**HAPPENINGS IN THE CHURCH**

*By Riley B. Case*

***CONTEXTUALIZING THE SCRIPTURES***

There is a new word out these days to add to the United Methodist jargon lexicon: the word *contextualization*. It is a new enough word that my dictionary does not even have a listing. One dictionary that does defines the meaning as: “Depending upon or relating to the circumstances at a particular place and time. Local. Antonym: catholic.” In one of the bishops’ reports on the Way Forward as to what the church should do about the differences over matters of human sexuality, we are told the bishops uphold values of mission, unity and *contextuality*. That is interesting since many of us thought the values bishops upheld were the doctrine and discipline of the church. But this is a new day. One proposal for dealing with differences over the practice of homosexuality is called the One Church Model, or Option number 2, which would remove all negative language in the *Discipline* regarding the practice of homosexuality and the traditional definition of marriage in order to make for a more *contextual* church. The argument apparently is that marriage as understood by the church for the last 2,000 years (the catholic faith) does not fit new developments in American culture, at least as that culture is expressed in Hollywood, California or New York. The result is that what the church teaches in the Congo is different from what the church teaches at, say, Iliif Seminary, and that is all right because that truth and matters of right and wrong are dependent upon the times and places.

Bishops do things like that. In the earliest days of Methodism it was believed and preached that slavery was a sin. People more zealous about this (more than necessary according to the “institutionalists”) were called *abolitionists*. As slavery was becoming more pronounced in the United States in the first half of the nineteen century, the abolitionists were considered schismatic and denounced by those that we might call the *centrists,* as troublemakers. The abolitionists went so far as to believe the bishops ought to uphold the *Discipline*, especially the part where it stated slaveholders should not be members. The bishops urged some middle way. In today’s language they wanted conversation, dialogue and getting to know one another. Then it was revealed one of the bishops himself, James Andrew, owned slaves. But there were special circumstances (contextualizing). Bishop Andrew did not personally purchase slaves; they had been inherited by his wife. Furthermore, good Christians were told to obey the laws of the land and in some states the laws of the land upheld slavery. Some argued that the problem was the mistreatment of slaves and not slavery itself. The bishops, while they did not so state it that way, wished to uphold values of mission, unity and *contextuality.* At any rate they argued for unity. Surely there was a Way Forward that would keep the church together. The bishops were most unhappy in 1844 when petitions were presented to the General Conference that would have forced the issue. The debate lasted ten days. Some of the bishops urged four more years of study. The church split anyway.

In 1955 Roy L. Smith authored a book, *Why I Am a Methodist.* Smith had pastored the largest church in Methodism, had been editor of the *Advocate*, and was sometimes referred to as Mr. Methodist. Smith waxed eloquently and positively about every aspect of Methodism, including the contributions women had made to the church. He then introduced the idea of the ordination of women and argued that while many supported the idea (including all of the holiness groups that had left Methodism to form new denominations) for practical reasons ordination of women would not work in the Methodist Church (pp. 172-175). It was a *contextual* argument: matters of right and wrong are dependent upon times and places and situations. A year after Smith said ordination of women would not work in the Methodist Church, the General Conference of 1956 approved of women’s ordination.

This is not to argue that *contextualizing* is a bad thing. We do it all the time whether we call it that or not. When I was three years old my mother told me I was never to step off the curb into the busy street (“busy” in that situation meant about four cars an hour). I had to try it of course and learned about corporal punishment. But, whether I understood why or not, after that I obeyed. When circumstances changed (I got older) I was told I could cross the street but I had to look one way and then another. When I was older still I was told simply to “be careful.” The “commandments” or instructions made sense only in “context.” So there are laws and commandments in the Old Testament that we do not follow; stone the adulterer; do not eat pork. Whether we understand why the commandments were given or not, we believe God had a reason. The reason, however, was appropriate for the time and place and circumstances. The word “progressive” is not a bad word. There is such a thing as progressive revelation.

Methodists on the American frontier and until relatively recently preached against alcohol, card playing, and gambling. For good reason. On the lawless American frontier dancing, card playing and alcohol were associated with gambling, prostitution, and the breakdown of the family. Nearly three times more alcohol *per capita* was consumed in 1800 than today. Persons lost their money, their souls and sometimes their lives due to alcohol, gambling (card playing) and dancing (prostitution). Abstinence was a moral force for good. Europeans, and then later Americans lived in a different cultural context and thus the prohibitions against alcohol were not as strong. The moral argument for abstinence was a contextual argument.

Christianity is by nature counter-cultural. The Old Testament law was given because God’s moral truth was in conflict with pagan culture. It is revealing that in general, traditionalists use contextualizing to set themselves against pagan culture. Progressives tend to use contextualizing to conform to pagan culture. In the early 1900s when modernism was sweeping the church, particularly in the area of education, it was argued that John Wesley was “wrong” (the arguments were more subtle: Wesley did not “understand the implications of his own theology”) about his strong teaching on Original Sin and the Atonement. He was “wrong” because modern psychology and the social sciences of the time taught a different view of human nature. Children should not be taught they need Jesus for forgiveness of sins. What they need is to learn to think for themselves so they can decide whether or not they are sinners. The modernist argument was essentially that because of the direction of the culture the church needed to adjust its doctrine. It was the *contextualization* argument: what was OK for one time was not OK for the present time.

And so in recent years we are being told, sometimes by bishops and sometimes by those who are presumably leaders, that the world is changing in regard to human sexuality and the church needs to adapt. Teaching about celibacy in singleness and fidelity in marriage is out-of-date. No one is believing, much less practicing, sexual abstinence before marriage, so we hear. 58% of Americans accept same-sex marriage and those who believe that is inconsistent with Christian teaching are judgmental and hateful and not following Jesus’ teaching on inclusivity. For some people (like religious “fundamentalists”) and or in some cultures (like the Congo in Africa) it may make sense to argue that marriage is exclusively between a man and a woman. But in a more progressive and enlightened America, we need to be flexible and listen to new winds of the spirit.

Is that what we want for our United Methodist Church?