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SCHISM AND SEPARATION

Dr. Maxie Dunnam – October 2017

The United Methodist Church is in crisis. Any United Methodist who is aware of the larger picture of our church is hearing about the possibility of division.

Two words are being used interchangeably, schism and separation. If you look at the primary definition of the two words, you find little or no difference. Both indicate the process for being separated. For the purpose of this discussion, I want to use both words to describe where we seem to be in United Methodism: *Because of schism among us we have separation in the body.*

After his descriptive metaphor of the church as the *body*, Paul gives this challenge: "There *should be no schism in the body, but that the members should have the same care for one another.*" (1 Corinthians 12:25 New KJV) The existence of differences of gifts, and the exalting of particular gifts in the Church, had been used by the Corinthians to cause schisms. Many translations use *division* here instead of *schism*. Both words name a separation not *from*, but *within*, the church. Thus, schism within may lead to separation from a particular expression of the church, but not from the Church as the Body of Christ.

There is schism in the UMC body. What Bishop Melvin Talbert did April 23, 2016 when he performed a same sex wedding in Birmingham, Alabama was a blatant act which made visible what should have been acknowledged for a long time. This was a schismatic act.

Years before another Bishop, Joseph Sprague, raised similar shock waves of schism when he published *Affirmations of a Dissenter*, putting in print some of what he had been teaching, i.e. that Jesus was not born of a virgin nor did he possess trans-human, supernatural powers, that stories in the New Testament are not literally true, along with other explicit challenges to the authority of Scripture and the beliefs of the orthodox Christian faith.

Schismatic action has seemingly become the "everyday" occurrence in our church: an entire Jurisdictional Conference officially declared they will not abide by the Church's will on marriage and human sexuality and blatantly actualized their schismatic action by electing a person in a same sex marriage as bishop. Bishop Ough, the President of our Council of Bishops, has rightly contended that "the landscape has changed," so our Bishops have appointed a task force charged with "finding a way forward" for the unity of our church.

Wesley taught that there are times when we have to separate ourselves from those who are hindering faithfulness and the spread of the Gospel. He was accused of schism when he preached the Gospel in its fullness which led to the founding of the Methodist movement. Though he remained an Anglican priest, he was not in good standing, and the Methodist movement, particularly in the United States, was a separation from the Church of England.

There may be a way of being unified by papering over our disunity. Isn't it too much to ask "conscience driven" people, who believe that same-sex marriage and the ordination of practicing homosexual persons are justice issues, to give up their convictions for the sake of some sort of institutional unity? Can we ask persons who are convinced by their faithful study of Scripture and the witness of the church for 2000 years, that the practice of homosexuality and the marriage of same sex couples are incompatible with Christian teaching, to compromise their consciences committed to Biblical authority?

This is a *kairos* time. We must renew our commitment to Christ and to The United Methodist Church, willingly being obedient to our doctrine and discipline as we have corporately and in Christian conferencing defined ourselves. If we can't make that commitment and live in covenant faithful to it, then let's participate earnestly, responsibly, and in Christian love in exploring an alternative which may mean separation as a legitimate missional response to our dividedness. ■