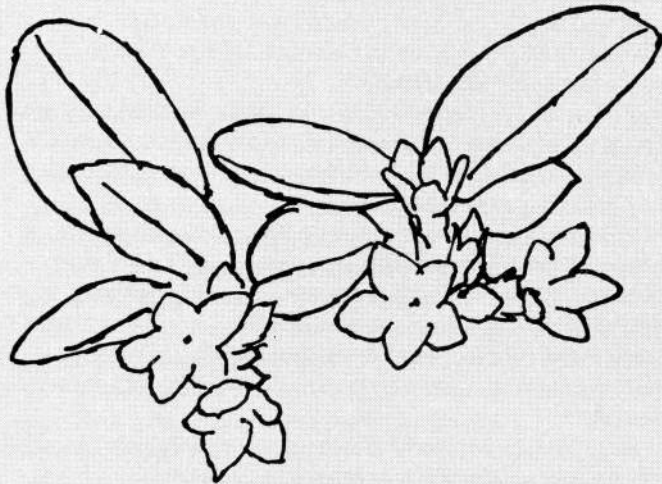




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A NEW SEASON

The greatest irony in education is that in the fall, while the world is harvesting what it planted in the spring, school teachers are just sitting down to *begin* the process of planting. They are just beginning the journey that will end next June, a journey that has to be charted by means of curriculum, lesson planning, meetings and thought, lots of thought.

For teachers and potential teachers who are discouraged by the task of educating our community's children in a faith that seems at times not to play a great role in their lives at school, among their peers, or even at home, our advice is: don't worry about the garden, concentrate on that single seed.

Remember that the lesson you work hard to prepare, the example you set as a vigorous, faith-filled person, one who can laugh at yourself and share the wonder of God's world with your students; your role as a member of one Church family; the seriousness with which you take your job as a teacher of religion: all these things nourish the "seeds" that make up your class of 1990-91. Don't worry about what they'll hear from the TV or their friends, whether they pray at home or whether they'll think of Sunday School during the summer.

Just know, as sure as the sun is in the sky, that what you

do for each of your students this year will be with them forever. Never underestimate the power of a single word or act, the impact of a single lesson, the impression made in one short day. Let the seeds entrusted to you this year be your world and someday the world will blossom into a garden that could vie with Paradise. Hmmm...

THE FUNDAMENTALIST CHALLENGE: Suggestions for an Armenian Response

A questioner once asked me: Is it so bad if an Armenian becomes a biblical fundamentalist? Wouldn't a fundamentalist still believe in many basic doctrines of the Christian faith and have a solid moral code? The answer is yes, but biblical fundamentalism, despite what it can preserve, really distorts the challenge of Jesus Christ. It provides an



absolute certainty based on a belief that every word in the Bible really has been dictated by God and one needs only hold to the literal meaning. It does not recognize that every word in the Bible, even though inspired by God, has been written by human beings who had limitations.

The message of the Incarnation is that there is no way to avoid the interplay of the divine and the human in approaching God. Biblical literalism, since it makes all divine, supplies a false certitude that often unconsciously confuses the human limitation with the divine message. A literalist interpretation destroys the very nature of the Bible as a human expression of divine revelation.

One must understand that only human beings speak words. Therefore the very valid description of the Bible as "God's word" has both the divine element ("God's") and the human ("word").

SOME "DON'TS" AND "DO'S"

Those familiar with what works and what doesn't work in responding to fundamentalist challenges have come up with the following bits of wisdom.

Don't waste time arguing over individual biblical texts with fundamentalists. The question is a much larger one of an overall view of religion, of Christianity and of the nature of the Bible.

Don't attack fundamentalists as if they were fools. Often biblical literalism is an attitude of self-defense even on the part of extremely intelligent people. They want to preserve their faith in God, and this seems to them the only way. They will understand your attacks on them as an attack on their faith. Indeed, were you to be successful in convincing an intelligent biblical fundamentalist that the position is wrong, you might be surprised to find that the former fundamentalist does not become a more moderate Christian but an atheist.

Some fundamentalists are very well informed about biblical technicalities, such as languages. There are occasionally evangelists who know a lot more about the Bible than the average priest.

Don't be sure that your standard arguments against fundamentalism will work. Biblical fundamentalists have developed careful defenses against the contrary arguments that they have encountered. For instance, if you triumphantly point to the fossil argument supporting evolution, you may be surprised to find a fundamentalist who maintains that God created the world with fossils already in it and that therefore such fossils tell us nothing about the antiquity of the world.

An important "do" is to present the Bible in an intelligent, nonliteralist way. There is no use moaning about the number of fundamentalist media preachers if we have no one in the media presenting the Bible in a sensible, nonliteral manner based on modern biblical approaches, and not simply using the text as a jumping-off point for a pietistic homily. When fundamentalists are the only ones to offer people knowledge about the Bible, people will go to fundamentalists. A very solid, scholarly approach to the Bible can be spiritually nourishing and mentally satisfying. Armenians must encourage that in the media.

One might object that on the Armenian scene there is a shortage of priests and that many are not good expositors of

the Bible. Then one must capitalize on the real interest among the laity who should be tapped and professionally prepared for this service. If as a Church we recognize this as a major problem, then we should mobilize our forces in order to supply intelligent biblical leadership among Armenians.

TEN CHALLENGES AND RESPONSES

Often Armenians become a bit tongue-tied when the teachings of their faith are challenged by biblical fundamentalists. Many of us are very articulate in explaining the doctrines of our faith--the badarak, the sacraments, the hierarchy--in the words and phrases remembered from Sunday School. But nothing in our training equips us to handle the objections that such beliefs are *nonbiblical*. The first reaction to a fundamentalist probing may be to respond in terms of Church teaching--a response that confirms the fundamentalist in the opinion that such beliefs are totally foreign to the Bible. It might help if Armenians were able to speak about these issues in biblical language that fundamentalists might understand.

Consequently, I have written out ten responses to ten challenges often raised by fundamentalists against Church positions. I have tried to formulate these responses so that they are *in terms of biblical faith*.

Obviously, there may be more than one way to phrase these responses from a biblical perspective. I think my wordings, which I have tested on friends, are accurate: but I don't pretend that they exhaust the full meaning of our faith on the subjects discussed. I am treating only aspects of those subjects that are of most concern to biblical fundamentalists.

I have tried to put the 10 challenges in everyday language--just the way you might hear them in a conversation with a Christian fundamentalist at your front door or during a lunch break at work. The challenges are in the form of questions reflecting *how fundamentalists understand the positions* that bother them.

1. Why don't you see the Scriptures as containing the fullness of God's revelation instead of always running to the teaching authority of the Church for God's truth?

The Armenian Church considers itself a biblical Church in the sense that it acknowledges and proclaims the Bible to be God's word. In the teachings of Moses and the prophets, and in the teachings of Jesus proclaimed by the apostles, *to which the Scriptures bear witness*, the Armenian Church confesses that God has revealed himself to humankind in a unique way. It acknowledges the sufficiency of the revelation witnessed by the Bible in the sense that no new revealer or no new special revelations are necessary for men and women to find the will of God and the grace of salvation.

If great attention has been given to the teaching of the ongoing Church in Armenian Orthodoxy, that teaching is not presented in terms of a new revelation but as the result of the Church's continuing task to proclaim the biblical revelation in light of new problems in new generations. In carrying on that task the Church regards itself as the instrument of the Holy Spirit which would guide Christians along the way of truth (John 16:13).

2. The Bible teaches us that we are saved through faith

in Jesus Christ, our sole mediator. Why do Orthodox Churches contradict this by praying to the saints?

The Armenian Church proclaims to its people that, just as the Bible indicates, justification and redemption come through the grace given by God because of the death and resurrection of Jesus. Human beings cannot earn redemption or salvation. Neither is it won through good works. Good works are done through God's grace in response to God's redemptive work in Christ. Accordingly, Christ is the unique mediator between God and human beings.

The Armenian Church has recognized the intercession of the saints. That is part of its understanding of the biblical injunction that we must pray for one another. The "we" includes not only believers on earth, but those who have gone before us as saints in God's presence in heaven. Such intercession is useful and salutary but in no way necessary in the sense in which the mediation of Jesus Christ is necessary. Any intercession on the part of the saints must be accepted by God and joined to the supreme intercession of the one high priest Jesus Christ. There is no other name by which we may be saved, as Acts 4:12 affirms.

3. Why don't you recognize we are saved through a personal relationship to Jesus Christ, not through membership in a Church?

While the Armenian Church proclaims the all-sufficiency of the redemptive death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, it acknowledges that Christians must respond in faith and commitment to Christ so that God's redemptive grace may transform them as children of God. Therefore, encountering Christ and believing in Him in a personal way is very much a part of our thought.

Jesus Christ redeemed a people--that is why we belong to a Church--and one becomes part of that people by becoming one with Christ.

Baptism of infants, which makes them part of the Christian family of God, in no way is meant to substitute for the later personal decision that is intrinsically a Christian demand. In the wholeness of Christian faith, baptism and personal commitment must accompany each other.

4. Why do Armenian priests repeat what you call "Eucharist" instead of recognizing that Christ died once and for all and that his death can be the only Christian sacrifice?

Following the New Testament injunction of Jesus, "Do this in memory of me," the Armenian Church in its liturgy regularly breaks the bread which is the Body of Christ and offers the cup which is the communion in His Blood. It accepts fully the teaching of the Epistle to the Hebrews that the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross is once and for all. There is no need for other sacrifices.

The Divine Liturgy is a sacrifice in the sense that it makes present again for Christians of different times and places the possibility of participating in the Body and Blood of Christ in commemoration of Him, proclaiming the death of the Lord until He comes. The badarak is in no way a separate sacrifice of the cross or adding to it as if the sacrifice were insufficient.

The Armenians refer to our clergy as priests. That terminology recognizes that when a Christian, designated by ordination, presides at the Eucharist, which recalls the

death of the Lord until He comes, that that person represents Jesus is, in our judgment, fully biblical.

5. Why do Armenians go to the Church and its sacraments as the source of grace rather than to the Saviour Himself?

Christ saves Christians in and through the Church. The Church, which is the Body of Christ for which He gave Himself (Ephesians 5:23, 25), has great dignity and importance; but the Church itself does not save people. We believe that Christ is operative in the sacraments of the Church and that it is Christ who gives the grace that touches lives. The Church teaching that the sacraments work *ex opere operato* (that is, through the sacramental action grace is conferred) never should be understood to mean that the sacrament of itself, independently of Christ, is effective. That formula is meant to say that the efficacy of the sacraments is not dependent on the clergyman or administrator of the sacrament. Rather, for those who are disposed to receive His grace, Christ is operative in the sacrament.

6. Why do Armenians say that the Catholicos is the head of the Church when Scripture says that Christ is the head?

Armenians believe that Jesus Christ is the head of the body which is the Church. No human can take His place, dispensing with His headship. The Catholicos has no authority independent of Christ or in rivalry with Him. Even as the New Testament speaks of overseers, or bishops guiding individual churches, the Catholicos is an overseer through whom Christ supplies guidance to the whole Church, keeping it in the truth of the gospel.

7. Why do Armenians look on Mary as more-than-human instead of recognizing that she needed salvation?

In Orthodox faith, Mary, like all other descendants of Adam, had to be redeemed through Christ. We honor her especially for two biblical reasons: (a) She is the mother of Jesus who is Lord and God; (b) According to Luke 1:26-38 she is the first one to hear the good news of Jesus' identity and to say, "Be it done to me according to your word"--thus becoming the first disciple to meet Jesus' standard of hearing the word of God and doing it (see Luke 8:21).

We believe that God gave her special privileges, but these are related to the graces of discipleship given through Christ and in no way divinize her. All believers in Christ are delivered by His grace from the sin of Adam: All believers in Christ will be raised bodily from the dead. Armenians believe that Mary, the first angel, was the first to be raised bodily (assumed into heaven).

While we acknowledge that the doctrine of the Assumption of Mary is not found in the New Testament, we hold it as consonant with the picture in Luke of Mary as the first one to believe, and with the picture in John where she is especially honored as Jesus hangs on the cross.

8. Why do Armenians neglect the biblical teaching that Christ is coming back again?

We Armenians believe in the second coming of Christ. For us that means that God has yet to establish fully His Kingdom and to judge the world. All this will be accomplished through Christ and is not attainable by human

endeavor. As for when, through the coming of Christ, God will establish His Kingdom, we believe in the teaching of Jesus recorded in Acts 1:7: "It is not for you to know the times or seasons which the Father has fixed by His own authority." All human guesses as to the time of the second coming must yield to that biblical teaching.

9. Why does the Armenian Church discourage private interpretation of Scripture and make its members submit to official teaching?

We Armenians do not exaggerate the principle that the Church is the interpreter of Scripture. The Church encourages interpreters of Scripture to discover with all the means available to them what individual passages meant when they were written and encourages all of its members to read the Bible for spiritual nourishment.

Individuals may come to radical conclusions, however, from their Bible reading. This has indeed happened in the course of history. Some have even denied the divinity of Christ, the Resurrection, Creation and the Ten Commandments. The Armenian Church will take its guidance on such biblical matters from the long tradition of Christian teaching stemming from reflecting on the Bible.

10. Why don't Armenians defend God's word in the Bible against all possibility of error, scientific matters included?

The Armenian Church teaches that the Bible communicates without error that truth which God intended for the sake of our salvation. Affirming biblical inerrancy (freedom from error) in that sense, it also resists modern attempts to make the Bible answer problems that the biblical authors never thought of. It resists attempts to take biblical texts that envisioned other situations and apply them without qualification to situations of our times.

The Armenian Church believes that none of its positions are in conflict with the literal interpretation of the Scriptures, when "literal" means *what the author intended in his times as a communication of the truth that God wanted for the sake of our salvation*. It resists the use of biblical interpretation to support scientific or historical statements that lay beyond the competency of the biblical authors in their times.

Window Transparency

You will need for this activity: an iron, leaves, brown paper bags, waxed paper, crayon shavings (optional), masking tape, construction paper and scissors.

As fall begins and we see the trees in our neighborhoods beginning to turn many different colors, we are again reminded of God's beautiful world and the dependability of it. Every year the leaves turn, winter comes, followed by spring, and then summer.

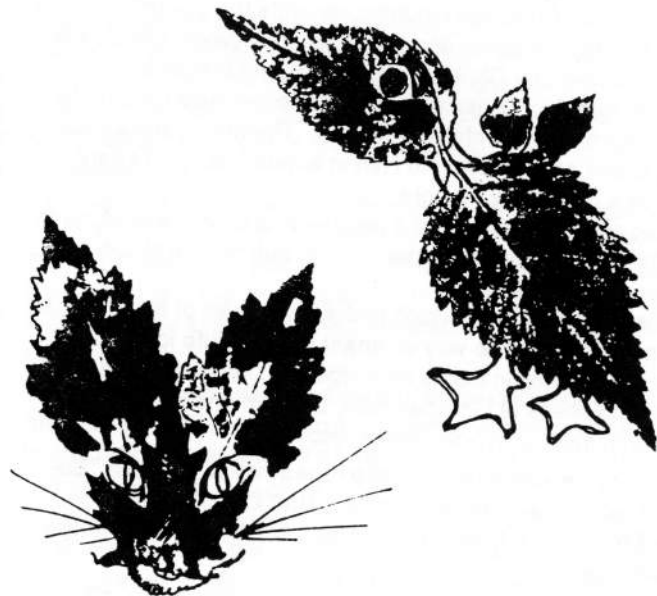
Go outside and collect several leaves. Put them between the pages of a heavy book for a day or two to flatten them.

Next, take a large piece of waxed paper and fold it in half. Insert a few of your flat leaves between the two layers of waxed paper. For added color, drop in some crayon shavings, if you like. Then take a large piece of paper bag and lay it over the waxed paper. Press on the brown bag



with a warm iron. It should seal the waxed paper with the leaves inside.

Now you can cut your transparency to the size you want it to be. You can make a frame for it from construction paper by cutting strips of paper to go around the edges. Hang your transparency in a window and enjoy the pretty sight it makes. Make several now and save them for Christmas presents to give to friends and family members.



Leaf Creatures

You will need: flattened leaves, construction paper, glue, crayons.

Go outside and collect several sizes and shapes of leaves. See how many different kinds you can find. Press them flat between the pages of an old catalog or heavy book for several days. The more variety of leaves used, the more animal creatures you can create.

Next, arrange your leaves in a simple animal design on paper. The creatures can be made entirely of leaves, or a leaf can be the body and crayon or marker lines may be added for the head, legs, etc. See how many unusual animals you can make!