

## Cradle Episcopalian?

I did my academic preparation for ordination in the Anglican Studies Program at Emory University. That work included placement in a local parish and weekly reflection group meetings, at which our field supervisors took turns critiquing us. My supervisor prefaced his first critique with this: "Mike Tanner is a cradle Episcopalian. Unfortunately, his parents didn't know it and brought him up in the wrong church." That was the church of my mother, to which she and a preacher converted my Methodist father.

It imagined itself as simply the "church of Christ," founded in the First Century, not a denomination founded later. Historians, however, trace it to the early years of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, when American Christianity was fraught with discord, with leaders in almost every denomination (even the Episcopal Church) claiming theirs as the one true church. Men like Alexander Campbell, a Presbyterian, and Barton W. Stone, a Baptist, bemoaned the division and envisioned unity based simply on doing what the Bible says, no less, no more. With such a premise, their unity movement morphed into a restoration movement, which divided in every generation over what the Bible really says.

I trained to preach the gospel as framed by my splinter. After three years of Bible college, a tiny congregation called me to be its preacher and to grow that splinter in Tuscaloosa.

To reach members of other churches, I continued a television program sponsored by my congregation. Viewers called in questions, and I answered them. Fortunately, there was a backlog of questions, giving me a week to prepare my answers. I offered a correspondence course and a home study, and I published a bulletin aimed at members of other splinters. These efforts became my undoing.

One viewer, an aging African-American woman signed up for the correspondence course and then for the home study. She dearly loved the Lord and would study the Bible with anyone who would give her the time. As we spent time together, I sensed that her view the Holy Spirit differed from mine. As I now see it, I regarded the Holy Spirit as a retired author, active in the church only as we read and adhere to the Bible. She found the Spirit to be alive and well and active in the church today. I offered to study what the Bible says about the Spirit. She jumped at the opportunity. I scoured the Bible for everything about the Spirit and organized my findings into twelve lessons. She quietly listened to each, offering no argument. At the end, I asked, "Well, what do you think?" With not a hint of malice, she replied, "I think you don't believe in the Holy Spirit." Touché!

Later a man from one of our movement's other splinters called about my bulletin. I visited and spoke to him for several weeks about the issues that divided our splinters. He was gentle and kind, a recovering alcoholic, at least twice my age. For weeks, he listened, never challenging me. His love was, however, palpable. One night, love prevailed. My arguments rang hollow. I didn't believe them anymore.

My preaching changed, and my congregation murmured. Rumors spread. Inquisitions arose. That career was short lived. There is, however, no turning back once the Spirit comes out of retirement.

Mike Tanner