



HAPPENINGS AROUND THE CHURCH

DO UNITED METODISTS STILL BELIEVE THE BIBLE?

By Dr. Riley Case

I remember an incident from seminary. A student pastor asked the professor, “What am I going to do about all of these people in my church who still believe the Bible?” We were doing some critical analysis of Bible texts as I remember. The professor asked, “Are they the young people or the old people?” “The old people,” was the answer. “You can’t do much,” replied the professor, “but when this generation is gone we won’t have this problem anymore.” A few years earlier in 1937, Ethel L. Smither published an “official” and “approved” (by the Board of Education of the M.E. Church) book on the use of the Bible with children in which she declared that Old Testament material should be withheld from younger children because their first picture of God might be distorted by various pre-Christian ideas. In the New Testament when a story of Jesus is told, it must “always separate Jesus from God.”

The Bible has not always fared well in the hands of seminary professors and church institutionalists. Most of us have worked around this in our ministry. In many respects the skepticism is not nearly as bad as it was sixty years ago and for much of this we can thank our present Board of Discipleship. However, when it comes to the present debate on human sexuality, the Way Forward and whether we should simply remove all negative references to homosexual practice from the *Discipline* (as in the One Church Plan coming before the General Conference in February) we should recognize that the Scriptures are being relegated to the background. The situation is so serious it could divide the church.

It should be stated and clearly understood that there are no credible arguments from the progressive point of view supporting any Biblical basis for reversing 2,000 years of what the Church has always understood as revealed truth about marriage and human sexuality. Arguments that Jesus said nothing about the practice of homosexuality ring hollow. Also ringing hollow are arguments that sexual practice is not regarded as an “essential” in Biblical teaching and that Christians can agree on more important things (such as “love”—as that is defined by progressives) and we can all live under a big tent where all do what is right in their own eyes.

What is really behind almost all these arguments from the progressive side is the assumption that in matters of truth and morality God is revealing new truth these

days. Revelation did not cease with the closing of the canon. New cultural situations mean God is making adjustments as to what is right and wrong and true and false and it is not the Church Universal that has been given insight as to what the new revelation is. Rather it is to be the modern, mostly American and European enlightened, progressive mindset that is in charge of interpreting the newest revelation.

This is painful for many of us because some of the people caught up in the “new revelations” are friends and persons we otherwise highly respect, including numbers of bishops and persons in our seminaries. What follows is an attempt to speak of the process of how we arrive at basic Christian truth from an historic United Methodist perspective.

God has revealed Himself, according to classic Christianity, in history--in creation and the mighty acts of the Bible in which God was raising up for Himself a people. This revelation culminates in the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, in the gift of the Holy Spirit to the believers in Christ, and in the teaching of the apostles which gives, mostly through the New Testament epistles, the interpretative meaning to these mighty acts. That interpretative meaning is that Christ's death is the sacrifice for the sins of the world and by grace through faith we might be saved from the consequence of sin and made part of Christ's body the church, the New Creation.

As part of the New Creation God has given to the Church the awesome responsibility to guard, disseminate and apply God's revelation in the world in which we live. Christianity is a universal religion, that is, Jesus as the Way, the Truth and the Life applies to all people of all cultures at all periods of time. In all of this we recognize that fresh ideas and fresh perspectives are always needed in the effort to understand and communicate Bible truth for present times. One person who offered a fresh perspective was John Wesley and with him the Methodist movement.

Wesley appreciated and applied the catholic faith, that is the faith of the fathers, and he stood in that tradition. But he also recovered some neglected truths of the early church, such as the necessity of a conversion experience, the preference for the poor and the least of God's children, and teachings of Assurance and Unlimited Atonement. More importantly, he recovered the emphasis on Holiness and holy, disciplined living.

The Methodist emphasis on holy living made it a counter-cultural religion. Methodists were “different.” They lived simply; they sought to separate themselves from “worldly” amusements; they disdained gambling and alcohol and Sabbath breaking. In America they sought to include all classes and races of persons in their fellowships.

In all of this they lived under authority. That authority simply put was the Bible as understood and taught by the Church, especially that part of the church known as Methodism. This truth was summarized in the *Discipline*, especially in the Articles of Religion and the General Rules.

In more recent times the *Discipline* has offered a formula in the Methodist tradition for theological reflection. As the *Discipline* states: “Wesley believed that the living core of the Christian faith was revealed in Scripture, illumined by tradition, vivified in personal experience, and confirmed by reason.”

We as evangelicals associated with The Confessing Movement affirm this formula 100% and offer a challenge to progressives to offer some Biblical and theological understanding as to the justification for wanting to jettison the church's historic teachings and understandings on human sexuality. From our perspective we offer this defense.

Scripture – We believe there is a clear witness in Scripture as to God's plan for marriage between a man and a woman and that the covenant of marriage prohibits sexual relations outside the marriage bonds. This is based not on a few isolated texts but taking the whole of the Scriptures from creation ("male and female created he them") through Revelation and the connection between marriage on earth and the marriage in which the Church is the bride and Christ the bridegroom (Gen. 1:27; Eph. 5:32; Rev. 19:7).

Tradition – If there were some question as to the clarity of Scripture regarding marriage and sexual ethic, it certainly would have been raised in the teaching of the Church through the ages. At this point we would assert that there is nothing, whether in Catholic or Protestant or Orthodox historic teachings, nor in any of the church fathers, nor in any of the commonly accepted truths passed down through the ages to suggest any other view than that which is affirmed in the UM *Discipline*.

Experience – Wesley was quite clear that experience was not the sum total of our feelings, prejudices and biases which are a part of our natural state, but God's confirming witness through the Holy Spirit which is the result of faith and confirmed by the faith community which surrounds us. Experience does not stand in isolation from the other theological guidelines.

Reason – Reason might be defined as "Faith seeking understanding" (Karl Barth). Reason also does not stand in isolation from the other theological guidelines. Through reason we test our affirmations with coherence, clarity, understanding, and congruence. If the Bible as understood through tradition is not clear in its affirmations about human sexuality, then it is reason that must offer a coherent and convincing argument that God's will is leading the church to jettison its historic stand on human sexuality.

These are troubled times. Let the Church know, and especially those who seek some assurance from The Confessing Movement and other renewal groups, that many believe the United Methodist Church is much too important in God's great plan to be compromised by ideologies informed more by secular culture than Biblical faith. We affirm the faith once delivered to the saints.