

FIRST THINGS

DO NOT RASHLY TEAR ASUNDER

WHY THE BELEAGUERED FAITHFUL SHOULD STAY AND REFORM THEIR CHURCHES.

by
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The struggle for the soul of the United Methodist Church has reached a decisive point. At every quadrennial national meeting since 1976, the issue of the ordination of partners in same-sex unions has been raised and defeated. Until now my church has not gone the way of the Episcopalians, the United Church of Christ, the mainline Presbyterians, and the Evangelical Lutherans. At the General Conference this April, Methodists face another battle over this issue, and the legislative outcome is in doubt. The contest will hinge on how many of the African delegates will get visas and on whether we can meld together the voices of evangelicals, moderates, overseas delegates, and centrist liberals who care about the future of the United Methodist Church and who wish to avoid a decade of devastating court challenges.

Some of my oldest colleagues in my churches "Confessing movement" argue for an "amicable separation" from their church, just as did those in John Wesley's day who believed that they should leave the Church of England because they could not remain in it with a clear conscience. Wesley urged members of the Methodist societies not to separate from the troubled Church of England. So do I urge renewal-minded people in the mainline churches not to separate from their wavering churches but to remain with them and to work for reform.

Wesley remained steadfast in his conviction to remain in the church that baptized him until he was either forced out or compelled by unavoidable conscience to depart. He never left, and neither have I. I find myself ironically in a position analogous to Wesley's in 1784, when he preached his famous

sermon "On Schism." He urged his fellow Methodists: "Do not rashly tear asunder the sacred ties, which unite you to any Christian society."

After a lifetime of fighting schism and seeking to renew the United Methodist Church from within, I still have to deal with my conscience now and in future circumstances unforeseen. I cannot promise to remain. But what is the specific trigger that might justify separation from a faltering mainline denomination? What legislative act would force renewing organizations to disaffiliate with the denomination? For Methodists, the answer begins with Wesley's sermon.

Many of my colleagues in church renewal think of separation as a better choice than remaining in an unhealthy and unfaithful community. But Wesley regarded schism as a pernicious evil; since it "brings forth evil fruit; it is naturally productive of the most mischievous consequences," including "severe and uncharitable judging of each other offence . . . anger, and resentment," which "may issue in bitterness, malice, and settled hatred; creating a present hell wherever they are found, as a prelude to hell eternal." Schism he understood as "a causeless separation from a body of living Christians" and a "disunion in mind and judgment (perhaps also in affection)."

The schismatic heart leaves behind it a burnt path of destruction: Those "promoting the work of God in the souls of their brethren, will grow languid . . . to the utter destruction, first of the power, and then of the very form of religion." Schism places "more stumbling-blocks in the way of these for whom Christ died."

Wesley was pleading with new converts in the Methodist societies, many from the dissenting church traditions (Puritan, Reformed, Presbyterian, Baptist, Congregational, and Quaker) to remain in the established church and seek reform rather than offend further against the unity of the body of Christ. Wesley was a cradle Anglican. Most of those he was cautioning had not grown up within his own Anglican ethos of spiritual formation and conciliar ecclesiology.

Wesley admonished those who hastily assumed that separation is a moral virtue: "They leave a Christian society with as much unconcern as they go out of one room into another. They . . . wipe their mouth, and say they have done no evil!" They may be "justly chargeable before God and man, both with an action that is evil in itself, and with all the evil consequences which may be expected to follow." My heart says that, though those choosing separation may be justly chargeable for the consequences, I want empathically to honor their own examination of their own consciences and seek patient reconciliation rather than make charges that would further inflame.

Wesley urged resistance to the hotheads on both sides. "O beware, I will not say of forming, but of countenancing, or abetting any parties in a Christian society. Never encourage, much less cause, either by word or action, any division therein . . . It is far easier to prevent the flame from breaking out, than to quench it afterward." Similarly I plead with my fellow evangelicals in a discordant church: Do not take pleasure in contention. Do not encourage division. Distance yourselves from those who love dispute.

"On Schism" has poignant application to all the divided mainline churches today, where believers are troubled about a failing church that forgets its own core teaching. Rather than focusing primarily on the results of legislation, Wesley framed the deeper issue as a matter of conscience. He did not presume to settle the matter of conscience for each individual. But he did call each individual to a serious examination of conscience in the presence of God with the caveat that the unity of the body of Christ should be considered in the examination.

In the text Wesley chose for his homily, Paul is pleading with the Corinthians "that there might be no schism in the body of Christ." The divisive issue in Corinth was specific: negligent and uncharitable attitudes at the Lord's table. Some held private suppers "in such a shocking manner" that some went hungry while others were drunk. Was this bad enough to prompt splitting the church of Corinth? Paul thought not. By analogy, was the lethargy of the Church of England sufficient cause for the Methodist societies to leave it? Wesley thought not. By analogy today, is the

controversy on sexual ethics deep enough to split the United Methodist Church, the mainline's largest denomination, which seeks to be a plausible expression of the one body of Christ? I think not, but my conscience is troubled.

Though the biased press usually blames separation on conservatives splitting off from the property-owning liberal bureaucratic denomination, the opposite is true. The doctrinal revisionists have cut themselves off from their doctrinal and denominational roots by demanding that their church disavow its classic teaching on enduring covenant responsibility in marriage. The threatened schism is not caused by laity who are faithful but by revisionists unfaithful to it. Those who are conscience-stricken should not be blamed for longing for a purer church.

My dilemma: Should the renewing laity leave the tainted church or stay to reform the erring leadership? Every mainline church today faces the same basic dilemma that troubled the early Methodist societies: stay or leave. Wesley's instruction is: Better to stay and reform than to leave and further divide the worshiping community. The renewing laity are already more rooted in faith than are many of their wayward clergy. They will ultimately be vindicated in this struggle.

Though determined to maintain the unity of the church, Wesley concedes that there is one crucial exception: If "you could not remain in the Church of England, without doing something which the Word of God forbids, or omitting something which the Word of God positively commands: If this were the case (but, blessed be God, it is not) you ought to separate from the Church of England." This would be "separation with cause" and not a needless schism. But if your church does not require you to do what God forbids, you must stay.

The problem of conscience is thus narrowed to whether the church commands you to do something wrong. Throughout my ministry I have continually remained in covenant connection with clergy with whom I disagree on both doctrinal and moral issues. If other ministers disavow their vows, I have preferred to act through ordinary disciplinary means to correct those abuses. My

church has had innumerable failures of discipline during all my years of ministry, but these did not require separation. They call for the sensible use of legislative and judicial means of correction.

I can say with good conscience that I have not yet been commanded by my church to do something contrary to God's command. Similarly, Wesley did not think that a sufficient cause existed for the Methodist societies to leave the Church of England. He thought the dryness of his church was reformable. He called for its renewal and worked within it to make it happen.

This is the commitment to date of the Confessing Movement Within the United Methodist Church. With Wesley I say: So long as the church to which I am now united does not require me to do anything that the Scripture forbids, or to omit anything the Scripture enjoins, it is my indispensable duty to continue therein. Even if the general conference denies what Scripture enjoins, I am not required to cooperate with that attempt. I can stay and stand against the distortion. I want with all my heart to remain within the wrenched body that ordained me.

There is a haunting precedent here: Serious historians have argued that if the Methodists of the 1840s had not split into North and South divisions, the Civil War could have been averted.

Similarly, if the largest of the mainline denominations tragically splits on sexuality issues, what consequences will ensue for the unity of the body of Christ in America, and indeed around the world?

While it looks at first glance as if the sexual revisionists may be taking over the United Methodist Church, they have not. What they have temporarily succeeded in doing is to circumvent the scriptural teaching on God's purpose in sexuality—not only for the deeper companionship of man and woman but also for the protection of children in bonded unity. But that is reversible. We must not run away at the first defeat in a conflict that may continue many more years. We have won every single one of these contests in every previous general conference. Centrist Methodists have won nine consecutive quadrennial legislative challenges since 1976. The revisionists have won zero.

They think we will leave if they win only one.

The single word *within* is the jewel embedded in the very name of the Confessing Movement. That is our name. Our purpose is not to focus on confessing apart from our historic confessing community, but within it. *Within* is the decisive word for me and for the movement I helped initiate. You do not reform the church by fleeing from it.

And our movement has only grown over the years. It has not gone away but increased in strength. On the first week of Easter 1994, a group of ninety-two laity, clergy, bishops, and professors gathered to consult and pray about the future of the United Methodist Church. I joined Bishop William R. Cannon and Dr. Maxie Dunnam in calling together the group that became the Confessing Movement Within the United Methodist Church. Out of that conversation came a larger gathering of more than eight hundred United Methodists meeting in Atlanta in April 1995, who called the church to the confessional statement for the renewal and reform of the United Methodist Church: *We Confess Jesus Christ: The Son, the Savior, the Lord*. That movement has grown exponentially to over 600,000 correspondents.

The liberals want us to leave, and leave them alone. Now is the time to remain steadfast in faith, to stay and reverse their illusion of their inevitable momentum. They do not have the support of the Methodist laity, nor can they gain it in time. If their proposals to change Methodist teaching were put to the test of a referendum, they know they would fail. They can only win in a controlled and manipulable legislative process.

A legislative action can be repealed. An act of the general conference that ignores the will of the laity will not stand long. The bishops have been shamefully silent in this conflict. They are consecrated to defend classic Christian teaching, but they have either cowered or encouraged more divisiveness. Few have had the courage to lead. Five bishops standing together against the vacillating council could be victorious.

I am vexed by the thought of remaining within a supposedly Christian body that actively promotes debased behavior. But I am not intimidated by legislative proposals that may for a time do so. I have the option of disagreeing and seeking improvement. But if church discipline seeks to coerce my conscience by requiring me to act contrary to conscience, then I do have a plausible cause to separate.

What is the tipping point? My own view is different from that of many of my own closest cohorts in the renewal trenches. My own decision about whether to leave the United Methodist Church hinges on this steady and clear conviction: As long as the classic Wesleyan doctrinal standards are in place and constitutionally guaranteed, my intention is not to leave the church that baptized me and ordained me. But if the church requires of me some act to which I cannot in good conscience consent, I will, like John Wesley, consider it "my bounden duty to separate from it without delay."

I hope that such will not be required. For now I appeal to classic Wesleyan doctrinal standards on those matters of creation, penitence, the sacramental life, and sexuality that are today rending the body of Christ. On questions of covenant accountability within the marriage of one man to one woman, those established doctrinal standards are clear, since they call for following scriptural teaching on creation and they confess God's providence and grace in the relation of man and woman and their accountability for their offspring. If the general conference defines discipline contrary to those doctrines, I will work within the church to correct it. The clarity of these scriptural doctrines encourages me to continue to work against those who would twist and abuse them.

Let me give a practical example. If the general conference requires me as a pastor to admit into membership one living in open defiance of classic Christian teaching, I would still follow the ordinary disciplinary process: empathically counsel that person to become more fully ready for membership and holy communion and the rite of holy matrimony. I would then leave it to due

judicial process to defend my pastoral actions if they are questioned. I am confident in due process in the long run. This is entirely different from withdrawing from the church. Churches are not reformed by people who have left them.

I have refused to yield to the well-intentioned voices that wish, sadly, to separate. The morality of separation is not as wrenching for respected believers in other Reformation traditions who were born with the élan of dissent. Separation would be for me like a tragic divorce from a solemn covenant. If we win, I will stay. If we lose, I will stay as long as conscience permits.

If the United Methodist Church's legislative bodies ignore or reject the settled Christian teaching of holy matrimony by approving the marriage of a man with a man or a woman with a woman, every member will face this question of conscience: Am I being coerced by such legislation in a way that would require me to do what God forbids? If such an action forces the faithful to deny their conscience, that would justify what Wesley called "separation with cause."

Methodists have proven again and again that legislation is infinitely amendable. But according to the United Methodist Church's constitution, the doctrinal standards cannot be amended in the slightest. The doctrinal standards call for scriptural authority and that authority clearly rules out same-sex sexual experimentation.

If church legislation seeks or pretends to overrule Scripture and the constitution, the answer is not to leave but to seek its correction. Such hubris will in time be overruled by the faithful laity. Bad legislation can be corrected by good legislation. If that takes a long time, then we do well to recall that God is patient. St. James calls the faithful to "let patience have its perfect work." This patience is not measured in a single year or quadrennium. It sees these times in relation to God's own time.

Are the experimental-sexuality advocates really like an unstoppable flood? Even floods are diminished in time by natural processes. The dam can be repaired. If those called by God to repair

the dam leave, it is not likely to be sooner repaired, and it will more quickly fall into ruin.

As a matter of political prognostication, admittedly always fallible, I personally think the faithful laity will win once again on sexuality issues in the 2012 general conference and in subsequent ones. Increasing numbers of delegates from the global church will prevent the approval of teachings on sexuality contrary to Scripture and Methodist belief. In the longer term, the voice of Scripture will be sustained over any short-term legislative victories liberals may win, because lay consent will ultimately confirm marriage as a relation between one man and one woman in durable covenant fidelity.

When referenda on this issue have been submitted to test by vote in states, the voters eventually always have decided for marriage and against rashly changing the definition of marriage. Do we think the community of believers is in the long run less wise than the voting majorities in state referenda? I would like to find a way to refer the question of the definition of marriage to a general referendum of United Methodist laity to instruct the general conference. It has been endlessly debated since 1976. It needs a definitive resolution. At present no such referendum is available but it could be devised by the general conference.

The sexual revisionists have fantasized that their views are inevitably going to win out. But they have been predicting absolute and irreversible victory in vain in every legislative year for thirty-six years. If they should succeed, the response of the laity would likely be resistance on a massive scale, and the revisionary advocates would then have to face the consequences in loss of support to theological schools and church agencies and in loss of confidence in the council of bishops.

Would I participate in the formation of another denomination? This would bring down upon us a thousand new problems. We would walk away with what some might regard as a pure conscience, but with an insurmountable burden of litigation, congregational division, building churches from nothing, and adding to the rancor.

I asked at the beginning what trigger might justify separation from a faltering mainline denomination, and for me from the United Methodist Church. It is the repeal of the First Restrictive Rule, which protects the church's doctrinal standards from being amended. My church's constitution calls for scriptural authority to rule on such questions as divine creation, the nature of the marital covenant, the abuse of nature, and the divine intent in sexuality.

Are the mainline churches unreformable? The Confessing Movement was founded to make sure that the United Methodist Church is not unreformable. This may be a decisive test case, but not the last one. This is a serious hemorrhage, but the patient has not died. The faithful are called to be prepared to stay and continue the ministry of rectifying what has gone astray. That is what shepherds and sheep do amid danger. They stay with the flock. They do not flee.

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