**HAPPENINGS IN THE CHURCH**

***By Dr. Riley B. Case***

*CAN WE STILL SPEAK ABOUT PURITY?*

“*Finish, then, thy new creation; pure and spotless let us be…” (Hymnal #384).*  United Methodists, as well as other Christians, sometimes sing what we don’t mean. “*Take my silver and my gold; not a mite would I withhold…*” (Hymnal #399). We really don’t want God to have our silver and gold. Nor are we much interested in becoming “pure and spotless.” The hymn “Love Divine, All Loves Excelling” is a Wesley holiness hymn, and holiness, quite frankly, is not in style. In the modern mind holiness translates out to “holier-than-thou.” Righteousness translates out to “self-righteousness.” Purity translates out to “puritanical.”

All of this is forcibly argued in a rant by Lindy West who writes for the feminist blog, Jezebel. She starts her May 8 article with these words: “Everyone else on earth is as annoyed with ‘purity” as I am, right?” Though she speaks primarily of what she calls the myth of “sexual purity,” she really is mad at any idea of purity that sets a standard that would inhibit persons from doing what they want to do - when they want to do it - how they want to do it - with whomever they want to do it. All of this delivered with such a barrage of filthy language that it is iimpossible to find a good quote without having to bleep out most of the content.

We sometimes speak of the culture wars, but we are engaged in something more serious than that. The church is engaged in spiritual warfare. Jesus said, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” (Mt. 5:8). We believe that, or, at least we used to believe that in the Methodist tradition. One of the forty-four of John Wesley’s Standard Sermons is “Blessed Are the Pure.” For Wesley purity had to do with motives, words, and actions. It was related to simple living and godliness in dress, speech and actions. The Wesleyan revival in England was accompanied by a moral revolution. The tendency toward drunkenness, gambling, promiscuity, vile language, Sabbath breaking, and various forms of human degradation, if not reversed, were at least modified in eighteenth century England. The Methodists brought dignity to women and children, and stressed family life, respectful human relationships, and simple living. The first Methodist Sunday schools were designed for poor children who had no religious or educational opportunities.

That vision for purity and holiness carried over for Methodists in the new world. Methodists in America fought alcohol, gambling, indecency, and worldliness in literature, in dancing, and in frivolous entertainment. To be a Methodist carried the image of straightforwardness and honesty. Methodist General Conferences for years passed resolutions on the importance of the family altar, and on marriage, and on the family.

Even in the heyday of theological modernism, in the 1930s, the Methodist Episcopal Discipline of 1932 carried a section on “Personal Purity” stating that upon Christian citizens…

*…devolves the sacred privilege of counteracting that pagan conception of life which puts a low estimate upon personality, fosters the vulgar and the obscene, develops the irreverent and the frivolous, encourages sensuality and vice, and forever tempts mankind to live on the plane of the animal.*

The section goes on to protest against the present trend of literature that produces a mental attitude toward life that is debasing and demoralizing.

As recently as 1964 the Methodist *Discipline* the stated that ministers (including local pastors) were to be committed to

*The highest ideals of the Christian ministry with respect to purity of life in body, in mind, and in spirit, and to bear witness thereto by abstinence from all indulgences, including alcoholic beverages and tobacco…*

What happened? As was said Christians today are engaged in spiritual warfare. Talk about “purity” and moral standards casts a judgment on actions, speech, and attitudes that are part of a world, and, we might say, a more militant secular and anti-Christian culture in America, that is in rebellion against God. Christians are scorned and mocked and accused of right-wing extremism, homophobia, and hate-mongering for supporting such ideals as celibacy in singleness and faithfulness in marriage, and for affirming that which Christians of all ages and in all places have always to be understood as a Biblical standard, namely, that marriage is between a man and a woman and is a “mystery” based on the relationship of Christ and the Church.

And where the secular world leads can religious progressives be far behind? I remember a discussion on the Hymnal Revision Committee’s Language and Theology Guidelines subcommittee back in 1986. A translation of Francis of Assisi’s hymn “All Creatures of Our God and King” was being presented with the line, “O sister water, pure and clear….”

Oops, bad mistake. The committee was treated to a lecture on sexism. The line “sister water pure and clean” was demeaning to women. “Why do women always have to have ‘purity’ thrown at them?” “’Purity’ is not a word women want to be associated with today” (Evidently the speaker had more insight into what “women” want than the rest of us). One can note that in our current UM hymnal (Hymn #62) St. Francis’ flowing water in verse three runs clear but not pure.

The religious progressives have followed the modern secularist agenda like a panting puppy. I remember a remark from the 2012 General Conference: “The Church trails way behind society on the matter of gay marriage.”

When did we start losing our moral vision? Following the social and moral upheaval of the 1960s, progressives led the 1972 United Methodist General Conference into a redirection of its doctrinal and moral traditions. That conference gave us the present independent superboards, introduced the idea of theological pluralism, promoted social engineering through quota systems, directed the church away from emphasis on personal purity and morality, and introduced a new understanding of inclusivism which meant that all persons were to be accepted regardless of what they believed or what they did.

In other words, for United Methodists, at least for the institutional progressive wing, there are no moral standards. The emphasis on such historic Methodist teachings as abstinence, chastity, purity, and separation from the world is gone. If it had not been for an amendment from the floor of the conference stating that the practice of homosexuality was incompatible with Christian teaching, the conference would have affirmed homosexual practice.

The consequences have been disastrous. This once-proud denomination has lost more than three and a half million members since the 1972 General Conference. What is worse, the seminaries, the boards and agencies, and the bishops--those who have led us in the decline--seem incapable or unwilling to assume any responsibility for their perpetuating the theology and the lack of moral vision that have contributed to the decline.

I overheard a man telling some of his friends that he had switched churches. “I was Wesleyan but they didn’t like my partying so I became United Methodist. They don’t care what you believe.” It is nice to have new United Methodist members, but not for the reason stated.

. Fortunately, the Church is much more than the seminaries, the bishops, and the boards and agencies. In many communities United Methodists still believe and practice high moral values. They seek the filling of the Holy Spirit and can use words like chastity, abstinence, and obedience without apology. And they pray the words they sing:

*Finish, then, thy new creation; pure and spotless let us be…*