**HAPPENINGS IN THE CHURCH**

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***USING WORDS LIKE “PROGRESSIVE” AND “EVANGELICAL”***

Timothy Tennent, president of Asbury Seminary, writes in a May 5 blog a perceptive article entitled: “Orthodoxy vs. Heterodoxy: The Fundamental Divide in the United Methodist Church.” According to Tennent the real divide in the UM Church is not over homosexuality, or how to get the church to grow, or how to live together, but over what is the gospel of Jesus Christ. Two groups, “so-called progressives” and “so-called conservatives” have such different understandings of the gospel of Jesus Christ that they are probably no longer compatible. For sure they are not equivalent groups, morally, theologically, or numerically. One is committed to historic Christianity; the other committed to a re-imagined church. One stands on a faith that has endured the test of time; the other on the debunking of biblical authority and a radical new morality in step with contemporary culture.

What Tennent is saying has been said also by others. What is worth comment for this article, however, is Tennent’s views on the words we are or aren’t using these days to refer to ourselves and others. Tennent does not like the word “progressive” because it implies that liberal views will move the church forward, rather than backward. It suggests meaning that is misleading.

But if we don’t use the word “progressive” to refer to those who wish to make the church more acceptable to modern secular culture, what word shall we use? Tennent himself seems to prefer the terms *orthodoxy* and *heterodoxy*. But there are problems with the word *orthodox*, to say nothing about the word *heterodox,* which can hardly even be pronounced, let alone understood. I remember some long discussions years ago with Chuck Keysor, the founder of Good News, over language. Keysor preferred *orthodox*, as well as *Bible-believing*, to refer to the sizable group in the Methodist Church who affirmed Wesley’s essentials of the faith, and upheld the authority of Scripture. *Bible-believing* was not a good term since it implied that Good News judged those who disagreed with it as “non-Bible-believing.” Keysor eventually gravitated toward the word *evangelical* to refer to the persons who identified with Good News.

There is talk these days about amicable separation within the United Methodist Church. Whether or not anything comes of such “talk,” for the sake of communication it is important that the descriptive words we use of ourselves and others are respectful and not pejorative, misleading or judgmental.

If progressives want to be known as *progressives*, then let us together use the word. If the preferred word is *liberal* then let us use the word, as long as everyone has some common agreement as to the meaning. By the same token, if evangelicals want to be referred to as *evangelical*, then let us all use the word. If the preferred language is *orthodox* or *traditional* or *conservative*, let us out of respect use the words.

Which introduces a main concern of this article. Why is it that progressives are hesitant to use the word *evangelical* to refer to those of us who believe we stand in doctrine with the Reformers, with Wesley, and with Methodists through the years? In its European context the word *evangelical* has sometimes been used as a substitute for *Protestant*, as against *Catholic*. Following Luther and Calvin it emphasizes salvation by faith through Jesus Christ’s atoning death and resurrection. In its American Methodist history the word additionally implies a born-again experience. It stands in contrast to an understanding of the faith that is primarily confessional or sacramental or liberal (in the classic use of how the word liberal is used). For years standard dictionaries used a definition that actually identified the word *evangelical* with Methodist:

**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.* (Thorndike Barnhart Comprehensive Desk Dictionary, 1958)

Chuck Keysor did not like to use the word *evangelical*  to refer to those who held to the historic Methodist faith because he believed that the word had been debased by theological liberals who wanted to use *evangelical* for themselves even as they denying the essential teachings of Christianity implied in the use of the word *evangelical*. It was always curious to me that professors in the Methodist seminary I attended labeled as *fundamentalist* any emphasis on such truths such as blood Atonement, the necessity of the New Birth, the Authority of Scripture, and the distinction between the saved and the lost. *Fundamentalist* had a pejorative ring. It referred to an approach to Christianity that was a relic of the past and had no future in a Christian world of growing sophistication.

When progressives in the church issued the book *United Methodism @ Risk* in 2003, which was basically an attack on “conservative renewal groups” (the words were in quotes to signify that the authors did not consider them legitimate “renewal” groups) they argument was that the renewal groups wanted to change the essential nature of the church because they wanted a church where “diversity and tolerance and breadth of spirit are in short supply.” If diversity, inclusiveness and tolerance is now the essence of what the gospel is, and evangelical faith is an intrusion then it is indeed time to speak of separation, amicable or otherwise.

Timothy Tennent is absolutely right. The divide in the church is about what is the gospel. One progressive group was handing out literature at our annual conference suggesting the gospel is that God loves everybody. Nothing about Jesus, the cross, the resurrection, salvation, or eternal life. Gospel means simply that all are loved. But one doesn’t need to be United Methodist to believe that, or even Christian. As Timothy Tennent says, there is a fundamental divide in the church.

The word *evangelical* spreads a very big tent. Under that tent are included fundamentalists, evangelical liberals (liberal in politics), Calvinists, Arminians, Wesleyans, dispensationalists, pre-tribs, post-tribs, a-mills, pre-mills, charismatics, Pentecostals, restorationists, separatists, literalists, immersionists, low church, high church--all groups that progressives have problems with. That big tent also includes just about all the Christians overseas. Evangelical United Methodists have some problems with some of these groups also, but at least these groups have an understanding of “gospel” that includes Christ’s death on the cross as the atonement for sin, that acceptance of Christ is necessary for salvation, and that Christians are called to live high moral lives. With these groups we can agree to disagree on many matters. Where we cannot agree to disagree is on the essential nature of the gospel, which includes the necessity of the new birth, the authority of Scripture, and the importance of moral living.

If progressives affirm these things then let us carry on together in the work of the kingdom. If not then let us discuss the whether we have compatibility in the church and whether amicable separation might be the honest way to go.