



HAPPENINGS AROUND THE CHURCH 8.11.16

A DIVIDED UNITED METHODISM - WHAT IS THE GOSPEL?

By Dr. Riley B. Case

I was in a study with some other UM clergy. We were more theologically diverse than probably was good for us. We were arguing the question, "What is the gospel?" We agreed gospel meant "good news" but what was the Good News? Each one gave a definition. Here are some responses: "There are new possibilities of freedom in the way of Jesus;" "Liberation, as from structures and powers--political, social, and economic--that would enslave us;" "Love;" "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." And (and I am not kidding), not on this occasion but on another occasion a district superintendent giving devotions defined gospel as "There is transcendent meaning amidst the exigencies of life."

This incident took place some years ago. If it had taken place in 2016 we would have had definitions that included words like "inclusiveness," "justice," and "diversity."

One pastor in the group was intrigued enough by the discussion that he went back to his church and had his Bible study group write down their responses to our question, "What is the gospel?" He shared these with us at the next meeting. Good steady United Methodist lay people! They had not been confused by fad ideology. The answers ran something like this: "John 3:16 God so loved that he gave his only begotten son;" "Christ died on the cross for our sins;" "Jesus shed his blood that we might be saved."

We as United Methodists have serious problems. It is not just that we can't agree on the Biblical teachings on sexual morality. We don't have common understandings on the authority of Scripture. We can't agree on what it means to honor covenants and promises. But far worse, we cannot agree on what are the most elementary Christian truths, such as "What is the gospel?"

This was brought to mind this week as I read Jeremy Smith's Hacking Christianity blog entitled, "Unity Requires Flexibility Not Rigid Orthodoxy." Smith argues that rigid orthodoxy does not bring us together but divides us. Smith does not define "rigid orthodoxy" but it must refer to the United Methodist doctrinal standards, or perhaps,

what John Wesley referred to as the "essentials." Or, perhaps just the plain teachings of the historic church. According to Smith, flexible theologies (he names as examples black, feminist, womanist, Asian, queer, and liberationist theologies) that are contextual and that grow out of contemporary experiences can best draw persons into circles of love that can serve as a basis for the unity, the unity that is to be found in the harmony of loving God and neighbor and in acts of mercy and justice.

How depressing. This is not to question the importance of loving God and neighbor and doing acts of mercy and justice. But if the call to love God and neighbor is our only message, or even primary message, or if somehow we identify this as "gospel," then we are of all people most miserable. The human problem is not knowing what to do (as in loving), but doing it. This is what Paul agonizes about in Romans 7 ("For I do not do the good I want but I do the very thing I hate"). We will not find unity and harmony in loving God and neighbor because we do not love God and neighbor, no matter how hard we try. That is why we must speak of sin and God's provision for the problem of sin.

This is the message of Romans. This is the message of the Bible. This is the message of Christian faith. This is the message of Wesleyanism. The answer to the human problem is not "do better and try harder" but to make known that God has intervened on our behalf through Jesus Christ whose death on the cross is an atonement for sin. In accepting Christ by faith we are reconciled to God and given the hope of eternal life. We also receive power through God's Holy Spirit that then enables us to love God and neighbor.

But this is not where much of progressive ideology is. Like liberalism before it and modernism before that, those who rail against orthodoxy are mostly railing against the basic teachings of the faith: original sin, the need for redemption, the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, Christ's atoning death on the cross, the resurrection of Christ and the victory over the powers of sin and death. Paul (1 Cor. 1:23) says the preaching of Christ crucified is a stumbling block to Jews and folly to the Greeks. He might have added, it appears to be folly to those who call themselves religious progressives. Progressives have a new gospel, inclusivism, which, when taken to its logical conclusion, leads to the blurring of all distinctions. There is no distinction between the saved and the lost or between believers and non-believers. In the more extreme forms of "inclusivism" there is no judgment and no hell. There is no atonement and the cross at best is only a moral example. Consequently, there is no need for salvation. Christianity is reduced to a self-help philosophy or a form of social activism.

So the question that arises is a serious question: does The United Methodist Church have enough shared values to stay together as one denomination? What is the basis for unity? An appeal to love God and neighbor is not enough; Unitarianism does that. Other religions do that. When the Discipline of The United Methodist Church speaks of connectionalism (para. 132) it speaks of the link of our common tradition of faith including the doctrinal standards and the General Rules. But progressives have already

let it be known that they are not bound by the Discipline in those areas where they disagree. They rail against "rigid orthodoxy."

So, what is the basis of unity? If this is a misrepresentation of progressive ideology then let us have discussions. One would hope that such discussions would take place in the Bishops' Commission of the Way Forward. But the church presently suffers from our uncertain message. We cannot even agree on the meaning of the word "gospel."