

## EXODUS in Liberal Churches

We have figured out your problem. You're the only one here who believes in God." That statement, addressed to a young seminarian, introduces Dave Shiflett's new book, *Exodus: Why Americans are Fleeing Liberal Churches for Conservative Christianity*. The book is an important contribution, and Shiflett offers compelling evidence that liberal Christianity is fast imploding upon itself.

Shiflett, an established reporter and author, has written for *The Washington Post*, *The Weekly Standard*, *National Review*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *Investors' Business Daily*, among other major media. He is also author of *Christianity on Trial* and is a member of the White House Writers Group.

Shiflett's instincts as a reporter led him to see a big story behind the membership decline in liberal denominations. At the same time, Shiflett detected the bigger picture--the decline of liberal churches as compared to growth among the conservatives. Like any good reporter, he knew he was onto a big story.

"Americans are vacating progressive pews and flocking to churches that offer more traditional versions of Christianity," Shiflett asserts. This author is not subtle, and he gets right to the point: "Most people go to church to get something they cannot get elsewhere. This consuming public--people who already believe, or who are attempting to believe, who want their children to believe--go to church to learn about the mysterious Truth on which the Christian religion is built. They want the Good News, not the minister's political views or intellectual coaching. The latter creates sprawling vacancies in the pews. Indeed, those empty pews can be considered the earthly reward for abandoning heaven, traditionally understood."

Taken alone, the statistics tell much of the story. Shiflett takes his reader through some of the most salient statistical trends and wonders aloud why liberal churches and denominations seem steadfastly determined to follow a path that will lead to their own destruction. Shiflett also has a unique eye for comparative statistics, indicating, for example, that "there may now be twice as many lesbians in the United States as Episcopalians."

Citing a study published in 2000 by the Glenmary Research Center, Shiflett reports that the Presbyterian Church USA declined by 11.6 percent over the previous decade, while the United Methodist Church lost "only" 6.7 percent and the Episcopal Church lost 5.3 percent. The United Church of Christ was abandoned by

14.8 percent of its members, while the American Baptist Churches USA were reduced by 5.7 percent.

On the other side of the theological divide, most conservative denominations are growing. The conservative Presbyterian Church in America [PCA] grew 42.4 percent in the same decade that the more liberal Presbyterian denomination lost 11.6 percent of its members. Other conservative denominations experiencing significant growth included the Christian Missionary Alliance (21.8 percent), the Evangelical Free Church (57.2 percent), the Assemblies of God (18.5 percent), and the Southern Baptist Convention (five percent).

As quoted in *Exodus*, Glenmary director Ken Sanchagrin told the *New York Times* that he was "astounded to see that by and large the growing churches are those that we ordinarily call conservative. And when I looked at those that were declining, most were moderate or liberal churches. And the more liberal the denomination, by most people's definition, the more they were losing."

Any informed observer of American religious life would know that these trends are not new--not by a long shot. The more liberal Protestant denominations have been losing members by the thousands since the 1960s, with the Episcopal Church USA having lost fully one half of its members over the period.

In a sense, the travail of the Episcopal Church USA is the leading focus of Shiflett's book. Indeed, Shiflett states his intention to begin "with the train wreck known as the Episcopal Church USA." As he tells it, "One Tuesday in latter-day Christendom, the sun rose in the east, the sky became a pleasant blue, and the Episcopal Church USA elected a gay man as bishop for a small New Hampshire diocese." How could this happen? The ordination of a non-celibate homosexual man as a bishop of the Episcopal Church flew directly in the face of the clear teachings of Scripture and the official doctrinal positions of the church. No matter--the Episcopal Church USA was determined to normalize homosexuality, even as they have normalized divorce and remarriage. As Shiflett explains, "It is commonly understood that the election of the Reverend Gene Robinson, an openly gay priest, to be bishop of the diocese of New Hampshire was undertaken in clear opposition to traditional church teaching and Scripture. What is often left unsaid is that this is hardly the first time tradition has been trounced. The Reverend Gene Robinson's sexual life was an issue and was accommodated, just as the Episcopal Church

earlier found a way to embrace bishops who believe that Jesus is no more divine, at least in a supernatural sense, than Bette Midler."

What makes Shiflett's book unique is the personal narratives he has collected and analyzed. *Exodus* is not a book of mere statistics and research. To the contrary, Shiflett crossed America, interviewing both conservatives and liberals in order to understand what is happening within American Christianity. Shiflett's interviews reveal fascinating insights into the underlying realities and the personal dimensions of theological conflict. *Exodus* is written in a very direct style, with Shiflett providing readers anecdotes and analysis of his personal interaction with those he interviewed.

One of Shiflett's interviewees was the Reverend Bruce Gray, Rector of St. John's Episcopal Church in Richmond, Virginia. In an interesting comment, Shiflett recalls that this was the very church where Patrick Henry gave his famous speech in 1775--the speech in which Henry cried: "Give me liberty, or give me death!" As Shiflett notes, "The Episcopal Church, by freeing itself from many of its traditional beliefs, sometimes appears to be well on its way to achieving *both*." Reverend Gray supports the election of Gene Robinson as Bishop of New Hampshire, and he told Shiflett that the biblical condemnations of homosexuality had been considered by thoughtful people who had decided that the texts do not mean what they appear to mean. He cited his own bishop, who had issued an episcopal letter arguing, "Many people believe any homosexual activity is purely prohibited by Scripture . . . . But other Christians who take Scripture seriously believe that the Biblical writers were not addressing the realities of people with a permanent homosexual orientation living in faithful, monogamous relationships, and that the relevant scriptural support for those relationships is similar to the expectations of faithfulness Scripture places on marriage." That is patent nonsense, of course, but this is what passes for theological argument among those pushing the homosexual agenda.

In order to understand why so many Episcopalians are leaving, Shiflett visited Hugo Blankenship, Jr., son of the Reverend Hugo Blankenship, who had served as the church's Bishop of Cuba. Blankenship is a traditionalist, who explained that his father must be "spinning in his grave" in light of developments in his beloved Episcopal Church. As Shiflett sees it, the church that Bishop Hugo Blankenship had served and loved is gone. In its place is a church that preaches a message Shiflett summarizes as this: "God is love, God's love is inclusive, God acts in justice to see that everyone is included, we therefore ought to be co-actors and co-creators with God to make the world over in the way he wishes."

Shiflett also surveys the growing list of "celebrity heretics" whose accepted presence in liberal denominations serves as proof positive of the fact that these groups will tolerate virtually anything in terms of belief. Shiflett discusses the infamous (and now retired) Episcopal Bishop of Newark, New Jersey, John Shelby Spong. "When placed in a wider context, Spong is simply another character from what might be called America's religious freak show." Yet, the most important insight to draw from Spong's heresies is the fact that he has been accepted without censure by his church. As Shiflett explains, Spong's views, "while harshly criticized in some quarters as being far beyond the pale, are present not only throughout the mainline but throughout Protestantism, even in churches that are assumed to maintain traditional theological rigor."

In Shiflett's turn of a phrase, these liberal theologians believe in a "Wee deity," a vapid and ineffectual god who is not much of a threat and is largely up for individual interpretation.

On the other side of the divide, Shiflett spent time with conservative Roman Catholics, the Orthodox, Southern Baptists, and the larger evangelical community. In considering Southern Baptists, Shiflett largely drew upon interviews he conducted with me and with Richard Land, President of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention. Shiflett understands recent Southern Baptist history, and he takes his readers through the denomination's "conservative resurgence" that defied the conventional wisdom that denominations can never be pulled back in a more conservative direction.

More importantly, Shiflett understands that doctrinal beliefs are the crucial variable determining whether churches and denominations grow or decline. He deals with the statistical data honestly, even as he points to the larger context and the underlying factors at work.

Shiflett's opening story about the seminarian who was confronted by his peers underlines the importance of theological seminaries as agents for either the perpetuation or the destruction of the faith.

In this case, seminarian Andy Ferguson, who had questioned the anti-supernaturalistic claims of his seminary professors, was confronted by a fellow seminary student who said, "We've been talking about you. We know you're having a rough time, and we've finally figured out what your problem is . . . . You're the only one here who believes in God." Andy Ferguson decided that his fellow student was right. "They believed in things like the redemptive power of the universe, but I

was the last one there who wanted to defend the biblical God--the God who makes claims on us, who said we should do some things and not do others, and who put each one of us here for a purpose."

In the end, Andy Ferguson left the liberal seminary, converted to Catholicism, and went into the business world. He told Dave Shiflett that liberal Protestantism is doomed. "Mainline Protestantism will reach a certain point where it will appeal only to Wiccans, vegetarians, sandal-wearers, and people who play the recorder. No one will feel at home there if they believe in God."

*Exodus* is a book that is simultaneously brave and honest. Refreshingly, he eschews mere sociological analysis and points to the more foundational issue--*truth*. No doubt, this book will be appreciated in some quarters and hated in others, but it is not likely to be ignored.