

ON TO GENERAL CONFERENCE 2016

Over the last three issues of this newsletter, Lifewatch has labored to help prepare The United Methodist Church for General Conference 2016. Bishop Timothy W. Whitaker's essay "God's Own People" (09/01/15), Dietrich Bonhoeffer's sermon "A Church of the World or a Church of the Word?" (12/01/15), and now Dr. Thomas C. Oden's sermon "The One Who Keeps Watch over Our Souls" (see below) have been published with General Conference in mind.

It is our hope and prayer that these thoughtful presentations will help to teach and fortify those attending General Conference to stand strong for the Gospel of Life. May God's amazing grace and mysterious providence be with our church gathered in Portland in May!

2016 LIFEWATCH SERMON: "THE ONE WHO KEEPS WATCH OVER OUR SOULS"

by Dr. Thomas C. Oden

Hear the Word of the Lord from Proverbs 24:11-12: "Rescue those who are being taken away to death; hold back those who are stumbling to the slaughter. If you say, 'Behold, we did not know this,' does not he who weighs the heart know it...? Does not he who *keeps watch* over your soul know it?" (RSV, emphasis added)

We are here to keep watch. Meanwhile, the Lord who keeps watch over our souls knows our thoughts and motives. We are here as Lifewatch to watch over those most vulnerable. We are here to stand before the Lord to pray for those who are being led to death, to repent for our callousness, and to pray for grace to do all we can to protect those who need our protection.

USING THE CHURCH AS AN INSTRUMENT FOR POLITICAL CHANGE

I went into the ministry in 1951 at the age of 20 to use the church as a *means* to a political *end*. The end was a soft Marxist vision of wealth distribution and proletarian empowerment. I was enamored with every aspect of the 1950s' ecumenical Student Christian Movement, the National Council of Churches, and the utopian left wing of the Democratic Party.

Long before America entered the Vietnam War, I greatly admired Ho Chi Minh for being an agrarian patriot. All my heroes were pacifists and socialists. Who taught me this? The Student Christian Movement. All of my favorite authors were pastors, all famous names then but never heard now: Harry Ward, A.J. Muste, Norman Thomas, and John Swomley. I cared most deeply about those pacifist collectivists who never won an election or even wide acceptance in the local churches, but who held sway in the growing Protestant church bureaucracies. Those who encouraged my social illusions seemed to me to be the very best representatives of the church and the university. I felt little interest in going astray from those I trusted most. When in 1950 the *Reader's Digest* attacked "Methodism's Pink Fringe," they were targeting the very leaders with whom I most identified.

WHY I ABANDONED MY PATRIMONY

I have been asked why I abandoned my patrimony and why I changed so quickly from all that I had earlier learned about classic Christianity. Answer: I was in love with heresy. I was drawn to the great illusions of the wayward modern spirit, but carelessly ignored their consequences. As a result, I caused unintended harm, but I was less sensitive to the harm I was doing than the harm I thought others were doing to the voiceless poor.

While I imagined I was being critical and rational, I was actually ignoring my best analytical abilities. I became entrapped with a need for upward mobility in an academic environment busy generating ideas for a regulatory society. The One who keeps watch over my soul knew of all this, even when I did not.

Until the end of the 1960s, I do not recall ever seriously exchanging ideas with an articulate pro-life advocate. They were nearby, but not on my scope. I systematically avoided any contact with those who would have challenged my politics.

After years of studying how to demythologize the New Testament, I was trying to read it entirely without its crucial premises that God becomes flesh and dies for our sins. That required a lot of evasive reasoning. I habitually assumed that truth in religion was finally reducible to economics (with Marx), or psycho-sexual motives (with Freud), or self-assertive power (with Nietzsche). That was truly a self-deceptive time for me.

During the late 1960s, I began to recognize that I was

not the rootless radical I had imagined myself to be. That perception surfaced in a television interview with my old friend Father Charles Curran, who was a Catholic theological expert at the Second Vatican Council. The producers expected the distinguished Catholic ethicist to take the viewpoint of classic Catholic teaching; and I, as the liberal Protestant, was supposed to argue for situation ethics. As it turned out, we found ourselves debating as if I was the Catholic and he was the liberal Protestant. They had not counted on Father Curran moving left while I was moving right.

The zenith of these popular movements of utopian idealism was, for me, the first Earth Day in Houston, Texas in 1969. This happened one year before Earth Day went national. I went to a teach-in near McGovern Lake on the first day of spring and sat on a park bench near the outdoor amphitheater to read. My reading material was a copy of the Socialist World, a propaganda piece I had not seen in several years, but its themes were all too familiar to me. The paper was saturated with labor-leftist messianic rhetoric. This caused me to think back two decades to my Norman Thomas days when I had actually been a socialist. Looking at that paper caused me to be overcome with embarrassment at the realization that I had come so close to being trapped in that world. With the tumultuous decade of the Sixties coming to a close, I understood that life on the cutting edge was draining me. At that moment, I experienced an unnerving revulsion against my own recklessness.

In addition to that piece, for some reason, I had in my pocket that day my India paper edition of the 1662 Book of Common Prayer. I turned to the Collect for the Day. Under the shade of a majestic, gnarled oak tree, I read out loud: "Almighty Father, who has given thine only Son to die for our sins, and to rise again for our justification: Grant us so to put away the leaven of malice and wickedness, that we may always serve thee in pureness of living and truth; through the merits of the same thy Son Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen." My eyes filled with tears as I asked myself what I had been missing in all of my frenzied subculture of experimental living.

I began to question my role as an activist reformer and began to move inwardly toward classic Christian teaching on natural law and public order involving such issues as abortion, parental responsibility, and sexual accountability to God's way of ordering creation as male and female.

A CHANGE OF HEART

One reason for writing A Change of Heart (InterVarsity Press, 2014) was in part to alert young people to question the realism of the permissive, statist, collectivist, and unexamined illusions that has once guided me. The wrongs that I failed to recognize in my youth have had ripple effects, some of which I will never completely know, but I understand that on the last day I will be accountable for them.

I did not become an orthodox believer until after I tried out most of the errors long rejected by Christianity. If my first forty years were spent hungering for meaning in life, the last forty have been spent in being fed. If the first forty were prodigal, the last forty have been a homecoming.

I now understand that I would never have been able to be a plausible critic of the absurdities of modern consciousness until I myself had experienced them. Looking back, I now know God has accompanied me on this long path to help me at last to put my feet on the road to classic Christianity. My major learning has been the rediscovery of Christmas and Easter as events in history: incarnation and resurrection. Both have to do with life: God's life coming to us in human form and the renewal of life from his grave.

Prior to the time of my decisive change of heart in 1970, I had been teaching social ethics to young pastors. In those ethics classes I had been providing a rationale for their blessing of convenience abortions. I had not yet considered the vast implications of those consequences for women, families, and society, but most of all for the lost generation of irretrievable aborted babies. When I tried to explain to God why I had ignored those costs, the answer kept coming back to me: No excuse. I had been wrong. The situation ethics on which those abortion arguments were made were unprincipled and careless of human life.

When Rudolf Bultmann was my guide to the demythologizing of the New Testament, I was left without an adequate grasp of the law and of moral constraint. I had been taking seriously the premise that the moment reveals what to do. Accordingly, we do not learn what to do from universal history, but only from the fleeting slice of it we call "now." I was left with no way to function in the discipline of ethics. I had already thrown away the instruction of the law which guides conscience and leads to repentance. This had devastating consequences for family and sexual ethics.

JANUARY 22, 1973: Roe v. Wade

At the time of Roe v. Wade, situation ethics was entering its heyday. Its core conviction was that the command of God is revealed in the now, and only in the now, and hence not disclosed in any durable rule ethic. Established rules and long-standing precedents were widely considered irrelevant and yet what *was* relevant was making Christianity acceptable to modern understandings of the truth. The history of moral wisdom was being junked, and I was functioning as a junk dealer.

Two years later abortion became an unavoidable issue for me when women seminary students who were struggling to understand their own abortions came to my office for counsel. They were grieving over loss. They had thoughtlessly become trapped in sexual activity as "flower children" committed to making love not war. They were among the best students I ever had. They did make love, but a subtler war ensued. It was a war against children. It was a

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war within themselves about what they had done. I belatedly recognized that millions of innocent lives were being destroyed on behalf of political expediency that was knowingly careless of its consequences. Taking life was being argued simply on the basis of arbitrary individual choice and convenience. I experienced an overwhelming wave of moral revulsion against the very abortion-on-demand politics I had once advocated. It was a visceral nausea, like an aversion in the stomach to what I had previously digested.

The protection of the prenatal child had been swallowed up in a wave of advocacy for free choice, overriding the incomparable value of life and overlooking the irreversibility of death. The deliberate killing of babies in the womb had become the new normal, and I was a part of it. That was a shock and still is. That realization produced a numbing loss of confidence in a whole series of permissive policies I had previously struggled to achieve. The abortion issue was my wake-up call.

As I awakened from my stupor, I realized that some mainline Protestant theologians needed to stand up for the unborn. Not many Protestant theologians at that time were openly pro-life because that would have caused loss of face with some audiences whose feathers they dare not ruffle. But there were two courageous United Methodist theologians who did speak out. Both were my highly valued friends and mentors: Albert Outler and Robert Nelson. Both were mentioned by Lifewatch in its earliest years. This was a time when few reservations were being voiced against convenience abortions. They made the case for life, and showed the weaknesses and tragedies of the culture of death.

In time, I came to a simple conclusion: Before conception, *we have a moral choice* as to what we will do with our bodies. *After* conception, *we do not have a choice* to take away the life our bodies have created. After conception, men do not have a choice to be non-fathers, and women do not have a choice to be non-mothers. After conception, more than two human beings are involved. Then it is not a matter of convenience but of life.

After Roe v. Wade, I could consent only to being responsibly *pro-choice before conception and pro-life after conception*. That was in January of 1973, the month of the decision of the United States Supreme Court, Roe v. Wade. As it turned out, that was the first step in a series of acts of political repentance for me.

To the Corinthians who lived in a cesspool of sexual confusion, Paul wrote: “Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy him. For God’s temple is holy, and that temple you are.” (I Corinthians 3:16-17, RSV)

But suppose we say, as I said for years to myself, “I know nothing about this.” Then I heard Proverbs 24 speak to me: “If you say, ‘But we knew nothing about this,’ does not he who weighs the heart perceive it?” (v. 12, NIV) He who weighed my heart knew that I was avoiding what I knew more deeply in the voice of conscience.

In Austin, Texas on leave in 1976, I was invited to a

private luncheon to speak with Sarah Weddington, the attorney who had argued and won the Roe v. Wade decision before the U.S. Supreme Court. She was a smart, youthful, feminist attorney. Her client, Norma L. McCorvey, was the “Jane Roe” in Roe v. Wade. Her client was at that time a leader in the fight for convenience abortions.

Fast forward. Years later, in 1995, Ms. McCorvey revealed she had falsely testified that she had been raped. Surprisingly, she turned against the very court that had made a judicial precedent for abortion on the basis of her plea. In 1995, McCorvey was baptized and became actively pro-life in a life-affirming ministry to women who have had abortions, but have lived with unresolved grief and depression. Chiefly, she taught forgiveness in a unique way by helping those women understand that their children are waiting in eternity to welcome them with open arms.

Life is of incomparable value since it is the precondition of all other human values. It is on a wholly different plane morally than the relief of suffering, which itself is in the service of life. Protecting life is the premise of every conceivable value that depends upon life. That protection has been denied by law to millions and millions of babies in our time.

John Cassian, in the early fifth century, advised those seeking to live a holy life in this way: “Learn to be compassionate toward those who struggle, and never frighten with bleak despair those who are in trouble or unsettle them with harsh words. Instead, encourage them mildly and gently and, according to the precept of that most wise Solomon: ‘Spare nothing to save those who are being led to death and to redeem those who are being slain.’” (Conference 2.13.10)

The parents of unborn children are made able by grace to hold fast to a specific promise: God “will not let you be tempted beyond your strength” (I Corinthians 10:13, RSV). Both parents of unplanned pregnancies are called to come to trust this Word and live by its promise.

The One *who keeps watch over our souls* has known our hearts even when we go astray and wonderfully when we return.

Dr. Oden is one of the outstanding teachers and theologians of the Church catholic today. He is the author of many books and countless articles. In addition, he is the general editor of the Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture (InterVarsity Press), the general editor of the Ancient Christian Doctrine Series (InterVarsity Press), the director of the Center for Early African Christianity at Eastern University in Pennsylvania, and the former Henry Anson Buttz Professor of Theology and Ethics at Drew University’s Theological School.

Months ago your scribe called Dr. Oden to invite him to preach the 2016 Lifewatch Sermon. The professor patiently listened to the invitation. Then he replied that, though he wished he could preach the sermon for Lifewatch, there were just too many writing projects demanding his attention. Your scribe concluded the conversation on a suggestive and humorous note, “Tom, think and pray about this challenge

for a week; then I will call you back. And by the way, between now and then, I hope this invitation makes you miserable.” Dr. Oden agreed to the plan. Well, several days passed. Then an unexpected email from Dr. Oden arrived. It contained the above sermon. Thanks be to God! (PTS) ♥

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The following article, “Early Christians and Abortion,” is especially relevant to United Methodists. John Wesley, the founding father of The United Methodist Church, always looked to what he called “primitive Christianity” for guidance in matters related to the Church. Why? Because “primitive Christianity” was the Christianity of the 300 years that immediately followed the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and that was shaped by the apostles who followed Jesus and who accomplished their mission in faithfulness to Him. According to Wesley, apostolic precedent should be followed -- for the sake of faithfulness to what Jesus Christ had taught and accomplished. (PTS)

EARLY CHRISTIANS AND ABORTION

by Dr. David W. T. Brattston

This article presents the Christian attitude toward abortion before the first ecumenical council, that is, until AD 325. Because the New Testament does not comment on the morality of abortion, this article considers the writings of the first generations of Christians after the apostles, for they indicate that opposition to abortion (1) was shared at a time when the writers -- or Christians not many generations earlier -- personally knew the apostles or their first disciples and thus benefited from their unwritten teachings and interpretations of Scripture, (2) comes from a date so early that there was no likelihood for the original gospel to have been altered, and (3) is not based on only one interpretation of the Bible among many but was the interpretation of Christians who were personally familiar with the New Testament writers or their early followers.

With the exception of one author who wrote at length on the subject, early Christian writings do not discuss abortion in depth but merely state in a few words or phrases that it was forbidden to Christians. Most of the authors of the period do not touch on the subject, but those who did considered it among the worst of sins.

The earliest source is an anonymous church manual of the late first century called *The Didache*. It commands “thou shall not murder a child by abortion nor kill that which is begotten.” (at 2.2)

The *Epistle of Barnabas* contains a similar guide to Christian morality. It was composed sometime between

AD 70 and 132, and was included in some early versions of the New Testament. In the midst of several chapters of instructions on ethics, it states: “Thou shall not slay the child by procuring abortion; nor, again, shalt thou destroy it after it is born.” (19.5) The latter phrase refers to the ancient Greek and Roman practice of abandoning newborns to die in unpopulated areas if the baby was the “wrong” sex or suspected of health problems. To the author of *Barnabas*, this practice and abortion were equal in sinfulness.

Dating from just before AD 150, the *Revelation of Peter* was still read in church services in fifth century Palestine. It describes in detail the various punishments in hell according to different types of sins. The punishment for women who induced miscarriage was to sit up to their necks in blood and dirt while the aborted children shot sparks of fire into their eyes (Chapter 25). Clement of Alexandria, the principal of Christendom’s foremost Christian educational institution at the end of the second century, accepted these statements as an accurate exposition of the Faith (*Extracts from the Prophets* 41; 48; 49).

In *Paedagogus* 2.10.96, Clement spoke negatively of women who “apply lethal drugs which directly lead to death, destroying all humane feeling simultaneously with the fetus.”

Clement and other early Christian writers often quoted from the *Sibylline Oracles* as the work of a pagan prophet who had predicted the coming Christ like the Jewish ones. Later, the *Sibyllines* were rewritten to increase the proportion of Christian ethical teaching. Oracle 2 describes abortion as contrary to God’s law, while Oracle 3 commands people to raise their children instead of angering God by killing them.

A Plea for the Christians was written around AD 177 by “Athenagoras the Athenian, Philosopher and

Christian,” partly to convince the Roman Emperor that there was no truth in the rumor that Christians ritually murdered and ate babies. In declaring that such a practice was contrary to Christian ethics, Athenagoras emphasized the

sacredness of unborn life: “And when we say that those women who use drugs to bring on abortion commit murder, and will have to give an account to God for the abortion, on what principle should we commit murder? For it does not belong to the same person to regard the very fetus in the womb as a created being, and therefore an object of God’s care, and when it has passed into life, to kill it; and not to expose an infant, because those who expose them are chargeable with child-murder.” (Chapter 35) To Athenagoras, abortion was the same as abandoning a newborn and other murder.

The *Octavius* of Minucius Felix was composed sometime between AD 166 and 210, in part to prove that Christians had a higher morality than pagans. In condemning pagan practices, Chapter 30 deplors the fact that “[t]here are some women who, by drinking

“...in the first three centuries after Jesus, all Christian authors who mentioned abortion considered it a grave sin.”

medical preparations, extinguish the source of the future man in their very bowels, and thus commit [murder] before they bring forth.”

Our next author is Tertullian, a lawyer who became a Christian and a theological writer. He wrote a large number of books on Christianity, three of which mention abortion: *Apologeticum* (AD 197), *An Exhortation to Chastity* (around AD 204), and *On the Soul* (between AD 210 and 213). The *Apologeticum* was an introduction to Christianity for inquirers who wished to learn about it. Chapter 9 acquaints readers with the Christian position on abortion: “murder being once for all forbidden, we [Christians] may not destroy even the fetus in the womb, while as yet the human being derives blood from other parts of the body for its sustenance. To hinder a birth is merely a speedier man-killing; nor does it matter whether you take away a life that is born, or destroy one that is coming to the birth.”

On the Soul was the longest work related to abortion in the first three centuries of Christianity. According to Chapter 37, “the embryo therefore becomes a human being in the womb from the moment that its form is completed. The law of Moses, indeed, punishes with due penalties the man who shall cause abortion, inasmuch as there exists already the rudiment of a human being.”

In *An Exhortation to Chastity* (12), Tertullian mentioned that there were many difficulties in raising children but he asked: “Are you to dissolve the conception by aid of drugs?,” and he answered his own question: “I think to us [Christians] it is no more lawful to hurt a child in the process of birth, than one already born.” He recommended that life-long celibacy makes life freer because it relieves a Christian from the burdens of raising children; there is no alternative because, after a child is conceived, it is forbidden to kill it.

In the early decades of the third century, Hippolytus was a bishop in central Italy. Later, his followers purported to elect him bishop of Rome in opposition to another candidate, thus becoming the first “antipope.” For a few years Hippolytus and his rival operated competing church organizations. In his *Refutation of All Heresies*, he made many accusations of lax morality against the opposing side in an attempt to maintain that it had departed from the standard of behavior commanded by the gospel. Among other practices, he charged that in the opposite camp, “women, reputed believers, began to resort to drugs for producing sterility, and to gird themselves round, so to expel what was being conceived on account of their not wishing to have a child either by a slave or by any paltry fellow, for the sake of their family and excessive wealth.” (9.7) Whatever the truth in these allegations against Hippolytus’ opponents, this passage indicates common disapproval of abortion, sexual promiscuity, and placing material considerations above the lives of unborn children.

A generation after Tertullian, Soprano, the bishop of his city, listed abortion among the sins of a Christian who was causing a deep rift in the universal Church (*Letter* 52.2). By including the reference, he indicated that it was impermissible among Christians.

The Apostolic Church Order (or Ecclesiastical Canons

of the Apostles) was composed around AD 300 as a short law book for Christians, ostensibly by eleven apostles. Its wide popularity is evidenced by the fact that it was translated into several languages. Included in Chapter 6 is a prohibition that Christians shall not kill a child, at birth or afterward.

The Emperor Constantine legalized Christianity in AD 314. This was the year Lactantius completed his decade of labor on the *Divine Institutes*. In it, he stated that when God forbids homicide, He prohibits not only illegal violence but even causing death in a manner allowed by secular laws. It is a very grave sin to kill newborns, “for God breathes into their souls for life, and not for death.” It is a crime to “deprive souls as yet innocent and simple of the light” which God has given. (6.2) Lactantius’ *Epitome* 64 similarly states that exposing or killing an infant is included in the Lord’s prohibition of murder.

After Christianity was legalized, congregations in various regions held conferences to regulate the affairs of the Church. One objective was to standardize the practices of excommunication and penance. About the time of Constantine’s conversion, or perhaps a few years earlier, the Council of Elvira in Spain decreed that anyone who committed abortion was to be given the Eucharist only when in danger of death (Canon 63). This was the same penalty as for repeated adultery and child molesting (Canons 47 and 71). The more lenient Council of Ancyra in Turkey (AD 314) enacted a ten-year suspension for women who caused abortion and for makers of drugs that induced miscarriage (Canon 21). The first ecumenical council, held at Nicaea in AD 325, did not itself condemn abortion but the third ecumenical council (Chalcedon, AD 451) adopted the decrees of Ancyra, including those against abortion...

In short, in the first three centuries after Jesus, all Christian authors who mentioned abortion considered it a grave sin. Although Origen mentioned it without discussing its sinfulness (*Homilies on Exodus* 10.2), no Christian author in the three hundred years after Christ condoned it. This opposition was not merely local: Christian sources in Spain, Italy, Tunisia, Greece, Egypt, Turkey, and Syria recognized abortion as forbidden by God and in the same category as any other murder. The condemnation was universal and unanimous.

Dr. Brattston is a retired lawyer and judge. Hundreds of his articles on early and modern Christianity have appeared in various denominational publications in every major English-speaking country. “Early Christians and Abortion” has been published before, and it appears in Lifewatch by permission. Dr. Brattston lives in Lunenburg, Nova Scotia.

LIFEWATCH CONDEMNS

Last November, Robert L. Dear, Jr. shot twelve people at a Planned Parenthood clinic in Colorado Springs, CO. When the smoke had cleared and the dust had settled, Dear had killed three and wounded nine. It is only a matter of time until the Colorado court system declares Dear guilty of committing these revolting, horrible crimes.

Without knowing any additional details about this

perpetrator of violence and about his acts of violence, Lifewatch unequivocally condemns the recent violent deeds of Robert Dear at the Planned Parenthood clinic in Colorado Springs. In absolutely no way can Robert Dear be considered pro-life -- that is, as an advocate for, and defender of, all human life. Quite to the contrary. By senselessly assaulting people, Mr. Dear has proven himself to be a violent, murderous attacker of human lives. Furthermore, Dear's deeds postponed -- by a day, a week, a month, a year, several years, a decade, or more, we do not know -- the day when each unborn child in America will be protected by law and loved by many. That is, Dear's deeds not only left behind dead and wounded people, but also postponed the day that in the United States justice becomes mercy, and mercy becomes justice, for the unborn child and mother. So Dear's deeds can then be blamed for abortions -- hundreds, thousands, millions? -- to come. God have mercy, now and always.

PROBE A LITTLE DEEPER

So, let's probe a little deeper: What was Robert Dear's relationship to the Pro-Life Movement?

Ross Douthat, a columnist for the New York Times provides an answer in his November 30, 2015 column, "What We Fear When We Fear Terrorism." Douthat writes: "There was a time [in the United States], in the late 1980s and 1990s -- the era of aggressive Operation Rescue tactics, pro-life despair over Planned Parenthood v. Casey, and the Army of God's 'defensive action statement' justifying the murder of abortionists -- when the anti-abortion movement seemed to be acquiring an organized violent fringe. (Not coincidentally, this was an era when support for the pro-life position hit a post-Roe v. Wade low.)

"But thanks in no small part to the efforts of pro-life leaders, this fringe was pushed out of the movement and ceased to be a meaningful or influential force, and after the 1990s organized violence against abortion clinics went into clear decline. And unless there's something unexpected to be revealed about Robert Dear, he looks like proof of this trend, not an exception: However much some sort of pro-life idea played into his motivations, he seems to have been a classic disturbed killer, representing nothing larger than his own demons, his madness-haunted self.

"Which doesn't mean there won't be political fall-out from his wickedness, or that it won't rebound in some sense to Planned Parenthood's benefit. But I'm skeptical that it will change the politics of abortion very much, or that a left-wing push to make 'pro-life terrorism' an issue will get all that far, as long as it remains clear that no pro-life organization is actually connected to his actions." (PTS) ♥

KEEPING MOVEMENTS MORAL

As Ross Douthat noted above, the Pro-Life Movement removed from its ranks those who committed violence, or justified the committing of violence, against abortion clinics and their employees.

Likewise, within conservatism in the early 1990s, when "William F. Buckley Jr. himself wrote a long indictment of his friend [Joseph] Sobran in National Review and consigned

his and [Patrick] Buchanan's brand of Jew-hatred to the margins of the conservative movement." (Tevi Troy, "How the GOP Went Zionist," Commentary, December 2015).

Earlier, it can be surmised, the Civil Rights Movement leadership most probably let the Black Panther Party and other violent elements exclude themselves from the nonviolent mainstream movement.

As can be imagined, social and political movements throughout American history have attracted all kinds of characters and sideshows, moral and immoral. Mission drift has so easily set in. Motivating aspirations and goals have changed. Therefore, such movements have been morally pruned every so often -- for the good of the movement.

In our day, it is particularly disappointing that the "Black Lives Matter" Movement does not distance itself from its anti-police elements.

The nasty elements that appear, now and again, in various social and political movements tend to have one thing in common: the extremist elements degrade the God-given dignity of one set of human beings or another. (PTS) ♥

THE TABLE

The Unity Dialogue (on the Church and homosexuality), of the North Carolina Conference of The United Methodist Church, met in Dixon Chapel at conference headquarters in Garner, NC on November 11 of last year. The good dialogue of that day centered on the sermon preached that day by Rev. Ned Hill, the pastor of Edenton Street United Methodist Church, Raleigh, NC. For your information, your scribe's remarks follow. (PTS)

1. My thanks to all of you for being here. Your participation is significant to our conference, to The Unity Dialogue, and, I hope, to you.
2. All of us are grateful to Rev. Ned Hill for this afternoon's sermon on Nehemiah 5. Rev. Hill's sermon theme is clearly stated in the last paragraph of the original sermon manuscript: "He [Nehemiah] kept everyone at the table."
3. "The Table" has been a useful metaphor in American public life for a decade and more. Individuals and groups are invited to The Table, come to The Table, sit at The Table, engage in conversation and discussion and debate at The Table, and make decisions at The Table -- whatever Table it is.

But please remember this: The Table, at which people sit and talk and decide, always has a culture. In other words, The Table always has manners. That is, those at The Table share some truth claims, and some basic convictions about how conversations should be conducted and decisions made. People do not go to The Table as strangers with nothing in common.

As Rev. Hill indicated, the culture of The Table is actually cultic or sacramental. For us United Methodists, The Table is first of all The Lord's Table, from which we receive Jesus Christ's real presence through the Bread and the Cup. Going to The Lord's Table, as we did this afternoon, is also a

renewal of our participation in The Baptismal Covenant. According to The Baptismal Covenant, all of us are charged (in painful brevity) to: discern evil, resist evil, confess Christ, follow Christ, be loyal to Christ in The United Methodist Church, and faithfully participate in a United Methodist congregation.

Therefore, for us, The Lord's Table and The Baptismal Covenant form the culture of The Table. Communion and Covenant should determine -- determine! -- that we United Methodists stay at The Table, and how we United Methodists behave at The Table. Again, Communion and Covenant should keep us at The Table; and Communion and Covenant should shape our conversation at The Table. We United Methodists do not go to The Table to say whatever we want, whenever we want, however we want, and threaten to leave if we want. Communion and Covenant disallow that.

4. On October 23, the Duke Divinity School deanship of Dr. Richard Hays was wonderfully celebrated. During the celebration, his official portrait was unveiled. The striking portrait features, of course, Dr. Hays. It also includes a Table. The portrait's Table holds a Bible turned to Romans 8. Whittier Wright, the artist of the portrait, noted this is the key to understanding Dr. Hays's deanship: "meeting at Table, with the meal composed of the Word of God."

The portrait illustrates that The Table has a defined culture.

5. Come to The Table! Yes! But The Table, for us United Methodists, has a culture! And that culture consists of Communion and Covenant.♥

THE UNIVERSITY OF MISSOURI AND THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

All people live out their lives -- in the grace of God and under the temptations of God's defeated adversary. All people have a responsibility to avoid and resist what is evil, and to serve and advance what is good. Likewise, institutions -- such as the Church, the family, the university, and the State -- have the responsibility to promote the common good.

So evil is to be resisted without demonizing those involved in evil deeds. And good is to be advanced without unnecessary coercion and ruthlessness. When large institutions are involved, a rule of law is involved. Faithfully following a rule of law, with its processes and procedures, is the way a complaint against alleged bad behavior is adjudicated. Faithfully amending a rule of law, by employing its processes and procedures, is the way a rule of law is made more just.

Alleged racist incidents and resulting protests at the University of Missouri at Columbia were in the national news last November. The protests (emboldened by the football team's threat to boycott its next scheduled game) and the resulting media storm led to the resignations of the university system's president and the university's chancellor. And the racially based acrimony continued.

What is troubling to this pastor is that a major university, because of the media spectacle of the protests, appears to have lost its nerve, set aside its rule of law, and yielded to the demands of the protesters. In the long run, the university would have been wiser to have allowed those with complaints to have had their day in court, so to speak, and made decisions after proper investigation and thoughtful deliberation -- all according to the university's, and the state's, rule of law.

Some might object: but the rule of law is just a hiding place for "conservatives." Not true. The rule of law is a strong structure that aims to protect and serve democratic civilization and discourse. Take away the rule of law, and the will to power (of the strong against the weak, of the loudest against the others) is left.

A WARNING TO THE CHURCH

What occurred at the University of Missouri should be a warning to The United Methodist Church. And the warning is this: At General Conference 2016 in Portland, bishops be committed to maintaining the rule of law. The worship services and the proceedings of General Conference should be conducted with order and dignity. Those who disrupt such services and proceedings exclude themselves from participation in, and/or observation of, the same services and proceedings. Law should rule. That is, church law (where it applies) and civil law (where it applies) should rule. In this law, God's providence and guidance can be discerned. Lawlessness breeds chaos and confusion, not reform; and lawlessness, which is not properly addressed, inspires the lawless to engage in more lawlessness. Yes, there is room for conscientious objection, but conscientious objection at its best is, in the end, nonviolently submitted to the rule of law.

The Council of Bishops and the bishops who will preside at the plenary sessions of General Conference 2016 can, with God's help, work together, stand as one, and maintain order. But the Council and the bishops must be well prepared to do exactly that. (PTS) ♥

CONSCIENCE WELL UNDERSTOOD

There seems to be more than a little confusion, these days, about the meaning and the place of conscience in moral deliberation. Instruction from John Wesley and John Henry Newman can help us consider conscience.

In England, John Wesley (1703-1791), the leader of the Methodist movement, preached a sermon "On Conscience" in 1788. In his sermon, Wesley set the record straight on the Christian meaning of conscience: "Therefore if you desire to have your conscience always quick to discern and faithful to accuse or excuse you; if you would preserve it always sensible and tender, be sure to obey it at all events. Continually listen to its admonitions, and steadily follow them. Whatever it directs you to do according to the Word of God, do, however grievous to flesh and blood. Whatever it forbids, if the prohibition be grounded on the Word of God, see you do it not, however pleasing it may be to flesh and blood. The one or the other may frequently be the case. What God forbids may be pleasing to our evil nature. There



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you are called to deny yourself, or you deny your Master. What he enjoins may be painful to nature: there take up your cross. So true is our Lord's word, 'Except a man deny himself, and take up his cross daily' (Luke 9:23), 'he cannot be my disciple' (Luke 14:26, 27, and 33)." (emphasis added)

John Henry Newman (1801-1890) began as an evangelical Anglican in England, led the reformist Oxford Movement, and later was received into the Roman Catholic Church. In "A Letter Addressed to the Duke of Norfolk on the Occasion of Mr. Gladstone's Recent Expostulation" (1874), Newman wrote about the corrupted understanding of conscience in his day: "...now let us see what is the notion of conscience in this day in the popular mind.... When men advocate the rights of conscience, they in no sense mean the rights of the Creator, nor the duty to Him, in thought and deed, of the creature; but the right of thinking, speaking, writing, and acting, according to their judgment or their humor, without any thought of God at all.... Conscience has rights because it has duties; but in this age, with a large portion of the public, it is the very right and freedom of conscience to dispense with conscience, to ignore a Lawgiver and Judge, to be independent of unseen obligations. It becomes a license to take up any or no religion, to take up this or that and let it go again, to go to church, to go to chapel, to boast of being above all religions and to be an impartial critic or each of them. Conscience is a stern monitor, but in this century it has been superseded by a counterfeit, which the eighteen centuries prior to it never heard of, and could not have mistaken for it, if they had. It is the right of self-will." (emphases added)

Unfortunately, in our time, the corrupted understanding of conscience (as described by Newman)

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often seems to win out over the faithful understanding of conscience (as described by Wesley). Therefore, speak the truth about conscience. That is a very important task in our day. (PTS)♥

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The late, great German systematic theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg (1928-2014) once wrote: "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)♥

*Magna est veritas, et
prevalebit.*

Truth is most powerful, and
will ultimately prevail.

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