**HAPPENINGS IN THE CHURCH**

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***WHAT IS THE BASIS FOR UNITY IN UNITED METHODISM?***

Nearly 100 years ago, in 1921 to be exact, Dr. J. Gresham Machen of Princeton University wrote his classic *Christianity and Liberalism*. It was written during the height of what was then known as the Modernist-Fundamentalist controversy, though Machen himself did not want to use the term “fundamentalist.” Machen’s argument was that Christian faith has been defined by Scripture and tradition and is based on facts and doctrine. Why was it necessary to qualify that faith by adding the descriptive label fundamentalist? What was known as “modernism” or “liberalism” was willing to abandon fact and doctrine in deference to modernity. If that was the trend so be it, but the resulting ideology was better identified by the label “liberalism” and not “Christian.”

The modernists believed, of course, like the gay activitists of today, they were on the “right side of history.” Within five years after Machen’s writing, the *Christian Century* declared that the Fundamentalist-Modernist controversy was over; “fundamentalism” had lost; modernism had won; it was time to leave behind the old battles and work toward creating the brave new world. Of course the Methodists back in the “cricks and hollows” didn’t know the theological battle was over yet, but programs of re-education and institutional flag-waving would bring these common folk into conformity and acceptance of modernism. Methodism, once a populist movement, would now be led by the mediating elite of the sophisticated ruling class. All across the land “fundamentalism” was so berated that it became a derogatory label. By the late 1920s every single seminary of the Methodist Episcopal (M.E.) Church and the M.E. Church South, had declared themselves for modernism (the situation in the Evangelical Church and United Brethren Church seminaries was a bit more complicated). Methodism’s social conscience was turned over to an unofficial self-appointed elitist group, the Methodist Federation for Social Action, which had an affinity, at least for a while, for economic socialism.

Machen’s *Christianity and* *Liberalism* is still relevant. The question should still be asked: Is there a point at which a religious ideology is so far afield from the faith defined by Scripture and tradition that if it has integrity, it should no longer label itself as Christianity? The modernism of Machen’s day has morphed and reconstructed itself and faded away and resurrected itself as something different so many times--process theology and liberation theology and neo-orthodoxy and existentialism and feminist theology and womanist theology and Sophia worship and progressive theology-- that one struggles at times to understand how it protends to call itself Christian.

Despite the institutional pressure, grass-roots Christians never did, at least in large numbers, buy into modernist ideology Ordinary United Methodists, for example, are really after all a rather conservative bunch. While most pastors don’t do well in teaching and presenting our United Methodist doctrinal standards--the Articles of the Religion, the Confession of Faith, the General Rules--these standards still do encapsulate what the great majority of UMs believe. And while our bishops and other leaders have pretty much set a course of picking and choosing what parts of the United Methodist *Discipline* they will uphold and what they won’t uphold, our statement on *Connectionalism* speaks about commitment to a common tradition of faith, including our Doctrinal Standards and our General rules (para. 132). These doctrinal standards affirm the Incarnation of Christ, His Atonement (“to reconcile the Father to us,”) the Trinity, the authority of the Scriptures, Justification by Faith, and the New Birth.

The divisive issue that threatens to split United Methodism asunder is related to the church’s teaching on marriage and sexuality, but behind this issue is the more important issue of whether we anymore have a core of faith and values to which we as a denomination are committed.

A new coalition, *Love Your Neighbor* (LYNC), has recently released a “Vision for the United Methodist Church” statement. The coalition is the gathering of eleven groups including five ethnic caucuses. These groups are “official” and “unofficial” meaning, among other things, that some of the groups receive apportionment money. The Vision Statement imagines a new direction for the denomination. The statement consists of ten affirmations or “beliefs.” The ten beliefs with some commentary (in italics) are as follows:

1) Personal and social holiness. Personal holiness is defined as doing no harm. The statement is critical of those who use the threat of schism as “extortive.” Unity is not maintained through forced conformity, selective Scriptural literalism, or colonial structures, but in ways that respect the fullness of God’s diverse creation.

*The statement on personal and social holiness makes no reference to traditional Wesleyan understandings of such things as purity in heart, the filling of the Holy Spirit, and the disciplined spiritual life. It is more a denial of Wesleyan holiness than an affirmation. Unity found in ways that “respect the fullness of God’s diverse creation” does not communicate anything helpful for discussion.*

2) Inclusive and open to all people. This has to do with full inclusion of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer people in the life and ministry of the UM Church.

*The statement basically calls for the church to reverse itself on all of its teaching on human sexuality for the last two thousand years.*

3) Racial justice.

4) A Church global and connectional in nature. The Church needs to address structures of colonialism by encouraging regionalism whereby different “regions” set their own standards and decide how they want to do church.

*Thus, the way to “globalism” is to be actually less global by letting separate regions run their own affairs. Thus, presumably, while Africans might want to take a position against the acceptance of homosexual practice, Africans should not tell Americans that the practice of homosexuality is a sin for Americans.*

5) Peacemaking over war and stewardship over ecological degradation. Among other things this means that war is sometimes caused by “religious triumphalism” whereby one religion asserts an exclusive relationship with God. Peacemaking would stress that no one culture or religion should express any hint of superiority.

*The statement implies that Christian missions and the message that Jesus Christ is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, instead of bringing new life and hope to the world, has been actually a form of “religious triumphalism” and the cause for war.*

6) Incorporates all persons, into full church life. This means special sensitivity toward persons with disabilities such as physical, mental and psychological challenges.

7) Fullness of life and dignity in death. This would affirm abortion and the possibility of dignity in death (assisted suicide) as fullness of life issues.

8) Peaceful pursuit of self-determination and religious expression. We should not impose conversion on others or express self-righteousness toward others.

*Evidently the real message of Jesus was not redemption from sin but listening to others and learning the truths that come from them. Basically since all religions have truths we should not evangelize*.

9) Strive for economic justice.

10) Welcomes and seeks justice for the stranger. This means equitable immigration and migration policies.

Time for reality checks. If the *Love Your Neighbor* agenda were to be adopted by General Conference there would be reason to ask, like Gresham Machen of years ago, whether or not any legitimate claim to the word *Christian* remains for United Methodism. As presented, the *Love Your Neighbor* statement of beliefs posits a religion without an Incarnation, without an Atonement, without a Trinity, without any sense of lostness without Christ, without a doctrine of personal salvation, without judgment, and without reason for evangelism. The ideology espoused really doesn’t need religion at all except to provide some sanction for its progressive political and sociological agenda.

The statement claims to deplore schism but offers no basis for any kind of unity. By contrast the Confessing Movement and other evangelical renewal groups offer the historic faith as the basis for uniting not just the church in America but the church around the world. The evangelical renewal groups ask not that our present *Discipline* and our structure and our doctrine be changed, only that it be supported.

What is the reason why this is not sufficient for our present day?