

My analysis of “The Fix We're In”

By: The Rev. Ben Smith -11-23-09

It is no wonder that South Carolina Episcopalians are so bewildered by the twists and turns of current Episcopal Church politics. So much has happened behind the scenes, and trace back to disagreements out of sight of the press and the pulpit.

It just so happens that I was a student in the midst of it when it had its origins. I was a slightly younger schoolmate of Christopher FitzSimmons Allison, and a slightly older schoolmate of John Shelby Spong - both of them very bright and charming individuals, but very bitter intellectual enemies. Too bad, but they were never at Virginia Seminary at the same time. I overlapped them both, and consider both my friends, though I have serious disagreements with both. Somehow I don't see that disagreements about things that are beyond human certainty, such as God, are necessarily reasons to break friendships.

The story of our present plight breaks the surface in the year 1975, when the Board of Trustees elected Dr. Charles Price, Harvard University Chaplain, as Professor of Theology, overlooking the interim acting professor, Dr. John Rodgers, for the chair. Fitz Allison, in a pique with the Board of Trustees' decision, promptly resigned as Professor of Church History, and accepted a call to serve as Rector of Grace Church, New York City. A few months later he joined with a retired Australian Bishop, Bishop Alfred Stanway, to found a new seminary to provide a theological professorship for his friend, John Rodgers. That was the beginning of an astonishing upstart school, The Trinity Episcopal School for Ministry, to give both John Rodgers and Fitz Allison a chance to teach on their own terms.

Now about the theological conflict that led to that momentous event. In the years of the deadly slaughter of two world wars, a re-thinking of the Christian message was taking place, giving birth to the Neo-orthodox theology of the post-war western world. Among the theologians were two intellectual giants, German expatriate Paul Tillich and Swiss Calvinist, (rejected from a German university because he refused allegiance to Adolf Hitler) Karl Barth. Barth came to the U. S. and lectured at Union Theological Seminary in New York, where the notable American theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr taught. Both made the cover of Time Magazine. Tillich stayed on, Barth returned to Basel. Dr. Clifford Stanley, Professor of Theology at Virginia Seminary taught Fitz Allison, Jack Spong, and me. His focus was on his teacher, Paul Tillich, who in turn focused on the human plight that cried out for deliverance from the “ground of our being.” Karl Barth taught John Rodgers at his university in Basel, Switzerland.

Dr. Stanley, our teacher, barely mentioned Karl Barth, dismissing him as a “neo-fundamentalist.” John Rodgers, who succeeded Dr. Stanley as “acting” theological professor, had studied under and taught the theology of Karl Barth.

Obviously the new seminary founded for Dr. Rodgers lectures would be oriented to the theology of Karl Barth.

The upshot is that now three successive bishops of the Diocese of South Carolina have boycotted the old-line, well-established, and prestigious Episcopal Seminaries, by not permitting candidates for the ministry to attend such as General Seminary in New York (founded 1817), Virginia Seminary in Alexandria (1823), the School of Theology at Sewanee (1869), the Church Divinity School of the Pacific in California (1893), Episcopal Divinity School, in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and the Seminary of the Southwest, in Texas, and Seabury-Western in Illinois. Their only options are The Trinity Episcopal School and Nashotah House, the old line Anglo-catholic seminary in Wisconsin.

I believe the boycotting of seminaries is tantamount to book-burning, and leads to the stifling of intellectual inquiry and an open quest for truth. That rankles the cherished motto of Virginia Seminary: "Seek the truth, come whence it may, cost what it will". It is a policy that represents the "dumbing down" of the Christian faith. The tragedy is that the theology that has now come to dominate the once broadly tolerant South Carolina Lowcountry now claims to have a corner on the self-proclaimed "orthodox" Christian faith. Hence it's distancing itself, sadly, from the national Episcopal Church.

Both Fitz Allison and Jack Spong have been prolific writers, for the general public rather than the scholarly theological community. They could not be further apart intellectually. Fitz Allison's several books champion traditions Christian orthodoxy. Jack Spong's many books advocate an unveiling of the myth and mystery of the Bible in search of a new "religionless Christianity," a phrase popularized by German theologian/martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer. (Unfortunately when I was a student, Bonhoeffer's books had not yet been translated from German to English). Both became Episcopal bishops, Spong of the Diocese of Newark, Fitz of the Diocese of South Carolina. It is difficult to assess the popularity of their views, though Spong's publishers put his book sales into the millions.

During our student days, bold scholars at the University of Tubingen in Germany were doing risky research. Having been knocked off balance by the explorations and scientific theories of Charles Darwin, the German scholars were approaching sacred scripture with new scientific tools, among them *formgeschichte*, the study of form and shape of language and its vocabulary in an attempt to discover the "oral tradition" that preceded the writings in the old and new testaments. It was like unpeeling the magic and mystery that had developed in time to entice readers of the story to come into it. We were learning about this at the time we were students. The works of Otto Dibelius, Martin Niemoller, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer were just coming to light in this country. Jack Spong, at first a university chaplain at Duke University, picked up on the radical research of the New Testament, and set his course to popularize it. It has led him to write about a "religion less Christianity", casting doubts on some of the most celebrated and cherished doctrines of Christianity, such as the virgin birth, the bodily resurrection of Jesus, and the rewards and penalties of heaven and hell for orthodox belief or moral behavior for all eternity. His ministry is in fact a bold assault on orthodoxy, and he has attracted hordes of devoted followers.

Fitz, after a brief couple of years as chaplain to the University of South Carolina, from his home parish of Trinity Church in Columbia, went to Oxford to study for and receive his D. Phil,

and give him the credentials to teach church history, first at Sewanee, then at Virginia Seminary. Fitz's preaching and writing took advantage of his familiarity with current Broadway dramatic productions; when I rented his house at Sewanee in the summer of 1964, I reveled in his complete collection of Broadway plays loading his theological library. Fitz was spending the summer at Oxford, when I was studying at the summer graduate school of theology at Sewanee.

Fitz returned from Oxford and paid a brief visit at Sewanee when we still occupied his house. I ran into him in the university post office, and he told me, with great enthusiasm, of his discovery of some obscure English divine who had played a significant role in the development of the Church of England. I couldn't remember his subject's name, and couldn't fathom Fitz's ebullient fascination with him. I didn't see Fitz again until we met at the consecration of one of my classmates as Bishop of Upper South Carolina, and once more after he was elected Bishop of South Carolina, I visited him in his lovely rectory at Grace Church, Broadway, New York. We were still good friends.

When Fitz got around to building a staff and calling new clergy, it became obvious that the church in South Carolina was beginning to change directions, becoming more conservative. Fitz frequently expressed public concern about the church's attitude towards homosexuality, and the clergy he recruited followed suit. Resolutions were passed in Diocesan conventions opposing a moderate stance towards homosexuality, and the Diocese of South Carolina drifted further from the national church.

In 2000, Fitz and Bishop Alex D. Dickson, retired of West Tennessee, journeyed to Singapore to participate in the consecration of Chuck Murphy, from Pawleys Island, South Carolina, and John Rodgers, from The Trinity Episcopal School for Ministry, for the dioceses of Rwanda and South Asia. These consecrations were considered irregular and illegal, and are not recognized by the Episcopal Church. Fitz remains in the Episcopal Church, but he is also active in the Anglican Mission in America. He remains a member of the Board of Trustees of the Trinity Episcopal School of Ministry.

About the author: The Rev. Benjamin Bosworth Smith is the great-great grandson and namesake of the Ninth Presiding Bishop. Ordained in 1954, he served as first rector of St. Andrew's Church, Mobile, then as Chaplain to the University of Alabama Medical School in Birmingham. He served the Diocese of Alabama as President of the Standing Committee and Chairman of the Department of Ministry to Higher Education. He served as Eighth Rector of Grace Church, Charleston from 1977 until his retirement in 1992, and served as Chairman of Examining Chaplains for the Diocese of South Carolina and Chaplain to the College of Charleston. The College granted him an honorary Doctor of Humane Letters degree in 2000.