known that after the Council of Nicea the struggle went on for many years before the decisions of that assembly were universally accepted.

The authority of the first four General Councils is acknowledged in church history, and their doctrinal standards are the church's heritage today. But even their decisions were accepted only because they commended themselves to the entire church as in accordance with the divine revelation. It was this subsequent endorsement by the whole Christian world and not the mere decision of a council that constituted the real test of universality. Conservatives still believe that while it is not always possible to

coordinate tradition with Scripture, they often appeal to the former whenever possible or necessary. This appeal should always be done, however, under the shadow of Holy Scripture.

The testimony of the early church is invaluable in many respects. A church commentator writing some three centuries after the great fathers of the second and third centuries pointed to the importance of studying the early church authors:

Let us without hesitation rise up to the study of Holy Scripture by means of the invaluable expositions of the Fathers, as though by a ladder of vision, so that, borne along by their genius, we may be found worthy to attain effectively to the contemplation of God.⁴⁶

The Importance of Early Church Tradition in Anglicanism

The appeal to church tradition as it relates to the early church is a very Anglican thing to do. Various Anglican authors, it has been shown, appealed to the fathers to affirm or reject any current teachings which may be piquing the interest of church members. Certainly early Anglican authors placed much stock in what the early church fathers taught. Turner describes this Anglican appeal to the early church when he states:

An opponent of the Anglican Church at an earlier period once described her as a ‘Patristical Protestant church,’ and, though many Anglicans at all periods of her history would question the complete adequacy of the latter epithet, her constant appeal (after Scripture) to the church of the first five centuries lends some support to the former description.⁴⁷

John Burgon, Dean of Chichester many years ago, compiled an astounding index of Scriptural quotations from the church fathers totaling 86,589. He was a staunch defender of biblical inerrancy in its original manuscripts. Burgon attempted to show the trustworthiness of Scripture by his appeal to the fathers.⁴⁸ The Dean is one example of many Anglicans who utilized the patristic fathers in their hermeneutics. This leads to

another question: If the early Anglican divines placed such an emphasis on the tradition of the early church fathers to help determine correct doctrine and belief, in what other ways did that emphasis affect the way they interpreted the Bible? This question is especially important in light of the fact that an appeal to tradition is one leg of the Anglican three-legged stool of approaching the determination of Christian truth.

It has been shown that the early church appealed to the teachings of the apostles passed down to them as their source of authority for determining correct doctrine and proper interpretations of Scripture. In order for those far removed from apostolic times to interpret Scripture properly, it is helpful to try to go back to those closest to the apostles to determine how they interpreted Holy Writ. In so doing one will be less likely to fall into the trap of believing false doctrine and turning away from the truth (see 2 Tim. 4:3-4). Many of the early Anglicans were very familiar with the early church fathers. That familiarity was what they viewed as part of practicing a proper biblical interpretive methodology. In the next chapter the influence of the fathers will become even more apparent as early Anglicanism's approach to Scripture is examined in more detail.

CHAPTER 6 ANGLICAN DIVINES AND HERMENEUTICS

Modern-day Anglicans and Episcopalians tend to make assumptions about the way the two churches interpret Scripture. Some believe that the Anglican ethos includes a wide-open, no rules approach to the Bible. Some clergy tout that ethos as one that allows a great freedom to hold a diversity of opinions about how to interpret the Scriptures. Is this a true assessment of the church? Is there really an Anglican hermeneutic? Are there insights from the early Anglican divines that might help twenty-first century church members as they read the Bible? These questions will be addressed in the balance of this chapter.

Anglicanism and the Bible - An Introduction

The premise of the study to this point has been to build a case for a conservative hermeneutic by first examining the foundation of the early church fathers and their approach to Scripture. In order to know how the apostolic church interpreted the Bible one must look at those closest to them. Likewise, to find out what true Anglicanism teaches about the Scriptures and their interpretation, those closest to the beginning of Anglicanism must be studied. By looking at a number of the early Anglican fathers, a perspective of hermeneutics is seen that reflects the intentions and insights of Anglicanism's founders. The Episcopal Church recognizes these divines as the ones most responsible for the formation of the mother church. The premise behind this examination is to determine if the modern-day understanding of Anglicanism lines up with its original

establishment, and whether Anglicanism was meant to be an ever-evolving entity in which the history, doctrines, and beliefs of the past hold little or no sway over the current church.

Anglicanism's Three-Legged Stool

It will be important to use as a focal point the generally accepted idea of authority in Anglicanism resting in a three-legged stool of Scripture, tradition, and reason. This *three-legged mantra* has been the rallying point for Anglicans for centuries. But the question is: "Has it been misunderstood by the twentieth and now twenty-first century Anglican/Episcopal Churches?" A proper understanding of this authoritative stool will be helpful for the average Episcopalian to understand how to correctly approach hermeneutics.

The Via Media

If the Episcopal Church is to truly be (as it claims) the church of the *via media*, a church which bridges the gap between Catholic and Protestant, then it must offer both sides a middle ground of interpretive methods which encompasses both the essence of the Catholic appeal to tradition and the essence of the Protestant appeal to *Sola Scriptura* (Scripture only). It is the contention of this paper that Anglican conservatism best represents this *via media* concept. Just what is the *via media*?

Peter C. Moore, Anglican priest and president of Trinity Episcopal School for the Ministry in Ambridge, Pennsylvania, elaborates on the *via media* aspect of the Anglican Communion when he says:

Historically, Anglicanism has seen itself as the midpoint between; on the one hand, the radical views of the Puritans, who wanted to strip the church both of the theological substance of Catholicism and also of its form, and, on the other, the sacramentalism of the Roman Catholic church. While keeping Scripture as its supreme authority, Anglicanism honors reason and tradition as important vehicles through which that authority is grasped. It celebrates the breakthrough of the Reformation, such as justification by faith alone, but retains the Catholic sense of mystery and the crucial role of the sacraments in deepening that faith.”¹

Moore argues that much of American Anglicanism has lost the original essence to a “religion of good taste.” Noting this degeneration, especially in North America, Moore sees this loss as symptomatic of a decline of the presence of a tradition of sound apologists, “whose speaking and writing have challenged people to grapple with the essential care of the Faith as it interacts with the secular world.”²

There are some great modern-day Anglican apologists who have defended the traditional orthodox faith. Authors such as J. B. Phillips, C. S. Lewis, Alan Richardson, John Stott, Michael Green, J. I. Packer and N. T. Wright are some of the better-known writers who have utilized a conservative hermeneutic in the context of the modern art of biblical criticism.

In order to examine Anglicanism and its relationship to biblical interpretation one must begin before the Reformation, which is considered the official start of Anglicanism. The church in England is most often associated at its earliest times with people like Augustine, Alban, Columba and others.

The Early Anglicans

Augustine in England

The Church of England did not, as some think, begin in the sixteenth century because of King Henry VIII's desire to divorce and remarry. While Christianity's roots in England can be traced back to St. Alban (250 A.D.), St. Columba (521 A.D.), St. David (520 A.D.), and others, it would be much nearer the truth to say that the Church of England *began* when St. Augustine of Canterbury landed in Kent with a party of monks in the year 597 A.D. where he set up his headquarters at Canterbury. Since then, there has been no essential break between the church overseen by Augustine and the church under the current Archbishop of Canterbury.

Little is known of the interpretive method of many of the earliest Christian inhabitants of England. Most is known about Augustine who resided in England in the late fourth and early fifth centuries. According to Robert Grant, Augustine searched for an all-inclusive principle by means of which he could determine which portions of Scripture were allegorical and which were not. In the course of his theological development he came to take more and more passages of Scripture in their plain sense. The allegorical method became for him a stepping-stone toward a final interpretation that incorporated the historical and traditional understandings of Scripture.³

Pre-Reformation England

For the most part the early inhabitants of England followed closely the established church's methodology when interpreting the Bible. They tended to be quite conservative in their understanding and interpretation of Scripture. By the fourteenth century, a deep

resentment had built up toward the Papacy. The rise of nationalism along with economic and social changes began to move England toward a split from the rule of Rome. These factors along with a general discontent within the life of the church all contributed to the coming Reformation.

The traditions of the Roman Catholic Church had become so powerful that they began, in some cases, to rise above Scripture and its authority. Pious observances and customs, once the inspiration to deeper devotion, had become changed out of all recognition. Pardons and indulgences remitting the punishments of purgatory were commonly sold, along with the miraculous charms, bones and trinkets that passed as relics of the saints.

A final aspect of Christianity in pre-Reformation England remains to be noted. One of the imperishable strains of Christian religious experience has been the repeated yearning of people for a single conservative fellowship in which life is guided by the Gospel precepts, and each person finds a discipleship like that of the little band that walked the Galilean roads with the Master. Over and over in Christian history this strain has broken out, challenging the worldliness of the institutional church, witnessing against compromise with the encroachments of secularism. Such was the condition of England leading up to the Reformation.

John Wycliffe

John Wycliffe (1329—1384), scholar and priest, was in many ways England's most important figure in the fourteenth century. According to Bray, Wycliffe wanted a Bible study that was intellectually rigorous, yet accessible to the wider public at the same

time. He was a strong advocate of the moral interpretation of Scripture, “shorn of its allegorical tendencies.” For him, the literal sense was moral enough.⁴

Wycliffe’s way was paved by a notable medieval interpreter, Robert Grosseteste. Grosseteste was a keen scientist and wrote a number of commentaries on Scripture. His theological writings made use of the Greek fathers in a way unparalleled in his contemporaries. He did his utmost to promote biblical studies, helping to create an English school of interpretation that produced an atmosphere favorable to the later work of Wycliffe and a group called the Lollards.

Wycliffe’s study of the Scriptures and the early church fathers caused him to become dissatisfied with the scholastic writers of his day. His knowledge of canon and civil law helped him to discern the many errors of total submission to a Pope.⁵ Wycliffe’s faith came from the Scriptures. He considered them as divine revelation, containing a sufficient and perfect rule of Christian belief and practice. He deemed the authority of Scripture to be superior to any other written or traditional authority. He believed that all truth was contained in Scripture, and that no conclusion was to be allowed unless sanctioned by the sacred records.⁶

Some of his followers (noted earlier as Lollards) were greatly influenced by Wycliffe. They were outspoken about the corruptions of the church and of the clergy. The established church in England resisted the Lollard movement spawned by Wycliffe. While the Lollards were more political revolutionaries than church reformers, Lollardry became one of the contributing sources of English Protestantism.⁷

The way the Lollards struck out wildly on all sides showed their general dissatisfaction with the state of faith at that time and the perceived need to return to the

Bible, now made easier to access and understand by Wycliffe. He believed that the Bible derived its absolute authority from the fact that with unprecedented consistency, the Bible belonged to the eternal world of ideas. Indeed it was the ancient image of all eternal truth and the book of life. For that reason it was sufficient in itself. All universal concepts and the eternal moral laws were contained in it; indeed it was identical with the Logos, with Christ himself.

This idealistic view at the same time carried with it a strong trust in human reason. The eternal truths of universal concepts and morality could already be discovered in this world by reason, and the truths of faith were demonstrable as a rule or principle by reason. Thus, the Bible cannot contain anything that would not be in accord with reason.⁸

Anglican Divines and the Reformation

The Reformation's Impact on Hermeneutics

At the Reformation in the early part of the sixteenth century, the Church of England struggled to maintain its Roman Catholic roots while seeking ways to embrace the emerging Protestantism. Thrown back upon herself, isolated by the course of events from the rest of the Catholic world, the Church of England had to restate her theology and her principles, and revive her spiritual life in the light of the Reformation crises. Without surrendering for an instant her legitimate share in the teaching of the church fathers, she had learned from the Reformation to refer her theology back to the test of the Scriptures. While expressly acknowledging the authoritarian force of the creeds and the decisions of the ecumenical councils, she felt the necessity of commending the truths that

they express to the reason and the conscience as well as to the obedience of man. She appealed to a wider theology than that of Protestantism. She claimed to have a truer outlook than that of her Roman brothers and sisters. Protestantism was moving more toward the private interpretation of the individual and the authority of a few leading theologians. Roman Catholicism was concentrating its focus on obedience to an almost military sway of the Pope. But the English church was trying to base its faith upon Scripture as the source of truth, and to justify it by the consent of the early church as the interpreter and witness of Scripture. That same Scripture was to be proved and explained by reason, the illuminator and informer of the mind and conscience.

There were difficulties facing this middle way between the dogmatism of Rome and the individuality of Protestantism. It demanded a moral and intellectual effort. It provided no Pope or theologian for the solution of all doubts. It sought for unity through the compelling power of truth, not in the suppression of the will. Within the context of the essential elements of faith and morals it encouraged a variety of thought. The Church of England was careful in her Reformation to avoid the extremes of the Catholic and the Protestant. In all her public documents, her Prayer Book, her sermons, her articles, her canons, she was careful not to be committed to a single word that went beyond the language of Scripture and antiquity.⁹

Thomas Cranmer's Influence on Anglican Hermeneutics

One of the guiding lights during this process of transformation after the Reformation was Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Cranmer. This English Reformer was quite innovative as he began the process of reordering English Christianity. He

developed the English Prayer Book in 1549, which would later be known as the *Book of Common Prayer*. He believed that he was not establishing something new, but returning to a more ancient tradition. Cranmer's belief was that true Anglican faith was closely linked with the faith of the early church fathers. He asserted that in the early days of the church, liturgy served godliness by its concentration on the Bible, read and expounded. He further asserted:

But these many years past, this godly and decent order of the Fathers hath been ... altered, broken, neglected, by planting uncertain stories and legends.¹⁰

Cranmer was greatly disturbed by the way the pre-Reformation church had abandoned both the tradition of the fathers, and the Scriptures.

Cranmer and the Articles of Religion

Along with developing a new Prayer Book and its accompanying liturgies, Cranmer also developed what would become the Church of England's *Articles of Faith*. Initially, these *Forty-two Articles* dealt with everything necessary for the Anglican to believe. These were later condensed down to the *Thirty-nine Articles of Religion* that appear in Anglican and Episcopal Prayer Books even today. The Prayer Book set the standard of doctrine for worship. The decisions of the undivided church based on the teaching of Scripture formed the ultimate test of orthodoxy and heresy. The *Articles* initially safeguarded certain points of doctrine from medieval and sixteenth century exaggerations.¹¹

At the Reformation the Church of England reaffirmed the primacy of Scripture. The sixth of the *Thirty-nine Articles* states "Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation." The eighth article shows the primacy of the Bible even to the creeds of the

church by urging the acceptance of the creeds on the ground that “they may be proved by most certain warrants of Holy Scripture.”¹²

Both deacons and priests in the Anglican Church were required at ordination to proclaim their belief in the sufficiency of Holy Scripture. The nineteenth *Article of Faith* points out that the churches of Jerusalem, Alexandria, Antioch, and Rome have erred in matters of faith.¹³ Thus, the Scriptures are to take preeminence over the traditions of the church anywhere it may have been in conflict.

At the same time, the appeal to tradition was not abandoned. The preface of the Ordinal in the 1552 Prayer Book claimed that the threefold ministry of bishops, priests and deacons was validated not by Scripture alone but also by ancient authors, or, in other words, the early church fathers. And this combination of Scripture with the ancient authors was to be understood by all those who were diligently reading and therefore recognize that the ministry was both apostolic and contemporary.

The Confessional Nature of the Articles

Some have tried to say that the Anglican and Episcopal Churches are not *confessional*. That is, in contrast to certain other denominations that have retained a statement of beliefs such as the Westminster Confession, they have no doctrinal standards, no essentials of the faith. There are others who disagree. Dyson Hague in the Forward to Griffith-Thomas’ book *The Principles of Theology: An Introduction to the Thirty-nine Articles* argues:

For, after all, the *Thirty-nine Articles* still stand, not only as a great monument of the victories of the Reformation, but as an ever-steadfast bulwark of the true principles of the Church of England. It is the great historic confession of the Faith, and to all conscientious sons of the church they do contain the true doctrine of the

Church of England agreeable to God's Word. Our heart's desire and prayer to God is that this monumental work will not only prove of inestimable value to the present generation of the clergy and laity generally, and especially to the divinity students in all the Theological colleges throughout the Empire, but that it will remain as a standard for accuracy, suggestiveness; and fullness for future generations of English churchmen.¹⁴

It is sometimes said that the *Articles* are ambiguous and were intended as a compromise, and that therefore any clear, definite statement of church doctrine is impossible and not to be expected. But this does not agree with the facts of the case. Cranmer's object in promulgating the *Articles* was clearly expressed in his letter to John a Lasco, 1548:

We are desirous of setting forth in our churches the true doctrine of God, and have no wish to adapt it to all tastes and to trifle with ambiguities, but laying aside all carnal and prudential motives, to transmit to posterity a true and explicit form of doctrine agreeable to the rule of the sacred writings.¹⁵

Cranmer went on to say in another statement in 1563 that the *Articles* were written "for the avoiding of the diversities of opinions, and for the stablishing (sic) of consent touching true religion."¹⁶

Episcopal Clergy Required to Sign Statements Affirming the Articles

This same intention regarding the *Articles* is seen in the requiring of clergy to sign statements affirming them as the recognized statement of doctrine. While not being officially confessional, the results appear to be much the same. That the *Articles* were intended to be the legal and authorized statement and test of Episcopal doctrine on all subjects treated in them seems quite clear because of the *Articles'* origin, history and purpose.

It is alleged that Anglican/Episcopal clergy may believe and teach almost anything (or almost nothing). Sometimes this is said in criticism; sometimes

Episcopalians themselves as a matter of pride say it. Either way, only by ignoring or demeaning the *Thirty-nine Articles of Religion* can such criticism can be said. It has become fashionable, in contemporary times, to do just that. It is not uncommon to hear seminary professors or liberal clergy in the Episcopal Church make statements like “since the Episcopal Church has no dogma ... diversity is possible. *The Thirty-nine Articles* serve as a possible guidance, but they have no authority.” The Prayer Book states that before ever being ordained as a deacon, prior to being ordained priest and before being consecrated bishop, a person must pledge conformity to the “doctrine, discipline, and worship of the Episcopal Church.”¹⁷ The Constitution of the Episcopal Church specifically states that those so ordained must be in conformity to the *Book of Common Prayer*. That same Constitution includes the *Articles of Religion* as part of that Prayer Book.¹⁸

The Relevance of the Articles Today

The relevance of Cranmer’s *Thirty-nine Articles* for today lies in the fact that, for the most part, they speak, albeit in dated language, of eternal truth—of the nature of God, the life and work of Christ as Savior, the work of the Holy Spirit; of the nature of humanity, man’s sinfulness, and need of grace; of the mercy and love of God displayed in justification and salvation; of the nature and work of the church, its ministry, its doctrine and sacraments; and of the relationship between the church and the world through which Christians pass, as pilgrims on the way to an eternal destiny. Dr. Massey Shepherd, who before his death in the late twentieth century was the preeminent Episcopal authority on canon law and the Book of Common Prayer, said of *the Thirty-nine Articles*:

They are Protestant to the extent that they do not claim any doctrines as necessary to salvation except those that can be proved and established by the Holy Scriptures; but they are also Catholic in the sense that they do not reject the developed traditions of the undivided church of the early centuries that are in accord with the mind of Scripture.¹⁹

B. J. Kidd affirms the importance of the *Articles* to help in determining what the Anglican is to believe. He maintained that when it comes to doctrine, Scripture must be interpreted not by the private opinions of the interpreters, but in subordination to the doctrinal standard which governed from the first, all the changes, constitutional or religious, that were made (i.e., the early church and Councils).²⁰

Cranmer and Tradition

Cranmer, in composing the *Thirty-nine Articles*, acknowledged that while dependence upon the early tradition of the church was important, it must be acknowledged, as Article 21 says:

That General Councils...sometimes have erred and that things ordained by them as necessary unto salvation have neither strength nor authority, unless it may be declared that they be taken out of Holy Scripture.²¹

According to McGrath, Cranmer emphasized Scripture and the major doctrines of the church. He also had a strong emphasis on historical continuity.

Tradition mattered to Cranmer, who believed that to Anglicans the early church was seen as a defining moment in the interpretation of Scripture.²²

John Jewel

Bishop John Jewel, bishop of Salisbury and a contemporary of Cranmer, pointed out that Cranmer was fond of asking a Catholic colleague to show him any one authority (for the point he was making) either of Scripture or ancient author, either Greek or Latin, and he would switch over to the other side.²³ This shows the theological weight Cranmer

gave to Scripture and antiquity. His appeal to both sources shows the balance of Cranmer's hermeneutical methods.

Jewel, was a most influential voice in defense of Anglicanism against Rome and Reformation Protestantism. He was a staunch defender of the Bible, and believed that just as there were heresies and heretics in the primitive church, there is and would be the same in all generations. The antidote for heresy was the same used by the ancient fathers who called on the people, and exhorted them to read the Bible, so that they might be better able to avoid heresies.²⁴ Bishop Jewel also declared that the authority of the Bible was above that of a General Council of the church, and was the ultimate interpreter in disputed doctrinal questions.²⁵ At the same time he called upon tradition to bolster his arguments. When defending a prayer book in English, he made an appeal to Scripture and tradition:

Our first proposition is that it is contrary to the Word of God and the practice of the Primitive church to use in the public prayers and administration of the Sacraments any other language than what is understood by the people.²⁶

Jewel defended the split between the English church and that of the church from Rome because Rome left the teachings of the fathers, and of the apostles, and of Christ; and of the primitive and Catholic church. He believed the Church of England had come as near as it possibly could to the church of the apostles, and the old Catholic bishops and fathers, "which church we know hath hitherunto been sound and perfect."²⁷

Richard Hooker

Richard Hooker (1553—1600) was perhaps the most influential man in the history of the Anglican Church. He argued most effectively for its distinctiveness.

Hooker, an ordained priest and theologian, made a positive argument for Anglicanism against the attacks by Puritan Presbyterians on the one hand, and against the Roman Catholics on the other. Hooker tried to make peace between these two bodies by seeking a common ground in the rational principles that permeate the universe, which man, being rational, can apprehend, and which are in accord with the teachings of Scripture.

The rational principles are seen, so Hooker said, in the eternal law by which God governs the universe. Human laws by which states and the church are ordered should be in accord with this law of reason. Human laws should be adapted to meet the needs of particular historical situations. He believed that it was possible, even necessary, to allow practices which were not expressly forbidden in Scripture and which could be justified on the basis of tradition and reason.

For Hooker the Scripture was the ultimate court of appeal against abuse rather than a handbook outlining daily life and practice. For example, some extremists would have done away with all music, candles, vestments, gestures, set prayers, stained glass windows, crosses, processions, absolutions, and benedictions. Hooker argued that, in and of themselves, these things were not wrong, though they could be and had been used wrongly from time to time. The question for him was: "Even though these things might not come from Scriptural command, would they be edifying?" How is one to judge? The answer: by using common sense.²⁸

Hooker and the Three-Legged Stool

Hooker is often associated with the Anglican concept of authority resting in Scripture, tradition, and reason. It is mistakenly believed by some that each leg of this

mythical three-legged stool is equal in its authority over the Anglican Church. Nigel Atkison clearly shows that Hooker's theological method demonstrated the priority of Scripture above reason and tradition.²⁹ Hooker believed that if, in fact, the three are co-equal legs of authority, then all sorts of problems would arise. In Christian ethics, for example, if Scripture says anything, tradition says a little of this and a little of that, and common sense says something that looks quite different, then there is a big problem. How does one decide among competitive, clamoring voices.

Another common mistake, according to Hooker, is to make tradition or reason (or both) superior to Scripture. In so doing, one wishes to understand history and development, or new ideas and trends, as carrying more authority than the text of Scripture. By elevating tradition and reason above Scripture, human thinking and human received wisdom overrides the ancient text, if the text contradicts or appears to contradict either.

The founding fathers of Anglicanism like Hooker, Jewel, and Cranmer avoided such an elevation by always placing Scripture first in authority and truth-value. In those things to which it speaks, it is superior to human opinion. In those matters to which it does not speak, tradition is to be consulted. In those matters where neither Scripture nor tradition speaks, reason is called upon to light the way.

Hooker and the Role of Reason in Hermeneutics

Hooker thought that a distinction needed to be made between the essentials and non-essentials of the faith. He wanted to protect the Anglican Church against a rigid literalism, not in an attempt to dilute the authority of Scripture, but to defend its authority.

At the same time he concluded that there is “no part of true philosophy, no art of account, no kind of science rightly so called, but the Scripture must contain it.”³⁰

For Hooker, reason was a counter-weight to customs that kept people in darkness. Thus, reason argues against blind obedience to a Pope, not against the biblical concept of the virgin birth or other such supernatural events described in the Bible. He did not view reason as supplementing the limitation of Scripture. If that was true, then what was the use of reason? Reason, for Hooker, was a tool of the Holy Spirit by which one understands the Bible. He taught that reason was in subordination to the Word of God and that the Word of God was the final authority in the life of the Christian and the church. Some modern Anglican/Episcopalians misunderstand reason leading them to say something like, “I know what Scripture says, but I am waiting for the insight of the General Convention, scientific findings, the latest scholarship, etc.” That use of reason was never the intent of Hooker or the early Anglican divines.

There is another problem with the modern view of reason as it relates to the *stool* analogy. Today reason has tended to be defined as autonomous and skeptical. By this definition, for example, if the literal resurrection of Christ does not make sense to the individual, then he or she can flee to reason and still be a good Episcopalian. This rejection can be done because the traditional understanding of the term is not being denied; it is merely being reinterpreted to fit the individual’s understanding of the world today. Since science says that bodies don’t rise by themselves after being dead three days, and since the individual has not seen a resurrection, then by using reason that person determines that the disciples must have been either mistaken, lying or speaking symbolically. But for Hooker, reason was the collective wisdom of the whole body of the

church. Reason was not a “what makes sense to me” proposition, it was the universal consensus inspired by God down through the ages. If the individual Christian denies the universal consensus of the church for most of its two thousand years, Hooker would call that pride, not reason.

Anglican J. I. Packer notes that the proper role of reason is to express faith:

By receiving, applying and transmitting revealed truth. Faith and reason come into conflict when reason denies God’s authority, refuses to be a servant of faith, and reverts to some sort of unbelief; and ‘freedom’ which reason thus gains is actually perfect slavery.³¹

Hooker, to the surprise of many, reflects a modern conservatism, which is deeply grounded in and nourished by Scripture, yet strengthened and sustained by a close connection to Christian orthodoxy down through the ages. John Keble, the high churchman of the Oxford movement of the nineteenth century, maintained that English theology underwent such a “decisive change” in Hooker’s hands that the next generation of English divines (Laud, Hammond, and Sanderson) owe to Hooker’s *Laws* the fact that the Church of England “continues of such a distance from Geneva and so near the primitive truth and apostolic order.”³²

Hooker’s use of reason did not separate him from the Reformers and Reformed theology. Atkison ably demonstrates that Hooker’s use of reason occupies the same general ground as the Reformers. Hooker’s views of tradition and Scripture were largely compatible with Reformed thinking.³³ Hooker repeated over and over again that God’s eternal law over His creation was mediated through a series of laws and these laws were grounded in the very nature of God. It was part of God’s nature to work in an orderly and reasonable way, and consequently it should not come as any surprise to discover that

God's own creation also worked in an orderly and reasonable way, especially if one remembers that nature is God's own instrument.

Atkinson aptly points out that Hooker believed reason is unable to teach the things individuals must do to obtain salvation, therefore, humankind needs the grace of God to open its eyes to see the truth of divine revelation. Reason is free to operate in the other spheres in which humankind is *civilly* and not *spiritually* associated.³⁴ Hooker accepted the dictates of reason as being good, provided they are "unrepugnant unto any of God's revealed laws and ordinances."³⁵ He embraced a Reformed orthodoxy that sought to avoid the Puritan's extreme biblicism. He cited the Reformer Calvin to make the point that the church has power to make laws to regulate its life. The church does not need spiritual authority for every action it takes, as long as that action does not violate the clear teaching of Scripture.

Hooker and the Role of Tradition in Hermeneutics

The Reformation, contrary to the belief of many, did not simply appeal to Scripture alone (*Sola Scriptura*). Martin Luther, as mentioned earlier, appealed first to Scripture and then to tradition found in the practice of the primitive church of antiquity. The early Reformers had the tendency to limit the testimony of the fathers to the first five centuries. While Hooker was not willing to be so limited, he positioned himself squarely behind two essential premises. First, the church has always been from the beginning and will be to the end, though it has not always been equally sound or sincere; nevertheless, it is right to retain those things that have from the very beginning existed in the church, since at no point in history did the church stop being the church.

Secondly, he believed that since the church had never really fallen there had existed a continual consensus of truth. This is not to say that parts of the church had not suffered from periods of corruption and decay, or that individual Christians had not lapsed into heresy and error. It is to say that, in spite of such aberrations, the church still maintained and held on to the essentials of the faith.

Hooker, while appealing to the tradition of the early church, did not feel the need to slavishly imitate the apostolic church, for he realized that the social and political situation in the church of the first few centuries was totally different from that of sixteenth-century England. His appeal to the early church was not just an appeal to antiquity for the sake of appealing to something ancient. He appealed to the doctrines of the early church as pertaining to things necessary for salvation (which he believed could not change), and contrasted those essential doctrines to matters of discipline and church government (which he believed could change).

The distinction between doctrine and discipline was a fundamental one for Hooker. He could be flexible, accommodating and aware of local circumstances and needs, as well as local history and development. At all times Hooker was striving for unity and peace. He considered it a duty to reduce controversy and division in the church. He felt the only reason to disturb the church's peace was over the very essence of Christianity.

Hooker and the Role of Scripture in Hermeneutics

Hooker constantly underscored the "absolute perfection of Scripture."³⁶ He believed in the verbal and plenary inspiration of Scripture. He believed that "because God

cannot err and make mistakes and because He always tells the truth, the same is true of Scripture. Scripture cannot fail to be true; it cannot deceive.”³⁷

Hooker challenged the Roman Catholic teaching that sources outside of Scripture could be elevated to the level of Scripture. He challenged the Puritans who elevated the preacher’s message up to an equal status with Scripture. Having been persuaded of the full authority and sufficiency of Scripture, Hooker was concerned to protect the supreme and final authority of the Bible. Hooker, like all of the Reformers, was willing to look at the *spiritual sense* of Scripture, but this did not necessitate a belief that the *spiritual* could be obtained at the expense of the concrete words of Scripture. Hooker was not the sole voice in defense of the orthodox understanding of Scripture. Other Anglican writers were just as staunchly conservative.

It stands to reason, therefore, that writers from the fifth century and earlier are to be considered of major importance for a full perspective of Anglican biblical interpretation. This importance is reflected in the writings of contemporary Anglican conservatives like J. I. Packer and John Stott. These scholars make many references to the early church fathers in defense of their respective interpretive methods.

Scripture, according to the Church of England, rightly interpreted, contains all that is necessary to save the soul. From it, by fair and logical inference, may be deduced everything which ought to be imposed as an article of faith. The Anglican Church in its earliest form does not despise or underrate the light of learning, nor the light of antiquity, but that, as the final court of arbitration, she maintains the sole supremacy of the written Word of God.³⁸

Later Anglican Divines

Liberals assert that tradition is an ever-growing thing that evolves making the earlier tradition of lesser value. Browne calls into question the reliability of any changing doctrinal tradition when he notes:

As has just now been said, when we search for authority in favour of any doctrine, we can tell at once where to go, if Scripture be our rule. But if we have to depend on something besides, where must we look? The former rule is contained in a small compass, is easily accessible, and with proper assistance may be understood. The latter is to be searched for through many folio volumes; is, at last, not certainly to be found; and is at least as difficult as Scripture itself to be understood and explained. Or, if it be said, that it is not in the writings of the fathers, but in the stream of church tradition, a deposit which was entrusted to the church and has never been lost by her; we can only reply, that this is even less certain than traditions which may be searched out from ancient writings and from them proved to have anciently existed. Tradition by word of mouth is a thing proverbially uncertain. In peculiar conditions of society, or for a short time, it may be sufficient for the preservation of truth. But it is evidently unfitted for a body like the Catholic church; which was to pervade all nations, extend throughout all ages, weather the storm of ignorance and barbarism at one time, and bear up against the scorching and withering glare of learned infidelity at another.³⁹

In fact, the testimony of the primitive fathers aligns itself in relation to tradition most closely to the Anglican view of Scripture. The Anglican Church fathers reflect what church father Irenaeus said:

We know that the Scriptures are perfect as being spoken by the Word of God and His Spirit.

And again:

But those by whom the Gospel came to us; which they then preached, and afterwards by God's will delivered to us in the Scriptures, to be the pillar and ground of our faith.⁴⁰

Because of his grounding in patristic theology, Cranmer left to the Church of England a balanced and careful expression of Christian truth, stating what is necessary but avoiding extremes. At its best Anglicanism continues to hold that balance and to reach out across

the Christian world.⁴¹ If it is acknowledged that from the beginning of Anglicanism and especially after the Reformation, Anglicans had a high view of Scripture and its authority, then the question needs to be answered, “Was there an Anglican way of interpreting the Bible?” The answer to that question can be found in the writings of a number of the early Anglican divines, the fathers of Anglicanism. Just as returning to the writings of those closest to the apostles (the early church fathers) can help develop an accurate knowledge of how biblical interpretation was originally understood and practiced; so to, by appealing to many of the acknowledged fathers of Anglicanism can one determine how the Bible was interpreted by those closest to Anglicanism’s beginnings.

Other Post-Reformation Divines

Having looked at and examined the views of biblical interpretation of Anglicans like Wycliffe, Cranmer, and Hooker, it will be helpful to look into other recognized Anglican divines. The divines before and during the Reformation period reflected an absolute trust in the Bible, and practiced a conservative hermeneutical methodology. This methodology was a reflection of the early church fathers that the divines held in such high esteem. Even after the Reformation, there were many Anglicans who continued on in the conservative tradition of the past. One begins to see a subtle shift away from the conservatism of the past the more time that passed since the Reformation. Post-Reformation divines began to moderate their positions regarding hermeneutics, though there remained a general conservatism apparent in their writings.

John Keble

John Keble, who was mentioned earlier, echoed Hooker when he argued that Christians do not first gain faith by applying their reason to the study of the Bible. They rather learn from others in the body of the faithful and, thus being led, obtain evidence themselves for the truths of Scripture. The faithful must then be “involved in the life of the church and exposed to the tradition that existed most surely in the Primitive church.”⁴²

John Whitgift

John Whitgift, Archbishop of Canterbury in the late sixteenth century, believed the Anglican Church had a commitment to the authority of Scripture and the faith of the creeds. He also taught a broad acceptance of certain Reformation theological positions that were closer to the doctrines of the early church than to the definitions of other Protestants. This acceptance allowed for a wide liberty of thought, as long as it was not in conflict with the essentials of Christian doctrine. At the same time Whitgift sought to avoid the precise and strict theological definitions of the sixteenth century confessional systems.⁴³

Daniel Whitby

Daniel Whitby (1638—1725) was a Fellow at Trinity College in Oxford who became the leading voice of moderate orthodoxy within the Church of England. He believed that the writers of Scripture were divinely inspired and preserved from fundamental error, though he was prepared to accept that the Holy Spirit did not dictate

everything in the Bible. He defended, for example, the biblical miracles on historical grounds, and argued for the apostolic origin of all the books of the New Testament.

He set forth some principles for biblical interpretation. One principle maintained that any dubious texts of Scripture are to be interpreted so as not to contradict the fundamentals of the faith, or any doctrine that was evidently and clearly stated in the Word of God. Secondly, since Scripture cannot contradict itself, when any paragraph of Scripture being considered is ambiguous, it is to be interpreted in no way contradictory to any other paragraph.

According to Whitby, another important tool in biblical interpretation was tradition. For since tradition is necessary to assure the church that there were such men as apostles who delivered Scripture and Christianity to it, one can look to tradition as an excellent help in gleaning the sense in which Scripture was originally understood.⁴⁴

William Payne

Another divine, William Payne, wrote in an essay entitled, “The Sixth Note of the Church Examined, viz. Agreement in Doctrine with the Primitive Church,” that the true mark of the church was its agreement with the doctrines of the early church. So strong was this belief that Payne challenged the very claim of Papal infallibility:

For if we may be allowed to go back to the Primitive church and to examine the doctrine and belief of that in order to find out what the necessity of receiving and believing all that she imposes must be set by, till it appears that she requires the same doctrine and no other than what was taught and believed by the Primitive church.⁴⁵

He believed Scripture was the only rule of faith and doctrine, but the primitive church could help keep Christians from following the private judgment of any one person.

Jeremy Taylor

Jeremy Taylor, one of the Anglican leaders against the moral laxity and lack of Christian character in early seventeenth-century England, reflects the foundation of his biblical interpretation when he asks what is needed for the salvation of the Church of England. His answer is that:

We have the Word of God, the faith of the Apostles, the Creeds of the Primitive church, the *Articles* of the first four General Councils, a holy liturgy, excellent prayers, perfect Sacraments, faith and repentance, the Ten Commandments, and the sermons of Christ, and all the precepts and counsels of the Gospel.⁴⁶

William Beveridge

William Beveridge in the late seventeenth century echoes Taylor when he describes the doctrine of the Anglican Church as being easily understood. That understanding comes from the Bible, the Liturgy and the *Articles* of the church (which are taken out of said Scriptures); and therefore what ever doctrine is nowhere taught or declared there, one can be confident the apostles never taught it.⁴⁷ Consequently, a good argument could be made that, the modern Episcopalian is not obligated to obey or believe anything (no matter how plausible it may seem) not found clearly taught in the above doctrinal list.

Peter Gunning

Peter Gunning in the mid-seventeenth century wrote:

Reason, and experience, and the direction of all wise men in the church of God ancient and modern (the house of wisdom), Councils, reverend Fathers and writers, and our church in particular, have directed and commanded us not to interpret Scripture in things of public concernment to the church's rule of believing and doing, but as we find it interpreted by the Holy Fathers and Doctors

of the church, as they had received it from those before them. For that the leaving of every man to make anything of any text, upon any device out of his own head, to the founding any new and strange doctrine or practice of the church universal (for in other matters they may be happily with leave quietly abound in their own sense) leaves all bold innovators which can but draw away disciples after them, to be as much lawgivers to the church by their uncontrollable law-interpreting, as any Pope or enthusiast can or need pretend to be; and hath been, and ever will be to the end of the world, the ground of most from the teaching and stable interpretation of the church, in their own instability and science falsely so called, pervert the Scriptures to their own and others' (their obstinate followers') destruction.⁴⁸

Even King James I, for whom the King James Version of the Bible is named, recognized the importance of the early church tradition when he commented:

I will never be ashamed to render an accompt of my profession and of that hope that is in me, as the Apostle prescribeth. I am such a Catholic Christian as believeth the three Creeds, that of the Apostles, that of the Council of Nice, and that of Athanasius, the two latter, being paraphrases to the former. And I believe them in that sense as the ancient Fathers and Councils that made them did understand them; to which three Creeds all the ministers of England do subscribe at their Ordination. And I also acknowledge for Orthodox all those forms of the Creeds that either were devised by Councils or particular Fathers, against such particular heresies as most reigned in their times...

As for the Fathers, I reverence them as much and more than the Jesuits do, and as much as themselves ever craved. For whatever the Fathers for the first five hundred years did with an unanime consent agree upon, to be believed as a necessary point of salvation, I either will believe it also, or at least will be humbly silent, not taking upon me to condemn the same.⁴⁹

Conservatives who remained in the Church of England after the Reformation tended to focus more on the doctrine of salvation. Earlier Anglicans had focused more on Trinitarian doctrine, cosmology, and natural theology. As a result, conservatives attempted to restore the Bible to its position of authority and popularity as the foundation of doctrine and inspiration, and a source of personal holiness. This restoration was largely successful until the nineteenth century witnessed a further assault upon the Bible's authority at the hands of the new movement of literary and historical criticism.

William Temple

While the Bible's authority, reliability, and historicity began to be challenged after the Reformation, the Church of England still had staunch defenders of Scripture. Men such as William Temple (1881—1944) believed that sound teaching and doctrine were very important to the community, even more than to the individual, because whatever is the prevalent belief of the community will be accepted uncritically by great numbers of individuals and will predispose them towards forms of religious practice, corresponding to that belief. Heresy may be compatible in the individual with deep religious beliefs, which as a whole is sound; but the church is bound to look at heresy as a more serious evil than some aberrations that, in the individual, would be more harmful.⁵⁰ Temple examined intellectually the claims of orthodoxy. While he had many questions, he was never troubled by New Testament criticism and held fast to an orthodox understanding of the Bible.

Charles Gore

Charles Gore, bishop of Oxford (1853—1932), always struggled to understand the love of God. He was sure that the orthodox Creed with its miracles was the only one that made God and His love credible.⁵¹ As part of the second generation of the Oxford movement, which tried to reassert the catholic and apostolic heritage of Anglicanism, Gore showed an appreciation for the ancient doctrines, discipline, and devotional practices of the church. As recently as 1861 it was possible for an Oxford theologian to speak these words from the University pulpit:

The Bible is none other than the voice of Him that sitteth upon the throne. Every book of it, every chapter of it, every word of it, every syllable of it (where

are we to stop?), every letter of it, is the direct utterance of the Most High. The Bible is none other than the Word of God, not some part of it more, some part of it less, but all alike the utterance of Him who sitteth upon the throne, faultless, unerring, supreme.⁵²

Conservatism Reflected by Anglican Divines

While these latter examples of Anglican divines would not be classified as early fathers of Anglicanism, it is helpful to see examples of the continuance of conservative beliefs and teachings in the writings of later Anglican authors. They reflect a long-standing tradition of evangelical and conservative hermeneutics in the Anglican Church. Many of the great authors of early Anglicanism viewed themselves as helping the Church of England return to its apostolic roots by embracing the best of the Roman Catholic Church and the Protestant Reformation. In so doing it would provide a middle ground, a *via media*, into which seekers of truth and apostolic Christianity could come and find a haven where the mind was free, the boundaries were not as ridged, but the backdrop of early Christianity could be used as a benchmark to guide the church into the correct use of the faith once delivered to all the saints.

With this new freedom, this new *via media* thinking, generations of Anglicans were afforded the ability to repudiate the exclusivity of either the church's Catholic heritage (because she is Reformed) or her Reformed heritage (because she is Catholic). A drawback to this new freedom was the embracing by some of new theologies that were not recognizable as either traditional Reformed or Catholic doctrine. Thus, many today believe they are following the *via media* while concocting any sort of doctrine and baptizing it as part of that *via media*, when in reality that baptism may be diametrically opposed to the original concept of the *middle way*.

It has been shown that the early church developed written and unwritten doctrines that were derived from their interpretation of Scripture. This resulted, ultimately, in the formation of orthodox Christian teaching. The vast majority of the Christian church for most of its history believed that orthodoxy. Most of the great Anglican divines had a high view of Scripture guided by the teachings of the early church fathers and a conservative hermeneutic. By being so guided, they believed the chances of reaching correct biblical interpretations were greatly enhanced. On the rare occasions where Scripture and tradition fail to adequately direct their interpretation, reason was to be used in determining how best to understand God's revelation.

CHAPTER 7 EXAMINING THE PARADIGMS OF HERMENEUTICS

One might grant that the Bible was interpreted in an orthodox manner in the early church. A thread of orthodoxy might be seen throughout the history of the church through the Middle Ages. It might even be granted that the early Anglican divines practiced an orthodox biblical hermeneutic. But in these modern times, in which science has claimed to put to rest the idea of the supernatural, scholars are much more knowledgeable, and society has changed its way of looking at the world and people, aren't the old ways of looking at history irrelevant? Do the old orthodox paradigms work anymore? The answer to these questions will be explored next.

New ways of interpreting Scripture seem to appear as often as invaders on the screen of a video arcade game. Many of these new paradigms aren't really new, but simply add new wrinkles to old paradigms. In exploring the realm of biblical hermeneutics it will be important to look at some of the main interpretive approaches.

Anglicanism has maintained that the Bible is the normative common witness of the spiritual truth that has been revealed to humankind. There is no other source comparable to this one, and no human authority that can supersede or contradict it. The writers of the New Testament seemed to believe in the infallibility of the Old Testament, which constituted for them the Scriptures. The early church fathers and the medieval tradition for the most part continued this belief (adding to it the New Testament), and the Reformation did nothing to weaken it.

Even Bishop Spong admits that the church's approach to Scripture from at least the dawn of the second century was an unquestioning one regarding the literal truth of the Bible or the authority of the holy church. In this plain sense way the Bible was read and interpreted by the leaders of the Christian church. It was the way the fathers of the church (Polycarp, Iraenaues, Chrysostom, Origen, Augustine, and Jerome, etc.) had taught them. Spong tries to assert that because the church fathers were all Greek, Latin or North African in origin, they didn't understand that the Bible, written by Jews, did not relate to sacred history as if it were an objective description of literal events.¹ By writing them off as ignorant Gentiles, Spong can conveniently ignore the fathers' testimony as it relates to hermeneutics.

Main Approaches to Hermeneutics

It must be acknowledged that one cannot simply accept the interpretive methods of the early church fathers or anyone else uncritically. A modern approach to Scripture must wrestle with the interpretative methods of the fathers as well as those methods that have evolved during the history of the church. There are three main ways to approach Scripture. In the first approach, the Bible is viewed as a collection of documents written by people at different times to describe their experience of God. Because the realities of spiritual development happened over time, there were a number of contradictions produced, such as the Old Testament God of justice verses the New Testament God of mercy.

The second approach looks at the Bible as a record made by people who heard God speaking to them and who wrote down what they understood. God's self-disclosure

was perfect and infallible in itself, but human understanding is imperfect. The result is a text that, despite the errors and inaccuracies that it contains, remains a basically faithful account of a real experience that can still be enjoyed today.

In the third approach, the Bible is viewed as the revelation of God given through human beings. God spoke to human agents in words that they could understand, but in directing them to write, God often gave them messages that were mysterious. In practical terms, this means that there are no discrepancies or contradictions in the written text of Scripture, except perhaps some that crept in because of later copyist errors. This approach asserts, in principle, that it is possible to detect these errors and remove them, so that as close to a perfect text as is possible can be recovered. The original (or "*autographa*") text is verbally inspired and is therefore infallible and inerrant, at least within the context of what it is trying to affirm. When confronted with examples of so-called contradictions and discrepancies, holders of this position will insist that many of these difficulties have logical resolutions, or are paradoxes that can be resolved. So, for example, the Old and New Testaments cannot be divided into justice versus mercy, or a vengeful God versus a loving God. Instead, both Testaments contain the concepts of justice and mercy, a loving God and a just God.

The Liberal Approach

The first approach described above, represented by theological liberalism in the nineteenth, and twentieth centuries, is now all but replaced by a new liberalism. While many similarities exist between liberals of all centuries, a common denominator is the general belief that Scripture is a purely human document, not of divine revelation. It

rejects the verbal inspiration of Scripture, and a straightforward approach to interpretation.

The Main Strength of the Liberal Approach

The main strength of this approach is its openness to new ideas, and its willingness (at least in principle) to get rid of theories that can be shown to be untenable. Being free of the restrictions imposed by church authority or by popular opinion, it can look for truth without worrying about secondary factors that might distort the conclusions of *scientific* research. It is not bound by the misinterpretations of the past.

The Main Weakness of the Liberal Approach

By the same token, the great weakness of this approach is its instability. It is impossible to say for certain whether a particular theory is true or not because theories are always changing and being challenged (witness the various quests for the historical Jesus). There are no authoritative standards for interpretation.

The Moderate Approach

The second of these approaches to interpretation (which has been called by some the “moderate” approach) was held by those past and present that have had their feet in both the liberal and conservative camps. Theological moderates would include many that would hold to a largely allegorical interpretive style while not completely abandoning the historical aspect of Scripture. It appears (in its less conservative form) among Roman Catholics and some Protestants (including not a few Episcopalians). In its modern

context, this approach represents a desire to merge critical biblical study with some aspects of classical Christian orthodoxy.

Many who hold to this position grew up in much stricter theological and moral environments, but have been greatly influenced by the social and moral liberalism of the past 35 years. They therefore create a theological construct where one can have that tension resolved. Quite often this method creates a mishmash of inconsistencies that usually become more subjective than objective, more relativistic than absolute. This approach is much more difficult to rationally defend than the other two approaches.

The Main Strength of the Moderate Approach

The main strength of this approach is that it can move in the world of scholarship and in the world of spirituality without undue disruption to either. It can provide a moderating effect on both while helping the church to avoid what it calls *unthinking* conservatism. Moderates claim to have the ability to recognize both the liberal and conservative positions.

The Main Weakness of the Moderate Approach

The main weakness of this approach to the Bible is the tendency toward compartmentalization, meaning that a person might act like a radical critic in the company of those who hold to that position, while behaving like the most traditional of believers when associating with those in that camp. People who are aware of this tension will often refer to those who compartmentalize as *fence sitters*, without real honest

integrity. This group is often most resistant to a systematic approach to theology and interpretation.

The Conservative Approach

The third of these positions or ways of approaching Scripture is the orthodox conservative view, which its detractors are likely to call *fundamentalism*. This term is even less helpful than *liberal*, because its use tends to imply that those so labeled are uneducated and merely prejudiced in their objections to critical scholarship. This perception is quite often far from the case. Critics of this position can sometimes show an intellectual snobbery toward conservatives.

To those who hold the conservative position, the inner witness of the Holy Spirit is all-important, because it is the Spirit who speaks through the text to the heart and who applies the text to the life of the believer. Defenders of this position argue that it is possible for conservatives to use as much scholarly and intellectual strictness as anyone else. The strength and weakness of conservatism lies in the literalism that this insistence upon the sufficiency of Scripture produces. Conservative Episcopalians have made a conscious effort to return the Scriptures to the place they held in the first Christian centuries and in Reformation times. They are restoring the accent upon biblical teachings that had fallen by the wayside in favor of, what some might call a, modern pop-socio-psychological narcissism.

This limiting focus can also apply to the areas of modern biblical scholarship that have been generally accepted. The literalistic-minded conservative may miss some of the benefits gained through scholarship be it evangelical, conservative, or even on an

occasional basis, liberal. This fear of scholarship has sometimes caused conservatives to develop a siege mentality.

Many conservatives believe that it is impossible for anyone to honestly read the New Testament without arriving at an orthodox interpretation. At the same time conservatism recognizes that the individual Christian may have a difficult time deciding whether some of Christ's commands are universal in their application, or only intended for those in certain places or times. For instance, it has always been held, until recently, by both Catholics and orthodox Protestants, that Jesus' prohibition of remarriage after divorce is absolute (except for the grounds he provides). It was believed that his prohibition of the possession of riches was only intended for those who had a special vocation to a life of poverty. But it is very hard to see how this distinction can be justified apart from the belief that the church has a right to decide in the matter. Here again is where conservatives and others can be greatly helped by appealing to the early church fathers to see how they understood these prohibitions. These writings are so important because the fathers understood Scripture to have absolute authority over their lives and their tradition.

The Main Strength of the Conservative Approach

The great strength of the orthodox approach is that it is closest to that practiced by the church through the ages. The communion of saints is more significant than the criticism of scholars, which is one reason this position maintains itself with little real change from one generation to the next. Critical theories come and go with great rapidity, but those who hold the orthodox view continue to stick to their guns, come what may.

When conservatives set forth a defense of the faith (apologetics) it is virtually the same as that found in the great Reformers, the early church fathers, and, indeed the Apostles themselves.

For example, there is little doubt that most early Christians believed in the verbal inspiration of the Bible. Even if few modern defenders of this position go that far (and most want to insist that natural abilities and the character of the individual writers of Scripture were used by God, not suppressed), the writers the Bible clearly state that Scripture was written by holy people who were moved by the Holy Spirit (2 Pet. 1:21). They say that all Scripture is inspired or “God-breathed” (2 Tim. 3:16). The authors and the text of Scripture seem to bear the stamp of God’s authority. Conservatism bows its knees to the authority of Scripture.

The Main Weakness of the Conservative Approach

The main weakness of the orthodox position is its tendency towards being blind and dogmatic, holding on to the thought patterns of a bygone era, and not speaking to concerns of the present age. Often, those who hold this position have trouble with credibility as they try to communicate their views to the outside world. This is not necessarily because their position is indefensible (as their critics charge), but because they are unwilling to adapt their language and presentation to a new situation. Admittedly, it is hard to update doctrine without distorting it one way or another. But at the same time, Christian truth can never be allowed to appear dry and irrelevant. The great challenge of those holding an orthodox position is to make their position seem compelling when dealing with today’s problems. The conservative must demonstrate that

the reason orthodoxy stays around and is still viable is its intrinsic worth, not simply its historic nature.²

Robert Funk points out another possible weakness with this position:

An inspired, or inerrant, set of gospels seems to require an equally inspired interpreter or body of interpretation. Interpretation must be equally inspired if we are to be sure we have the right understanding of the inerrant but variously understood originals.³

The problem with this line of reasoning is that the inerrancy of the Bible (or in this case, Gospels) would not be determined by whether it was inerrantly interpreted. By following the basic rules of interpretation and drawing upon the wisdom and insight of the early church fathers, one can certainly have a very good idea of the original intention of each Gospel passage.

One of the ways in which a literalistic conservatism has tended to do more harm than good is the belief that the doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture could be interpreted in such a way as to limit the field of truth to what is in the Bible. In so doing people can become indifferent to knowledge that must be found elsewhere. An example of this can be seen in literalistic conservatives who view the use of a laser to be wrong simply because it is not mentioned in the Bible.

The Importance of a Conservative Approach to Scripture

The Labeling of Conservatism

The rest of this chapter will seek to present a case for the relevancy, modernity, and truthfulness of the ancient orthodox conservative view of Scripture. The importance of holding to this time-tested traditional hermeneutic will be shown. There has been much against which conservatism has had to defend itself.

In modern society one who claims to know the truth is viewed as an obscurantist or, worse yet, a fundamentalist. Those who claim to know the truth are often compared to the extreme Islamic groups so that both can be lumped into the camp of fundamentalism. Few in the Episcopal Church are willing to accept this label since it has been stretched to connote ignorance, rigidity, paranoia, and violence.

The result of this labeling is that Episcopalians today are often unwilling to identify what used to be called heresy as heresy. The Episcopal denomination rarely disciplines clergy on theological grounds. Pastors and priests sometimes feed their congregations a diet of self-help sermons that avoid potentially divisive doctrinal issues. Many church members would be hard-pressed to explain the meaning of the Apostles' Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and biblical morality. Some conservatives feel that taking much of a stand in defense of a conservative hermeneutic is simply too risky. Some fear the conservative approach to Scripture is subject to abuse by power-hungry people and is identified with intolerance and ignorance in the wider culture.

Who can deny that there is an element of truth to this fear? The image from the period of the Inquisition when monks patrolled the Italian countryside in search of heresy and, with the help of the state, delivered the unrepentant to prison, torture, and death is bone chilling. In more recent times the picture of white youth ministers in rural America being fired for inviting African-American children to church is socially painful. In order for conservatives to learn from the past and avoid making mistakes similar to those mentioned above, boundaries must be placed around the church's teaching and hermeneutical process.

Conservatism Demonstrates the Importance of Theological Boundaries

Drawing theological boundaries, then, can indeed be risky. Had the church avoided taking this course in centuries past, nothing would be left of the gospel. In the second and third centuries for example, the church was nearly overwhelmed by the teaching of Marcion. Much of the teaching in the Marcionite churches was unobjectionable, for Marcionites preached vigorous sermons from Paul's letters and expressed intense devotion to Jesus. The format of their services was similar to orthodox services. Moreover, the Marcionites were a highly disciplined group who rejected giving in to worldly passions and endured martyrdom as valiantly as any orthodox Christian would. Leaders of the church in Rome, where Marcion first began to advocate his position, might have been tempted at first to stay quiet about his ideas; after all, Marcion was content to work within the established church structures. Nevertheless, leaders of the Roman church excommunicated him in 144 A.D. and mounted a vigorous campaign over the next century and a half to refute his teachings.

The church may be grateful that they did. The essence of Marcion's teachings was the existence of two gods – the god of the Old Testament who created the *evil* world and the god of the New Testament who appeared in the form of Jesus Christ to deliver those who believed in him from their cruel creator. Had the church not stood its ground against the Marcion threat, the gospel would have been distorted into an unrecognizable shape and the faith would have ended in shipwreck.

Some have suggested modern theological liberalism, the Jesus Seminar, and writers like Spong, could be the modern-day "Marcionites" in the sense of seeming very religious and spiritual, working within the church structures, preaching with conviction

and perhaps gaining a growing following. Like the Marcionites, these purveyors of a different gospel and a different Jesus are, according to conservatives, threatening the very foundation of the Christian faith. This threat is not only because of the influence they have within the church, but also, the way their writings affect how the unchurched view the nature, character, and requirements of God.

There is a growing challenge to the various forms of theological liberalism. This challenge is coming in the Episcopal Church from those awakened from their slumber by the clarion call of a few orthodox voices within the church. These voices are calling the Episcopal Church back to its historic teachings about the nature of God, the authority of Scripture, and Christian morality. Those bold enough to speak in defense of orthodoxy are much like Athanasius who stood against an Arian emperor, and argued for the eternal equality of God the Son and God the Father. There are voices like Martin Luther who stood against prelates of the church for justification by faith alone apart from works of the Law. They are like Anglican C. S. Lewis who utilized a bold apologetic style against the liberal skepticism of his day. The confessing church in the Germany of the Third Reich stood against the so-called German Christians for its right to be independent of the control of the Fuhrer. Although they were not successful, worldly forces easily swayed their stance for truth in the face of the weak religious leadership.

All these who have challenged liberalism show the importance of drawing theological boundaries by pointing to examples of the church in every age. But how can the Episcopal Church fulfill this duty and at the same time prevent the abuses of boundary drawing that have sometimes plagued the church and hindered its witness?

Principles should guide the legitimate boundary drawing and heresy hunting by those who support the truth of the authority and reliability of Scripture.

Conservative Principles for Determining Heresy

True conservatives do not go out seeking heresy under every tree. Instead, by giving Scripture the highest authority, and by constant use, conservatives believe they become better able to distinguish good from evil, truth from error (Heb.5:14).

Conservatives apply two principles to any teaching or interpretation given to them. The first states that the supposed false teaching should be a clear deviation from a principle that rests at the heart of the gospel, or is clearly taught throughout Scripture. St. Paul did not pronounce an anathema (condemnation) on the Judaizers of his day over some fine point of eschatology, a particular form of baptism, or whether to use musical instruments in worship. Their false teaching went to the heart of how one entered the people of God. St. Paul did not excommunicate an unrepentant member of the Corinthian congregation for some small deviation from the moral standards demanded by the gospel, but for sexual immorality so heinous that even pagans considered it distasteful (I Cor. 5:1-5).

Second, those who draw theological boundaries, particularly if they are in power must constantly examine their own motives. The following axiom of St. Peter will serve the drawer of boundaries well:

But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer, or reason for the hope that lies within you, but do so with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.⁴

Conservatism's Use of History in Drawing Boundaries

Conservatives believe that in order for one to accurately draw theological boundaries, a knowledge of the Bible and proper interpretive methods must be developed. It is here that Anglicanism offers what some believe to be a great deal of help in developing a balanced hermeneutic. This hermeneutic is both faithful to the ancient church and adaptable to modern times. At the core of this methodology is the acceptance of the historical nature of Scripture.

William Lane Craig quotes George Ladd as saying “the uniqueness and the scandal of the Christian religion rest in the mediation of revelation through historical events.”⁵ In sharing this quote Craig says the foundation for his belief is that Christianity is not a code for living or a philosophy of religion; rather it is rooted in real events of history. This is hard for some to believe because it means that the truth of Christianity is bound up with the truth of certain historical facts to the degree that if these facts should be disproved, so would Christianity. But at the same time the historical nature of the Judeo-Christian story shows the uniqueness of Christianity because, unlike most other world religions, there is now a means of verifying its truth by historical evidence.

How is it possible to learn anything about the human past with any degree of assurance? Filleau de la Chaise, a disciple of Blaise Pascal, believed that the proper method of persuading people of the truth of the Christian religion does not consist in trying to make its theological mysteries comprehensible or reasonable. It consists in showing that the mysteries are connected to the truth of certain indisputable historical facts.

Carl Decker, a historical relativist, once stated that facts exist only in the mind. He says facts are merely the historian's statements about events. This is silly. His belief forces him into the bizarre conclusion that Lincoln's assassination made a difference in history only because people have long memories, but that if everyone had forgotten Lincoln's death within forty-eight hours, then it would have made no difference at all and would have ceased to be a historical fact.

In spite of what Decker asserts, Lincoln's death would have made a big impact on U.S. history whether anyone remembered it or not. It was primarily Lincoln's absence, not memories of Lincoln, which made such a difference in U.S. history. Even if everyone had forgotten that there ever was a man named Lincoln, the absence created by the death of that unique man would still have had its awful results. Even Decker admits, "the facts exist independently of our minds and still have an impact even long after they are forgotten."⁶

As people who believe in an objective revelation given through historical events, Christians cannot afford to sacrifice the objectivity of history. Otherwise, the events of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus cannot be said to be a part of the objective past because the Gospels do not represent objective history. Scholars like Phillip Wesley Comfort, F. F. Bruce, and N. T. Wright give excellent defenses of the historical nature of Scripture (especially the New Testament).

Until the Christian agrees that the Bible in many places speaks of historical events (however those events are interpreted), it will be impossible to develop any sort of logical defense of the Christian faith. As Leslie Newbigin astutely observes:

If, in modern society today, I say 'The Bible teaches,' I will at once have to answer the question 'But why should I believe the Bible?' In this culture an

appeal to the Bible is simply an expression of my personal choice of this particular authority among the many which I might choose from.⁷

Evans shows that the church has always been committed to the historical truth of the Gospel accounts, and cannot abandon history without abandoning the faith of the apostles and church fathers. The church has maintained this historical character of its founding events simply because of a conviction that the narrative is historically true.⁸

What should the Episcopalian do when confronted with a scholarly writing that purports to falsify the historical nature of Scripture in whole or in part?

Conservatism's Process for Assessing Scholars and Scholarship

The challenge when dealing with scholarship is that it, like science, is constantly changing. Conservatives say that sometimes those changes are not for the better. This work is not seeking to downplay the importance of scholars and scholarship. On the contrary there can be much to be learned from scholars. Anglican/ Episcopal conservatives engage in biblical criticism in order to know as much about the text as possible. But their findings are applied with a *hermeneutic of consent*, an attitude that stands open to God's work of salvation in history and to God's Word of life in the Bible. Conservatives strive to be *positive critics*, who hear the text as God's Word written even when it seems strange and alien. Interestingly, with the emergence of reader-oriented criticism (the kind of literary criticism that finds no meaning in the text except what the reader brings to that text), it is the conservative who is among those most insistent on using the proper historical-critical method in doing exegesis. One should not approach the work of a scholar simply on the basis of whether that scholar is liberal or

conservative. Rather, there should be a healthy skepticism of any scholarship at the outset.

Questions to Ask in Assessing the Work of Scholars

However, that skepticism does not mean that one dismisses scholarship out of hand. Instead, he should be prepared to ask questions of the scholar. The following questions posed by author Edith Humphrey, for example, should be asked in assessing scholars studying the New Testament:

1. What are the presuppositions of the scholar, how have these affected the questions asked, and how are Jesus and the society in which He lived presented?
2. How many layers of hypothesis are necessary in order for the scholar to arrive at his conclusions?
3. Is the scholar dependent on the hypothesis of others as a basis for his/her work, and how certain are these preliminary arguments?
4. Does the picture of Jesus that emerges, or the picture of first-century society that is put forth, sound uncomfortably like our own times?
5. Is the scholar skeptical about or open to the Gospels themselves providing data for the picture of Jesus and his world?
6. Are major issues begged routinely by the words 'of course' and 'no one doubts?' These evasive tactics are used to try to shame or manipulate someone into accepting an idea put forth.⁹

It is unlikely that everyone in the Christian community has the time or ability to fully explore these questions. However, the Episcopalian can be generally aware of the issues, so that when *Jesus and History* appears in the local newspaper, or when friends ask what about the latest picture of Jesus portrayed by a scholar, he or she can have insights into the sometimes speculative process many scholars go through to reach their conclusions.

Because of the Jewish makeup of the early church (and thus the distinct conviction of a personal God at work in history), as well as the clear evidence from Scripture itself, the Gospel writers (and the early Christians in general) were very concerned with history. The manner in which they wrote and the types of things that interested and concerned them, all point toward the fact that what actually happened in the past, including while Jesus was on this earth, was both critically important and meant to be remembered. That historical narrative was likewise to be passed down in a faithful manner. Wright says it is preposterous to argue, as many liberal scholars do, that the ancient writers were largely gullible and uninterested in historical accuracy. “To say that they could not adequately distinguish fact from fiction, reality from myth,” he says, “simply does not fit the evidence.”¹⁰ The Bible is, however, much more than historical narrative. If the Bible is a historical document which also contains literary devices such as metaphor, simile, parable, and poetry, can it be trusted as a revelation from God?

The Foundation for Developing a Conservative Hermeneutic

The Reliability of Scripture

Before a hermeneutical plan can be agreed upon, Scripture must be deemed worthy of such a plan. Conservatives believe the Bible is worthy of the scrutiny that comes with hermeneutics. Scripture is worthy because it can be demonstrated to be divine rather than human in origin. It can be shown to be reliable in what it reveals about God, humanity, and history. The case for the general reliability of the Gospels, for example, is quite strong. Because of this reliability the Gospels should be approached with no more skepticism than are other ancient works that are ostensibly concerned with historical matters. If Scripture (and especially the New Testament) can be shown to be historically reliable, then how it is interpreted will be affected as well.

The task of defending the reliability of Scripture will be left to others. A summary of the main arguments for the reliability of Scripture will suffice to show the reader that the Bible is a product of the Divine Will. The arguments for the reliability of Scripture lie in four main areas: manuscripts, archaeology, predictive prophecy, and statistical probability.

Manuscript Evidence

There are tests that can determine the reliability of the extant manuscript copies of the original documents penned by the authors of Scripture. By using the Bibliographic, Eyewitness, and External tests (described in Appendix one and four) it is possible to determine with a great deal of certainty that the text of the Bible is, in essence, what was

passed on by the apostles of Jesus. The vast amounts of extant manuscripts cause the Bible to be the best attested document of antiquity.

Archaeological Evidence

Archaeology is an important test of the reliability of Scripture. Over and over again, comprehensive archaeological work linked with careful biblical interpretation confirms the accuracy of the Bible. Archaeology has confirmed many biblical sights and people which liberal scholars at one time attributed to myth.

Predictive Prophecy

The third determining factor of biblical reliability is predictive prophecy. The Bible records predictions of events that could not be known or predicted by chance or common sense. Especially impressive are the minute prophecies fulfilled about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. These prophecies were penned at least one hundred years before the birth of Christ.

Statistical Probability

The fourth test of Scripture's reliability concerns the statistical probability that any or all of the Bible's very specific, detailed prophecies could have been fulfilled through chance, good guessing, or deliberate deceit. The improbable prophecies of the Old and New Testaments being fulfilled by one man (Jesus) is statistically impossible. These tests lead to one conclusion: The Bible is the Word of God and Jesus is the Divine Messiah of Israel, just as the Bible predicted many times and in many ways.¹¹

When Scripture is determined to be a reliable revelation from God, it can be regarded as completely sufficient for doctrine (2 Tim. 3:15-16). At the same time the needs of the contemporary situation are quite different from needs long past, some means has to be found for relating the ancient book to the thought and life of a later day. This task is performed by interpretation. The reliability of Scripture gives the interpreter a greater security when practicing his hermeneutic.

Standards of the Conservative Hermeneutic

As noted earlier, the continuity between the church now and the church then is not, in and of itself, a guarantee of correct biblical interpretation. Therefore, a standard of hermeneutics must be established in order to have a chance at obtaining a correct interpretation of Scripture. The importance of this is stated in the *International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia*:

Of course, it is obvious that the nature of thought and of language is such as to constitute for all human writings among which the Bible, as a document to be understood, must be placed, a science of interpretation with a definite body of laws which cannot be violated or set aside without confusion or error.¹²

Tradition and the Laws of Interpretation

In spite of the diversity of biblical interpretations in the early church, there was also a measure of unity. This unity was provided by the church's emphasis upon tradition, a tradition that was itself flexible, but ultimately derived from the apostolic age. The tradition was expressed primarily in the creeds, liturgies, and writings of the early church fathers. For Christianity that tradition, like Judaism (and to some extent Islam), was monotheistic. Christians believed in one God who was the creator of the universe and

sovereign over everything in the created order. Scripture was interpreted in the context of this unity surrounding the nature of the one God.

Revelation and the Laws of Interpretation

Christianity was also scriptural, believing that this God revealed his purposes in a written text that could be read, studied and applied by those who believed in him. This idea of having a divine revelation was unique to Israel, and even today is found only in those religions that depend in some way on the Israelite experience.

The Christian doctrine of God teaches that humans can have a living personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ. The Son of God became a man in order to die on a cross for the sins of the world. By his resurrection he conquered the power of sin and death, and gave his followers eternal life. This is experienced by the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit (Romans 8), the third person of the Holy Trinity. This Spirit bears witness with the human spirit that the Christian becomes a child of God by adoption.

Conservatives believe the Christian faith is therefore not primarily an intellectual ability or academic doctrine but an experience with the living God that is vital and can be received by anyone regardless of intellectual ability or academic achievement. The Christian belief is that one cannot hope to properly interpret Scripture apart from the help of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit works in concert with the human spirit to help one apprehend the Christian faith. As St. Paul declares in 1 Cor. 2:10b-14:

The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man's spirit within him? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. We have not received the Spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us. This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual

truths in spiritual words. The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.

When one receives Christ and His Spirit, a gift is given allowing the new Christian to more easily understand the revelation of God in Scripture. This step is vital because it puts the reader in contact with the *Author* of Scripture.

The Christian faith is, as the Prayer Book says, “a mystical union between Christ and his church.” It is within that union the Spirit speaks to the human spirit. This inner witness of the Holy Spirit is fundamental to all true Christianity, but it is not the only way God speaks. The conservative cannot deny that God has continued to speak to individuals. Church history bears out the belief that while God continues to speak, that which God speaks never contradicts what he has placed in the revelation of Scripture.

The individuals through whom the revelation of Scripture was given were specially chosen by God, and had an authority that no Christian today can claim. Moreover, the writers of Scripture functioned within a tradition which had its own ecclesiastical checks and balances, so that what they said was part of a wider, more objective message. Individual believers were to test their own interpretations and experiences in light of the common witness and submit to its authority (Acts 17:11). Scripture warns of spiritual forces at work that will seek to pervert the truth (Galatians 1:7). It is only as the Christian reforms his opinions according to the collective witness that they can hope to be preserved from error and heresy. The existence of such a witness thus becomes a matter of ultimate practical importance for the spiritual well being of believers and of the community to which they belong.

The importance of having a written revelation is that it can be used to form the basis for a community of believers that is both open to individual expression and bound

to a common witness. It gives those who belong to the church a common focus, and a way of excluding elements that do not belong within the community. By establishing norms that must be accepted a written revelation defines the character of the God whom one worships and closes the door to anything that is incompatible with that character. The church teaches that the Bible strikes a balance between individual experience and common confession. This balance is the special hallmark of the believer's relationship with God.

Infallibility and Revelation

Throughout much of the history of the church there have been those, learned and unlearned, who have viewed the Bible as inspired and infallible. Even Hooker, the great architect of Anglicanism, regarded the testimony of the fathers and the church to the infallibility of the Bible as adequate.¹³

Why should infallibility be so important? Shouldn't it to be enough merely to believe the Bible is trustworthy in areas of faith and morals? Infallibility is important because the Bible is a historical book and Christianity is a historical religion. If the Bible errs in matters of historical fact, Christianity is affected. But is this the case? The Hansons maintain that no reputable historian of the ancient or modern world would think of abandoning any belief in a document simply because he finds an error in it. They say in this vane:

If a historian is handling, for instance, Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*, or Plutarch's *Lives*, or Plato's *Dialogues*, he would not on finding one error reject the whole as hopelessly unreliable. He would determine the value of the whole by the document's reliability as a whole, not simply by one point alone. It is only if we make the unfounded and unnecessary assumption that

the Bible is above error, that we can be thrown into a state of alarm and despondency by a single mistake, or indeed by several mistakes.¹⁴

In response to this view of Scripture some might posit that if part of the Bible is true and part is not, who is to tell what the true parts are? There are only two answers to this question. Either the decision lies with the individual, so the truth becomes subjective, merely what appeals to that person, or else, it is the scholar who tells the individual what can and cannot be believed. Both of these positions fall short. By following proper hermeneutics, being guided by the early church tradition that affirmed the reliability and authority of Scripture, and being led by the Holy Spirit, the conservative can arrive at the conclusion that the Bible is trustworthy and capable of accurately reflecting that which God desires humans to know.

As was mentioned earlier, conservatives tend to hold to a qualified infallible Bible, a belief that would acknowledge that the Bible translations available today are not without error, but that the original manuscripts were absolutely infallible. Beyond that they would say that any possible errors in modern Bible translations are so minimal as to not affect the reliability and inspiration of the Scriptures being interpreted. Since conservatives believe God is the ultimate source of the Bible, he is also its ultimate superintendent.

The authority and truth of Scripture are not obscure issues reserved for the private debate and entertainment of theologians; they are relevant, indeed critical for every serious Christian. Charles Colson, the former Nixon White House advisor who became a Christian and now leads an international prison ministry, shares that, from his experience, where the Bible is proclaimed as God's holy and inerrant revelation, believers grow and discipleship deepens. Christians live their faith with power. Where the Bible is not so

proclaimed (or where Christianity is thought to rest on subjective experience alone or contentless fellowship) faith withers and dies. Colson concludes, “Christianity without faithfulness to a reliable Bible is merely another passing fad in an age of passing fads.”¹⁵

The Bible, according to the conservative, is God’s revelation to his church. That revelation can be shown to be reliable, some say, infallible in the way it was revealed and in the sufficiency of its message in bringing God’s reality to the world. This view of Scripture brings a confidence as one begins the hermeneutical process.

Essentials and Non-Essentials

The Christian church has maintained that the Bible is the normative, common witness of God’s spiritual truth revealed to the world. There is no other source comparable to Scripture, and no human authority can supersede or contradict it. Boice says critics of the Bible often ask the following questions: “Does one’s particular view of the Bible matter so long as he has faith in Christ? Doesn’t a preoccupation with the Bible detract from one’s relationship with Christ?”

One’s view of the Bible does matter because this view determines how he will live life. Many people today operate on the basis that the Bible is simply a man-made book, and thus it can offer no absolutes. Since there are no absolutes, some perceive themselves as having freedom from any commandment or rule of God. They are not tied to a God or a God-given morality. They feel no need to acknowledge any authority. In this they think they have avoided the problem of absolute truth. In reality, they have determined (perhaps subconsciously) a set of absolutes of their own making. These

absolutes, while appearing not to be so harsh and dogmatic, in reality carry a false sense of freedom. But the consequence of this kind of freedom is that they are cast adrift on a sea of meaningless existence. If there are no absolutes—no final truth about the origins, creator, purpose, and future of humanity—then ultimately existence in their world has no meaning. This truth is expressed in the arena of words. If there are no absolutes, then words or what they stand for are not absolutes either, so ultimately words are meaningless. This is relativism's great triumph. If the church does not have a sure Word of God with objective content, then what is going on in churches does not have much to do with the God it proclaims.

The conservative view of the Bible offers the best hope for obtaining a correct interpretation of Scripture and for discovering if there are any absolutes. Many believe that by adding the *Anglican* to conservative, one has the tools of tradition and reason to aid in his interpretive process. Before looking at the distinctive attributes of Anglican conservative biblical interpretation a qualification must be made.

It must be recognized that Anglicans have traditionally allowed a lot of latitude in biblical interpretation. The closer one gets to the roots of Anglicanism, however, the more of a distinction is made between the essentials and non-essentials of the Christian faith. As the old axiom sometimes attributed to St. Augustine states, "In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, and in all things charity." True Anglicanism demonstrates this maxim.

The Anglican/Episcopal Church has, until recently, subscribed to doctrines that the Christian church traditionally considered essential to Christian faith and life. These *absolutes* have been clearly defined in Anglicanism's historical documents. At the same

time great latitude was allowed in those things that were not clearly stated in the Bible. This latitude has been seen in issues like styles of worship (high church, low church, etc.), modes of baptism (immersion, sprinkling, etc.), and views of the Lord's Supper (transubstantiation, consubstantiation, symbolism). How does one determine what is an essential aspect of Scripture and what is a non-essential? It all begins with a proper hermeneutic.

Some Procedures for the Proper Interpretation of Scripture

At the outset of any attempt to interpret the Bible it is important to follow the basic procedures for interpreting Scripture. Insights gleaned from the early church and early Anglicanism help develop a foundation for these procedures. Boice lays out principles that can lead one toward the proper interpretation of Scripture. To be able to “rightly divide the word of truth,” the interpreter must begin with the first principle, **Unity and non-contradiction**. This traditional view of Scripture is that, while it has many instruments, it has one author who is God. If God is the author of the Bible then taken together these terms mean that, if Scripture is truly from God, and if God is as he says he is, a God of truth, then the parts of the book must go together to tell one story. If the parts of the book seem to contradict or be in opposition to each other, then one's interpretation of one or both of these parts is in error.

The second principle of interpretation is called **the analogy of faith**. This means that Scripture interprets itself. When there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture, it must be searched and known by other places in Scripture that speak

more clearly. For example, if the divinity of Christ is unclear in a passage like Titus 2:13, then one might look at John 1:1 to see Christ's divinity clearly presented.

The third principle in a proper hermeneutical method is to **study the context**. Each biblical statement must be considered in context (of the chapter, book, and the whole Bible). This keeps one from simply taking a text out of context and making a pretext out of it. It also helps keep in check the practice of picking out single verses as proof-texts. For example, the Old Testament prohibition of eating shellfish is abolished in the context of Peter's vision in Acts 10.

The fourth principle of interpretation is to **consider the style**. Consideration must be made of the style of the writing and interpreting it within that framework. This is obviously the case when dealing with the poetical literature such as Psalms, Proverbs, and Job. These books frequently employ symbols or images and can be misinterpreted if taken literally. The book of Revelation should not be taken literally in all parts. Style also has a bearing on Jesus' use of parables—a special tool in teaching. Usually parables make one or, at best, a few main points. Consequently, it is wrong to try to make every detail say something applicable. For example, an attempt to assign a meaning to the husks, pigs, and other details of the parable of the prodigal son is problematic.

Thomas Aquinas illustrated this quite well when he observed:

When Scripture speaks of the arm of God, the literal sense is not that he has a physical limb, but that he has what it signifies, namely the power of doing and making. This example brings out how nothing false can underlie the literal sense of Scripture.¹⁶

When the Bible says that Christ is sitting on the right hand of God, writers like Spong mock those who believe in the Bible “literally,” by joking that God can only use his left hand. In fact, most conservatives join with the early church fathers to affirm the

meaning of this text to be that Christ is one with God and shares in the power and authority of God. And this is the literal sense of the passage.

The fifth principle of proper interpretive methodology states that **historical material is interpreted by didactic (teaching) material**. Historical material is the account of what happened in the past. It is important for the teaching material to interpret the historical material rather than the other way around. Events that happen in history are sometimes right and sometimes wrong, sometimes normative, and sometimes extraordinary. If one uses historical material to determine what should be believed or done in the present, he is often misled. For example, on the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2 the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples in the forms of wind, fire, and tongues. Some argue that the three should be present when a person is *filled* or *baptized* with the Holy Spirit. However, the teaching material of Scripture regarding the Holy Spirit (John 14; I Cor. 12:7-11; Gal. 5:22-23; Acts 8:14-17) should be used to teach that each person's experience with the Spirit may be different. Each type of Scripture should be interpreted according to the intent of that particular genre. This allows the historical writings to speak for themselves.

The sixth principle of biblical interpretation is to ask, **why was it written?** What was the purpose for which a particular passage was written? One application of this principle is seen in some references of Scripture that bothered Rudolph Bultmann, Spong and others. They were troubled by what they perceived the Bible saying about heaven being *up there* and hell *down there*, (below the earth). It applies to passages saying that bones cry out, bowels yearn, kidneys instruct, or ears judge. Some say these references reveal a mistaken notion of the universe and the human body, but this is ludicrous. What

these passages demonstrate is that biblical writers wrote in the idiom of their day so they would be understood. Their use of such phrases was no more a mistake than the modern usage of such phrases as *walking on air*, *a gut feeling*, and *deep in my heart*.

Boice's seventh principle states that attention must be given to **the meaning of words** used in Scripture. In studying words, one must be aware that meanings change over time, even within the pages of the Bible itself. For example, the Old Testament refers to the Law. Sometimes *law* means the Ten Commandments; sometimes it means all of the Laws of the Old Testament. When Jesus used the word he often meant all of the Old Testament books other than the Psalms, Prophets, and Poetic writings. Even variations in English translations can be confusing. An example of this is seen in I Thess. 4:15. The King James translation says: "We which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent them which are asleep." According to modern English usage, *prevent* means that those who are alive at Christ's return will not be able to stop those who have died from also rising to be with Jesus. But that is not the meaning. The original meaning of prevent in King James' time was to *precede* or *come before*. The text really means that those who have already physically died in Christ will rise first and the living shall then accompany them in Christ's presence. A more modern translation clears up this difficulty.¹⁷

If, after using all of these hermeneutical tools on a passage, or if the straightforward meaning of the words gives an uncertain sense, then one might follow St. Augustine who gave this advice:

The first thing to consider is whether we have punctuated the passage wrongly or mispronounced it in some way. If after careful consideration one is led to the conclusion that it is still not possible to be sure how the passage should be

understood, then one should consult the rule of faith which is derived from clearer passages of Scripture and from the authority of the church.¹⁸

In Augustine's day punctuation and/or a misinterpretation could often be resolved by referring to the early church writers (the rule of faith). Today, one get closer to finding the original meaning of a biblical passage by looking to the writings of the early church fathers. The fathers are especially helpful when there are disagreements of interpretation between scholars and non-scholars.

Exegesis and Eisegesis

It is very easy to practice both exegesis (reading out of the text) and eisegesis (reading into the text). For example, by using exegesis on Romans 2:5 one has a difficult time getting rid of the concept of the wrath of God. The word is clearly used and the concept clearly conveyed. Because it has become desirable in some circles to reject wrath as a concept regarding the nature of God, the biblical interpreter is forced to use eisegesis to get rid of the idea of wrath by using various devices (i.e., a loving God wouldn't deliver wrath, etc.). Eisegesis tends to be very subjective and easily manipulated to reflect one's own bias.

Unity and Diversity in Hermeneutics

Another tension that exists in biblical interpretation is between the unity and diversity of Scripture. Scholarship, by its nature, tends to be analytical, and therefore, prone to diversity. It looks for sources, for constructions, for clues to the pre-history of the text of the Bible. In doing this, there is a temptation to place undue emphasis on anything that can be made to appear distinctive or contradictory within the biblical

narrative. This is nowhere better illustrated than the different accounts of the resurrection of Jesus. Scholars and others automatically assume that the various accounts come from different sources (outside the apostles) and are contradictory. Some will not consider that these accounts can be harmonized, Conservative scholars suggest that what appears to be contradictory accounts may just be different perspectives and/or emphases. For example, when Matthew's gospel says that one angel was at the tomb and John's gospel says there were two, it might never occur to most liberal scholars that Matthew does not say there was *only* one angel. John says there were two, and where there are two there is always one; it never fails. The critic has to add the word *only* to Matthew's account in order to make it contradictory. But in this case, the problem is not with what the Bible actually says, but with what the critic adds to it. Matthew probably focused on the one who *spoke* and, "said to the women, 'Do not be afraid'" (Matthew 28:5). John referred to how many angels they *saw*; "and she saw two angels" (John 20:12).

There are other apparent contradictions in Scripture. Many of these have easy explanations. Looking at the context can clear some up. Others may be solved by clearer passages elsewhere in the Bible. Using proper interpretive methods these supposed errors could be solved. Whenever there seems to be a contradiction, the words of Augustine might be heeded:

If we are perplexed by any apparent contradictions in Scripture, it is not allowable to say, 'the author of this book is mistaken'; but either the manuscript is faulty, or the translation is wrong, or you have not understood.¹⁹

Augustine was open to using allegory to interpret portions of Scripture. This did not mean that he doubted the historical reliability of Scripture. He made it clear, for example, that the biblical account of creation and of sin is not figurative like the Song of Songs, but it is history. He avoided those excesses that, in the name of allegory,

sometime deny the literal meaning of the text. While he would readily admit that there were two real trees in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 2:9), he believed the first symbolized Christ, and the second, while not significant for the fruit it bears, is so for the consequences of transgressing the prohibition to eat it.²⁰

The Relationship between Modern Scholarship and Conservatism

What, then, is the ideal relationship between modern scholarship and the conservative hermeneutic? Perhaps the conservative Episcopalian can recognize, as did Silva, that the history of biblical interpretation during the past two centuries, in spite of its abuses and faulty presuppositions, has been an attempt to bridge the gaps in language and culture between modern readers and the original text.²¹ The conservative is no freer of presuppositions than the liberal, rationalist, or secularist. Nevertheless, conservatives insist that they are concerned with approaching Scripture on its own terms, rather than imposing a modernizing straightjacket upon it, and this straightforward approach leads to a sympathetic and intellectually satisfying reading of Scripture.²²

Scholarship and Experts

One needs to be careful not to confuse the proposals of radical scholarship with the actual advances of biblical scholarship as a whole. It is tempting to think that, in light of modern biblical scholarship, more exegetical problems arise today than in the past. If that is the case, which is not a given, it is because knowledge about the Bible has grown. Therefore Christians have a much greater awareness of their ignorance. Two hundred

years ago Bible readers only thought that they understood many passages that puzzle scholars today.

And then there is the question of experts. First, what experts say sometimes is just nonsense. Second, the experts in a certain field often disagree with one another. Third, academic topics seem to be subject to fads and other non-rational factors. Fourth, knowledge is becoming so specialized that even *experts* may not be expert with respect to many issues in their disciplines. It might even be suggested that no one is really an expert in the issues that people care most about. Finally, the experts from one discipline often contradict the experts from another.

Paradoxically, the subjective sense of the clarity of Scripture seems lessened at the same time that there is greater objective evidence regarding the clear meaning of Scripture. This is due, in part, to many post-Enlightenment influences, and fallen human nature. Societal influences also weigh heavily in the hermeneutical process.

Much of modern liberal scholarship, moreover, categorizes Scripture as an intellectually, morally, and culturally flawed human witness to God, which mediates God's message to its readers only as they sieve its contents through various philosophies of knowledge (epistemology) and various metaphysical philosophies (ontology). These paradigms stem largely from secular culture.

The paradigm currently held by liberal theologians is that God, being finite and limited in what he can do, is working unsuccessfully so far, to establish his will of love and liberty throughout this world, and calls on people to help him. Perhaps this agenda grows out of a secular concern for human rights in a world order felt to be out of control.

These changing paradigms are bound to go on as long as theologians seek to *Christianize* Western society's changing philosophies or *Easternize* Western Christianity's philosophies, and hail as prophetic and profound all attempts to reconstruct the faith so that it matches the world's dreams and serves the world's goals. Built on the belief that everyone should rely on his personal judgment as to how much of biblical teaching one should take seriously and how far any of it should be held to express God's own thoughts, this modern method guarantees a plurality of beliefs and purposes in the church. It makes it impossible to affirm any theological dogma as right or wrong. Conservatism, at its heart, has a deep love of the Bible. That Bible, according to conservatives, clearly teaches true doctrine and proper morality. Conservatism attempts to apply all aspects of hermeneutics to a Bible it considers the inspired and (some say) infallible Word of God.

CHAPTER 8 REFORMING THE HERMENEUTICS OF THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH: A CONSERVATIVE PERSPECTIVE

Arriving at a Conservative Hermeneutic

It is entirely possible for an Episcopalian to arrive at what is essentially a conservative hermeneutic of Scripture, without necessarily knowing how, nor being able to defend the rationality behind such an interpretative method. This can happen because a straightforward reading of the Bible lends itself to conclusions that reflect conservative principles. It is not enough to know that conservatives love the Bible. Many liberals say they do as well. The conservative has the conviction that, whatever means God uses to reveal himself to others, it is through the Bible that he uniquely makes his nature and purposes known. To the Anglican conservative the Bible is the Word of God in the sense that it declares divine truth with clarity and authority as nothing else declares it. And, as Stanley Brown-Sherman states in referring to conservative evangelicals of the past, “To understand the evangelical must be in large measure to understand the place which the Bible occupied in their life and thought.”¹ The modern conservative has the same desire to be “occupied” by Scripture.

Conservatives emphasize the authority and value of Scripture, but conservatism does not depend solely upon this emphasis. Its real emphasis is upon a return to the religious and theological convictions of many of the Reformers of the sixteenth century.

These Reformers, as mentioned earlier, believed they were modeling their theology and biblical convictions after the early church fathers.

The Conservative Hermeneutic and Subjective Experience

Conservatism seeks to rescue religion from the formality and dullness that have caused those caught in them to become what some have dubbed *God's frozen chosen*. Conservatives lay a great emphasis on experience, but not in the same way as the liberals do. By the term experience the conservative Christian means an awareness of certain states or conditions in the moral and spiritual life so personal and intense that they were perceived as *felt*, and not merely intellectually believed.

There is a big difference between the appeals to experience made by conservatives and those made by liberalism and many modern religions. Liberals and modern religions are more likely than not to stress the authority of the experience itself as authenticating a belief or religious practice. The conservative hesitates to give to experience this independent value. He insists that experience must be tested by and gains its ultimate authority from Scripture.

The Anglican priest John Wesley often deferred to Scripture in his writings. This is illustrated in his *Journal*. When he heard the testimony of the experience of forgiveness experienced by others he was moved to intellectually understand the truth that the sense of forgiveness could be justified by an appeal to Scripture. His own actual experience of knowing he was forgiven, however, came much later when Wesley heard someone reading from Luther's preface to the Epistle of the Romans.²

The conservative's reliance upon the Bible, even in matters related to subjective experience, might seem to convey a high degree of self-authentication. This is exactly where the conservative's appeal to tradition makes all the difference. Rather than falling into the trap of both liberalism and fundamentalism, the conservative can point to the tradition of the early church as confirmation that the experience he is describing is biblical, and at the same time consistent with the type of experiences seen and interpreted in the earliest churches.

Conservatives believe that people today claim to be transformed and quickened by the same Spirit that did so for men and women in the Bible. Thus the Bible is not simply a repository of truths once spoken, nor the record of events that took place long ago. It is God's living Word to the present and an evidence of his activity in the here and now.

As was shown earlier, Anglican tradition has held to the sufficiency of Scripture in the sense that it is the inspired Word of God to humanity, and that it contains all things necessary to salvation. Conservatives also believe that the Bible is sufficient in that, when it is taken as a whole, it is the complete revelation of divine truth and needs no supplementing. Conservatives consider it the sole source of Christian doctrine that must be believed.

The Conservative Hermeneutic and the Authority of Scripture

The Bible claims an authority over the lives of its adherents and the Episcopal Church has affirmed this authority. Critics of the notion of biblical authority sometimes suggest that Christians would be liberated if they were to abandon their belief in the

authority of the Bible. Some might suggest that this claim of authority is simply a covert demand to acknowledge the authority of something – or someone else. The conservative Episcopalian’s insistence upon the authority of Scripture reflects a determination not to permit anything from outside the Christian heritage to become the norm for what is truly Christian. Theological history has provided many all-too uncomfortable examples of what happens when a theology or method of interpretation cuts itself loose from the controlling influence of the Christian tradition, and seeks norms from outside that tradition.

The fact that the Bible possesses a divine authority for the conservative does not mean that it must be looked upon as *blind authority* which bludgeons the reason of people into unquestioning acquiescence or which asks people for a blind faith. Christian theology is a theology of the Word, and a word is essentially the address of one rational being to another. If God has spoken through his Word (the Bible), then by nature, that Word carries with it the authority of the one who spoke it.

Conservatism and Reason

Reason and Divine Authority

The Episcopal conservative would certainly agree with Hooker who believed that reason and common sense must be used when seeking to find God’s message in the Bible. He said:

Our words, when we extol the complete sufficiency of the whole entire body of Scripture, must not be thought excluded as unnecessary, because the necessity of a diviner light is magnified.³

One would be justified in thinking that if Hooker had lived in the modern era, he would have welcomed the benefit of nature's light in the attempt to understand the Bible by means of scientific common sense. At the same time, however wrapped up in the fascinating critical study of the Bible, one must remember that its message can be understood only by means of a "diviner light." It must also be acknowledged that the general public has a difficult time (as do some scientists) distinguishing the difference between scientific fact and scientific theory. The same applies in the realm of the *scientific* study of the Bible. Reason and common sense can help the conservative hermeneutic as long as it remains subordinate to Scripture. The authority of Scripture can help to reign in reason when it begins to drift into conjecture and speculation.

Liberal writers provide excellent examples of what happens when the authority of Scripture is demoted, and reason is allowed to drift into such conjecture and speculation. Spong is a case in point. In his book *Born of a Woman* the bishop attempts to rescue women from the dire effect of a "literalized" reading of the Gospel narratives: "literalism guarantees death," he says. In failing to accept the straightforward reading of Scripture, Spong renders women more securely dependent upon men. Because he does not interpret the Gospel texts in any sort of literal way, Spong does not take the stories of independent women seriously—stories of women whose primary relations are not with men, in particular with husbands, but with God.

In his attempt to present a balanced view of sexuality and of relationships between the sexes, he makes up a story about a woman (Mary) who was raped, rather than following the Gospel story about a woman who chose to conceive and didn't need a man to do so. Spong, in another instance, makes up a story about a woman who followed

Jesus because she was married to Him, rather than relating the Bible story telling about a woman who chose to follow Jesus because she loved Him as any disciple would her teacher.

One should not be surprised that the Episcopal Church is home to such belief (some would say heresy). The Christian religion has produced more heresies than any other religion, and the heresies it produces are more tenacious than those of any other religion. The Episcopal Church seems to be a magnet attracting a great variety of aberrant teaching. This attraction has come about because of the improper elevation of human reason.

The Conservative Hermeneutic and Rationalism

The conservative hermeneutic offers categories by which one may interpret and understand the world, its history, and humanity in relation to God. It is uncompromisingly opposed to all forms of rationalism—the view that the human reason is, because of its own inherent perfection, a competent and impartial judge of truth and falsehood in all matters, whether secular or religious. Rationalism is the belief that some ideas or concepts are independent of experience and that some truth is known by reason alone.

The Problem of Rationalism

In the society at large, and in a good deal of the Episcopal Church, this type of rationalism still persists. The idea of an impartial abstract reason is a mirage, a good example of humankind's perennial temptation to be exalted among the gods, knowing

good and evil (Gen. 3:5). Reason is, as has been noted earlier, conditioned by many things, such as education, environment, class position, and so on.

As beneficial as human reason is, it is not immune from error or distortion. That is why, though biblical science may criticize the literary and historical forms of the Bible, there is no human science that can pass a judgment upon the divine message of the Bible and pronounce it true or false according to the rules of human reason. In this sense, “the Word of God judges man, not man the Word of God.” Either the divine truth of the Bible is accepted by faith or by unfaith it is rejected.

Wilson and Templeton stated something in the early 1960’s that is as true today. They maintained that there was a tendency to decry the value of creeds or dogmatic statements of religious belief and to lay the emphasis on Christian character and conduct. In other words, how one behaves is more important than what one believes or professes. This view would accurately reflect liberalism today. When this attitude is examined it becomes clear that it is not really the importance assigned by the church to its creeds that is criticized, but human inconsistency.⁴

Rationalism’s Effect on Behavior and Conduct

The problem with basing theology or beliefs only on behaviors and conduct is that they often are merely a reflection of a person’s inner convictions, which may or may not be compatible with Scripture, or even common sense. For example, one may resort to a *little white lie*, which may in turn be a reflection of an inner conviction that sometimes lying is justified if it helps achieve one’s goals. In the light of Scripture, Christian tradition and Scripture-informed reason, such an attitude would not be judged to be the

truth. While it is true that the Episcopalian's beliefs on the highest things about God, his fellow human beings, and himself should determine the quality of his conduct by providing the motives and the ends, no one is ever better than the best that he believes. If his starting point is false or in some other way erroneous then his actions may well end up being inconsistent and subjective. Consistent living demands that behavior should be the practical living out of inner convictions; the Christian life is properly the complement of the Christian faith. The question gets back to this, "What is the Christian faith?" And again it must be stated that the Christian faith is that which has been passed down through the Scriptures and the early church fathers. The Episcopal Church has been so thoroughly influenced by rationalism that returning to the conservatism of the past is very unlikely.

A New Reformation Needed

Many Episcopalians believe that what is needed today is to have the Episcopal Church simply fracture (again) and split into various other factions. This would be contrary to the way the early Anglican fathers viewed the church. They thought it was worth fighting for. Others say what is needed is a return to an orthodox, traditional approach to Scripture. A number of conservatives in the Episcopal Church are working for a new Reformation to happen in the church.

Even the Reformers Jewel, Hooker, Calvin, and Luther did not believe they were starting a new church. They believed that they were reforming the old church, and consequently, they were in direct alignment and continuity with the church of the early fathers. Some today would call the Episcopal Church to a religionless Christianity, faith without dogma, and a church without institution. Donald Poterski, in his chapter of the

book *Anglican Essentials*, sees the Anglican Church in England as approaching such a description. He believes if this trend continues, in less than two decades the Anglican Church in England will cease to exist. He blames this in part on secularization and religious pluralism. His remedy is to return to the Anglican essentials of orthodoxy and a Bible-guided outreach to others.⁵ Conservative Episcopalians would have the same prescription for the Episcopal Church. If the Episcopal Church were to return to a theological conservatism, what would its characteristics be? Would its *ethos* be lost?

Returning to the Traditional Anglican Ethos

Ideally, Anglicanism and Episcopalianism are biblically controlled, trinitarian, incarnational, liturgical, sacramental, rational, pastorally committed, and community oriented versions of mainstream Western Christianity. The ideal Anglican ethos, as the church's official documents (creeds, Prayer Book, *Thirty-nine Articles*, etc.) portray it, can be summed up in seven words: Catholic, Protestant, Reformed, Evangelical, Disciplined, Rational, and Moral.

It is **Catholic** (universal) in that it is always seeking to embrace the fullness of the faith without any sectarian narrowing of it. It is **Protestant** in the sense of rejecting the medieval distortion of apostolic Christianity. It is **Reformed** in the sense of subscribing to the Protestant idea of salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, for the glory of God alone (ruin, redemption and regeneration). It is **Evangelical** in the sense of believing that everyone needs salvation that “everyone might come within the reach of His saving embrace”—(*Collect for mission, BCP*), and that the church is the fellowship of the faithful who are alive in Christ. It is **Disciplined** in the way the spiritual life is practiced

through faith, repentance, Bible reading, prayer, and praise from the heart as modeled by the church fathers and the Prayer Book. It is **Rational** in outlook, refusing no question about the content of the faith and its relation to other forms of thought, ever striving to show the reasonableness of belief in Christ, and choosing the discipline of debate over that of the authoritarian big stick. And it is **Moral** in its mindset, stressing that the Law from which, as a means of salvation, Christians are freed, nonetheless binds them in its character as God's family code for those who have become his children.

Anglicanism can be further defined in two ways. First, Anglicanism is ecumenical, in that, there is a desire to associate with and learn from other traditions in Christendom, declining to say that it is the only way of Christian expression or salvation. Second, Anglicanism is liturgical. It follows ancient forms of worship with roots back in Judaism and the early church. This description of the Anglican ethos is designed to encompass many different traditions and backgrounds.

Reforming Modern Inclusiveness in Anglicanism

Anglicanism is institutional, in the sense that it has never divorced itself from the larger life of the civic communities to which its churches belong. It has always been concerned that community life be lived in a Christian way at all points. As a church of the *via media*, the Episcopal Church is often thought of as one that has an easy-going compromise, but the real nature of the *via media* is a constructive spirit of inclusiveness. This would not, however, be the boundary-less inclusiveness of the Episcopal Church today.

That original inclusiveness was an attempt to include all whom could be reasonably gathered within one church-fold, without denying or diluting its fundamental teachings. Anglicanism has been faced with obvious doctrinal error within its ranks and in the ranks of other denominations throughout its history. The Episcopal Church, as part of Anglicanism, has had to do likewise. In spite of this, the Episcopal Church has desired a unity to occur amongst Christian denominations. This is seen most clearly reflected in the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral of 1886 and 1888. This historical document of the Episcopal Church (found in the back of the Book of Common Prayer) states that in order for the restoration of unity to happen among the divided branches of Christendom there must be:

A return of all Christian communions to the principles of unity exemplified by the undivided Catholic church during the first ages of its existence; which principles we believe to be the substantial deposit of the Christian Faith and Order committed by Christ and his Apostles to the church unto the end of the world, and therefore incapable of compromise or surrender by those who have been ordained to be its stewards and trustees for the common and equal benefit of all men.

As inherent parts of this sacred deposit, and therefore as essential to the restoration of unity among the divided branches of Christendom, we account the following to wit:

- The Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament as the revealed Word of God.
- The Nicene Creed as the sufficient statement of the Christian faith
- The two Sacraments, –Baptism and the Supper of the Lord, –ministered with unfailing use of Christ’s words of institution and of the elements ordained by Him.
- The Historic Episcopate, locally adapted in the methods of its administration to the varying needs of the nations and peoples called of God into the unity of His church.

Furthermore, Deeply grieved by the sad divisions which affect the Christian church in our own land, we hereby declare our desire and readiness, so soon as there be any authorized response to this Declaration, to enter into brotherly conference with all or any Christian Bodies seeking the restoration of the organic

unity of the church, with a view to the earnest study of the conditions under which so priceless a blessing might happily be brought to pass.⁶

While the General Convention did not officially enact this action in 1886, it does show an earlier desire for a qualified inclusiveness within the ranks of the church. The Anglican concept of authority also takes to the middle ground. A course is steered between dictatorship and individualism. The Anglican sense of authority is moral rather than legal, persuasive rather than coercive; but not everything is designed to be left to personal inclination.

For example, the Roman Catholic church says, “Go to Mass on Sundays; if you don’t, you commit a mortal sin, if you persist in mortal sin, you are cut off from the church.” The Protestant says: “Come and worship with us; we have a splendid preacher and you will find his message inspiring.” The Anglican says, “you are morally bound to worship God on Sundays (or once a week); it is a universal Christian custom; it has always been the practice of the church. You neglect this duty at your peril – the peril of your own soul. We cannot compel you to come.”

The Dangers of Modern Inclusiveness

This same principle of authority could be applied to all areas of Anglicanism. Many think this kind of authority is too vague. Some weakness in humanity demands rigid authority. But, in reality, truth is what matters and the church must be true to the spirit of the Master.

Anglican author John Howe says this of the comprehensive nature of Anglicanism:

Anglicanism has a built in capacity within limits, for comprehensiveness. The limits are the bounds of Anglicanism, but within those there is no imposed

rigidity. But there are dangers that comprehensiveness, developed for whatever reason, can produce excessive diversity which within the one Communion is a hindrance to witness to the Gospel; and also hinders acceptance by other Christians that Anglicanism as a whole can be taken seriously. Diversity has to be viewed sympathetically.⁷

The problem with this inclusiveness without boundaries is apparent in the modern Episcopal Church. Evidence of just such a problem with inclusiveness is seen in the fact that bishops like Spong and seminary professors like Countryman can deny historic aspects of the Christian faith (such as the bodily resurrection and virgin birth of Christ) and not only remain in the church with impunity, but be celebrated in many corners of America.

There seems to be virtually no aberrant teaching or practice that is not overlooked by bishops or the church in general. In the eyes of many in other denominations (and even in many Anglican churches) the Episcopal Church believes in nothing but an irrational inclusiveness. Conservatives tend to believe this inclusiveness is often based on the elevation of a *reason* that has been unduly influenced by the beliefs of a largely unchristian modern society.

It is in vogue today, for example, to quote the latest scientific study regarding the possible connection of genetics to homosexual behavior. One need only look at the conflicting scientific studies to see that it is possible to have views on the morality of this issue based on ever-changing scientific studies (many of which turn out to be false or inconclusive), rather than the unchanging Word of God and the tradition of the early church.

Many voices in the church today are calling for Episcopalians to be inclusive. This inclusiveness is not an invitation to come to church, but rather, a wholesale encouragement to practice virtually any behavior one wishes. That inclusiveness would

say that no one has the right to say whether a behavior is right or wrong based on Scripture. Thus, when the conservative seeks to remind those church members who are involved in a homosexual relationship, that their sexual relationship is not condoned by Scripture, the conservative is said not to be inclusive. When conservative Anglicans/Episcopalians make a case against homosexual activity, one of the places often appealed to (besides Scripture) is the tradition of the early Christian church. That tradition emphatically declared homosexual behavior to be contrary to the will and Word of God.

Looking to the founding fathers of Anglican theology Richard Hooker, John Jewel, and Thomas Cranmer, one finds that they always placed Scripture as the first in authority and truth-value, even above inclusiveness. In those things to which it speaks, it is superior to human opinion. In those matters to which it does not speak, tradition is to be consulted. In those matters which neither Scripture nor tradition speaks, reason is called upon to light the way. Inclusiveness without regard for the authority of Scripture ends up being merely a sociological inclusiveness.

Why Division in the Episcopal Church?

Why does the Episcopal Church seem to produce such divisive opinions, held with great conviction, which leads to splits in the church, and charges and counter-charges of heresy? The reason is simple: Christianity consists of a message that claims to be absolutely true and that is at the same time deeply and perplexingly mysterious. From the very beginning, Christianity has taught that salvation and eternal life come by faith, and that faith consists of believing certain things about one historical individual, Jesus of

Nazareth, called the Christ. The details and meanings of the message about His life, death, and resurrection, and impending return are of extreme importance to the individual Episcopalian.

The concept of faith that involves the *mere* acceptance of certain doctrines as true is sometimes contrasted unfavorably with faith as personal trust in Christ. Of course, no martyrs of the early church thought that they would be saved and attain eternal life because they held to a certain set of propositions to be true. They believed that they would obtain eternal life because they trusted in Christ, not because they believed specific doctrines. But they did not make a dichotomy between faith as doctrine and faith as trust; part of trusting in Jesus Christ and their ability to be saved to the uttermost was the acceptance of certain propositions about the person and work of Christ. Trusting in Christ, which is necessary for salvation, makes sense only in the context of certain doctrines, and what they tell about Jesus and His work.

It is hard for twenty-first century people to grasp that the early church believed it to be absolutely necessary to know and accept some very specific statements about the nature and attributes of God and His Son Jesus Christ. It was so important that all Christians were required to repeat those statements (or creeds) frequently and to learn them by heart.

When faced with the modern dilemma between faith as trust and faith as acceptance of specific doctrines, liberals usually have a strong bias in favor of faith as *trust* without the need for rigid doctrines. This would have been incomprehensible to the early Christians, who could trust Christ in the midst of persecution precisely because they were persuaded that very specific things about Him were true. Faith makes a Christian,

but doctrine creates the church. It is possible for a church to endure for a while without a clear doctrinal base, but a church would not arise at all unless clear and significant doctrines were present.

The Importance of Fixed Doctrinal Standards in Hermeneutics

Contemporary Episcopalianism, which has drifted into, and is becoming known for doctrinal pluralism, could hardly have arisen on the basis of such pluralism. In fact, it arose out of some very clear doctrinal convictions, for which several of its bishops were prepared to give their lives. Where there are fixed doctrinal standards, it is certainly possible for faith to degenerate into mere formalism and legalism. On the other hand, where there are no fixed, clearly acknowledged standards, the wildest and most fanciful notions can become mixed in with basic Christian doctrines making it very hard to separate them.

Experience has shown that contemporary Christians who hold to fixed doctrinal standards have often been dismissed as out of touch with modernity. Where clear doctrinal norms do not exist, even Episcopalians who intend to keep the faith can easily wander far from it and find themselves involved in some very remarkable errors. If Episcopalians are not happy with false teaching, then it will become necessary to accept a fairly substantial dose of doctrinal theology and conservative hermeneutics. It involves learning essential Christian doctrine as taught in Scripture and the early church. It requires a commitment to study and learn from orthodox sources.

No doctrinal theology can be established for the Episcopal Church, or indeed any church, unless there is a recognition that the Bible stands out from all other books in three

ways: (1) it contains a supernatural revelation; (2) because of this it possesses a unity of structure and purpose; (3) it reveals and produces spiritual qualities which can only be explained by the direct inspiration of God.

The Bible as the Word of God

Doctrinal standards can be established only if the Bible is recognized as the authoritative Word of God. It is sometimes said that the Bible is the Word of God, while at other times it is said to *contain* the Word of God. Taken together these are true, alone they misrepresent. If the Bible is the Word of God (as the Ordination rites affirm) one must not forget that it contains the words of men also, many of which are not true in themselves, though the record that they were spoken is true and reliable. For example, when St. Paul quotes certain Greek philosophers in Acts 17, the words of those philosophers are not the Word of God, but are accurately transmitted in Scripture.

If, on the other hand, the Bible is said to be limited in that it merely contains the Word of God, there is the opposite danger of not knowing which are God's words and which are man's words, an entirely impossible position. The Bible *is* the Word of God in the sense that it conveys an accurate record of everything God intended humanity to know and learn in connection with his will. The Bible *contains* the Word of God in the sense that in it is enshrined the Word of God, which is revealed to the world for its salvation.

The Episcopal Church originally taught without any hesitation or qualification that Holy Scripture contains all things necessary for salvation. The Bible is a book of and for redemption. It is not primarily a collection of literature, though it is full of literature;

nor is it scientific, though it contains not a little science. It is not even merely a book of history, though it is probably true that the substance of more than half of it is in the form of history.

The testimony of the early church that the Bible was the Word of God is well established. The fact that the fathers of the church bear witness to the sufficiency of Holy Scripture constitutes one of the strongest supports for the Scriptures as the rule of faith for the Anglican/Episcopal Church.

Authority is always based on the possession of superior knowledge. No true Christian can have an objection to the authority that comes from any individual or corporate body that actually possesses more and better information than him. All that his duty to Christ requires is that the information derived from others should be examined, compared, and tested by the superior knowledge of Holy Scripture (see the Bereans in Acts 17) as the supreme and final authority in all matters of faith and practice.

Ongoing Revelation

Some may ask, “But what about the Holy Spirit’s ability to provide an ongoing *directive* authority? Can’t the Holy Spirit direct the church in new ways?” James Dunn answers this question by maintaining that, in order to learn what to do in any particular situation, one must look to the Spirit of God, whether the Spirit speaks through or apart from the Bible. Since the Spirit speaks now presumably in the same manner as He spoke previously, the New Testament will provide a check on any word or policy claiming directive authority today.⁸ The Holy Spirit would not contradict what he said through the

revelation of Scripture (Heb.1:1-4; 2 Peter 1:20-21), nor would the Spirit contradict any of the established principles in Scripture.

Testing a New Revelation

When a church, convention, or any ecclesiastical structure claims a new revelation or way of interpreting certain passages of Scripture, that claim must not contradict the already established principle in Scripture itself. So, for example, if a convention wanted to change the two thousand-plus years of teachings regarding human sexuality because new scientific evidence has been shown to possibly contradict the Scriptures, and if that convention voted in a way that usurps the authority of the Word of God, it is to be rejected by the church. It is not a rejection of science, but rather, a rejection of the authority of science over the revelation of God in Holy Scripture.

If a church or individual interprets Scripture in such a way as to deny one or more of the essential doctrines of the faith, then the validity of some sacraments and even one's claim to salvation might be brought into question. This same problem faced the early church. One of the fathers, Cyprian, wrote in his Epistle 19:3, 3-5:

The Lord instructed his disciples to baptize 'In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost' Does Marcion hold this Trinity? ... How can one baptized among such heretics be considered as having obtained remission of sins and the grace of divine mercy through his faith, seeing that he has not the truth of the Faith itself?⁹

In a scene ripped right out of today, church father Justin, Martyr (Dialogue 35: 2, 116-22) speaks out against Trypho, explaining the existence of heretics to his Jewish opponent:

As to the existence of such men, who profess themselves to be Christians and acclaim the crucified Jesus to be both Lord and Christ, and yet do not teach His doctrines but those of the spirits of error, we who are disciples of the true and pure doctrine of Jesus Christ are more trustworthy and better grounded in the hope promised by Him. There are, then, many who teach others to say and do

godless and blasphemous things in the name of Jesus, and are called by us by the names of the men from whom each teaching and opinions began. With none of them we have fellowship.¹⁰

The Episcopal Church and the Condemnation of Heresy

With most of the early church fathers condemning heresy, what is one to make of the seeming lack of emphasis upon affirming truth and condemning heresy in the Episcopal Church today? Perhaps the answer is found in the wholesale shift in society's view of diversity. The Episcopal Church as a whole, being inclined to adopt the beliefs and mores of society, has adopted society's views of diversity as a new revelation from God. This diversity seems to say that any view is as good as another and that little can be known for certain. This sort of diversity, based on an expanding relativism, has been elevated to a virtue in the twenty first century. This diversity, which relativises truth, also begins to blur the beliefs and teachings of all religions to the point that no difference is too great to cause one body to withdraw from another.

Episcopalians sometime embrace this diversity as a knee-jerk reaction to fundamentalism. It is not so much that they believe all roads lead to God. They instead believe that no road exclusively leads to God. As was mentioned earlier, some in the Episcopal Church look at fundamentalism as worse than, if not equivalent to heresy. Most liberals, in particular, are quick to label fundamentalism as heresy while failing to have any objective standard against which to judge the truth of such a statement. There is a temptation for conservatives to compromise on the absolute truths of Scripture in order to avoid being thus labeled. That compromise takes place when the conservative buys into some of the faulty methods of liberal hermeneutics. Spong rightly points out that

these conservatives practice what he calls a “selective fundamentalism.” These are Christians that abhor fundamentalism, but who are quite willing to defend the literal truth of parts of the Christian story while surrendering other parts. The more bizarre gospel references can be sacrificed, they argue, so long as the essential truths contained in the Bible are held intact literally.¹¹ Herein lies the problem for the conservative, and indeed for anyone who tries to compromise on the integrity of any part of Scripture. Either the conservative’s claim of authority falls apart or the credibility of their interpretation of Scripture is called into question.

If the Bible is recognized church-wide as the sole authority for doctrine and morality, then the first step will be taken to regain a sense of accountability for what is taught. That accountability is fully realized when false teachings are recognized for what they are—heresy. The church should then find appropriate consequences for those teaching heresy.

The Consequences of Doctrinal Diversity

Whether he rejects any or all essential doctrines of the Christian faith, the average Episcopalian does not feel the need to answer to Scripture, Creed, or church, but makes use of these and other *symbols* to the extent that he finds them enlightening. This can be seen in the resurgence of things like the labyrinth walk in the Episcopal Church. Thus the contemporary Episcopalian tends to gravitate toward any kind of metaphysical meaning, even ransacking biblical narratives, but never feels responsible to any transcendent authority. Conservatives claim that the historical character of the gospel narrative implies

that God is that transcendent authority who is there to question his human creation, and to whom all people must answer.

The rejection of authority and the psychoanalysis of truth fit perfectly with the modern refusal to tolerate disagreement. Diversity and pluralism are words that are used in this context. Pluralism can mean many things, but too often it is used to imply that various religions simply express truth through different systems. This pluralism is anything but a willingness to tolerate and respect honest disagreements, however. Evans calls this type of pluralism an “imperialistic attempt to decree that believers of all religious faiths must interpret their beliefs in the same way.”¹²

Anglican Comprehensiveness

Anglican comprehensiveness is not a practically limitless plurality of theological opinions. To those to whom truth matters because it is no less than Jesus Christ himself who is the Truth, comprehensiveness is to be understood as *comprehending* the very fullness of that truth, in other words, life in Christ. In this sense, comprehensiveness comes very close to the catholicity talked about in the creeds. Catholicity is therefore a unity in diversity. Comprehensiveness must therefore be understood as a life witnessing to the fullness of the revelation, and a life of union within the context of Scripture. Conservatism at its best avoids a fundamentalism, which rejects the culture, and a liberalism, which accommodates itself too much to the culture.

Legislating Doctrine and Morality

While there are few church canons that specifically speak to the doctrine and moral behavior in the Episcopal Church, the church has always taught the doctrines of God using all the light that God lovingly affords. Most essential doctrines like the Trinity, the virgin birth, the bodily resurrection, the various aspects of God's nature, and the authority of Scripture are outlined in the Prayer Book, but not specifically mentioned in canon law. In the past, when speaking about biblical morality—those God-given rules of human behavior, which both constrain and liberate the beings God created to populate his good earth, some in the Episcopal Church have chosen to eschew the rules in favor of guidelines or suggestions. Where do these rules come from? They come from Scripture and the experience (tradition) of the church in working out the meaning of human obligation and responsibility. When the Episcopal Church equivocates on these rules then the door is open to usher in new sets of *rules*. For conservatives the Episcopal Church's historical documents found in the Prayer Book and the church's tradition serve as a canon of belief.

If there is no canon that says, for example, "one may not ordain a practicing homosexual," it is because the matter was formerly too plain for argumentation. The biblical concepts of heterosexual matrimony or monogamy (for the unmarried) were the divinely appointed rules of life, acknowledged as such from the beginning of the Judeo-Christian history, and therefore incumbent on clergy and laity. The same would apply to any extramarital sexual relationship. While the Episcopal Church may not have specifically said in canon law that any sexual activity outside of marriage would prevent one's ordination, it has given tacit agreement to this biblical position. The problem has

come about in practice rather than in doctrine. The Episcopal Church has long ago abandoned, in practice, the idea that one should not be involved in sex outside of marriage. It has done this for any number of reasons (e.g. So as to not appear out of step with society, or too judgmental, or because everybody is doing it). In reality this accommodation to the mores of society has come about because of the abandonment of the Bible's authority in this area. The biblical doctrine of the authority of Scripture maintains that the belief and behavior of Christian people must be controlled and directed throughout by what Scripture teaches. J. I. Packer maintains:

To rest content with the guidance of unreformed church tradition, or uncriticized private opinion, not tested by the written Word, is theologically illegitimate, and Scripture warns us against lapses of this sort.¹³

The recognition of the authority of Scripture in matters of doctrine and morality was evident in the Anglican Church from its earliest prayer books. In the preface to the First Prayer Book of King Edward VI, 1549, one sees the importance of the authority of Scripture given the fact that the Bible was under such attack not only from without, but also from within:

And further, that the people (by daily hearyng of Holy Scripture read in the church) should continuallye profite more and more in the knowledge of God, and bee the more inflamed with the love of his true religion. But these many yeares passed this godly and decent ordre of the auncient Fathers, hath bee so altered, broken, and neglected, by planting in uncertein stories, legendes, respondes, verses, vaine repeticions, commemoracions, and synodalles, that commonly when any boke of the Bible was began: before three or foure Chapters were read out, all the rest were unread. [*sic*]¹⁴

The authority of Scripture is not only at the core of Anglicanism; it is essential to any meaningful interpretation of Scripture. It is also at the core of conservative Anglicanism, permeating its hermeneutics and theology.

This chapter has attempted to define and make a defense for conservatism both in its hermeneutics and its practice. By exploring the consequences of liberalism, the pitfalls of conservatism, the benefits of a conservative hermeneutic, and the importance of the authority of Scripture, this study has attempted to show the superiority of conservatism over liberalism as a hermeneutic and as an approach to the Christian life.

The next chapter will seek to move the reader toward some possible conclusions from the evidence presented thus far.

CHAPTER 9 CONCLUSION

This work has examined the differences between liberalism and conservatism in regards to their approaches to biblical interpretation and the resulting theology. The ramifications of both hermeneutics have been explored. A case has been made for a conservative hermeneutic based on the Anglican three-legged stool of Scripture, tradition, and reason. What is one to conclude in light of the above?

The choice between conservative scholarship and theologically liberal scholarship is not a choice between obscurantism and scholarship or between crudeness and sensitivity in biblical exposition. A far deeper issue is at stake. The conservative says a choice must be made between historic orthodoxy and modern subjectivism; between a Christianity that is consistent with itself, and one that is not; in effect, between one that is wholly God-given and one that is partly man-made.

The individual must choose whether to bow to the authority claimed by Jesus, the Son of God, or whether on their own authority, to discount and contravene a part of His teaching; whether to rest content with Christianity according to Christ or to go hankering after a Christianity according to the spirit this present age. For the conservative, the choice is whether to behave as Christ's disciples or as His tutors; whether to accept the biblical doctrine of Scripture as it stands, or to freely re-interpret the Bible according to the current whims of the day.

Conservatism has much to offer in the way of a defensible truth claim. It has much to draw on from its long history of biblical interpretation. Its love for and dependence upon the early church fathers, the reasonableness of its theological apologetics, and its clear and sound hermeneutics, provide an ample foundation for confidence by the Episcopalian. Yet, despite the fact that Anglican and Episcopal conservatives have been articulating a coherent theological vision for well over half a millennium, there is a perceptible reluctance on the part of many in the Episcopal and Anglican Churches to get involved in academic theological debate.

Conservatives have often been shamed into silence by the charge of fundamentalism which invokes images of anti-intellectualism. Conservatives in the Episcopal Church are increasingly showing themselves to be concerned about intellectual issues, without in any way weakening or compromising the church's concerns for pastoral and spiritual matters. Conservatism states that the Christian gospel is unique and cannot be confused or identified with any other religion or philosophy of life. It is a Gospel, they say, that must be shared throughout the world, despite the liberal charges of intolerance and judgmentalism. An Anglican evangelist commenting on the Acts of the Apostles remarks:

I find it ironic that people object to the proclamation of the Christian gospel these days because so many faiths jostle on the doorstep of our global village. What's new? The variety of faiths in antiquity was even greater than it is today. And the early Christians, making as they did ultimate claims for Jesus, met the problem of other faiths head-on from the very outset. Their approach was interesting.... They did not denounce other faiths. They simply proclaimed Jesus with all the power and persuasiveness at their disposal.¹

Most liberals and conservatives believe that all religious revelations should be treated on an equal footing. It is, however, a small step from this essentially political judgment concerning toleration to the theological declaration that all religions are the

same, or at least heading in the same direction. Indeed, those who are totally committed to a pluralist worldview seem to think that it is vital to the future of human civilization to treat the great religious traditions as different ways of looking at and experiencing the one ultimate divine reality (the old “many people standing blindfolded at different parts of an elephant” argument).

Episcopal conservatives are seeking to call the church back to its Anglican tradition and spirit. That tradition can be seen in the earliest forms of Anglicanism and by studying the great Anglican divines. That spirit was even evidenced in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when it offered freedom and deliverance. The great divines remind the church of the fact that Anglican toleration of other views did not include doctrines contrary to what was taught by the Scriptures and echoed by the early church fathers (and reflected in the *Thirty-nine Articles*).

Conservatives believe that one must not sit in judgment on God’s Word, complaining of this as too strict, or that as too difficult, requiring too much self-sacrifice. The only point to ascertain is whether the Bible is the Word of God or not; and if one is convinced that it is God’s Word, then it must be received with the most childlike simplicity, and obeyed without hesitation or reservation. Even with this emphasis on obedience to Scripture, conservatism is not guaranteed freedom from a preoccupation with its favorite doctrines, and an indifference to the moral demands it so often proclaims. Nevertheless, that does not negate the validity of such an emphasis on obedience.

The conservative’s goal is to bring people back to the Bible (which speaks of Jesus and can penetrate the hearts and consciences of people as strong as ever). As

readers ponder its pages the Holy Spirit is released in them. Much of the power of conservatism is found in its moral witness to life. As people are called to a biblical morality and ethic there can be a direct effect upon relationships, the crime rate, businesses, the print media and even Hollywood. The conservative morality is based on a hermeneutic that includes proper interpretive methods, early church tradition, and Scripture-guided reason.

It has become fashionable in many sectors of the Episcopal Church to question the value and the legitimacy of apologetics. It is said that the task of the believer is to confront unbelief with the Gospel challenge, to convict of sin, and share the message of repentance and renewal. Conservatives believe that Christians are also called to “always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope you have” (1 Peter 3:15). True apologetics cannot take place without utilizing the proper biblical interpretive methods – they go hand in hand.

Theological liberalism has just as many certainties and dogmas as orthodoxy. Liberals in the Episcopal Church can be as intolerant of conservatives as they claim conservatives are of others. Episcopal conservatives have long regarded liberalism as a serious threat to Christian integrity and identity. The liberal strategy of acknowledging norms and sources of theological authority derived from outside the Christian revelation is seen as something of a Trojan horse, allowing the ideas and values of the world to gain an unwarranted and unwelcome presence and influence within Christianity.

While liberals may strive to uphold a moral code, they have no universal authoritative basis to do so. Any murderer, rapist, or gangster could claim freethinking (liberalism) as a justification for his or her crimes. Freethinking ends in anarchy and

nihilism. Without absolute truth, guaranteed by God, there is no sure basis for right or wrong whatsoever. Life essentially has no meaning, no glory, and no worth.

Liberalism tends to diminish the historic nature of the Gospel accounts. However, the historical character of the Gospel implies that salvation is made possible by the work of Christ. If, as liberalism maintains, the Gospel is at best partly historical, partly myth, then difficulties arise with the hermeneutical process. There is a two-fold problem with treating the Gospel story as a non-historical or quasi-historical myth. First, the elimination or diminishing of historicity in favor of myth does not allow human sinfulness to be taken with real seriousness. Second, the elimination or diminishing of historicity in favor of myth eliminates the possibility of an actual historical relationship with God.

If the story were a non-historical myth, then perhaps salvation would be made possible simply by the story itself. One might, for instance, see the Gospel story as providing a moral ideal to be emulated. Inspired by the story, people seek to become more Christ-like. Such a scenario seems to presuppose that the sinfulness of humans is not as profound and pervasive as Christians have traditionally supposed, and as the evening news seems to confirm on a nightly basis. This view assumes that humans really do have the power to change their very nature.

The wholesale rejection of the historical reliability of the New Testament by the liberals goes hand in hand with their rejection of anything having to do with the supernatural intervention of God upon this planet. So convinced are they that God has not and will not intervene in the affairs of humans in this way, they seem to be completely closed-minded to the possibility of such an occurrence.

A discussion of the Christmas story, for example, from the perspective of a liberal scholar might go something like this:

Questioner: I hear that you are investigating the Christmas story in the Bible?

Scholar: Yes. I plan to investigate the biblical accounts using the latest tools available to us.

Questioner: Do you have any preconceived results in mind?

Scholar: No, I do not think one should predetermine the results of historical research. One should have an open mind. It is bad research to work with an agenda. I realize that we all have a tendency to have an agenda, but I personally believe that we should resist any attempt to make the results of historical-critical research fit our own desires and beliefs.

Questioner: Then I assume that you are open to the possibility that Jesus was truly born of a virgin?

Scholar: No, I never said that.

Questioner: But I thought you said one should never predetermine the results of research?

Scholar: What I meant was that one should never predetermine the results of historical-critical research.

Questioner: What's the difference?

Scholar: Oh, the difference is very significant. Historical-critical research assumes that we live in a closed continuum of space and time. This means that miracles are excluded as a possibility.

Questioner: Then you have already predetermined certain results. After all, you have excluded the possibility of Mary having conceived as a virgin.

Scholar: That's right. It couldn't have happened.

Questioner: Oh!²

The influence of the higher-critical methods of interpretation on liberalism has been demonstrated. When these methods are examined, one finds that they do not give objective knowledge. These methods also distort and erode biblical faith by denying the supernatural aspect of God's dealing with humanity, and by practicing an eisegesis which does not square with paradigms held by the biblical writers, or the early church fathers. Based on the power and authority of the rational mind, it boldly questions the authorship and content of all biblical writings. It assumes that science bestows the right to question not only the apostles but also the judgment of the apostolic fathers of the church.

The differences between liberalism and conservatism are numerous and varied. These can be distilled down to two main differences—differences in interpretative methods and views of biblical authority. Conservatism teaches that the Bible is the Word of God and God's divine revelation. The manuscript, archaeological, predictive prophecy and statistical probability evidence available can demonstrate this. Because conservatives can show that the Bible is divine rather than human in origin, they say there is an inherent authority in Scripture that supersedes any other institution or writing that claims to have divine authority.

It is the contention of the Episcopal/Anglican conservative that the two main revelations of God (Jesus and the written Word) compliment each other. Jesus came to fulfill the Law and the prophets; all the promises of God find their *Yes* in him. Secondly,

Jesus verified the writings of Scripture as the expressions of Him whose thoughts are above human thoughts, whose ways are above human ways. There is a symbiotic relationship between Jesus and the Bible. Each validates the other. They are earth and tree. Without the earth, the tree does not stand. Without the tree, the earth lies barren.

Conservatives believe that not only was (and is) the Bible the Word of God, it was originally intended to have much more authority in the life of the church than it seems to enjoy today. It is also the belief of conservatives that there is a correct way to interpret Scripture. That correct way can be discovered by lay person and scholar alike. That way is guided by following the basic principles of interpreting most historical documents. Conservative Episcopalians point to the Holy Spirit, the early church fathers, and the early Anglican divines as guiding agents in the interpretive process.

Reason is also part of the Anglican conservative equation when it comes to interpreting the Bible, and how reason is used in the life of the believer. The proper role of reason is to express faith by receiving, applying, and transmitting revealed truth. Faith and reason come into conflict when reason denies God's authority, refuses to be a servant of faith, and reverts to some sort of unbelief; the freedom that reason thus gains is actually perfect slavery. The early church fathers and the fathers of Anglicanism understood reason to be in subordination to Scripture. Reason would never, from their perspective, contradict Scripture.

The question facing the Episcopalian is this: "Do I go against almost two thousand years of biblical interpretation, the early church fathers, the early fathers of Anglicanism and disregard their interpretations pertaining to the essential elements of doctrine and morals?" And if so, "On what basis do I throw these aside?"

It is the contention of this work that there is no rational reason to discard the scriptural interpretations of the past as they pertain to the essential elements of Christian faith (encapsulated in the creeds) and morality (as plainly taught in Scripture and the church fathers). In fact, to do so is heresy. While heresy is a strong word, the conservative must make the distinction between that word and an aberration as it pertains to unbiblical doctrine. The word *heresy*, in its most common usage, speaks of false teachings that destroy. They are destructive because they overturn the basic elements that make up the historic Christian faith. In its place are substituted doctrines that distort or contradict the teachings found in the Bible. It may be the case, however, that a particular teaching does not overtly deny basic biblical theology, but is nevertheless dangerously inconsistent with an orthodox confession of faith. Thus, a person or group may be orthodox in their central theology while at the same time maintain teachings and practices that are clearly at odds with essential Christian theology. Heresy almost always begins with a misunderstanding of the nature and character of God. This leads to a demotion of the authority of Scripture in that person's life. If, however, one acknowledges the authority of the Bible, then the next step is to accept what Scripture says (when rightly interpreted), and apply the Word of God to one's life. It is quite possible to spend so much time trying to find out what the Bible does not say that one might never get to the point of trying figure out or to live by what it does say.

Scripture says, and conservatives affirm, that the Bible is inspired or "God-breathed." It is the very Word of God and therefore carries with it the authority and power of God. It is eminently useful, too. It is useful for teaching what is true, convicting one of what is wrong in his life, correcting that wrong and helping with an amendment of

life. This is the orthodox message arrived at through a conservative interpretative hermeneutic and reflective of the beliefs of countless Christians throughout the centuries – both Anglican and Episcopal. Conservatism proclaims this orthodox message to be the most compatible way of understanding what God has said to the church and the world. Conservatism is the craftsman through which the three-legged stool of Anglicanism – Scripture, tradition, and reason, can be properly constructed and utilized.

It must be reiterated that anyone interpreting the Bible, be they liberal or conservative, must not get so caught up in the academic pursuit of the interpretive process that they fail to remember the One towards whom the Scriptures point. In perhaps the most thorough book outlining conservatism in the Anglican tradition, *Anglican Evangelicalism*, the following stern charge is made:

It consequently behooves evangelicals [*read: conservatives*] in every age to rethink the atoning work of Jesus Christ, permitting the Cross to be the same power of God unto salvation for themselves which it has been for other generations, but meanwhile resting under no illusions, either as to the changeless transcendent fact of the Cross of Calvary, or as to the impossibility of any period accepting the Cross on the strength alone of ready-made explanations received from another time. The Cross is a fresh and living experience, or it is a mere far-off event in history according as sinful men, on the one hand, gratefully accepting it, nevertheless, are continually seeking new meanings in it, or, on the other hand, as they regard it in the form of a finished, dogmatic product. Present-day evangelicals, then, must accept the responsibility of making their contribution to a full understanding of Christ's work as divine Redeemer by interpreting the atonement in terms which have undoubted relevance for themselves and for their contemporaries.³

Some might say, “What right does the conservative have to judge others?” The answer is most clearly seen in St. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. He says (5:13) that Christians are not to judge those outside the church. “What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside?” This and other passages in the New Testament seem to urge those in the church to uphold the truth of God's

revelation by having some sort of accountability for what they do and teach. He says to Timothy (1 Tim. 4:16), “Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers.” Paul tells Titus (2:1), “You must teach what is in accord with sound doctrine.” The above is only possible by applying a conservative hermeneutic that is in harmony with the tradition of the early church, early Anglicanism, and sound Scripture-based reason.

In the final analysis liberalism and conservatism present two different types of Christianity. Conservatism has a heritage of turning to Scripture for the verification of experiential and intellectual truths. It has a heritage of living with the Scriptures in their hands. From it they sought the inspiration for their preaching. By it they governed their own lives and the lives of their people. Of them it might truly be said, “All day long do they study Your Word.”

To the adventurous spirits who thought the conventionalities and formal moralism of the times intolerable and who could find an outlet in alcohol, gambling and perverse living, the conservatives of the past brought release by breaking through the boredom of conventional life, and leading men and women into a deep experience of God. To the morally defeated they brought the power of conversion and love. To all converts these Episcopalian/Anglicans brought a task worth doing, God’s task of evangelizing the world. To the indifferent, the complacent, the hardened, the conservative’s zeal and conviction brought repentance and renewal by proclaiming God’s judgment and Christ’s death for sinners.

The modern Episcopal conservative can help to bring the Episcopal Church back to the place where the Scriptures are honored and given their rightful authority in the life

of the church. The Bible can be returned to its place of prominence in the life of the individual that it enjoyed for most of church history. This can be accomplished by a dedication to the principles of proper biblical interpretation and by paying careful attention to the perspectives of early church fathers, early Anglicans, and contemporary Anglican conservative scholars.

Conservatism offers the Episcopalian the best chance to recover the true meaning of the *via media* and Hooker's *three-legged stool* — Scripture, tradition, and reason. When an Episcopalian utilizes a conservative hermeneutic, because it has the tradition of the apostolic church and Reformation Anglicanism as a part of that hermeneutic, he can get closer to how the Bible is to be understood by all people, at all times, in all places. This hermeneutical approach and practice offers the best chance to help the Episcopalian to “earnestly contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints” (Jude 3).

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Chapter 2

Chapter 3

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Apologetics Resources

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APPENDIX B

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Church and Theology

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Reisman, Judith A. and Edward W. Eichel. *Kinsey, Sex and Fraud: The Indoctrination of a People*. Lafayette, LA: Huntington House Publishers, 1990.

Satinover, Jeffrey. *Homosexuality and the Politics of Truth*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996.

Support Groups

Exodus International is a coalition of Christian ministries worldwide that offer support to men and women seeking to overcome homosexuality. These outreaches offer such services as support groups, one-on-one counseling, literature, newsletters and other helpful resources.

Exodus International. P.O. Box 2121, San Rafael, CA 94912 (415) 454-1017

Portland Fellowship—a ministry proclaiming freedom from homosexuality through the power of Jesus Christ — The Portland Fellowship, P.O. Box 9205, Portland, OR 97207
website: www.portlandfellowship.com

Books

Many of the books listed above can be ordered through the local Christian Bookstore or by contacting Regeneration Books—(410) 661-0284.
Regeneration Books, P.O. Box 9830, Baltimore, MD 21284.

APPENDIX C

BASIC HERMENEUTICS

The following is a tool that can be used to help the average layperson to begin to practice the art and science of biblical interpretation. While this tool does not take into account all of the aspects of hermeneutics, it does give an elementary start to help Christians not seminary trained or necessarily biblically literate, to have a better chance to understand what they read when they open the pages of Scripture. The best antidote to heretical teaching is good hermeneutical training. Hermeneutics is a science in that it is regulated by rules and is an art in that it involves intuitive and analytical insight. The rules can be remembered easily with the acronym **L-I-G-H-T-S**. Hermeneutics “lights your path” as you walk through the Word of God. The acronym L-I-G-H-T-S will serve to remind the reader of the following elements involved in biblical interpretation.

- L**—Literal Interpretation
- I**—Illumination by Holy Spirit
- G**—Grammatical Principle
- H**—Historical Context
- T**—Teaching Ministry
- S**—Scriptural Harmony

Literal Principle

The “L” in L-I-G-H-T-S will remind you of what is known as the *literal principle* of biblical interpretation.

This means that we should interpret the Word of God in its most normal and natural sense. When the Bible uses a metaphor or figure of speech, it should be instantly apparent that you should interpret it accordingly. Thus when Jesus says that He is “the door” (John 10:7), it’s clear He isn’t talking about wood and hinges.

In a similar sense, when Jesus says that those who leave their families for Him and the gospel will receive a “hundredfold” return, the natural assumption is that He is speaking metaphorically. Any other interpretation leads to a logical absurdity.

When the *literal principle* of biblical interpretation is compromised or contradicted, truth becomes clouded and the totality of Scripture is confused.

Illumination Principle

The “I” in L-I-G-H-T-S will remind you of the illumination of Scripture that can only come from the Spirit of God. As 1 Corinthians 2:12 puts it, “We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us.”

Because the author of Scripture, the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:21), resides within each child of God (1 Corinthians 3:16), he or she is in a unique position to receive God’s illumination (1 Corinthians 2:9-11). The Spirit of truth not only provides insights that permeate the head, but also provides illumination that penetrates the heart.

Clearly, however, the Holy Spirit does not supplant the scrupulous study of Scripture. Rather, He provides us with insights that can only be spiritually discerned. In this way the Holy Spirit helps us to exegete (draw out of) rather than eisegete (read into) Scripture. He only illumines what is in the text: illumination does *not go beyond* the text.

The acid test of any doctrine is the text of Scripture. Illumination must always be tested by the Word. Whenever a teaching runs counter to God's revealed truth, you can be sure the Holy Spirit is not behind it (John 16:13).

Grammatical Principle

The "G" in L-I-G-H-T-S will remind you that Scripture is to be interpreted in accordance with typical rules of grammar, including syntax and style. For this reason, it is important for the student of Scripture to have a basic understanding of grammatical principles. It is also helpful to have a basic grasp of the Greek and Hebrew languages.

If you do not know Greek or Hebrew, however, do not panic. Today there are a host of eminently usable tools to aid you in gaining insights from the original languages of Scripture. Besides commentaries, there are "interlinear" translations that provide the Hebrew and Greek text of the Bible in parallel with the English text. In addition, there are dictionaries of Old and New Testament words that are keyed to *Strong's* concordance. Tools such as these make it easy for the layperson to obtain insights on the original Hebrew or Greek of the Bible without being fluent in these languages.

Historical Principle

The “H” in L-I-G-**H**-T-S will remind you that the Christian faith is *historical* and evidential (Luke 1:1-4). The biblical text is best understood when one is familiar with the customs, culture, and historical context of biblical times. Such background information is extremely helpful in drawing out the full meaning of any given text.

The King James Version of 3 John 2 reads, “Beloved, I wish above all things that thou mayest prosper and be in health, even as thy soul prospereth.” There have been some who have interpreted that verse to mean that God desires all Christians to be healthy and wealthy. However, by taking into consideration the passage’s historical context we come to understand this passage differently. This opening remark in John’s letter to his friend Gaius is, as Bible scholar Gordon Fee puts it, “the standard form of greeting in a personal letter of antiquity.” Fee concludes that “to extend John’s wish for Gaius to refer to financial and material prosperity for all Christians of all times is *totally foreign* to the text. John neither intended that, nor could Gaius have so understood it. Thus it cannot be the plain meaning of the text.” It may also be instructive to note that, as Fee points out, “the Greek word translated *prosper* means to ‘go well with someone.’”

When it comes to the context and customs of antiquity, there is no need to be led astray. Thankfully, there are a host of excellent handbooks and commentaries to aid you in understanding the people and places of the Bible.

Teaching Principle

The “T” in L-I-G-H-T-S will remind you that even though the ultimate illumination of Scripture comes through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, God has also provided the church with uniquely gifted human *teachers* as well (Ephesians 4:11).

James solemnly warned, “Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly (James 3:1). Paul echoed the same warning when he exhorted Timothy to “do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth” (2 Timothy 2:15). Scripture makes it abundantly clear that the task of teaching should never be undertaken in a cavalier fashion.

Following the example of the Bereans (Acts 17:11) we should make sure that what human teachers say is in line with Scripture (cf. 1 Thessalonians 5:21). When it comes to the Word of God, we ought to seek reliable sources for assistance.

As we seek to rightly interpret God’s Word (2 Timothy 2:15), we would do well to consult those whom God has uniquely gifted as teachers in the church (cf. Titus 2:1—15) and who guard against wolves in sheep’s clothing that will not spare the flock (Acts 20: 29).

Scriptural Harmony

Finally, the “S” in L-I-G-H-T-S will remind you of the principle of *scriptural harmony*. Simply stated, this means that individual passages of Scripture must always harmonize with Scripture as a whole. One text can never be interpreted in such a way as to conflict with other passages. In other words, if a particular passage can be interpreted

in several ways, the only choice is that interpretation which harmonizes with the rest of Scripture. The biblical interpreter must keep in mind that all of Scripture, though communicated through various human instruments, has a single Author: God. And God does not contradict himself.

An example of this principle can be seen in the often misinterpreted John 10:34. There is no possibility that Scripture is here teaching that the believer is a god, because this would result in the Bible contradicting itself. Scripture quite clearly teaches that there is only one God (Deuteronomy 6:4; Isaiah 43:10; 44:6).

The Bible was written over a period of sixteen hundred years by forty authors on different continents, in three different languages and on hundreds of subjects—yet without contradiction and with such flawless harmony that all other literature pales by comparison.

NOTES

¹Gordon Fee, *The Disease of the Health and Wealth Gospels*, (Beverly, MA: Frontline Publishing, 1985), 6.

²*Ibid.*

³*Ibid.*

The above is adapted from Hank Hanegraaff's book, *Christianity in Crisis* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1993), 219—225. It is used with permission of the Christian Research Institute, P.O. Box 7000, Rancho Santa Margarita, CA 92688.

Website: www.equip.org.

APPENDIX D

Thy Word is Truth

by
The Rev. Dr. Walter Martin

What do we mean when we say, "the Bible is the Word of God?" It is obvious that we are asserting that the Bible is a revelation from God—that it does not just illumine our thinking but reveals to our minds things which God knows and which we are incapable of learning apart from His communication with us.

Now, it is true that the Bible contains quotations from men (Acts 17:28), angels (Matt. 1:20), demons (Mark 5:9), Satan (Job 1:9), and God Himself (Exodus 20:1ff.). However, the Bible is called the Word of God because the whole transcript is an inspired, faithful, and infallible record of what God determined essential for us to know about Himself, the cosmos in which we live, our spiritual allies and adversaries, and our fellow man.

The Bible, then, was produced by men whose recording of events was divinely supervised and preserved from all the frailties of human error and judgment, which are so common in all other religious literature.

How could such faithful recording come about? By what method could God bring such a thing to pass? Such questions can be answered simply by pointing out an illustration from the late Donald Grey Barnhouse. Dr. Barnhouse maintained that even as the Holy Spirit came upon the womb of the Virgin Mary and, despite her sinful nature, imperfections, and limitations, produced sinless and perfect humanity for Christ in the Incarnation, so He moved upon the minds and spirits of the recorders of Scripture such that, despite limitations in language, culture, and even scientific knowledge, He produced His perfect message to humankind. Both phenomena were miraculous; both were perfect births -- one of the Son of Man and the other of a Book, the Word of God.

When we speak of the inspiration of the Scriptures, then, we are talking about the process that God used to convey His message. This process is described by the apostle Paul as a type of spiritual "breathing" (2 Tim. 3:16; cf. 2 Pet. 1:21). In fact, the Greek word for "inspiration" (theopneustos) literally means, "God-breathed."

The inspiration of the Bible and the concepts just mentioned refer only to the initial "breathing" of God upon the authors of Scripture to produce a copy of His thoughts for man. It is for this original text of Scripture, revealed by God and faithfully recorded by His servants, that the Christian church claims infallibility.

Through the centuries God has preserved literally thousands of copies and fragments of these initial manuscripts with only minor, insignificant transmissional mistakes made by scribes over the years. Historic Christianity affirms the plenary or

"full" inspiration of the Bible, and it further holds that inspired concepts can be communicated only by inspired words. Thus, the church's belief in the verbal inspiration of the Bible is logically inseparable from the doctrine of plenary inspiration.

To illustrate, the label on all RCA records at one time contained a picture of a dog listening to an old Victrola with the caption, "His Master's Voice." Dr. Eugene Nida of the translation department of the American Bible Society has pointed out that the dog listening to the Victrola will hear an imperfect transmission of his master's voice because the needle scratches the surface of the record. However, no matter how scratchy the record sounds, the needle cannot obliterate the sound of the master's voice -- the message still comes through loud and clear.

Expanding on this concept a little more, we can see that the Bible is represented by the record and that the imperfections of human nature and the limitations of human knowledge are represented by the needle. The passage of time is represented by the turntable. Just as any record becomes scratchy in time through wear, so is this true (though in a much lesser degree) with the copies of Scripture. But despite these limitations (which are the direct product of human freedom and its resultant sin), we can still hear our Master's voice with absolute clarity, just as the dog does on the record label. The "scratches" in the copies of Scripture — which, I might add, are exceedingly minimal -- do not prevent God from clearly communicating His message to humankind.

We might also note that the "scratches" are being "erased" as time goes on by archeology, by older and better texts, and by scientific discoveries. More of the "original" is thus being "dubbed" back into the already-very-accurate copies, so that year by year we are getting closer to the "master tape" from which all the duplicates (copies of manuscripts) were recorded. Thus the accuracy of our Bible copies increases rather than decreases with time.

Because of advancing knowledge about the Bible and its times, great gains have been made in solving problems which a hundred years ago were considered by some reputable scholars to be "insoluble." Thus it would be foolish indeed to abandon faith in the authority of God's initial revelation simply because there remains a relatively small percentage (less than 1/2 of 1 percent in the New Testament) of questionable material in the copies about which we do not yet have enough data to properly evaluate. Contemporary disciples of those who gave up their faith in the absolute authority of Scripture a hundred years ago would do well to remember that advancing knowledge *confirms* rather than diminishes the accuracy of the Bible.

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VITA

The Rev. Roger Grist

With deep roots in the Episcopal renewal movement and with both a heart for and experience in ministry to young and old, The Rev. Roger Grist integrates enthusiasm and practicality in ministry to others.

Having served in all sizes of churches he has become aware of what challenges face the local church and beyond. He has been trained in small group ministry, giving him the ability to relate personally with individuals. He is also ministering to larger numbers as the current Rector of St. Matthew's Episcopal Church in Portland, OR.

Fr. Grist has devoted much time to the study of the early church and the Bible. He is known for his Bible teaching and proficiency in the area of Christian apologetics. As the chaplain of the Greater Portland Order of St. Luke, he is deeply committed to prayer and ministry to the needs of others. He is an adjunct faculty member of the Acts 29 Ministries.

Roger Grist is married to Nancy and they have two children ages 4 and 12. He attended Texas Tech University where he received a BA in Journalism in 1974. After earning an MDIV from American Christian Theological seminary in Southern California, he did further study at The Church Divinity School of the Pacific.

Fr. Roger Grist brings a contagious enthusiasm to churches, conferences, youth gatherings, and special engagements—leading others to a greater confidence in God through Jesus Christ, the Bible, and the Holy Spirit.