



## **HAPPENINGS AROUND THE CHURCH 7.21.16**

### ***WHAT DIVIDES UNITED METHODISTS (1) – SCRIPTURE***

*By Dr. Riley B. Case*

Not many months after Vatican II in the 1960s, Bishop Reuben Mueller of the Indiana area and the Roman Catholic Bishop of the Fort Wayne Diocese planned a three-day retreat at Notre Dame for 50 Catholic priests and 50 United Methodist pastors. At this retreat Catholics who had never had serious conversations with Methodists and Methodists who had never had serious conversations with Catholics, would come together to explore our areas of agreement and disagreement. It was probably the most fulfilling and exciting spiritual retreat I had ever attended. There was such special spiritual connectedness that some of the priests were ready to share the Eucharist with the Methodists (nixed by the Catholic bishop).

The most memorable part of the retreat, at least for me, took place within the first hour. We started our time together with a discussion on authority, and specifically how the Bible related to our understandings of authority. Within the first fifteen minutes it was obvious that we had serious differences. Contrary to what we might have imagined, however, the differences were not between the Methodists and the Catholics, but between the more conservative Methodists and Catholics on the one side and the more liberal Methodists and Catholics on the other. Did we really believe the Bible? One group said yes; the other group had reservations. I personally found the most encouraging support for my convictions not from the Methodists but from the Catholics.

For nearly 100 years United Methodists have been trained in the academic historical-critical approach to the Bible which invites not faith seeking understanding but skepticism. With one or two exceptions most of my Bible classes in seminary dealt not with the great affirmations of the faith but with "problems" in our traditional understandings of Scripture. From class one got the impression that literalism and fundamentalism were bigger problems in the church than disbelief. I remember a student pastor who was getting criticism from some of his church members because, according to him, "They believed the Bible." The professor asked, "Are they young people or old?" "Old," was the answer. "Bear with them," said the professor, "for this

last generation; we won't have that problem when the young people in our Sunday schools grow up." According to my seminary training the Bible was a great religious book, but it was not the only source of authority for faith and practice. Because of modern scholarship the coming generations would grow up enlightened.

Surprise! Evangelical faith is alive and well, especially when the world-wide church is taken into consideration. Despite the growing secularism of the general culture the percentage of Americans who believe the Bible is the Word of God remains constant at somewhere between 35%-40%. The progressive approach to the Bible, the faith, and the world is in decline.

This must be taken into consideration when dealing with the present crisis in The United Methodist Church. The disagreements over human sexuality are not the root cause of our disagreements. The basic issue for United Methodists is the Bible and its authority for faith and practice. What, for example, is at the heart of what we understand to be the "gospel?" Is it "inclusiveness" (all are welcome regardless of belief or practice), as progressives seem to be saying, or is it redemption ("Christ died to save us from the consequences of sin), which the church has always believed and taught? Are we not operating with different understandings of such concepts as wrath of God, salvation, and the moral law? Is there a future judgment? Is there such a thing as Original Sin?

The two camps, those who hold the Bible as authoritative and those who would add to or qualify or compromise that authority, are even more pronounced than they were fifty years ago when the Indiana Catholics met with the Indiana Methodists. I always learn from my theological discussions with fundamentalist or catholic or Pentecostal brothers and sisters because we seek to make our cases based on the Bible. So I have in recent times debated modalism, the idea of "inerrancy," the place of Israel in God's plan, eternal security, election, the necessity of speaking in tongues, dispensationalism, and restorationism. We disagree, sometimes strongly, but at least we have a court of appeal-the Bible. Many of my progressive friends don't even know what these issues are or why they are important. When I have discussions on issues with progressives the talk drifts toward topics like victimization, privilege, inclusiveness, racism, homophobia, patriarchy, rights, my experience, and who's going to be the next bishop. Biblical arguments seem to carry little weight with progressives. "New truth" supersedes old truth. So in speaking of traditional marriage the Bible is no longer the authority in what God's design is for sexual relationships and the family.

The 1972 General Conference did the church no service when it came out with a brand new interpretation of Wesleyanism which spoke of a quadrilateral, a four legged stool standing on the legs of reason, experience, tradition, and Scripture. Progressives were delighted. This meant that "experience," as in whatever I am feeling at the moment, is on an equal par with the Bible as authoritative for Christian

truth. Fortunately, this was corrected in the revised doctrinal statement of 1988, but some persons even today talk about the quadrilateral.

Here are some evangelical affirmations as we enter conversation about Biblical authority.

The Bible is the Word of God. God's revelation of himself has come through history and has culminated in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The inspired record of that revelation, the Bible, is included as part of the revelation. Thus revelation includes words (propositional revelation). This is to say the Bible not only "contains" the Word of God, or "witnesses" to the Word of God. The Bible is the Word of God. This is not to preclude the idea of progressive revelation within Scripture. Neither is it to imply literalism.

The canon has been set. While new truth and new knowledge about the world around us is being discovered all the time through science and human development, the revealed truth about God's plan of salvation and his purposes for this world are in place and requires nothing new to make it complete. The very word "progressive" implies this is not so, but that new ideas and new truths need to be incorporated into Christian faith to make it "up-to-date" and relevant. Not so. We continually study and interpret and use all the tools of tradition and reason and experience to help us understand the fullness of Scripture and its application for today, but we stand with our own Articles of Faith:

We believe the Holy Bible, Old and New Testaments, reveals the Word of God so far as it is necessary for our salvation. It is to be received through the Holy Spirit as the true rule and guide for faith and practice. Whatever is not revealed in or established by the Holy Scriptures is not to be made an article of faith nor is it to be taught as essential to salvation.

We today do not need a new religion based on human wisdom and modern experiences. The Bible is our sufficient rule for faith and practice. If progressives in the church have a better way, let them enter into discussion about what it is.

(Part II about what divides United Methodists will deal with "What is the Gospel?")