

SALVATION AND SEXUALITY: WHAT THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH TEACHES

United Methodism's fall 2005 Judicial Council decision regarding Beth Stroud and Ed Johnson are consistent with the plain meaning of The Book of Discipline (2004). For that, United Methodists can be thankful. However, at the same time, it must be admitted that the challenges posed by those desiring The United Methodist Church to legitimate homosexual practice will not be met and solved by judicial responses alone. Clear teaching by bishops and pastors—on the Truth of Jesus Christ, on the truth of humanity, and on the truth of human sexuality—is needed, but often found wanting, in United Methodism today. It is hoped that the following article will, by God's grace, generate some relevant, faithful teaching in some quarters and corners of United Methodism.—Editor

FROM time to time, issues and movements—be they philosophical or theological, political or economic, or cultural or moral in nature—arise in a church and/or a society, gain significant social momentum, and require address from the Church. On occasion, such issues and movements can press and push so vigorously on the Church and her teaching that she is wise to return to her foundations, reconsider her basic doctrines and moral principles in light of the urgent challenges of the day, and engage the matters at hand on the basis of her foundational doctrines and morals. Slavery in nineteenth-century America was one such issue. National Socialism in Germany, during the 1930s and 1940s, was another example. And the civil rights movement in twentieth-century America was a third.

A movement pressing for the acceptance of homosexual practice has developed in contemporary societies, including American society. This movement, led and supported by many people of good will, can be found both in American society and inside many American churches, including The United Methodist Church. Following the civil rights movement, the feminist movement, and the sexual revolution of the last several decades, the movement for the acceptance of homosexual practice is quite aggressive. Indeed, as made clear in the recent cases of Beth Stroud and Ed Johnson, and the “Hearts on Fire” conference at Lake Junaluska, this movement is alive and well in United Methodism today. To date, this movement has not been sufficiently engaged by the Church’s teaching. The time has come for United Methodist doctrine and morals to address, in truth and love, this dissenting movement.

The United Methodist Church need not enter this task of teaching in a state of fear—fear of the dissenting movement, fear of schism in our denomination, fear of division in our annual conferences, or fear of strife in our congregations. After all, addressing the claims of those now advocating the acceptance of homosexual sex is simply a matter of teaching the Church’s faith. When The United Methodist Church teaches her faith, the church is simply being the Church and inviting many to think with the Church. Teaching the community’s faith involves the communal duties of: maintaining, proposing, and clarifying the Church’s authoritative doctrines and morals; practicing Christian discipleship; and speaking and listening as Christ’s disciples. Therefore, The United Methodist Church can enter this time of teaching with confidence. Confidence! After all, our confidence is based on trust in Jesus Christ’s reign over, guidance of, and grace throughout the Church.

We can be confident that God will accomplish good and great things when the Church teaches, truthfully and lovingly, the doctrines and morals that He has given the Church. After all,

God—who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—is with the Church as she teaches truthfully and lovingly. Over the generations, God has made us sisters and brothers, part of the family of the Church, through the waters of Holy Baptism. Furthermore, God has nourished us, as family, with the mysterious yet real presence of Jesus Christ in Holy Communion. And God gives us the Holy Spirit to speak and to listen, and to live and struggle together, as brothers and sisters often do. We can be confident that God will use this time of teaching for the purpose of renewing the Church in the Gospel. We can be confident that God will use this time of teaching to renew His Church in the faith, and in the new life in Christ, which He has given, gives, and will give to us.

So let us now turn to the Church's teaching. In what follows, The United Methodist Church's doctrines on salvation and moral principles on sexuality, which are relevant to the matter of homosexual practice, will be outlined. Remember that what follows is mainly derived—briefly and imperfectly, to be sure—from authoritative sources of The United Methodist Church. Furthermore, what follows is consistent with the witness of the Bible, with the Wesleyan tradition, and with the Great Tradition of the Church catholic. That is, what is presented below will be ecumenical in content; it can be found, more or less, in churches across the ecclesiastical spectrum—from Pentecostalism and Evangelical Protestantism to Classical Protestantism to Orthodoxy to Roman Catholicism. Again, what is to be offered is not personal or private opinion, nor is it the position of a denominational caucus. What follows is what The United Methodist Church, with the Church universal, holds to be true.

The Article of Religion on the Church (XIII) declares that the Church is to preach (and teach) “the pure Word of God.” This is a very high standard to which bishops, clergy, and lay preachers and teachers aspire. What is to be offered below is what United Methodist bishops and pastors have promised to preach, teach, and defend. In addition, the doctrines cited below are constitutionally protected, by The Book of Discipline, in The United Methodist Church. So this material has not been made up from scratch. Instead, this material has been received from God, from the Church, from the Bible, and from the Tradition. The attempt here, humble as it is, is to pass Church teaching on anew and afresh in a way that will engage a pressing challenge of our time. By teaching these doctrines and morals, the Church is attempting to be a servant of the Word of God.

WHAT THE CHURCH TEACHES: DOCTRINALLY

The United Methodist Church's teaching on salvation is doctrinal in nature. Doctrine is from the Church for the Church. Certainly, there is much room in United Methodism for doing theology. But theology is more experimental and more exploratory for individuals and groups in the Church who are so inclined. But doctrine is what the Church, the whole Church, believes, proclaims, and lives. Doctrine is foundational.

The Church's basic story of salvation, in brief, begins with creation. United Methodist doctrine declares: “There is but one living and true God ... the maker and preserver of all things, both visible and invisible” (Article I. “Of Faith in the Holy Trinity”). And the Bible states: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1, RSV here and following). Through God the Spirit and with God the Son, God the Father created light, day, and night; sun, moon, and stars; waters and lands; plants and animals. Finally, God created “man in his own image, in the

image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (1:27). At the end of this magnificent, marvelous, creative work, God paused and “saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good (1:31).

But the drama of God creating all that is did not end the story. Rather, the drama only increased. For man neglected God's command not to eat fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Though created in God's image, man caved in to temptation. Man disobeyed. Man displayed pride. Man overreached. That is, man fell from perfect harmony with God, as did all of creation. St. Paul describes the consequences of man's fall in this way: “Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man or birds or animals or reptiles” (Romans 1:22-23). That is, man left communion with the one, true, living God and elevated other gods to serve. “Therefore, God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed for ever! Amen.” (Romans 1:24-25)

The fall has a deep, profound influence on all men and woman, all boys and girls. The Article on Religion on original sin (VII) states that because of Adam's fall, “man is very far gone from original righteousness, and of his own nature inclined to evil, and that continually.” With the fall, more than a little negativism, more than a few bad choices, entered the human scene. With the fall, all mankind, while created in the image of God, became flawed and distorted, always and everywhere. With the fall, even man's free will was severely undermined: for man “cannot turn and prepare himself, by his own natural strength and works, to faith, and calling upon God; wherefore we have no power to do good works, pleasant and acceptable to God, without the grace of God by Christ preventing us...,” as the Article of Religion on free will (VIII) declares. In other words, with the fall, man became captive to sin. Man lost all hope, except for the false and temporary hopes that he might drum up on his own. Man became man in rebellion against God. No choices. No exit. No hope. This is Christian truth about humanity.

But once again, the story does not end here. Again, the drama increases. For God does not leave man alone, trapped in self, sin, and death. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” (John 3:16) Similarly, St. Paul proclaims: “[I]n Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them...” (II Corinthians 5:19). This is the Gospel! This is the radical love of God for the world, for man in rebellion against God. This love of God is not a feeling. Not a sentiment. Not a good intention. Not an aspiration. This love of God is Jesus Christ, who is “very God and very Man, who truly suffered, was crucified, dead, and buried, to reconcile his Father to us...” (Articles of Religion, II). So the love of God, in particular and in person, is Jesus Christ crucified: “The offering Christ freely made on the cross is the perfect and sufficient sacrifice for the sins of the whole world, redeeming man from all sin, so that no other satisfaction is required” (Confession of Faith, VIII).

The love of God means salvation for humanity. And salvation means God's great and graceful gifts of justification, sanctification, and perfection. Though today these words are not often spoken in our churches, they should be. They are a part of the Church's basic vocabulary. For they help to carry Good News to the world and to us. These great and graceful gifts from God—

justification, sanctification, and perfection—are received by man through faith, through trust, through an open heart. Only and solely because of what Jesus Christ has accomplished on the cross, “penitent sinners are accounted righteous before God only by faith in our Lord Jesus Christ” (Confession of Faith, IX). That is, God's justification of the sinner is God's pardon of the sinner, as John Wesley never tired of preaching. But justification also initiates sanctification, which is ongoing growth in God's grace. “We believe sanctification is the work of God's grace through the Word and the Spirit, by which those who have been born again are cleansed from sin in their thoughts, words and acts, and are enabled to live in accordance with God's will...” (Confession of Faith, XI). Furthermore, we believe that “[e]ntire sanctification [Christian perfection] is a state of perfect love, righteousness and true holiness which every regenerate believer may obtain by being delivered from the power of sin, by loving God with all the heart, soul, mind and strength, and by loving one's neighbor as one's self. Through faith in Jesus Christ this gracious gift may be received in this life both gradually and instantaneously, and should be sought earnestly by every child of God... The Christian must continue on guard against spiritual pride and seek to gain victory over every temptation to sin...” (Confession of Faith, XI).

Church and Bible, Holy Baptism and Holy Communion, proclamation and prayer, and ministry and mission are given by God to serve the purposes of mankind's salvation in Jesus Christ. To employ them rightly and regularly is to be in communion with God and with the People of God. To employ them rightly and regularly is to gain a foretaste of the final redemption, in which God “will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away. And he who sat upon the throne said, ‘Behold, I make all things new.’ Also he said, ‘Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.’ And he said to me, ‘It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end...’” (Revelation 21:4-6). This is the coming of the Kingdom of God in fullness and the coming of the King in glory. This cosmic redemption is the triumphant end of the drama, which began with creation.

WHAT THE CHURCH TEACHES: MORALLY

Salvation in Jesus Christ results in a way of life lived out in the Church and in the world. That is, salvation from Christ involves discipleship in Christ. As United Methodists, we believe that confessing Jesus Christ requires following Jesus Christ in all aspects of human experience and endeavor. In all areas of our lives and our life together, we strive, by grace, to follow Jesus Christ. Even in the area of human sexuality, we are to be obedient to the Lord Jesus Christ. That is, we are not just autonomous individuals, not just sovereign selves, left alone in the world to make our own choices.

The Church's basic teaching on human sexuality is not complex or complicated. It is based on a word from Jesus. In responding to questions about divorce and by relying on Old Testament witness, Jesus states the standard for His Church: “[F]rom the beginning of creation, ‘God made them male and female.’ ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.’ So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder” (Mark 10:6-9). Here Jesus describes one man

leaving his family of origin, one woman, and the joining of the two into one flesh by God. The Church understands this to mean that sexual relations are reserved exclusively for the marriage covenant. The Social Principles restate this Biblical truth when they note that “sexual relations are only clearly affirmed in the marriage bond” (Paragraph 161G). Therefore, according to Biblical and United Methodist teaching, sexual relations outside the “marriage bond” are problematic, indeed sinful. Contained in this teaching on sexuality is also the Good News: God and the Church love men and women, and help them to live holy lives, even in the area of sexuality.

Here it must be noted that, in the area of sexuality, as in other areas of human life, all stand in need of God's forgiveness and restoration. Sexuality is a highly complex and volatile part of human existence. Created and given by God, human sexuality is good, but it is often tempted and endangered by sin, by lust, by the strong drive toward self-satisfaction. Therefore, all people, without exception, enter this part of human experience as sinners in real need of God's constantly forgiving and restoring love.

The Church's teaching on homosexual practice is a part of this larger teaching on sexuality. The Social Principles express it well: “Homosexual persons no less than heterosexual persons are individuals of sacred worth... The United Methodist Church does not condone the practice of homosexuality and consider[s] this practice incompatible with Christian teaching. We affirm that God's grace is available to all, and we will seek to live together in Christian community. We implore families and churches not to reject or condemn lesbian and gay members and friends. We commit ourselves to be in ministry for and with all persons.” (Paragraph 161G) This is a trustworthy, brief summary of the will of God for the Church. While understanding homosexual activity to be sin (just as many, many other activities and dispositions are sin), the Church understands those who engage in such activity are people made in the image of God, invited into the life of the Church, and gifted with the Church's forgiving, redeeming, transforming ministry. The Church, here as elsewhere, is challenged to offer truthful love and loving truth.

It is important to note that United Methodist teaching on homosexual practice resonates with ecumenical teaching on the same subject. Though Christian truth does not require the support of a majority, an overwhelming number of communions preach, teach, and practice the aforementioned outline of Christian sexual morality with regard to homosexual practice. Indeed, Professor Wolfhart Pannenberg, the Lutheran systematic theologian, has noted: “If a church were to let itself be pushed to the point where it ceased to treat homosexual activity as a departure from the biblical norm, and recognized homosexual unions as a personal partnership of love equivalent to marriage, such a church would stand no longer on biblical ground but against the unequivocal witness of Scripture. A church that took this step would cease to be the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church.” (Christianity Today, November 11, 1996 in Pro Ecclesia, Fall 1997).

We must be bold to admit that, in the context of the modern world, the Church's teaching on salvation and sexuality is countercultural. Especially odd to contemporary ears is the notion that a community has real, authoritative teaching. Post-modernity has encouraged the growth and development of “the religion of the sovereign self” (Richard John Neuhaus). This self-based religion has no authoritative teaching outside the self's own religious opinions and experiences. Therefore, it considers all authoritative teaching suspect.

The Church's teaching is countercultural in another respect. Contemporary hearts are accustomed to embracing love as a feeling, a sentiment. However, the Church understands love, agape love, in a more willful way. According to the Church, Christian love is more about the sacrifice of self for the good of others than the realization of self for the good of self. On this point and others, even the most nuanced presentation of the Church's teaching, because of its countercultural nature, will not be found persuasive to all, even in the churches.

But in the face of opposition, the Church still has the duty to teach, in love, what she knows and holds to be true. After all, the Church is confident that her teaching on salvation and sexuality is revealed through Scripture and supported by Tradition. But also, the Church observes that her teaching on salvation and sexuality helps Christian people to flourish, to be better human beings than otherwise they would be. Therefore, the Church teaches, in loving hope, to reach out to others, and to offer to one and all the joy of salvation.

TEACHING, THEN ENGAGING DISSENT

The United Methodist Church wants to stand with the Church—the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church. And The United Methodist Church wants to stand on the truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ—even when that truth is undergoing a challenging dissent. At the same time, United Methodism does not want to silence its clergy and laity who are in dissent. United Methodism and Christian truth are not that insecure.

So the Church's task is to teach her doctrine and morals. (To refuse to teach, in this situation, is simply to allow the dissent of the day, and the confusion in the Church, to increase.) Then the Church's task is to listen patiently and carefully to those in dissent, and to respond wisely to their thoughtful challenges. To be open and honest, civil and conversational, in the service of the Church's teaching, is a necessary act of the Church's love. Certainly, such dialogue demands time, energy, and scarce resources. To be sure, the Church can grow weary of dialogue. Nevertheless, after she has offered her teaching, doctrine, and morals, the Church must engage in dialogue with those who dissent. In this matter, she has no choice.

All along the way, United Methodists, in our teaching and in our Christian conferencing, will continue to strive to serve Jesus Christ, to build up the Church of Jesus Christ, and to point toward the Kingdom of God coming in fullness. This is a part of our witness to the world. (PTS)

All references to the Articles of Religion, the Confession of Faith, and the Social Principles are found in The Book of Discipline (2004). The above is a revised version of a Special Report that first appeared as in Lifewatch (December 1999). Because there has been so little teaching on the matter of homosexuality, it is offered here once again.