**HAPPENINGS IN THE CHURCH**

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**A DIVIDED UNITED METHODISM – PLAYERS IN THE PRESENT DRAMA**

Here is an up-to-date (as of the end of July) on various groups involved in the present crisis in the United Methodist Church. .

**THE CONSERVATIVES –** This group is made up of evangelicals, conservatives, “orthodox,” and traditionalists. Regardless of the label, for many of us this is the United Methodism we inherited from John Wesley and Francis Asbury. It is the United Methodism of our General Rules and our Doctrinal Standards. It is gospel hymns, the preaching of salvation, the proclamation that Christ died for our sins and we can be saved by grace through faith. It is holy living and seeking to serve the least, the lost and the last. It is the *Discipline* of the Church. This is the Methodism that grew from 2% of the religious population in America in 1784 to 33% of the religious population of America in 1850.

The Confessing Movement counts itself as part of this group. The Confessing Movement in its purpose statement confesses “Jesus Christ as Son, Savior, and Lord.” The Confessing Movement declares it exists “to enable the United Methodist Church to retrieve its classical doctrinal identity, and to live it out as disciples of Jesus Christ.” The Confessing Movement sees the unity of the church in the coming together around shared values and beliefs and practices.

At the moment these shared values of beliefs and practices are under attack, not so much from outside the church but from within the church. With the election of a lesbian bishop, with resolutions on the part of several conferences and church leaders declaring that the *Discipline* is hateful and harmful to persons in the church and therefore not to be followed, and with the breaking of covenants within the church, those who are conservative wonder if there is anything left to hold us together. There is a rebellion within the church.

This is part of a long-festering bigger problem. For those in rebellion the Bible is not the final authority for faith and practice; for those in rebellion the “gospel” has to do more with “inclusiveness” (all are accepted by God regardless of faith and practice) rather than in the proclamation that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures. For those in rebellion religion is basically a social and political ideology wrapped up in religious language rather than a vital relationship with a living God. . For those in rebellion the historic teachings of our Articles of Religion such as the article on Son of God (..”truly suffered, was crucified, dead and buried, to reconcile his Father to us, and to be a sacrifice not only for original guilt, but also for actual sins of man”) are not particularly relevant for our present day.

For those in rebellion traditional Christians are not salt and light in a dying world, but are proclaiming a false gospel. That is the opinion of blogger Chris Kratzer who claims, among other things, that United Methodists. because of their belief in the Biblical understanding of human sexuality, are in part responsible for the mass killings in Orlando. And as for the evangelicals in the church Kratzer compares them with militant Islamists:

*A significant segment of conservative, evangelical Christianity worships the same kind of angry, vengeful, hell-wielding, punishing, violence justifying, penal and militant God as does Islamic fundamentalists.*

Where is holy conferencing when we need it? Despite all of this, conservatives in the church would like to believe in a hopeful future for United Methodism. They are calling on the Council of Bishops to bring into existence the special commission ordered by the General Conference to find a way forward for the church with integrity. They are also calling for the organization of a new association, the Wesley Covenant Association, which will have an organizing meeting in Chicago October 7.

**THE PROGRESSIVES -**  This group is much less convinced that John Wesley is relevant for today, nor that the moral codes of our United Methodist forbearers are adequate for the modern age. Progressives believe that the revelation of God is ongoing and that God’s authoritative voice can be discerned in science and reason and personal experience and in the emerging theologies of women, minorities, and other oppressed groups. The Bible may be one “word of God” but it is not the final word or the only “word.” Since Progressives are quite certain that they themselves have discerned what God’s latest new truth is, they have declared that, in matters of human sexuality, marriage is not only between a man and a woman, that a person may identify as male or female or both or neither and that God approves of various kinds of sexual arrangements and practices. Progressives also believe that ideas of judgment and the wrath of God and hell were culturally initiated and that the modern day church should move beyond that.

Progressives also claim that their superior religious insight trumps the church’s *Discipline.*  And since the *Discipline* is hateful, to defy the *Discipline* is an act of prophetic love. Covenants and promises and vows that fail to meet the Progressive vision of inclusiveness can be justifiably broken.

.**THE “CENTRISTS” –**  For some of us the word “centrist” is misleading. This group would be better labeled as “moderate progressives” since they too argue that Bible teaching was culturally influenced and with modern enlightenment perhaps adjustments need to be made in the understanding of traditional Bible teachings. Only in a denomination in which the corporate culture itself is dominated by a progressive mind-set would this group be considered “centrist.” Many centrists (or moderate progressives) are loyal institutionalists. High value is placed upon unity and getting along with one another and not offending others. If there is a highest value it appears to be kindness. If persons believe they have been injured or discriminated against they probably have been and therefore the church needs to make adjustments that all might live in peace. “Centrists” are known for a “live and let live” philosophy. They tend to argue that sexual teachings are not of the essence of Christian faith and therefore can be compromised without harm. The Centrists are placing high hopes in the commission the bishops are appointing that will help the church to a way forward.

**THE AFRICANS –** Africans to date are supportive of the United Methodist Church and are optimistic about the church’s future. This is because there is excitement in the African Church. That Church is, after all, growing. Africans give witness to the great works on God in the present time. Thay also support many of the church’s social teachings, especially those that address poverty. But while there are a number of different countries and languages and cultures that make up African United Methodism what the Africans have in common is that they are conservative in matters of Bible authority, especially as it related to human sexuality. Africans were very disappointed that after all of the trouble of being elected and coming to General Conference they were not able to cast their votes on the issues of human sexuality. They also are convinced that many Americans do not realize how the African church would be thrown into great confusion if the church changed its stance on the practice of homosexuality.

**THE BISHOPS –** The bishops, unfortunately, are part of the problem. A good number of them are among those who have broken covenant with the church and with their own vows to uphold the church’s doctrine and discipline. They evidently cannot even decide among themselves whether the *Discipline* should be supported. They have now put out still another statement while, not mentioning specifically the breaking of the church covenants on the part of progressives, at least finally recognize there is a serious problem in the church. They have indicated they will soon be appointing the special commission that will suggest a helpful way forward.

Stay tuned.