**HAPPENINGS IN THE CHURCH**

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***CAN “UNITY” BECOME IDOLATROUS? (PART 1)***

The United Methodist Church is conflicted over a number of things, not the least of which is the church’s witness to traditional Christian teaching about marriage and sexuality. That teaching is being challenged by persons who call themselves progressives through resolutions, arguments, demonstrations, acts of ecclesiastical disobedience, the breaking of clergy covenants and plain old bullying. The situation is so serious that some suggest that amicable separation would be least harmful to the cause of Christ over the long haul. Others have suggested “ways forward”--ideas or plans that would enable the United Methodist Church to live together and in some way stay “united.” Back of these suggestions is a conviction that any kind of division, separation, schism, or divorce would be the worst tragedy that could befall the church. “Unity,” or the pretentions of “unity,” must be preserved at all costs, even if it means the loss of integrity, the compromising of basic beliefs, more church fights, and the eventual disintegration of the denomination. One year at General Conference I counted five sermons on “unity” by bishops, as if that were the idol at whose altar we worship.

Methodism once had a much different idea about unity and division. After about 1840 the major regional divide in America, both for the country and the church, was between North and South. Before that time, however, the major regional religious divide was between East and West, the West at that time meaning anything west of the Appalachian Mountains. The East operated with an established religious culture adapted from its European roots. The West, on the other hand, was a blank sheet waiting to be written on. It was a new land for a new day. The nation had thrown off the British tyranny. Religion also was being weaned from its dependence on all things European and was ready to be Americanized. There was a religious ethos blank sheet and the Methodists were at the head of the line to write on it.

And so they did and much of it originated in the west. The Cane Ridge camp meeting in Kentucky in 1801 not only introduced the phenomenon of camp meetings but also launched the Western Revival, or the Second Great Awakening. Within a decade Methodists had recast the understanding of “altar” from the table were sacraments were consecrated to the kneeling bench where souls were converted and consecrated. Camp meetings introduced the gospel “spiritual,” perhaps the first truly American indigenous music. Methodists were the first to practice the evangelistic house call and the get-acquainted welcoming hand-shake (at camp meetings

Methodism also championed, whether by design or by accident, a much more sectarian doctrine of the Church. Sectarianism emphasize purity over unity, separation from the world, a disdaining of tradition, and a radical priesthood of all believers. Methodists led the parade. Along with Baptists Methodists took on all the frontier sins: alcohol, gambling, card playing, dancing (associated with prostitution), and Sabbath breaking. They separated from the world by stressing no frills, no gold and no fashionable dress. They established the conversion experience instead of baptism as the basis for membership. The clergy were not called Father or Reverend or even Pastor, but Preacher. Some converts were converted at one revival and began preaching, or at least exhorting, the next week.

Methodists were also inclusive. Methodist camp meetings were the first major social gathering in America where black and white, and rich and poor, met together on more or less equal footing. By 1820, even after the exodus of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) and African Methodist Episcopal Zion (AMEZ) Churches, blacks made up 20% of Methodist membership.

They were also inclusive in another more sectarian way. Methodists did not assume that Catholics or Presbyterians or Baptists, whatever their background, were truly converted. Whoever Methodist camp meetings swept in after conversion were candidates, via the right hand of fellowship, to be Methodist members. In retaliation Methodist circuit riders sometimes came around on their monthly circuit visits to find whole congregations taken over by Baptists (who had resident lay preachers).

Others also were not pleased with Methodist aggressiveness. While Presbyterians, Baptists, and Episcopalians pushed back against Methodists, the greatest critics were the Campbellites themselves with Cane Ride camp meeting and revival roots. The Campbellites out-sectarianized the sectarian Methodists. They railed against bishops and infant baptism and creeds. They did this, amazingly, under the guise of “unity.” Why the sectarian wrangling? Can’t we all just be one in Christ, or “Christian” (as in the Christian Church)? In the case of the Campbellites anti-sectarianism ended up establishing additional numbers of sects. In 1838 the *Western Christian Advocate*, the voice of western Methodism, ran 28 consecutive anti-Campbellism articles under the title: “Campbellism Exposed.”

The western frontier can be called the cradle of modern sectarianism (more on that in the next Happenings article). The frontier revival with its egalitarian and anti-clergy undertones, put religious authority in the hands of common people, or perhaps it is better to say, strong-willed common people. With their vision of purity being more important than unity the result was the proliferation of new religious groups, from Mormons to Adventists to 20 kinds of Baptists. Methodists also were conflicted. An account of one circuit, the Marion Circuit in Indiana, is informative. According to the circuit steward, who wrote a history of the circuit, the camp meeting in 1842 was held too late in the season and was unsuccessful because of cold weather. The circuit received only 300 members (it received 400 the year before). However the circuit lost 260 members during the year, many of them over the issue of abolition (the church was moving too slowly). Thus their increase was only 40.

Still, it can be argued Methodism handled the religious chaos better than others. The connectional system and church discipline had a lot to do with that. Preachers, as well as laity, were subject to disciplining, primarily by way of church trials. Numbers of clergy were disciplined and some were defrocked. “Unity” had less to do with institutional identification as with being of one mind and spirit under the discipline of Methodist doctrine and the Methodist conference.

That should be the lesson for today. United Methodism has traded its sectarian tendencies for a more catholic understanding of the church where “unity” is a value that trumps all other values including accepted values, common beliefs, common practices, and even covenant and moral faithfulness. As a result we have a contrived unity which is based on institutionalism rather than things of the Spirit. Some bishops are acting as if the only heresy permissible in United Methodism is the belief that there is heresy.

Did the infighting and chaos of religious wars on the Western frontier help or hurt the cause of Methodism?

In 1820 the population of Indiana was 147,000. By 1830 it had increased to 343,000, an increase of 132%. Methodism during the same period grew from 4,410 to 15,205, an increase of 245%. From 1830 to 1840 the population of Indiana grew to 686,000, an increase of 100%. However, Methodism in the same period grew to 52,626, an increase of 246%.

From 1810 to 1850 Indiana population grew from 24,000 to 988,000, an increase of 3,924%. Methodism grew from 755 to 70,000 an increase of 9,130%. In 1790 America 1.2% of the entire population was Methodist. By 1850 the percent of Methodists was 5.4%. It is said that in 1850 one out of ten of everybody in Indiana was attending a Methodist Sunday school.

Oh yes, as for the easterners--especially those groups which envisioned the Christianizing of the world with refinement and education and the advancing of civilization---how did they do in the west? In 1780 the Congregational Church claimed 750 churches in America, by far the most of any denomination. In the 1850 federal census Indiana alone claimed 445 Methodist churches. The established Congregationalists claimed a grand total of two churches.

The cause of Christ is no served best by a contrived unity but by Christians with vision, common beliefs, an agreed upon moral witness. That should be a major consideration as United Methodism considers its “way forward.”