

JUSTIFIED BY SCRIPTURE

Worshipping Christians, moving to a new location in, say, a large town or city, will generally have little problem in finding a church which is liturgically to their liking, through happy-clappy, ultra-evangelical at one extreme, to high, Anglo Catholic at the other. They may have to travel a few miles, but this is not normally seen as a serious imposition. Those moving into more isolated areas, for example remote Scottish islands, may have more difficulty fulfilling their spiritual needs. There may only be one Anglican church in the locality and they must take it, or leave it. Occasionally, new worshippers arrive, only to find that they don't like what they see in the worshipping practices of that church. Some just accept it, while others may abandon organised religion. A few go out of their way to try to change it.

I relate a story which caused unnecessary concern in a small island charge (= parish) in a remote part of Scotland. There being no other choice for them, the newcomers attended our 'middle of the road' parish which could only be described as, basically, a 'broad church'; nothing extreme, one way or the other. Unfortunately, the new visitors did not see it quite that way. The elderly man and his wife were both extremely evangelical Christians, and vociferously declared the rightness and righteousness of their beliefs to any who would listen, and heckled the many who wouldn't. They criticised our altar and said it should be replaced with a plain, wooden table. They implied that every ornament and image portrayed the Satanic work of Popery; however, I did observe that their car's boot lid was decorated with the *Ichthus* symbol of the 'born again Christian', indicating that some religious imagery was acceptable, but obviously not in church.

While disagreeing with many of the arguments of the newcomers, I did what little I could to accommodate them, but their demands were extreme, and, for me, tongue-biting was the order of the day! I had no wish to accede to their demands and alienate other members of our established congregation. What should I do? Pastorally we were the responsibility of a priest, who had a mainland charge, and, to visit us, he was faced with a journey of 75 miles of narrow, single-track roads, plus two ferry crossings. Our diocese stretches some 300 miles from north to south and 100 miles east to west, so visits by our bishop are rare events. Plans to visit us have sometimes to be abandoned, often at short notice, because of storms which may cause the cancellation of ferries or the blockage of roads by land slips or snow drifts. The effects of inclement weather only add to the challenges for a Lay Reader who may have to make a return journey of eighty miles to take the Blessed Sacrament to a sick parishioner, without having to suffer extra stresses caused by tempestuous, new members.

Our intransigent newcomers unambiguously stated that the Bible is infallible and inerrant, although they didn't explain which translation they used of the many that had been published down the centuries. They appeared not to accept that Holy Scripture contains numerous contradictions. One only has to consider the two different versions of the Creation, in the first two chapters of the book called Genesis to demonstrate that it contains some inconsistencies. Many scholars date the former account (Chapter 1) to a Jahwist source of the 10th or 9th centuries BC, while the latter (Chapter 2) comes from a Priestly source dated largely to the 6th century BC, thus they were written some 300 to 400 years apart. In the two genealogical lists of Jesus' antecedents, Matthew disagrees with Luke; the former states that Our Lord was descended from King David via his son Solomon (Matt 1: 6) while the latter lists him descending via Nathan (Luke 3: 31). These are just two of many contradictions in Holy Scripture.¹

After one sermon, in which I had made a reference to the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation, and had explained that episcopally ordained priests were, by long tradition, given authority to absolve penitents of their confessed sins, I was accosted and informed quite bluntly that only God could forgive sin, the clergy had nothing to do with it. In a rebuttal, I referred to John 20, where Christ's words were at the heart of the service for the Ordination of Priests in the

¹ One internet source lists over 700 inconsistencies in the Bible. See:
www.skepticsannotatedbible.com

Book of Common Prayer Ordinal. I quoted from the Service for the Visitation of the Sick in the *Prayer Book* where, upon hearing the confession of a penitent, the priest pronounces absolution with the words, ‘by **his** authority committed to **me**, **I** absolve thee from all thy sins’ (my emphases). These are words that are difficult to misinterpret, but they cut no ice; I was damned as a heretic!²

A few weeks later, albeit unknowingly, I offended them again and they disagreed with some other words that I had used, or action that I had taken. This time, instead of approaching me directly, they communicated their complaint to every member of the Vestry (= PCC) and to many in the congregation, by e-mail and letter, demanding that I answer their charges. From what I could gather, nobody seemed to take any notice of the matter, most of the addressees didn’t want to get involved, clearly they didn’t see any problems with the leadership I offered them.

Again, I asked myself, what was I to do? My protagonist wrote to our bishop, demanding that my license be revoked. Our much-loved Prelate apparently suffered some verbal abuse when he refused to accede to their demands.

At that time, I was in the middle of a five-year period of part-time, post-graduate, distance learning research at the University of Glasgow, studying the life and principal written works of Anglican liturgist Dom Gregory Dix (1901-52). I hoped that this would lead to me being awarded a Ph D. After much thought and prayer, I decided to put my pastoral ministry on hold and stop leading public worship. I gave the Vestry three months of notice of my decision. Our long-standing tradition of having our Sunday worship offered by visiting, locum, holiday-making priests would continue for most of the summer, so I planned to preach at my valedictory, lay-led, Eucharistic service when this caused the least disruption to our service schedule. This proved to be in the middle of September.

When I read through the Propers for that Sunday, I was truly amazed at the content of the short passage from Saint Matthew, appointed as the Holy Gospel. It comprised just six verses, Chapter 18, Vv 15 – 20. Like many churches, we use the Revised Common Lectionary which offers readings from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible. It was immediately obvious to me that it answered almost all of the criticisms that I had suffered. First, the passage displayed several instances of gender neutrality, through deliberately mistranslating the original Matthean text, thereby clearly demonstrating that the Bible was not inerrant, infallible or indisputable. Secondly, the text proposed concise procedures to deal with disputes between church members, which did not demand that everybody should become involved. Thirdly, it clearly set out the exact authority that Christ gave to his disciples, and, thus, to their successors, about absolution of sins. I felt thoroughly vindicated, with a burden lifted from my shoulders.

My resultant sermon proved to be the longest I have ever preached and was revised and corrected many times before I was satisfied with it. It took me the best part of twenty minutes to deliver it, which was well beyond my normal ten or so. I wondered whether it was more than just happenstance that this text should be the one appointed for that Sunday, a day on which, quite independent of any external stimulus, I decided to resign. What do you think? Here is the Gospel Proclamation for that Sunday: Matt 18: 15 – 20 (NRSV).

- 15 If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one.
- 16 But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses.
- 17 If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax-collector.
- 18 Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

² Readers may be interested to read my monograph entitled ‘Sin and the Decalogue: A Study’ (ISBN: 978-0-244-75031-2)

19 Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven.

20 For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.'

Some little while later I came upon several sermons on this passage from Saint Matthew, published on the Internet. Each of the writers emphasised the importance of the text, to underscore our relationships, both individually and corporately, with our heavenly Father. After reading some of them I began to wonder whether I had been wrong to take the text as vindication of my stances in the various disagreements that I had suffered with my two judgemental church members. On reflection I thought, paradoxically, that they would have offered Biblical texts of their own to justify their narrow-minded prejudices, but I never heard of any. This way of thinking led me to ask myself if I was justified in using a few verses from an evangelist to support the stance that I had taken, and the sermon that I had preached. I believe that I have found this in an event recorded by Saint Luke. In chapter four, verses 16 to 21, Jesus was reported reading a passage of scripture from the prophet Isaiah in his local synagogue in Nazareth and then he used the text to justify his divinity and his miracle-working lifestyle. Justification indeed!

I am happy to report that I was awarded my Doctorate. However, at about that time I was diagnosed with a medical condition which ultimately left me house and chair bound. My absence from the sanctuary and the pulpit became permanent, and I had to stop leading public worship. However, after a lifetime studying liturgy and worship, I now get great satisfaction and delight from writing for academic publications and designing special services, such as a day in June 2024 when our church celebrated the 150th anniversary of its opening. We were delighted that our bishop was able to celebrate and preach for us; we were blessed with perfect weather on that occasion!

As for our disputative Biblical fundamentalists? They are now both dead and are probably arguing their extreme prejudices with any of the inhabitants of Paradise who will listen to them. I must give some thought as to where I might be able to hide when (and if) my turn comes to join them in God's nearer presence.

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David Fuller's sermon may be read and/or listened to at this web address. Please note that the spoken version is a computer-generated voice, a few words are mispronounced.

<https://www.moirrecottage.co.uk>

or by scanning this QR code:

