**HAPPENINGS IN THE CHURCH**

*By Dr. Riley B. Case*

**ON GETTING MESSAGES FROM GOD**

Normally it is the Pentecostals who get messages directly from God. The Holy Spirit gives directions on who to marry, or when to start a church, or even, in emergencies, where to find a parking space. But even Pentecostals don’t claim that God tells them when the Bible needs correcting. The religious progressives are not so hesitant: progressives believe God is speaking new truth. It is not truth about trusting for a parking space but truth about how the Bible needs to be updated and how they alone, the progressives that is, of all the people in the world are the ones appointed to understand this new truth. That, after all, is what the word “progressive” stands for: being out in front and leading the way toward a new future.

For nearly two thousand years all Christians in all cultures of all denominations have agreed that the marriage relationship is between a man and woman and is inviolate because it represents the relationship between Christ and his Church. It is so much part of the Bible foundation of how society ought to function that in Catholic theology marriage is a sacrament. This truth is so woven into the Christian (and Jewish) understanding of the orders of creation that it is not necessary to expound further about what is God’s intention.

But--surprise! In the progressive view of things God has had some additional thoughts. Perhaps God took some clues from secular culture. Skip ideas about the uniqueness of the man-woman relationship. Skip all the teaching on the orders of creation. God has proclaimed from the top of Mt. Sinai that the message of the Bible is not about salvation but about inclusiveness. Grace is not about God’s forgiveness of sin through the shed blood of Christ but about acceptance of all people, and presumably, of various innovative life styles.

Related to the idea of progressives getting new messages from God is the idea about being on the right side of history. We have heard from different persons that “the church has stood on the wrong side of history for too long.” In this view of things acceptance of homosexual practice stands alongside of ordination of women and civil rights as examples of the church resistance to new truth. (Just for the record it was the radical evangelicals, particularly those who were part of the Holiness movement, who first advocated for women speaking in the church.)

It is true that American society and American culture are trending toward the acceptance, not only of homosexual practice, but also toward other forms of sexual expression including gender change, polyamorous relationships, cohabiting, and acceptance of pornography. For that matter it is worth noting that society is also trending toward the breakdown of the home, the acceptance of drugs, violence on every side, and the disintegration of public schools.

It can also be granted that American culture is trending toward new definitions of “rights,” which now have come to mean whatever judges want them to mean. Religious progressives get messages from God; secular progressives get messages from whoever happens to hold political power at the moment. From this perspective the Constitution is growing and expanding and changing. Progressives are on the side of history out in front leading the way toward a new future.

We have been here before. Could we not move with caution about claiming to be on the right side of history? One hundred years ago secular progressives were saying that science would lead the way to a new future free from superstition and supernaturalism. Religion, if it had any future at all, might be allowed to discuss moral issues from a rational perspective. Progressives, religious and secular, argued that World War I would make the world safe for democracy (fundamentalists opposed the war). By 1926 the Christian Century pronounced that the fundamentalist-modernist controversy was over and fundamentalism was dead. In 1932 the famous Commission on Appraisal, with Harvard’s William Hocking as chair, and with religious progressives of the major denominations on the commission, studied the missionary enterprise of the Protestant Church and pronounced that progress was the goal of the church and other agencies were now doing that work better than the churches; that Christians had no right to impose their religion on peoples who already had their religions, and that basically, except for humanitarian work, missions was no longer needed in the world.

The 1930s also saw great fascination among progressives in the efforts of the Soviet Union to bring about a just society. In the 1920s and 1930s eugenics became a favorite science of progressives, who hoped to create a better and stronger race of humans (until Hitler advocated the same idea). From about 1920 through the 1960s ecumenism, the working together of denominations, was supposed to bring about a Protestant and progressive America. In 1929 Kenneth Latourette wrote his classic *History of Christian Missions in China*, in which he traced five major efforts to penetrate Chinas with the gospel, all of which had failed. He had hopes for Protestant missions for the 1930s. I remember hearing Eugene Stockwell of the Board of Missions say in the 1950s that once again with the imposition of Communism, there was little hope for Christianity in China. I remember reading another book in the 1970s saying that evangelical Christianity had disappeared in the Soviet Union.

In the late 1960s and into the 1970s a cultural revolution was, supposedly, coming about with the Woodstock generation. There was a New Consciousness with empowerment to the people. This included a sexual revolution, a rising drug culture, and, in the church, gender, race, and age caucuses. This brought with it the Death of God movement and, in the 1970s, Harvey Cox’s *Secular City* with its argument that metaphysics was dead. United Methodist seminaries, wanting to be on the right side of history, competed to out-radicalize each other. Thus began a 45-year decline in UM church membership.

It was during this time that the Good News movement, the first of the recent evangelical renewal groups, came into being. In the October 17, 1971 issue of *Christian Advocate*, Chuck Keysor, head of Good News, wrote an article in response to one written by Marcius Tabor which had been entitled, “An Ex-Fundamentalist Looks at the Silent Minority.” Tabor had argued that Good News was ultra-fundamentalist, would take the church back into the past, and was out-of-step with the direction of the Church and society of that day. Keysor responded by saying: “We had better be reading the signs of the times…” If anyone was out of step with history it was the institutional liberals. Keysor mentioned The Jesus People Movement, the Charismatic movement, the explosion of Pentecostalism, the proliferation of evangelical para-church groups--these argued that the slogan “a new church for a new world” applied not to compromising Christianity but to historic Christianity. God, not secularists nor religious progressives, would set the direction of history. Within a few years Christianity would sweep through the former Soviet Union, and through China and through Africa.

We do not know at this point how successful the progressive push in the UM Church for approval of gay “marriage” and acceptance of homosexual practice will play out. God has blessed Methodism in the past. We cannot guarantee that that blessing will continue in the future. But God will not be without a witness. God will continue to speak. But many of us are convinced that God’s speaking will not include the idea that the Biblical record can no longer be trusted.