

AFFIRMATIONS OF A DISSENTER

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Chapter Three

The Issue Is Biblical Authority

Talk for any length of time with Christians who represent polar opposite positions on the homosexual controversy that divides the Christian community, regardless of denomination, and you will discover that both sides agree on one thing: the real issue is biblical authority.

The more conservative proponents of the present positions within United Methodism regarding gay and lesbian Christians adamantly assert that their stance is biblically based and that any liberalizing of the Church's policies on ordination, union services, or the "practice" of homosexuality would strike at the root of biblical teaching. To buttress this position, proponents in this camp point to seven passages of scripture where they believe homosexuality is condemned.

Progressives, on the other hand, suggest that Jesus is not recorded as having spoken on this subject. They are quick to ask others to examine closely the biblical passages in question in their actual contextual settings. The Genesis story about Sodom (from which comes *sodomy*) is interpreted to be understood more accurately as an example of gross inhospitality rather than a condemnation of same-sex orientation or behavior. Most progressives dismiss the codes in Leviticus as time-bound laws for a certain era. The words of Paul in 1 Corinthians 6 and Romans 1 are interpreted as protests against sexual immorality in all forms, opposition to the gross manipulation of others, especially children; disavowal of the misuse of power; and

— The Issue Is Biblical Authority —

the unnatural acts of heterosexuals behaving as if they were homosexuals. Progressives say that the Bible knows nothing of inherent sexual orientation, only deviant behavior. They believe that from Genesis to Revelation the trajectory of the biblical witness is God's inclusive love that calls all of humankind into covenant with the Holy One through the hospitable and God-manifesting witness and life of the people of the Covenant, namely, Israel and the church.

I shall address the homosexual issue more specifically in a subsequent chapter, but for now my reference to this issue puts before us, in graphic contrast, one of the two fundamental and highly divisive issues in the church today, namely, the nature of biblical authority. The second highly divisive issue is Christology, and that, too, shall be discussed later.

Sitting on the progressive side of the biblical and theological divide, I have been both angered and saddened that biblical conservatives, whom I am calling neoliteralists given their inconsistent literal reading of scripture, and their caucus groups¹ have assumed that they are the only Christians who are faithful to biblical authority. Their message is that they represent scriptural Christianity and the rest of us do not.

Thus, in part angry at past nearly slanderous allegations made against me by some neoliteralists regarding my approach to the Bible, deeply saddened by the way the Bible is being treated by neoliteralism (as if more than a century of biblical scholarship is for naught), and troubled profoundly that neoliteralism is assumed widely in church and culture to be the rightful methodology for interpreting scripture, I intend in this chapter to dissent unapologetically from this nearly unchallenged takeover

1. As I write, these groups are Good News, the Confessing Movement, and the Institute for Religion and Democracy (IRD).

of the biblical high ground. I do strongly affirm that the Bible is and ever shall be the primary source of authority for all Christians and that biblical authority must not be viewed as static truth that falls off the pages of the Bible. Instead, it is a dynamic process that is empowered by the work of the Holy Spirit in the midst of the faith community's discernment processes through prayer, dialogue, informed scholarship, and application to the issues of today.

My dissent as a United Methodist includes incredulity that neoliteralism has been permitted, with little sustained challenge to the contrary from many who know better, to take passages out of context and read a particular theology into them. To the detriment of the whole church, in failing to foster informed debate on biblical authority, progressives have been lax in calling neoliteralists to task. Neoliteralists have been allowed to pick and choose certain texts to buttress their own predisposed positions in the name of scriptural Christianity.

I do hereby dissent from the arrogance of neoliteralism and the cowardly silence of progressives. In dissenting, I ask these questions of the neoliteralists. Given your stance on homosexuality, how do you read the words of Jesus on matters related to divorce and remarriage? The taking of human life whether in war or by capital punishment? The gradual, but apparent acceptance of women as leaders in the church? By posing these questions I presuppose that the neoliteralistic methodology demands consistency in biblical interpretation and that the neoliteralists are far from consistent in their interpretation, application, and use of Holy Scripture. Let me be specific.

I do not recall an orchestrated effort from the many neoliteralists at the 2000 General Conference when United Methodism affirmed almost unanimously in the Social Principles, "When a married couple is estranged beyond

reconciliation, even after thoughtful consideration and counsel, divorce is a regrettable alternative in the midst of brokenness.... Divorce does not preclude a new marriage" (Paragraph 161.D).

My point is not that I disagree with our Church on divorce and remarriage or that our position is not justifiable biblically. Rather, my question is how can the neoliteralists mount the campaign they have with regard to the supposed biblical mandate regarding homosexuality (when the Bible's position is murky at best on this subject) and overlook the words of Jesus regarding divorce and remarriage? The oldest of the Gospel accounts, Mark, records Jesus as saying, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another she commits adultery" (Mark 10:10-12). At least Roman Catholicism and some of the unequivocally fundamental Protestant denominations are consistent. What is the biblical hermeneutic at work that allows articulate leaders of neoliteralism to turn their collective back on their own approach to scripture in one instance while attacking gay and lesbian persons in the other?

The same question holds true regarding the taking of human life. Jesus is clear in the Sermon on the Mount, as Matthew (5:38-44) records it, regarding the sacredness of human life. Matthew has Jesus say:

"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also.... You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."

How can neoliteralism be supportive of the present war? How can it write off the pursuit of nonviolent alternatives,

given the words of Jesus? And, how can neoliteralists not advocate for the abolition of capital punishment, the curtailment of National Rifle Association-influenced gun availability, and a rethinking of this nation's reliance on military might if the words of Jesus in the Bible are to be taken at face value as neoliteralism demands? How can neoliteralism be pro-war and anti-homosexual, or anti-abortion and pro-capital punishment? Where is the consistency? What is the hermeneutical principle at work? And where is either the logic or the pastoral heart in this pick-and-choose approach to biblical authority? I dissent from what I believe is self-serving eisegesis.²

The same questions apply when we examine the role of women in leadership in the Church. To my delight, many women are in key positions of leadership in United Methodism. I rejoice that our North Central Jurisdiction College of Bishops includes four female bishops, who are among the intellectual and spiritual leaders of the Council of Bishops (COB). I view several of my female colleagues in the COB as among our denomination's finest episcopal leaders.

However, I can well remember, not only in the episcopal office but in matters of lay elections, ordination, and clergy promotions, when the voices of opposition toward women from the neoliteralists were boisterous, even strident. Now they would not be so bold. Is this because the words of the Bible have changed? Hardly. First Timothy still says unequivocally:

Women should dress themselves modestly and decently in suitable clothing, not with their hair braided, or with gold, pearls, or expensive clothes, but with good works, as is proper for women who profess reverence for God. Let a

2. Eisegesis reads into the text what the readers want to hear instead of seeking to hear what the text actually meant in historic context.

woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet she will be saved through childbearing, provided they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty. (1 Timothy 2:9-15, italics added)

This passage presents a dramatic dilemma for neoliteralists as they now point proudly to women leaders in their midst.³ That is, at face value, the 1 Timothy text about the place of women in leadership in the church (namely, nowhere) is clearly not being followed in their daily practices. What is the biblical hermeneutic at work that makes rather obscure biblical texts definitive and exclusive regarding homosexuality, while the unambiguous statement in 1 Timothy is either ignored or defied?

I question and dissent from the neoliteralists' inconsistent approach to the Bible that makes of scripture a theological and political cafeteria line that suits the political appetite of neoliteralists instead of inviting all of us to feast and be nurtured by the whole biblical offering.

To distance myself from the hermeneutical methodology of neoliteralism and to raise my voice of dissent regarding this shortsighted methodology and self-serving conclusions, it is incumbent upon me to make my affirmation of the biblical witness. I need to demonstrate how the Bible, complete with its inherent inconsistencies and time-bound understandings, truths and falsehoods, myths and poetry, prose and theological evolution, is the composite of Holy Spirit-inspired human words that point to the divine Word. That is, the Bible is the yeast dough of human hands, raised by the work of the Holy Spirit in the church to be the

3. As I write, both the Confessing Movement and IRD have women in their top positions of executive leadership.

primary witness to the Bread of Life who is Jesus the Risen Christ, the Word become flesh.

To begin to do this, I invite you to consider the following illustration gleaned from the teaching of Fred D. Gealy, who forty years ago taught his students, "Bible stories we had never heard."

Jesus is shown walking on the sea in Matthew 14 and Mark 6. How could this be? My understanding, and that of many others, of a fully human Jesus does not square with the supernatural power to cavort across a sea, especially during a turbulent storm. Something else, something deeper and more profound, is at work in these texts. Gealy opened wide the window of understanding on this story and helped me to begin to see deeper truth about Jesus and to better understand biblical revelation in all of its complex power.

He described in intricate detail the cosmology of the three-story universe taken for granted when Mark and Matthew wrote: (1) Above were the starry heavens—the abode of God; (2) Down below was Sheol—the place of utter darkness; and, (3) Betwixt and between was Earth where powers from Above and Below did battle for the kingdoms of this world and the souls of human beings. Between Sheol and Earth was stretched the Sea, not merely a body of water but the mythological abode of chaos where the great demons Leviathan and Behemoth, and even death itself, loomed. Thus, Jesus the Son came from Above (the Virgin Birth myth) to Earth to do cosmic battle with the powers and principalities of the underworld for the souls of humans and the sovereignty of the universe. Therefore, where else could God's preeminent representative walk but on the Sea where the enemy seemingly was in control? Jesus walked on chaos and death and defeated both along with all the powers and principalities. Is this not why Jesus drove the demon-filled swine back into the sea in Mark

5:13? Jesus is Savior and Sovereign. Death in any form is not the victor; but rather, the Victim is Victor!

I could say more. But in 1962 the biblical and theological insight and hermeneutical approach this example illustrates began to unlock the mystery of the Bible for me. I grew to realize that biblical authority is not found in selective proof-texting that announces, "The Bible says . . ." Rather, I learned that biblical authority has to do with the dynamic power of the Holy Spirit working through aged, time-bound human, but sacred writings, so that the words of the Bible become for the faith community, the primary microscope for seeing God's nearness and intimacy and the focused telescope for glimpsing God's otherness and grandeur. To see God's immanence and transcendence requires more than a surface reading of ancient words; much more is required.

Like so many (too many of whom have become strangely quiet as the neoliteralists have made the Bible their chattering rod), I learned and continue to practice the reading of the Bible through an exegetical methodology that always takes the context and placement of a particular text very seriously. When was this text written? To whom? Why? What is its literary form? What is its relationship to the larger body of material in which it is set? These are elementary questions to be asked as a particular biblical passage is approached. Progressive readers seek to understand the text in its ancient context and then attempt to interpret, translate, and correlate it with our present life situations. Such a methodology, best done in small groups, particularly in congregational study settings, is essential if the Bible is to be God's vehicle for the eternal Word to emerge beyond our finite words. Given such an understanding of biblical truth and the disciplined work of exegesis, the texts earlier cited in this chapter are heard and appropriated far differently by progressives than by neoliteralists.

It is to the task of progressive interpretation, of employing an informed and consistent hermeneutic, that I now turn.

Divorce

Let's begin by considering Mark's account of Jesus' hard saying about divorce and remarriage in Mark 10. Note that this text does not emerge from a vacuum. Contextually, we learn that once again the Pharisees are trying to entrap Jesus. Legalistic religion (controlled by privileged males who could do just about whatever they wanted with their wives, their female property, in the male-dominated paternalistic world of the Bible) was being employed to back Jesus into a corner. But Jesus would have none of the Pharisees' legalistic maneuvering. He confronted the powers and principalities hiding in hard-nosed religious rigidity, as they lurked surreptitiously posing as ethical faith.

"You think you are ethical, boys?" Jesus seemed to say, "Let me show you genuine marital ethics." Instead of privileged men being able to dismiss women as property at a whim or to have sexual intercourse with whomever they chose, so long as she was not the property of another male, Jesus set the record straight on marriage by taking his adversaries back to a portion of the creation stories found in Genesis 2:23-24. He pointed to God's intention for all married couples by revisiting this formative text about God's intended purposes for marriage in creation and by confronting the self-righteousness of the religious leaders. In so doing, quite radically, Jesus put women on par with the controlling males. He upset the patriarchal world of religious rigidity that manipulated and discarded women. It is clear, Jesus affirmed, that God's intent, God's dream for humankind is that marriage be held sacrosanct. The two are one. The real issue in Mark's text, however, is not

whether divorce is ever justifiable, but how the Pharisees were self-righteously admonishing others to do one thing while doing for themselves whatever served their own self-interest. In the story, Jesus saw through their ruse and confronted their hypocrisy. It becomes apparent that we do not have in Mark a new legalism about marriage and divorce but a refutation of rigid holier-than-thou self-righteousness.

Therefore, while divorce is always hurtful and wounds not only all parties involved, but also the very heart of God, reason and experience teach us that there are some situations where divorce clearly is the most loving and just option. In such cases the biblical God who does make all things new sanctions divorce and is involved as a nurturing and healing presence when a new marriage is begun.

I affirm the United Methodist position on marriage, divorce, and remarriage. It reflects the spirit and inherent truth of the biblical witness. I believe it conveys the heart and spirit of Jesus' teachings.

War and Violence

The words of Jesus, as recorded in the Gospels, are unequivocal. Over and over again, our Lord spoke against violence, for forgiveness, and on behalf of love. We may suggest he was naive or that he and the early church were advocating an interim-ethic, a radical short-lived lifestyle to be in vogue until Jesus returned, or that he was addressing interpersonal and not international matters. But no one can deny that Jesus was a pacifist in words, deeds, and lifestyle. What have neoliteralists done, and what can they do, with Jesus' example? Pretend it does not exist? Ignore it? Explain it away? If so, on this thorny issue about which Jesus spoke so often, how can neoliteralists pretend "scriptural Christianity" regarding their opposition to gay and lesbian Christians, when Jesus is not recorded as having spoken on

the subject? I dissent from their self-serving inconsistency and affirm that whether we like it or not, Jesus taught and lived nonviolence and expected the same of his followers. The early church did so believe, considering that nearly four hundred years of pacifism followed the church's birth. I suspect that neoliteralists find clever ways to explain away the obvious they do not like, while straining considerably to make plain that which is nonexistent, which they do like.

Neoliteralists aside, as regards war and violence, I affirm that now is the time for us to recommit ourselves to follow Jesus. Our mission is to walk his talk as we hear Jesus say to us, "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God" (Matthew 5:7-9).

Given Jesus' teachings about nonviolence across the pages of the Synoptics, I confess that I cannot understand how neoliteralists can be unequivocal supporters of the war in Afghanistan, pro-NRA, pro-capital punishment, and seemingly eager to treat United States military might as a modern god. Apparently neoliteralists feel comfortable with such an inconsistent, nonbiblical position, but I must raise my voice of dissent. Clearly, such a stance does not find credence in the life of the early church, the ministry of Jesus, or the witness of the Gospels. I say this partly because of the pacifism of the early church and primarily because of the witness of the New Testament, especially the recorded words of Jesus regarding the use of force. The unmistakable bias of these sources is pro-life and against any form of violence that threatens, let alone takes human life.

Yet, I know that I run the danger of embracing the very methodology from which I dissent if I only quote Jesus and refer to church history and assume that such assertions make my point. Therefore, I offer the following:

Where I live and work daily in the Chicago Area, the

effects of violence on the young (perpetrated at least in part by the availability of weapons of violence) cry out for redress. Needed are systemic solutions that would expose and erase the root causes of violence. Jesus' parables and his life of nonviolence invite our commitment to a thoroughgoing agenda of nonviolence. Yet, instead of committing to quality education for the marginalized, affordable housing for the poor, and jobs and mentoring for the young and vulnerable, our nation turns its back when the NRA lobbies, when states build more prisons for people of color and reinstitute and celebrate capital punishment (despite no data to demonstrate that this form of state sanctioned murder curtails crime), war is waged, and the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty discarded. Where is the biblically informed voice of United Methodism that addresses such heinous idolatry and wanton sinfulness? I dissent from our comfortable silence.

The violence in this nation and world provides a grand opportunity for Christians to espouse a different way. A way demonstrated by Jesus whose lifestyle was the radical notion of forgiveness of enemies and love, reconciliation, and receptive hospitality for all people.

So then, in the name of the One who cried from the Cross, "Father forgive them . . ." I affirm a different way. One that refrains from war and employs diplomacy, international sanctions, and United Nations established processes for justice; that dramatically limits gun sales, eliminates capital punishment, slashes the U.S. military budget, replaces the present penchant for prison construction with quality education, and dares to declare a sustained war on poverty with a commitment to jobs, affordable housing, accessible health care, and a serious attack on HIV/AIDS in this nation and around the world. The only underfunded war in this nation's history was the aborted War on Poverty, which could have succeeded if it

had enjoyed bipartisan support over the long haul. The abandonment of this necessary war contributed to a lingering despair apparent in many parts of our society today.

I believe it is undebatable that a humane church and national agenda is reflective of the heart of Jesus. But debate it I would with any neoliberalist whose nonbiblical Jesus calls for vengeance, militarism, and the availability of the weapons of violence for begetting more violence, while we affluent Christians pretend war is just and turn our backs on people of color, the poor, and the dispossessed. I cannot find credence for violence and the taking of life, state sanctioned or otherwise, anywhere in the church's memory of Jesus or in the formative years of the early church. I affirm Jesus as Savior, Liberator, and Model. I wonder why we have lost the memory of the early church's pacifism and our Teacher's commitment to lay down everything for the least, last, and lost.

Women

To begin to glimpse the role and place of women in the company of Jesus, one should read Luke—the most universal of the Gospels. Luke intentionally tells his story of Jesus with a profound appreciation for women. In Luke you will find wiser women than were the Magi in Matthew—from Elizabeth and Mary, to Anna in the Temple, to the place of Ruth in the genealogy, to the hospitable woman who dried Jesus' feet with her hair, then to Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Susanna, who accompanied him on his journey; to Martha and Mary; to the formerly crippled woman whom Jesus healed; to the parabolic floor-sweeper looking for the lost coin; to the tenacious widow before the judge; to the widow with two copper coins; and finally, to Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Mary the Mother of James at the tomb. Wise and powerful women play a

prominent role with Jesus in Luke's account of the gospel.

This is no accident. The radical hospitality of Jesus and the kingdom/reign he initiated were all-inclusive. No one was left behind. There was a place of equality for all—even for women in that patriarchal era in which women were assumed to be property and second-class humans at best.

Much of the Bible reflects a patriarchal bias because of the male-dominated era in which it was written and canonized. As George Orwell reminds us in 1984: "He who controls the present controls the past. He who controls the past controls the future." This is true with the Bible, church, and most images of God, including the reference to God as Father. This is symbolic language from a male-dominated time and culture. The strong tilt toward the male bias in God language and the leadership stories of the Bible are not exhaustive truth about God and the faithful *per se*, but a time-bound reflection of a period in history when political and religious power, including that of communication, was of, by, and for men. Males controlled the present, past, and future. Therefore, that women play so prominent a role in the Jesus story in general and in Luke in particular is an indication of the universal radicalism of Jesus. I affirm that women always have been at the Jesus Table. Retreat to the words of 1 Timothy as sacred Truth (words written not by Paul but by an anonymous veteran leader of the early church in the second century) is nonsensical.

Both male-dominated images for God and ecclesiastical assertions that only men should be ordained because the Twelve were men, are context-driven, dated, and biased presentations. They are not definitive of the life of Jesus or the realities of the earliest days of the Christian movement. Therefore, I rejoice in the use of gender inclusive images for God and in the growing presence of women in leadership at all levels of our denomination. In fact, I cannot imagine what would have happened to the quality level among

United Methodist clergy in the last twenty-five years had it not been for the significant influx of many competent women. I affirm the presence of women at the Table and dissent from those who would exclude women by any false and self-serving appeal to scripture or tradition.

I find it curious that many neoliteralists are now embracing women as church leaders despite the words of 1 Timothy. I understand the hermeneutical methodology that inform progressives, but what hermeneutical methodology has moved the neoliteralists from where they were to where they are now? Have the words in the Bible changed? Or are neoliteralists reading and interpreting a portion of the Bible contextually? If so, on this important issue, why not on other subjects?

The Bible simply does not belong only to those who identify themselves as "biblical Christians." The Bible is the sourcebook for the whole Christian community. Many of us, who are not neoliteralists, affirm the Bible as the inspired work of a profoundly faithful, but quite human, community. Actually, the Bible was written by fallible human beings after decades, if not centuries, of oral tradition in response to God's actions in their midst. They wrote in certain historical settings while employing then known theological concepts and available literary devices. They wrote in response to the mystery and majesty of the God who had called them into covenant, made them a people, and personified it all in Jesus. The Bible is not static truth to be lifted out of context, but a living, breathing document the reading, interpreting, and application of which require Spirit empowerment, textual exegesis and exposition, and hard-won conciliar understanding in Christian community. The Bible simply is not the literal Word of God. Such an assertion is idolatry. Jesus, the Risen Christ, is the Word, alive and present in the world. The words and witness of the Bible point to the Christ and to God's antecedent and

subsequent revelations of Truth. The Bible is far too important to be taken literally. Rather, the Bible must be taken seriously by a faithful church that employs its best available scholarship, deepest piety and most resolute discipleship that, together, we can hear what the Spirit is saying to us.

I joyfully affirm the primacy of Scripture. I vigorously dissent from the misuse of its wondrous witness.

Conclusion

This chapter is blunt. I am convinced that neoliteralism is idolatry. This powerful movement within today's church, prompted by the uncertainties that plague all of us at a time when everything seems to be coming loose at the seams, has made the words of the Bible the Word. This false approach to the biblical witness has made the Bible an end instead of a means. Yet, neoliteralism is not consistent. I know of no neoliteralist who advocates slavery, polygamy, or infanticide despite biblical words supportive of these practices. Rather, neoliteralists pick and choose biblical passages to suit their own needs.

I affirm the Bible as the primary means whereby God reveals both immanence and transcendence and calls the church and each of us into relationship with the God revealed in Jesus. The primacy of scripture is certain. How we approach this treasure is crucial. I believe that neoliteralism is theologically inconsistent and hurtful to the long-term faithfulness and viability of the whole church. I appeal to progressives to advocate for their understanding of biblical authority in order that the Bible might be rescued from neoliteralism for the benefit of the whole church.