



HAPPENINGS AROUND THE CHURCH 4.4.18

By Dr. Riley Case

WHAT ABOUT AN EVANGELICAL “TAKEOVER?”

Rev. Christy Thomas has an article in *United Methodist Insight* (March 13) entitled, “NOW is the time, UMC: Will You Stop the Evangelical Takeover?” Among the comments are these: “Those adhering to this far more fundamentalist-type theology have infiltrated themselves into the life and leadership of the UMC.” Groups like Wesleyan Covenant Association, Good News and Confessing Movement are “well-funded, well-organized and have no interest in taking prisoners.” “They want to expel those who don’t adhere to the same tight lines as they do.”

There are a couple of conflicting narratives afloat in the American religious world these days. On the one hand we are being told that the days of evangelical and fundamentalist Christian expression are over: evangelicalism is increasingly irrelevant; millennials are abandoning evangelical churches in droves; the future is with a church that “contextualizes” (be aware of that word—it is a new UM code word) the faith to make it believable in an increasingly secular culture. As part of this narrative there is a claim by a couple of UM “centrists” that evangelicals make up only about 20% of American United Methodists (in other words a small minority) and, therefore, they should not be able to derail the plan supported by the majority “Centrist United Methodists.” The plan supported by “centrists” is that all negative language in the *Discipline* with regard to practicing homosexuals be dropped so that all UMs can do what is right in their own eyes. Supposedly if we follow this formula peace and unity will prevail and the church will grow. The 20% figure suggests that if 20% are evangelicals (the right-wing) and 20% are progressives (the left wing), the great 60% middle (“centrists”) is the majority.

That is one narrative. The other is that evangelical groups are being heavily funded by conservative and right-wing interests and that they, with the help of African United Methodists, are exerting undue political power and pressure to seize control of The United Methodist Church and purge the denomination of LGBTQ supporters as well as progressives. This is part of a greater conspiracy theory that right-wing evangelicals wish to seize political power and impose a theocracy in America.

Time for some perspective. Methodism, in large measure, defined the word *evangelical* in America. In its original European Reformation meaning the word *evangelical* meant (being simplified) that salvation is by grace through faith (as opposed to through the sacraments or good works). What the American Methodists added to the meaning of *evangelical* in the Second Great Awakening was the emphasis on experience, as in being Born Again. For years (until the 1960s) American dictionary definitions of “evangelical” were very similar to that of Thorndike Barnhart Comprehensive Desk Dictionary, (1958): ***Evangelical*** - *Of or having to do with the Protestant churches that emphasize Christ’s atonement and salvation by faith as the most important parts of Christianity, as the Methodists and Baptists.*

For over 100 years Methodists in America were all evangelical. That began to change with the rise of theological *modernism*, a doctrinal system of the early 1900s which asserted that doctrines like Original Sin and the Atonement and the Authority of Scripture were outdated in the modern scientific world. Human beings were born neither good nor bad and with proper education and through careful social planning could accomplish what the Bible was really about, namely the Kingdom of God on earth.

One reaction to modernism was called *fundamentalism*, an attempt to shore up classic Christian doctrines and emphasize that acceptance of those doctrines was a necessary part of Christianity. It must be noted that John Wesley had a similar idea only he labeled the doctrines as *essentials* rather than *fundamentals*. It didn't matter. Modernism seemed new and exciting. The message was out with the old, in with the new. Fundamentalism seemed dated and legalistic, as was John Wesley for that matter. By 1924 every single Methodist seminary both north and south had identified its orientation as "modernist" (United Brethren and Evangelical Seminary reported their orientation as "mixed"). In 1926 The *Christian Century* reported the fundamentalist-modernist controversy was over and fundamentalism had lost and now the church could concentrate on more important things.

But of course, such conclusions were made by academic types and bureaucratic elitists and not by persons who showed up in Methodist churches in most of the cities of America. Incredibly, the conclusions were made at a time when only about 10% of ministers in the M.E. Church South were seminary trained. Evidently no one had bothered to check with them as to whether the whole denomination had swung in behind modernism.

When I entered seminary in the late 1950s I was told that my Methodist school was "broadminded" (back in the days before we discovered the word "inclusive"). It is true that different perspectives were offered: there were extreme modernists, modernists, old-time liberals, new-time liberals, and moderates (neo-orthodox). There were no fundamentalists or evangelicals or true conservatives or Pentecostals. Much of the seminary community seemed quite oblivious to the real world. When Billy Graham came to town and some students asked the seminary president whether we might invite Billy Graham to the seminary for some conversations, the reply was, "No, because we do not want to be identified with that kind of Christianity." When I asked the head of the chapel committee whether we might invite some evangelicals to speak in chapel (we had had rabbis, philosophers, and liberal politicians) the reply was to the effect, who did I mean since everyone at the seminary was 'evangelical.' When I gave some names his reply was, "I think you are talking about fundamentalists and we will not turn our pulpit over to such types." Before the presidential election the faculty was polled and 88% declared themselves for the Democratic candidate. The comment was made that we should not assume the other 12% was Republican since there was a Socialist candidate that year. This was at a time when for every Methodist congress person who was Democrat there were two that were Republican.

I would mention in seminary settings that someone needed to pay attention that Youth for Christ rallies were drawing into the tens of thousands at Saturday night rallies; Christian (evangelical) radio was exploding all over the radio waves; there were dramatic stories of revival in overseas places like Korea and Brazil and the Congo; Inter-Varsity campus groups were outdrawing denominational campus ministries. On the horizon were the Jesus People, the charismatic movement, and the rise of mega-churches. The professors (and others) would smile condescendingly. They were not angry or scornful (like some are today). Why should they be? Fundamentalism (what they called evangelicalism) was a dying ideology and was not a threat to their world-view. In a few years we would hear of it no more.

In the light of all of this, some years later, are we now fearful that the UMC is going to be taken over by a "dying ideology?" I was committed during seminary to the Methodist Church because I believed the future was not with what I was hearing in seminary but rather with what I was seeing in the churches I

was serving. I was not seeing churches turning from their Methodist evangelicalism to what I called ecumenical liberalism. The National Council of Churches was big in those days. Over 70% of all American Protestants were in denominations that belonged to the National Council. Churches of Christ Uniting (COCU) was also big. There was talk of a giant merger that would establish liberal Protestantism as American mainstream culture. Today, in case persons have not noticed, the percent of American Protestants in churches that belong to the National Council is less than 40% and liberal ecumenism is on hospice care.

“Will the UM Church Stop the Evangelical Take-over?” Why talk about a take-over when Methodism is basically as it has always been in the hearts and lives of United Methodists in the pew, evangelical? The idea that only 20% of UMs are “evangelical” is fantasy. The vast majority of UMs still believe, as they always have, that salvation is by grace through faith in the shed blood of Jesus Christ, that they stand in the foot-steps of John Wesley, that the historic creeds still speak to the essence of the faith, and that the Bible is authoritative in all matters, including teachings on human sexuality.

But Christy Thomas and others are not speaking about people in the pew. They are referring to UM centers of power and influence: the episcopacy, the seminaries, the boards and agencies, the “leaders.” Will the UM Church stop the evangelical take-over of the centers of power? Of course. For one there is no evidence that evangelicals desire to “take-over” the centers of power, or, even if they did, that there would be a brighter future for United Methodism. For two, it is not possible even if desirable, given the present realities. There are almost no bishops (at least Americans) who identify with evangelical renewal groups. There are almost no board and agency staff people who identify with evangelical renewal groups. There is some evidence that several denominational seminaries or professors in those seminaries identify as evangelical (as the word is historically defined), but most seminaries are still hostile to evangelicals.

We don't need purges today. We don't need more restrictive legislation. What we need is for the church to be the church. What we need is for that church to be faithful to the Biblical faith as interpreted by the Wesleys and by the *Discipline* and by the vast majority of Christian churches around the world. What we need is for the obsession with inclusiveness to extend to doctrinal inclusiveness, so that the evangelical voice is represented in church literature and on board and agency pronouncements and in the seminaries. What we need is for those who are in leadership to take our membership vows and our ordination vows with seriousness, to uphold the doctrine and discipline of the church.