

Unity in the Making  
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It is a great time to be a United Methodist Christian. I am fundamentally hopeful about the future of the United Methodist Church. Four trends that I have seen in my lifetime lead me to believe that this is not just my optimistic personality misleading my mind.

First, I think we have increasing clarity about our identity and our mission. The Restrictive Rules are a huge blessing. They have preserved doctrinal standards since 1808 and now give us a strong foundation for renewal. The mission statement adopted in 1996 has begun to clarify our priorities and challenged many in the church to think theologically about evangelism, discipleship and social justice. We have begun to address our numerical decline in the United States.

Second, we are doing better at issues of diversity. The fight to overcome racism and sexism in the church has been difficult and there is still a long way to go. But we are learning the value of diversity within the unity of the body of Christ, and learning how to include different people with different ethnicities and cultures so that our church can look and act more like the body of Christ God intended. Sometimes the contributions of Asian-Americans and African-Americans helps to correct deficiencies in the white church of North America. Diversity within unity is a good thing.

Third, I think the polarization of the last several decades has led many more people to a desire for unity. I find more and more persons willing to talk about the necessity of finding the center of the church. People in widely varied parts of the Church are tired of fighting, and they are asking “Why do we exist as a church?” and “How can we serve God more faithfully and more effectively?” These are hopeful questions.

Fourth, we are coming to terms with our global identity. The contribution of our African brothers and sisters and our United Methodist colleagues in Eastern Europe and the former

Soviet Union are bringing a new spirit to the UMC. We need them and they need us. In a rapidly globalizing world, to have a church like the UMC be a truly global church is an important witness in many ways.

In short, I think the UMC is well positioned to make a great contribution to the work of God in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We have the right doctrine if we will only remember it; we have a history of renewal if we will only re-live it, we have a nation-wide presence if we will only use it, and we have the necessary discipline if we will only enforce it.

Nevertheless, we have huge problems facing us. While the trends are positive we are still looking at forty years of decline in membership, worship attendance and Sunday School participation, and too many places where United Methodism appears to be dying rather than growing. In the midst of all that comes the question of unity. I am deeply convinced that the unity of the United Methodist Church is a very high priority. The most basic reason for this is that it is a gift from God. Christ prayed in John 17:21 “that they may all be one”. Ephesians 4 urges us to make “every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is above all and through all and in all.” The Nicene Creed affirms that the Church is one, holy, catholic and apostolic. From my youth I have sung the refrain, “We are one in the Spirit we are one in the Lord, we are one in the Spirit we are one in the Lord, and we pray that all unity may one day be restored, for they’ll know we are Christians by our love, by our love, yes they’ll know we are Christians by our love.”

But unity has another dimension. It is practical. The modern ecumenical movement was begun in 1910 because missionaries knew how hard it was to explain Christianity to pagans when the church is divided. Think of Africans who had missionaries from the British Methodist church, the Methodist Episcopal church south, the Methodist Episcopal Church, the African Methodist Episcopal Church all inviting him to join the one church of Christ. That does not even mention all of the non-Wesleyan denominations who had missionaries. As we contemplate

evangelism in an increasingly pagan America, what will a divided church do for our missionary witness, calling people to unity, to brotherhood and sisterhood in the body of Christ. Our denominational divisions belie the gospel we preach. Those who suggest separation—and they are people on both sides of the theological spectrum who have publicly raised that possibility—and those whose teachings and actions jeopardize unity are to that extent hurting our missionary effectiveness.

Yet, talk of unity comes far too easily sometimes. We need a much deeper understanding about what makes for unity, what constitutes it. We United Methodists are much better at doing our faith than thinking about it, and our lack of doctrinal muscle—dare I say our “doctrinal amnesia?”—means we must work harder than others to even get up a good conversation about it. I hope my speech today will help to shape the conversation about what makes for genuine unity within the body of Christ. There are church-dividing issues. There are some places doctrinally that we dare not go for the sake of the gospel. But such steps are not to be taken lightly. The great sin of American Christianity has been our willingness to break Christian unity over the smallest disagreement. A number of years ago I counted and found 117 different denominations listed in the Handbook of Denominations. That does not begin to count the non-denominational denominations, the independent congregations set up more like a wholly owned entrepreneurial business enterprise than a part of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church of Jesus Christ. This is a scandal. For the sake of the gospel, I am committed to unity. But what constitutes unity? If we are claiming our unity—living into it—both making it and receiving it, how do we do that?

I take as my starting point the opening paragraph of John Wesley’s “Thoughts Upon Methodism” written in 1786. He wrote,

I am not afraid that the people called Methodists should ever cease to exist either in Europe or America. But I am afraid, lest they should only exist as a dead sect, having the form of religion without the power. And this undoubtedly will be the case, unless they hold fast both the doctrine, spirit, and discipline with which they first set out. (*Works*, (Jackson Edition) 13:258)

Note the three elements here—doctrine, spirit, and discipline. I am prepared to argue that what Wesley meant by spirit we usually refer to as mission today. Think of those three as the basics of Christian unity, and I'll take them in this order: mission, discipline and doctrine.

### **Mission**

For decades, United Methodism and its predecessor denominations could take many things for granted. Most people in this country were at least nominally Christian, and we knew the basics of our doctrine and knew what our mission was. The 1960's and 1970's were a turbulent time. The culture changed and no longer supported Christianity. Our church was challenged. In the adaptation to the challenges, our best leaders were preoccupied with institutional maintenance due to the merger of Methodist and EUB churches. We presumed that our cultural dominance would continue forever. But as the world changed, the church became more and more irrelevant. Some of our leaders who sought relevance abandoned the basics of the faith, and the church was set adrift.

United Methodism lives by its mission. We were not founded in a doctrinal dispute. Wesley repeatedly said his teachings were the teachings of the church of England, and Otterbein, Boehm and Albright would have concurred. Our origins lie with the effort to carry the gospel to the poor, the unchurched, and the immigrant. When we are clear about our mission, we thrive. When we are confused about our mission, or when we adopt a partial mission in place of the whole gospel, we die. One church I know, when asked what their mission was, answered "We keep the building open for weddings and funerals, and help student pastors to go be real ministers elsewhere." Another congregation, when asked what was the difference between them and the Rotary Club, could not think of any difference. (These are real congregations and I know where they are. Names are being withheld to protect the guilty from public embarrassment.) Also, when evangelists focus on saving souls like spiritual scalps on their belts neglecting justice, and when social justice activists fail to name Jesus and invite personal commitments of lives to Christ as Lord and Savior, our mission is poorly conceived and poorly lived. We are prepared to

evaluate our congregation's life by what it provides me and my family, and allow all of our neighbors to go to hell. Or as Bishop Swenson said last night, all them to live in hell while we make no response.

The deep and abiding problem of protestant congregations in the United States is that they have ceased to be missionary outposts to reach the unchurched for the reign of God. Instead, they are clubs existing for the benefit of their members. Membership has its privileges.

That is the significance of paragraphs 120-22 in the *Book of Discipline*. The General Conference adopted the single sentence: "The mission of the church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ" but it also added the second sentence that local congregations are the arena where disciple-making best occurs. The connection, once conceived of a hierarchy where local congregations sent money for real mission work elsewhere, is thereby turned upside down. Local congregations are now seen as the main arena for accomplishing our mission. The general agencies, annual conferences and districts exist primarily to assist local congregations in their mission.

Further, the Discipline outlines a holistic process of making disciples. It includes outreach, evangelism, worship, Sunday School, Bible Study, and social justice activities. For one hundred years too many clergy and laity in the white part of the UMC have separated evangelism from social justice. African-Americans have generally done a better job of preaching and living a whole gospel.

The problem here is that too many people do not understand what is meant by disciple-making. They read paragraph 120 and go no farther. This summer a powerful and wise speaker at a jurisdictional event did not know that there are five parts to the mission statement's process until I told him where he could find the elaboration. To make disciples of Jesus Christ is to refer to the Great Commission in Matthew 28. It summarizes the whole gospel of Matthew. But that means it includes Matthew 25—the parable of the sheep and goats. It includes Matthew 22 and

the Great Commandments. It includes the Sermon on the Mount. I could lecture for a whole semester on the phrase “make disciples of Jesus Christ.”

One component of our unity is to focus on our mission. John 17:21 gives the purpose of unity as being “that the world may believe.” The kind of mission work that will truly evangelize the world will be diverse. God, in God’s wisdom, has made us red, brown, yellow, black and white. We are old and young. Some of us like hip-hop and others prefer country. Personally, for me, the third movement of Beethoven’s ninth symphony is in stiff competition with Handel’s Messiah as the best music of all time. But I am well aware that my preference for dead German music will not reach most of the people in the US today, let alone millions in Europe, Africa and Asia.

There may have been a time when the assumption was that all Methodist clergy could serve any Methodist church. I personally believe that was gone by 1850, when there were tensions between city Methodists and rural Methodists. But today, in making appointments of clergy to churches, I need a variety of persons in the conference so that their abilities to relate to the different subcultures of Kansas mean that all of our churches receive the clergy leadership they need. Western Kansas is different from Eastern Kansas, and our rural areas are not the same as the suburbs of Wichita and Kansas City. If all the clergy in the Kansas Area were alike, our missionary impact would be crippled.

Thus, our unity must have diversity. Some of the people with whom I disagree about many things are better situated to do evangelism in their context than I am. They may be doing it in a way that doesn’t quite fit my view of how to do church, but we need all kinds of missionaries to reach all kinds of people. We need Yankees as well as Texans, we need seminary-educated persons as well as part-time local pastors. We need women and men, African-Americans, Asians, Native Americans, Hispanic/Latinos/Latinas, and Anglo folk. When you look around the US today, we have people from all the continents, except I guess Antarctica, coming here, and we need missionaries in this country who can culturally adapt the gospel to reach them. There are

people doing things with skateboard ministry to folk with orange hair, body piercing and tattoos, and I praise God for them. I am not one of them, but I envision a church big enough to include lots of different kinds of people. We have our model of that in Paul, who in 1 Corinthians 9:22 said "I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some." Liberals need conservatives and conservatives need the liberals. If one group leaves, we are all worse off.

Let me make it perfectly clear. I will talk about doctrine in a few minutes and it is important. But too many of our congregations are fully prepared to do mission and effective ministry if the 1950's ever come back. Some of them are perfectly orthodox in doctrine but they are spiritually dead. I will argue long and hard for the extreme center, but I am totally opposed to the dead center. No matter how orthodox your congregation is, if they are not filled with Christ's love, if they don't have a passion for souls, if they are not willing to cross cultural bridges to reach new groups of people, they are not being faithful. We do not need just one embodiment of the gospel.

This leads to the question of ecclesiology. Like most Protestants, and especially American Protestants, we have a poorly formed doctrine of the church. Article V of the Confession of Faith says, "We believe the Christian Church is the community of all true believers under the Lordship of Christ. We believe it is one, holy, apostolic and catholic. It is the redemptive fellowship in which the Word of God is preached by men divinely called, and the sacraments are duly administered according to Christ's own appointment. Under the discipline of the Holy Spirit the Church exists for the maintenance of worship, the edification of believers and the redemption of the world."

This is a good beginning. We get a lot of help here. It focuses on preaching the Word of God, administering the sacraments, discipline under the Holy Spirit and the mission of worship, discipling believers and participating in God's mission of saving the world.

However, it allows for at least two different versions. Some could read this text as a narrowly defined group of persons who all think alike. Such a church would make uniformity a

goal, and the least disagreement would require separation. Such a group would not tolerate dissension, and would squash any innovations. There are such churches in the United States.

The other alternative is the playing field concept where there is a spacious area for people to take up different interpretations. The people of God are a big enough group that inevitably there will be lots of different positions all within the boundaries of the playing field. Some will be on the left side, Others on the right. Some will be low and others will be high. Some will stand in the extreme center of the field, others unfortunately will be in the dead center. What I like about this metaphor is first that it respects the various contributions that each group or person makes to the whole. A living, dynamic body of believers needs that kind of tension and lively interchange in order to keep its missionary action effective. At the same time, this metaphor names the existence of boundaries. There are defining limits to the church beyond which one can be said to have left the denomination. Violation of our doctrinal standards and violation of our discipline are both ways of leaving. There are some among us who hate any mention of boundaries and argue that such a vision is oppressive. I say that Scripture and tradition, not to mention the modern science of organizational behavior, insist that we set limits and enforce them.

But the most crucial way of delineating our boundary, our unity, is to say that we are missionary organization. In the Circuit Rider edition on evangelism a few years ago, Kevin Ruffcorn's article was entitled "If it ain't heaven, it's a mission field." His argument is that every congregation is on the mission field. When my great-aunt wanted to be a missionary, she lived in Iowa, she wrote the Board of Missions and volunteered. Everyone knew that America was a Christian country, and mission work happened overseas. So she volunteered and was sent to China. Now, you and I are missionaries in our communities. If America ever was a Christian nation (a very doubtful claim) we are so no longer.

It is our common mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ that unites us. We will do it in different ways. We do not always understand what a disciple is nor what evangelism is. But



we are doing it and we know it when we see it. When we passed the mission statement 9 years ago, I said to my friends that living into that statement would take 20 years. I think we are ahead of schedule. It is now more deeply engrained in our ethos than I ever imagined it would be, and I am grateful to the Holy Spirit for using that to help transform our denomination.

We pray “O for a thousand tongues to sing, my great redeemer’s praise, the glories of my God and King, the triumphs of his grace. My gracious mater and my God, assist me to proclaim, to spread throughout the world abroad the honors of thy name.”

### **Discipline**

Several times John Wesley quoted a phrase he said was from the early church “The soul and the body make a man; the spirit and discipline make a Christian;” “implying” he said, “that none could be real Christians without the help of Christian discipline.” (“Causes of the Inefficacy of Christianity,” §7 *Works* 4:90) Christianity Today recently had a cover article bemoaning the loss of church discipline. We United Methodists know that discipline is essential to salvation and to effective ministry. One of the book titles I like best is Charles Ferguson’s *Organizing to Beat the Devil: Methodists and the Making of America*. We know how to organize. But when you have forgotten that your mission is to beat the devil, the organization becomes an end in itself.

Hence, some people have been led by the Spirit to a strong missionary outreach that does new things for the Lord. Unfortunately, they too often make the mistake of neglecting discipline, discipline becomes devalued, and eventually their new ministry withers and dies.

We need to understand the ways in which our connectional system embodies the biblical values of unity and diversity in pursuit of our mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ. We need to embody spiritual values in all that we do. Our conferences need to be means of grace, times of conferring about what to teach, how to teach and what to do. I believe in itinerancy, and I believe God works through the appointment process. I believed that when I was a pastor. I believed that when I was a seminary professor. You have no idea how scary that claim is to me now. But I still believe it. And there are some clergy and laity who have come to mistrust our system because

they did not understand, or its leaders did not act in ways that showed how our connectional system is biblically based and practically effective.

Leaders of the church—bishops, clergy, general agencies, all of us who lead—must faithfully guard the church’s discipline for the sake of its mission. We have got to improve the quality of the covenant relationship among the clergy in conference, and between the clergy and their bishops. We must strengthen the accountability of bishops to each other and to their conferences. We need to improve the accountability of our general agencies to the church, and the accountability of local congregations to our discipline.

Such accountability requires a special role for bishops. I believe that we have an obligation to both enforce the Book of Discipline, and to do so in a way that highlights its spiritual and missional purposes. However, we cannot do it alone. Bishops are constrained by the ways in which the Discipline is written, and there are important roles played by the clergy session and the full session of annual conferences. We all have a role in increasing our collective accountability to each other and thereby to Christ.

We live in a time of disconnection in American culture. Robert Putnam’s *Bowling Alone* helps us understand why forming community—what he calls social capital—is so hard today. It has made all kinds of community much more difficult than it was 50 years ago, and not just for us, but for every organization in the United States. In such an environment, leadership is very difficult and requires extraordinary effort. We need to be raising up a new generation of Christian leaders who are intelligent, passionate, visionary, politically savvy and theologically astute leaders who can guide our church into its preferred future. That includes clergy, laity, general conference delegates and bishops. How we raise up those persons, mentor them, and then select them is critically important. “A charge to keep I have, a God to glorify, a never-dying soul to save and fit it for the sky. To serve the present age, my calling to fulfill, O may it all my powers engage to do my Master’s will! Arm me with jealous care, as in thy sight to live, and oh, thy

servant Lord prepare a strict account to give! Help me to watch and pray, and on thyself rely, assured if I my trust betray I shall forever die.”

## **Doctrine**

I spoke earlier about the change in American culture that came in the 1960's and 1970's. It was a multi-faceted change, and included not only turmoil over social issues but also changes in technology, science and theology. Part of that was the rise of mass culture transmitted through movies, television and now the internet. When they were young, my children could name you all four mutant ninja turtles—Raphael, Michelangelo, Donatello and Leonardo—before they could name you any of the 12 disciples. Perhaps I was a bad parent. But the reality is that most of our children were more deeply influenced by those kinds of characters than by Bible stories.

We can no longer assume we live in a Christian culture that will teach people the faith. For years the main question was “Which church do you attend?” People knew the answer to that even if they didn't attend church—they knew which church they would attend if they ever did attend church. Now, in many parts of our country the question is “Are you a Christian?” There are more Muslims in the United States than Episcopalians. One of my college friends was raised Methodist, then United Methodist, then Hare Krishna, then Sufi (you know, whirling dervish, mystical Islam) then Pentecostal speaking-in-tongues Christian. The world we live in is a marketplace of ideas and religious options. It is more like the first-century Roman Empire than nineteenth-century America. One key difference is that we are moving toward a culture that is post-Christian, where people believe Christianity has been tried and found wanting.

While this transition was going on, our church was de-emphasizing Scriptural authority and the basic doctrinal standards which had guided us for so long. Part of my work as a scholar was to argue for a particular understanding of what constitutes United Methodist doctrine. I believe we have four levels. At the highest level is Scripture. We are a Bible-believing church. But the Bible alone is not sufficient. During the last 2000 years of God's great missionary effort to save the world through his church, we have had to develop doctrine precisely to be faithful to

Scripture. For example, the doctrine of the Trinity is a biblical doctrine. It is a way of reading the whole Scripture that is consistent with its overall message. But it took the church almost 300 years to get it right. The Nicene Creed was our way of saying “this is the true Christian faith, and not this.” To say that Jesus Christ is “true God from true God, of one substance with the Father” is not quoting Scripture. Our Cambellite friends don’t understand this. Over the last 2000 years our doctrine has developed and expanded to cope with new missionary settings, always seeking to be faithful to God’s self-revelation in Christ as witnessed by the apostles and recorded in the Scriptures. So it is that doctrinal development is normal, and it is usually messy. We human beings are sinful, often self-centered and narrow-minded, and so we argue about how best to give faithful witness to Christ in our particular context. But we need doctrinal standards in order to be faithful to the original “faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints.” (Jude 3)

There are two other crucial elements here. First, we need to teach the Bible. Somehow in our congregations we have allowed our people to grow up Christian without knowing the Bible. I am a fourth generation Methodist and then United Methodist. Billy Abraham says I am a genetic Methodist. It was only in seminary that I finally learned the Bible, and even there I was just given the tools to start learning and much of it came from my preaching ministry over the years. One of the problems our seminaries face is we are sending them men and women who are called to preach, but they are not formed and they lack the basic knowledge of Scripture and tradition that one could have presumed in earlier days.

Second, we need to develop and inculcate our Wesleyan way of reading the text. Doctrine is based on a particular construal of the wholeness of Scripture. On September 11, 2001 I was teaching at Cliff College in England. I started my lectures on the theology of evangelism by claiming that the most important biblical text in understanding God is 1 John 4:8, “God is love.” I thought this was non-controversial and obvious. I was stopped by a student who said, no, the most important of God’s attributes is God’s sovereignty. There you had it. In John Wesley’s

home country the ancient controversy between Armenians and Calvinists being played out again. But its battle ground was how you read Scripture.

My research into Wesley's conception and use of Scripture argues that one of his key contributions was his note on Romans 12:6 that all interpretation of Scripture should be according to the analogy of faith, that grand scheme of doctrine which runs through the whole. It consists of the way of salvation—sin, justification and sanctification.

One of the greatest contributions to the United Methodist Church in my life time is Disciple Bible Study. When you see key words like “sin”, “justified” and “sanctified” in the headings, you realize that Dick and Julia Wilke are teaching a United Methodist way of reading the text. We believe in the Bible, and we have a distinctive way of reading it which informs our doctrine.

Next comes our constitutionally protected standards of doctrine—Articles of Religion, Confession of Faith, General Rules, Wesley's Sermons and Wesley's New Testament Notes. These are the primary means by which we interpret Scripture. They are difficult to change and hence they have shaped the Methodist movement, the Evangelical Association and the United Brethren in Christ for centuries. All other doctrinal statements, whether it is part two of the *Book of Discipline*, the Social Principles or Council of Bishops teaching documents, are to be measured against Scripture and the Doctrinal Standards.

But this means we need a much greater working knowledge of what they teach and how to apply them. Notice I named five. How many United Methodists could even get that far? Even the clergy? How many of them have a working knowledge of all five and use them in their preaching and teaching? Not enough.

When I was working on my honors thesis in philosophy at the University of Kansas, my advisor Rex Martin, a practicing Presbyterian, said, “You're a Methodist. You must believe in the warmed heart.” I had no idea what he meant. When I got to Perkins, my second semester I enrolled in Albert Outler's course “Wesley and the Wesleyan tradition.” Listening to Albert

lecture that spring was like Roberta Flack's song. "He was strumming my fate with his fingers, telling my life with his words. He was killing me softly with his song." It is like T. S. Eliot's poem where he says,

We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.

I came to understand that Wesley was capable of telling me who I was and where I needed to go. After years of preaching, I am more convinced of this than ever. What a joy it is to find that not only is Wesley a wise theological friend and mentor, but his sermons and notes are official church teaching which I have promised to preach and maintain.

After that, and more variable are the contemporary statements of the General Conference in the Book of Discipline, Social Principles and Resolutions. We are not very clear about what levels of authority each of these has, but none of them can be allowed to violate the Doctrinal standards. Last, there is a sense in which our liturgy and hymnody are official doctrine. This is the deep structure of our doctrine, and it is not widely understood. We need better doctrinal competence among our church's leaders.

When I ordained elders last spring, I asked them, "Have you studied the doctrines of the United Methodist Church? After full examination do you believe that our doctrines are in harmony with the Holy Scriptures? Will you preach and maintain them?" Bishops ask these questions because persons called to the ministry of an elder are not called to preach their own theology. They are called to preach and maintain the faith of the church expressed in its official doctrines. That is the reason that teaching things contrary to our doctrines is a chargeable offense.

But there is a spiritual reason for this. J. D. Walt put it beautifully in his Bible study just now: "doctrine is the radically relational curriculum for discipleship." J. D., I wish I'd said that. John Wesley's way of putting this same point comes in a letter to Conyers Middleton, spoke of how doctrine has a spiritual purpose: "The Second point to be considered is, what is real, genuine

Christianity? whether we speak of it as a principle in the soul, or as a scheme or system of doctrine. Christianity, taken in the latter sense, is that system of doctrine which describes the character above recited, which promises, it shall be mine, (provided I will not rest till I attain,) and which tells me how I may attain it.” (*Works*, (Jackson edn.) 10:72).

Consider for a minute, the fact that our inattention to doctrine and our lack of interest in evangelism are deeply intertwined. We sometimes don't practice evangelism because we have theological commitments that lean toward universal salvation. “It doesn't matter what you believe so long as you are sincere.” We have majored in sanctification, being nice or being politically correct either on the conservative or liberal end of the political spectrum, without talking about repentance and justification by faith. When you don't believe it matters if you are a Christian, then why invite someone to become one? If being a Christian is a once saved always saved phenomenon, then it is okay to claim you are a Christian and never darken the doorway of a congregation. John Wesley said there is no such thing as solitary Christianity, and we need a richer and fuller description of Christian discipleship with higher expectations than we have been used to giving.

Yet, we have to be careful about the role of doctrine. Brian McLaren's recent book *Generous Orthodoxy* reviving a term coined by Hans Frei who said, “Generosity without orthodoxy is nothing, but orthodoxy without generosity is worse than nothing.” (Brian McLaren, 14). This is the point behind Wesley's statement in the sermon “The Way to the Kingdom”. He says, “For neither does religion consist in orthodoxy, or right opinions; which, although they are not properly outward things, are not in the heart, but the understanding. A man may be orthodox in every point; he may not only espouse right opinions, but zealously defend them against all opposers; he may think justly concerning the incarnation of our Lord, concerning the ever-blessed Trinity, and every other doctrine contained in the oracles of God; he may assent to all the three Creeds, — that called the Apostles', the Nicene, and the Athanasian; and yet it is possible he may have no religion at all, no more than a Jew, Turk, or Pagan. He may be almost

as orthodox — as the devil, (though, indeed, not altogether; for every man errs in something; whereas we cannot well conceive him to hold any erroneous opinion,) and may, all the while, be as great a stranger as he to the religion of the heart.” (§I.6, *Works* 1:220-21). Wesley knew too many people who could talk good religion, but they weren't living it out. It is all about love of God and love of neighbor. It's 1 Corinthians 13. We can be absolutely right, but if we have not love, we are nothing.

Yet, Wesley was living in a culture where the basics of the faith could be taken for granted. Despite the threat of deism, the cultural power of Christianity in the 1700's was immense. His problem was how to get nominal Christians to become real Christians. We live in a different time where the very churches themselves are in danger of becoming secularized. I have been in too many congregations where there was no mention of Jesus, no offer of salvation, and no clear challenge to the secular, anti-Christian messages influencing persons lives. When we don't pay attention to the doctrinal basis for a Christian world-view, many other efforts fail.

For example, take the sin of racism. It is a huge issue still facing the United States, and getting more complicated as more immigrants from more countries make a home among us. I am all in favor of that kind of cultural mixing. But our witness against racism depends directly upon an understanding that God created all people in God's own image, regardless of skin color, language, ethnicity or whatever. They are precious in God's sight. The fight against racism is a doctrinal issue that rests ultimate on our doctrine of God and of creation. It rests on our understanding that God is a God of love who risked all, even becoming human for our salvation.

These are the essential doctrines which tie us together in very deep ways: Trinity, Christology, Sin, Repentance, Justification, and Sanctification. “And can it be that I should gain an interest in the Savior's blood! Died he for me? who caused his pain! For me? who him to death pursued? Amazing love! how can it be that thou, my God, shouldst die for me? Amazing love! How can it be that thou, my God, shouldst die for me?”

## **Process of Renewal**



I have written that United Methodist doctrine is best understood as being in the extreme center. This means that we hold a number of things in tension. We believe in both justification and sanctification. We believe we are saved by faith for good works. We believe in the authority of Scripture, but know it is interpreted by the best of the church's tradition, the best of human reason, and then applied in experience. The authority of Scripture, properly interpreted, must guide our church.

This approach is not a political maneuver to bring peace between extremes. It is deeply biblical, because it represents the Bible's views much better than any narrow, polemical, proof-texting approach. Furthermore, it is deep in the DNA, the basic identity, the doctrinal and organizational bones that shape who we are as the United Methodist Church.

Church politics is not a bad thing. It is the body of Christ together seeking to discern God's will and to be more obedient and faithful to the word of God given for a particular time and place. When we engage in church politics we need to do so as Christians. Standing in the extreme center means we need to be both passionate and humble. We need to "contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints," (Jude 3) while simultaneously recognizing that, on points of non-essential teaching we might be wrong. It is only God that is wholly righteous. We need to be strong in our convictions, and yet soft, avoiding anger against those brothers and sisters with whom we disagree. We need to be patient and understand that church renewal does not come in a short period of time. In that long-haul process, we need to exemplify the fruit of the spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

There are many issues facing our church today. I commend the Confessing Movement for not being a one-issue group, but for looking at the deep questions that affect so many aspects of our church's witness for Christ. Whatever the question facing us—evangelism, Hispanic ministry, ministry with the poor, episcopacy, itinerancy, homosexual practice—we must resolve them under the authority of Scripture, interpreted by our doctrine, focused on our mission, and

embodied by our discipline. These are not generational issues to be resolved by cultural changes. They are biblical and doctrinal matters that have a cultural context.

At the same time, we need to increase the degree of unity that binds our diverse church together, and conferencing together about doctrine, mission and discipline is the way in which we can do that. We also need a spirit of love—what Wesley called Catholic Spirit—as we live into that greater sense of unity. That means we need to take some risks. There are some deeply committed liberal clergy and laity who are very nervous that I am speaking to you all. Hence, I am going to publish these remarks on the Kansas East and West Conference websites. There are people in our church who are nervous because I participated in a bishops' panel at the Reconciling Ministries Network conference at Lake Junaluska three weeks ago. I am grateful for my two colleagues Bishops Sally Dyck and John Schol. All of three of us have attended both meetings, and people have raised their eyebrows and not understood how anyone could do both. Between the various sides of the church, our mutual suspicion runs deep. Too many persons are guilty of misrepresenting the motives and positions of others. Both sides are guilty of living with inaccurate stereotypes of the other. Our differences are real. But so is our unity in Christ, and I am convinced that each of the several sides has something to offer the whole church.

The United Methodist Church is engaged in a massive effort of renewal. Because we human beings are genuine, A-1, certifiable sinners, renewal is a messy process. It takes time. It involves mistakes. It involves great uncertainty. But we are being renewed. That genuine renewal comes from the power of the Holy Spirit, living out the truths conveyed in God's revelation in the Bible. I am living by the truth of 2 Corinthians 4:7 "But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us." Years ago my friend Billy Abraham said it clearly: God is about the business of accomplishing God's purposes. That is clear from Scripture. What is not clear is whether God will continue to find the United Methodist Church a fit instrument in that mission. I am convinced that a United Methodist Church which divides will be a less fit instrument for God. I

believe in renewal, not division. I have given my life to being used by God's mission through the United Methodist Church. I pray that you and I and all of the people called Methodist around the world, might be found faithful and fruitful and useful in God's plan of saving the world. Renewal will come from faithful men and women singing, "Here I am Lord, Is it I, Lord, I have heard you calling in the night. I will go Lord, If you lead me, I will hold your people in my heart." May we all sing those words and mean them.