

## The United Methodist Church has doctrine and discipline. United Methodists in dissent have opinions.

*Living faithfully as the Church of God empowers ministry to save lives and families from sin and death.*

### THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH'S EXISTENTIAL CRISIS: AN OPPORTUNITY TO GROW INTO BEING THE CHURCH

Jesus Christ is the Lord of all, of heaven and earth, of the cosmos. According to the New Testament, that means Jesus Christ is the Head of the Church, even as the Church is the Body of Christ.

To the extent that the resurrected, ascended Jesus Christ governs the Church, the Church will be “one holy catholic and apostolic” (The Nicene Creed and The Confession of Faith [Article V]). **The Church’s oneness** begins with, and is sustained by, baptism; for all in the Church are baptized into the one and only Jesus Christ. At Holy Communion, the power of the Holy Spirit renews this baptized community to be “one with Christ, one with each other, and one in ministry to all the world.” (The United Methodist Hymnal, p. 10) **The Church’s holiness** originates with the holiness of God the Father, passes through God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, to the People of God. God’s grace helps the Church to trust God’s grace and to obey God’s commands, and in the process to be transformed, set apart from the world, and sent back into the world with a mission. **The Church’s catholicity** is from the one and only Jesus Christ, who teaches and leads all the churches—around the world, in all cultures, and through post-Pentecost history—in a consistent way. As St. Vincent of Lerins (d. before 450) put it, the Church believes “what has been believed everywhere, always, and by all.” And **the Church’s apostolicity** points to the Church’s apostolic faith: Jesus Christ first taught His disciples; then the apostles (mostly former disciples) practiced, assembled, taught, wrote, proclaimed, spread, and defended this faith. To be denominationally specific, to the extent Jesus Christ rules The United Methodist Church, The United Methodist Church will be one, holy, catholic, and apostolic.

#### Forgotten for Six Reasons

That truth claim, in The United Methodist Church today, is easily missed or forgotten for six reasons.

**First**, we United Methodists, laity and clergy, wound up in a church that somehow resulted from the ministry and movement of Rev. John Wesley, an 18th century evangelist within the Church of England. (*Sola gratia*?) Rev. Wesley left many theological gifts—such as those pertaining to preaching strong sermons, organizing small groups, and lifting up the little people—to those of us who would later claim him as our ecclesiastical father. But he did not offer much to us about becoming and being the Church. He assumed the Church of England. Generally, Wesley was brilliant when it came to instilling discipleship in his people, but deficient when it came to calling them to be and become the Church. Wesley’s inadequate instruction on Christ and His Church allows United Methodists today to ignore Christ’s headship over, and leadership of, His Church.

**Second**, because of Rev. Wesley’s thinness on Christ and His Church, United Methodists, in our day-to-day church life, have tried to hold doctrine and discipline to a minimum. We have, to be sure, kept our denomination and congregations “organized”—with countless committees, conferences (charge, annual, jurisdictional, and general!), elections, officers, procedures, processes, reports, responsibilities, and whatever else helps the church to appear to be organized. But at the same time, we have functioned as doctrinal and disciplinary minimalists. That is, we have tried to keep the church’s substance (or doctrine) and accountability (discipline) to a bare minimum. That allows each level of the The United Methodist Church—from the congregation to the General Conference—maximum latitude in ordering life together for ministry and mission. United Methodism’s style is, in two words, maximal choice. In American culture, where choice is running wild, for The United Methodist Church to tend toward becoming a church of choice is hardly surprising.

**Third**, we United Methodists easily forget about Jesus Christ and His one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church today, because The United Methodist Church is now being “tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine” (Ephesians 4:14, NRSV). The decades-long debate in the church over human sexuality (and other matters), with increasing disobedience in church discipline and resulting in chaos, led many to hope that the special, called 2019

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It is sent, free of charge, to interested readers. Editor, Rev. Paul T. Stallworth: 902 Pinckney Street, Whiteville NC 28472 (910)642-3376.

Administrator and Publicity/Outreach Coordinator, Mrs. Cindy Evans: P.O. Box 306, Cottleville MO 63338 (636)294-2344.

Gift checks should be made payable, and mailed, to: Lifewatch, P.O. Box 306, Cottleville MO 63338.

Email: lifewatch@charter.net/Website: www.lifewatch.org

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General Conference would settle the church's doctrine and discipline in the area of human sexuality. Well, the 2019 General Conference's adoption of a large part of the Traditional Plan did settle the church's doctrine and discipline. But also it set off alarms in the worlds of centrist and progressive Methodism. Those alarms led to a progressive push throughout the 2019 Annual Conferences in the United States—including the election of more progressive delegates than generally predicted, the passage of many resolutions that reject the Traditional Plan and that are exploring post-UMC possibilities, and the ordination of people who are not abiding by current church discipline. The tossing to-and-fro continues. The being blown about by different doctrinal (and anti-doctrinal) winds continues. So United Methodists, due to the pressing challenges at hand, do not think we have time to stop and consider the Church and the Church's relationship to Jesus Christ.

**Fourth**, most United Methodists are “tired of fighting” over matters related to human sexuality. Fatigued, we do not have the energy for a long-enough, thoughtful-enough look, through the eyes of faith, at The United Methodist Church to discern Christ's Lordship over us. Rather, right now, many United Methodists just want to avoid yet another dispute with other United Methodists. To them, all this theological stuff seems needlessly complex and unnecessary.

**Fifth**, denominational leaders are speaking and acting as if God, through Christ, is not really sovereign over The United Methodist Church. There was the entrepreneurial Rev. Adam Hamilton, of Church of the Resurrection of Leawood, KS, after his May conference attended by 600 mostly American United Methodists. Speaking of post-2019 General Conference options, he said: “One of those options is stay and resist. We are going to live and be the kind of church we want to be, regardless what the denominational rules say.” Be the kind of church we want to be. Wow. There is no question about who is in charge of Resurrection Church—and that would be the “we” of the local church (presumably laity and clergy, probably with Rev. Hamilton leading the way), not Jesus Christ. A United Methodist pastor who speaks in such terms might be incapable of seeing the Church under, and basically led by, the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

**Sixth**, other leaders try to understand The United Methodist Church with the help of democratic theory. Well, the United Methodist Church does indeed try to function like a democracy. However, theologically speaking, the Methodist democracy can and should function under the Lordship of Jesus Christ—that is, when the conferences of the church deliberate, debate, and decide significant matters before the church, they are basically listening for the Word of God, for Jesus Christ, in the decision-making process, so that they might follow the Word of God. In other words, the Methodist democracy is at its best when it functions within the larger monarchy in which Jesus Christ is King. This United Methodist government—a churchly democracy within and under a Christ-led monarchy—aims to discern the Word of God to the Church, and the Lordship of Jesus Christ over the Church. A United Methodist democracy, without the Lordship of Christ, results in a church going its own way a la Rev. Hamilton.

**YOU ARE CORDIALLY INVITED TO ATTEND  
THESE ANNUAL EVENTS, WHICH WILL TAKE PLACE ON  
JANUARY 24, 2020 (FRIDAY)  
AT THE UNITED METHODIST BUILDING  
100 MARYLAND AVENUE, NE  
WASHINGTON, DC.**

**9:30 a.m. LIFEWATCH SERVICE OF  
WORSHIP**

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**3:00 p.m. LIFEWATCH BOARD MEETING**

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**ORGANIZE A GROUP FROM YOUR CHURCH TO ATTEND!**

### **The Challenge Now Before Us**

The challenge confronting The United Methodist Church is to listen to Jesus Christ as He calls us to become more faithfully His Church. That challenge does not just strongly urge us to have more pious feelings more often. Instead, that challenge demands that United Methodists discern what the real Jesus Christ is saying and where the real Jesus Christ is leading.

Most United Methodists today are claiming to be formed and led by Christ. However, not all are. The Jesus Christ of the crucifixion and resurrection, the Bible and the creeds, the Word and Sacraments, justification and sanctification, is the authentic Jesus Christ. All others, and particularly those who confine their ministries to feelings and emotional states, opinions and speculations, are mere imitations.

The authentic Jesus Christ will lead us—as The United Methodist Church, as Christian community—to trust Him and to obey Him. His Word and Sacraments shape us into a particular community, a peculiar people. Into His Church. Into a church that is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic.

Through the ages, for 2,000 years, the Church that is led by Jesus Christ—that is moving towards perfect unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity—is the Church that can hear, trust, and obey Christ when He teaches: “But from 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. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.” (Mark 10:6-9, NRSV).

The Church that hears, trusts, and obeys that word from Jesus Christ, that word of God, also knows and protects the beauty of marriage, the beauty of husband and wife, and the beauty and gift of children. That Church also knows and protects the beauty of each person, even the smallest and weakest, created in the image of God. Across all cultures, across all times, and despite shifting societal standards and personal preferences, recognizing and maintaining such beauty is part of what the Church has done from its beginning—since the Church is simply responding to its Head, Jesus Christ, and the Church is gladly on the pilgrimage toward more fully being one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. (PTS)♥

## THE BARMEN DECLARATION WITH A LITTLE POST-GENERAL- CONFERENCE COMMENTARY

*The Barmen Declaration of 1934 appears below in plain-text font. It is taken from Our Confessional Heritage (Presbyterian Church in the USA, 1978, pp. 154-155). Remember that Karl Barth (1886-1968), the great neo-orthodox Protestant theologian of the 20th century, was the main drafter of this declaration. Barth wrote it to protest against the accommodation of Protestant theology and churches, in 1930s Germany, to principles that are alien to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.*

*Following each of the six articles of The Barmen Declaration are brief comments, **in bold font**, by your editor. These comments assume that The Barmen Declaration is relevant to The United Methodist Church and its effort to defend its teaching and order from an illegitimate accommodation to elite American culture. These comments do not, in any way, imply that liberal and progressive United Methodists are today's Nazis; that is ridiculous. These comments do contend that today's liberal and progressive United Methodists, like yesterday's German Christians, are engaged in a project of accommodating the Gospel and the Church to contemporary cultural trends—with the best of intentions. (Paul T. Stallsworth)*

1. "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me" (John 14:6). "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door but climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber.... I am the door; if anyone enters by me, he will be saved" (John 10:1, 9)

Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death.

We reject the false doctrine, as though the Church could and would have to acknowledge as a source of its proclamation, apart from and besides this one Word of God, still other events and powers, figures and truths, as God's revelation.

**The Church does not understand contemporary societal laws that are adopted, or court decisions that are handed down, to be new sources of revelation. Furthermore, in The United Methodist Church, the experience of a person or a group of people, even if that person and that group have been mistreated, does not override the authority of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. First, last, and always, the Church and the Christian trust and obey Jesus Christ—alone. Jesus Christ as "the one Word of God" transcends interpretations that attempt to capture Him within, and conform Him to, contemporary culture or movements.**

2. "Christ Jesus, whom God made our wisdom, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption" (I Cor. 1:30).

As Jesus Christ is God's assurance of the forgiveness of all our sins, so in the same way and with the same

seriousness he is also God's mighty claim upon our whole life. Through him befalls us a joyful deliverance from the godless fetters of this world for a free, grateful service to his creatures.

We reject the false doctrine, as though there were areas of our life in which we would not belong to Jesus Christ, but to other lords—areas in which we would not need justification and sanctification through him.

**Humbly, unafraid, and unashamed, The United Methodist Church names sexual sins, which God through Jesus Christ forgives upon repentance. Humbly, unafraid, and unashamed, The United Methodist Church also speaks Christ's commands over every dimension of life, including sexual expression, so that the forgiven are freed for obedience to Christ and service to others. When the Church falls silent about about such matters, today's educational-entertainment-media complex—which is incapable of offering mercy—rules, harms, and even destroys more lives.**

3. "Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body [is] joined and knit together" (Eph. 4:15, 16).

The Christian Church is the congregation of the brethren in which Jesus Christ acts presently as the Lord in Word and sacrament through the Holy Spirit. As the Church of pardoned sinners, it has to testify in the midst of a sinful world, with its faith as with its obedience, with its message as with its order, that it is solely his property, and that it lives and wants to live solely from his comfort and from his direction in the expectation of his appearance.

We reject the false doctrine, as though the Church were permitted to abandon the form of its message and order to its own pleasure or to changes in prevailing ideological and political convictions.

**Through Word-and-sacrament ministry in United Methodist churches, Jesus Christ speaks and guides His Church. As His, the Church receives its very life and direction from Jesus Christ. Therefore, General Conference convenes to discern how Jesus Christ is leading The United Methodist Church—not to decide democratically optimal solutions to intractable problems. If General Conference forsakes the leading of Jesus Christ, it will over time abandon its saving message and its disciplining order, so that its day-to-day life in contemporary culture will be marked by ease—not by trust and obedience.**

4. "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant" (Matt. 20:25, 26).

The various offices in the Church do not establish a dominion of some over the others; on the contrary, they are for the exercise of the ministry entrusted to and enjoined upon the whole congregation.

We reject the false doctrine, as though the Church apart from this ministry, could and were permitted to give to itself,

or allow to be given to it, special leaders vested with ruling powers.

**The United Methodist Church is not a political hierarchy that places the Council of Bishops at the top, followed by active and retired bishops, active and retired clergy, and laity—with privilege possessed and power exercised by those above. Church leaders are charged to lead to increase the faithfulness of the ministry of the whole Church. So the Council of Bishops should respect, abide by, and execute the doctrinal and disciplinary decisions of General Conference. Bishops should not attempt to become “special leaders vested with ruling powers” over against what General Conference decides.**

5. “Fear God. Honor the emperor” (I Peter 2:17).

Scripture tells us that, in the as yet unredeemed world in which the Church also exists, the State has by divine appointment the task of providing for justice and peace. [It fulfills this task] by means of the threat and exercise of force, according to the measure of human judgment and human ability. The Church acknowledges the benefit of this divine appointment in gratitude and reverence before him. It calls to mind the Kingdom of God, God’s commandment and righteousness, and thereby the responsibility both of rulers and of the ruled. It trusts and obeys the power of the Word by which God upholds all things.

We reject the false doctrine, as though the State, over and beyond its special commission, should and could become the single and totalitarian order of human life, thus fulfilling the Church’s vocation as well.

We reject the false doctrine, as though the Church, over and beyond its special commission, should and could appropriate the characteristics, the tasks, and the dignity of the State, thus itself becoming an organ of the State.

**While respecting the role of the secular State, The United Methodist Church should not think or act like the State. The State and the Church have different goals to reach and tasks to accomplish. The Church jealously protects its faith and freedom, life and public witness, from State power—especially when the State overreaches and begins to suffocate civil society.**

6. “Lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age” (Matt. 28:20). “The word of God is not fettered” (II Tim. 2:9).

The Church’s commission, upon which its freedom is founded, consists in delivering the message of the free grace of God to all people in Christ’s stead, and therefore in the ministry of his own Word and work through sermon and sacrament.

We reject the false doctrine, as though the Church in human arrogance could place the Word and work of the Lord in the service of any arbitrarily chosen desires, purposes, and plans.

**Jesus Christ alone commissions the Church. So the Church does not make up its own mission. According to The United Methodist Church’s mission statement in The Book of Discipline (Paragraph 120), “The mission of the Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the**

**transformation of the world.” According to Jesus Christ in Matthew 28, disciples are made through the Church “baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” and “teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you” (vv. 19-20). To be faithful, the Church fulfills its Christ-given mission in the world in the way that Christ described—not in the way that it prefers. (PTS)♥**

## **BENEDICT SPEAKS: WE SHOULD LISTEN**

Unfortunately, the sexual-abuse scandal in the Roman Catholic Church seems to go on and on. Before the presidents of the bishops’ conferences met at the Vatican on February 21-24, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI jotted down some notes and wrote a personal reflection on the current scandal in the church and its underlying crisis of faith. In short order, Benedict’s reflection was published as the “Full Text of Benedict XVI: The Church and the Scandal of Sexual Abuse” ([www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/full-text-of-benedict-xvi-the-church-and-the-scandal-of-sexual-abuse-59639](http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/full-text-of-benedict-xvi-the-church-and-the-scandal-of-sexual-abuse-59639), accessed on 04/11/19). As the reader will soon discover, Benedict XVI’s reflection has much instruction to offer United Methodists (and others).

To be sure, the Roman Catholic Church and The United Methodist Church are two very different Christian communions. However, they are similar today in that both are deeply troubled churches. The Roman Catholic Church is in crisis because of sexually scandalous acts (particularly homosexual acts committed by priests and bishops on those less powerful) and bishops who administratively covered up such acts. The United Methodist Church is in crisis because its ecumenical, historic teaching on human sexuality (particularly homosexuality) is being challenged and its denominational leaders (starting with the Council of Bishops, the resident bishops, the appointed clergy, and on down) refuse to stand up for the standing teaching, which has been reaffirmed by many General Conferences, including General Conference 2019. The crises in both Roman Catholicism and United Methodism involve human sexuality, historic teaching under challenge, and bishops at their worst.

Because of the parallel nature of their unfolding crises, Roman Catholics and United Methodists should be able to learn from each other. Call it a teaching moment brought on by parallel crises. So when Benedict XVI writes, we United Methodists would be wise to pay close attention.

Some of Benedict’s most powerful and pertinent comments, from “The Church and the Scandal of Sexual Abuse,” follow. They are taken from the three sections of Benedict’s essay: (1) how the Sexual Revolution impacted the Roman Catholic Church, (2) how the preparation of priests was seriously undercut, and (3) how the church might best respond to the challenges at hand. Below, to the greatest extent possible, Benedict is allowed to speak for himself. It is hoped that the following will be instructive and encouraging to United Methodists.

### **Sexual Revolution Overwhelms Church Teaching**

According to Benedict, things began to unravel in what

Americans call The Sixties: “Among the freedoms that the Revolution of 1968 sought to fight for was this all-out sexual freedom, one which no longer conceded any norms.” Even “...pedophilia was then also diagnosed as allowed and appropriate.” Result: in short order, the victory of the Sexual Revolution was nearly total.

“At the same time, independently of this development, Catholic moral theology suffered a collapse that rendered the Church defenseless against these changes in society.” Catholic moral theology had wandered from its traditional foundation on natural law. It attempted a Biblical foundation, but discovered that “the Bible alone morality could not be expressed systematically.” Next, “a more pragmatic moral theology” was attempted. “In the end, it was [decided] that morality was to be exclusively determined by the purposes of human action that prevailed. While the old phrase ‘the end justifies the means’ was not confirmed in this crude form, its way of thinking had become definitive. Consequently, there could no longer be anything that constituted an absolute good, any more than anything fundamentally evil; (there could be) only relative value judgments. (emphases added, here and below) There no longer was the (absolute) good, but only the relatively better, contingent on the moment and on circumstances.” In other places, Benedict XVI has called this unfortunate development the “dictatorship of relativism.”

Benedict XVI’s predecessor, Saint John Paul II, constructively pushed back against this moral-theological collapse. According to Benedict, “Pope John Paul II, who knew very well the situation of moral theology and followed it closely, commissioned work on an encyclical [a letter from the pope to all bishops and for the whole Church] that would set these things right again. It was published under the title *Veritatis splendor* [*The Splendor of Truth*] on August 6, 1993, and it triggered vehement backlashes on the part of moral theologians. Before it, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* already had persuasively presented, in a systematic fashion, morality as proclaimed by the Church.

“I shall never forget how then-leading German moral theologian Franz Bockle, who, having returned to his native Switzerland after his retirement, announced in view of the possible decisions of the encyclical *Veritatis splendor* that if the encyclical should determine that there were actions which were always and under all circumstances to be classified as evil, he would challenge it with all the resources at his disposal.

“It was God, the Merciful, that spared him from having to put his resolution into practice; Bockle died on July 8, 1991. The encyclical was published on August 6, 1993 and did indeed include the determination that there were actions that can never become good.” (After reading these comments, one could never accuse Benedict of being humorless. God, the Merciful!)

### **Martyrdom and Morality**

Likewise, “[t]here are goods that are never subject to trade-offs.

“There are values which must never be abandoned for a greater value and even surpass the preservation of physical life. There is martyrdom. God is (about) more than mere

physical survival. A life that would be bought by the denial of God, a life that is based on a final lie, is a non-life. Martyrdom is a basic category of Christian existence. The fact that martyrdom is no longer morally necessary in the theory advocated by Bockle and many others shows that the very essence of Christianity is at stake here.” (It is interesting that liberal and progressive United Methodists seldom mention martyrdom. That does make common sense: if you are in fact accommodating the Church’s faith and life to contemporary culture [which is the 200+-year project of Liberal Protestantism], you will seldom be at odds with the cultural and political powers that be.)

Some claim the Church has authority in the area of doctrine but not in the area of morals. Benedict objects: “Those who deny the Church a final teaching competence in this area [human sexuality] force her to remain silent precisely where the boundary between truth and lies is at stake.”

“The moral doctrine of Holy Scripture has its uniqueness ultimately predicated in its cleaving to the image of God, in faith in the one God who showed himself in Jesus Christ and who lived as a human being. The [Ten Commandments are] an application of the biblical faith in God to human life. The image of God and morality belong together and thus result in the particular change of the Christian attitude towards the world and human life. Moreover, Christianity has been described from the beginning with the word *hodos* [Greek for a road, in the New Testament, often used in the sense of a path of progress].” The Ten Commandments and “the way” are reminders that morality plays a strong, authoritative role in the Church’s doctrine and discipline, and in the Christian’s faith and discipleship.

### **The Church Devastated**

“The long-prepared and ongoing process of dissolution of the Christian concept of morality was...marked by an unprecedented radicalism in the 1960s. This dissolution of the moral teaching authority of the Church necessarily had to have an effect on the diverse areas of the Church....”

“In various seminaries homosexual cliques were established, which acted more or less openly and significantly changed the climate in the seminaries....”

“One bishop, who had previously been seminary rector, had arranged for the seminarians to be shown pornographic films, allegedly with the intention of thus making them resistant to behavior contrary to the faith....”

“Perhaps it is worth mentioning that, in not a few seminaries, students caught reading my books were considered unsuitable for the priesthood. My books were hidden away, like bad literature, and only read under the desk.” This is a sad recollection, but not surprising.

Guarantorism developed. “This means that above all the rights of the accused [of sexual abuse] had to guarantee, to an extent that factually excluded any conviction at all.”

But what about the wide range of those harmed in, and by, a sexual-abuse incident? Benedict makes clear that, while the actual victims of actual abuse are the most devastated, there are many other victims throughout the Church: “In light of the scale of pedophilic misconduct, a

word of Jesus has again come to attention which says: 'Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung round his neck and he were thrown into the sea' (Mark 9:42).

"The phrase 'the little ones' in the language of Jesus means the common believers who can be confounded in their faith by the intellectual arrogance of those who think they are clever. So here Jesus protects the deposit of the faith with an emphatic threat of punishment to those who do it harm." Benedict claims that Jesus commands the Church's leaders to defend the Church and the Church's faith. If they do not, they risk punishment, because they harm the little ones in the Church and the Church's faith itself. This command might well be considered for leaders in The United Methodist Church.

As for priests who sexually abuse, "it is important to see that such misconduct by clerics ultimately damages the Faith.

"Only where faith no longer determines the actions of man are such offenses possible."

### Faithful Responses

"What must be done? Perhaps we should create another Church [with less 'clericalism?'] for things to work out? Well, that experiment has already been undertaken and has already failed. Only obedience and love for our Lord Jesus Christ can point the way. So let us first try to understand anew and from within [ourselves] what the Lord wants, and has wanted with us...."

Benedict XVI believes the first response is to clarify and secure the Church's faith and to proclaim it far and wide: "If we really wanted to summarize very briefly the content of the Faith as laid down in the Bible, we might do so by saying that the Lord has initiated a narrative of love with us and wants to subsume all creation in it. The counterforce against evil, which threatens us and the whole world, can ultimately only consist in our entering into this love. It is the real counterforce against evil. The power of evil arises from our refusal to love God. He who entrusts himself to the love of God is redeemed. Our being not redeemed is a consequence of our inability to love God. Learning to love God is therefore the path of human redemption...."

Eroding the Church's faith has severe, public consequences: "A world without God can only be a world without meaning.... Then there are no standards of good or evil. Then only what is stronger than the other can assert itself. Power is then the only principle. Truth does not count, it actually does not exist....

"A society without God—a society that does not know Him and treats Him as non-existent—is a society that loses its measure. In our day, the catch phrase of God's death was coined. When God does die in a society, it comes free, we were assured. In reality, the death of God in a society also means the end of freedom, because what dies is the purpose that provides orientation...because the compass disappears that points us in the right direction by teaching us to distinguish good from evil. Western society is a society in

which God is absent [from] the public sphere and has nothing left to offer it. And that is why it is society in which the measure of humanity is increasingly lost. At individual points it becomes suddenly apparent that what is evil and destroys man has become a matter of course.

"That is the case with pedophilia. It was theorized only a short time ago as quite legitimate, but it has spread further and further....

"Why did pedophilia reach such proportions? Ultimately, the reason is the absence of God. We Christians and priests also prefer not to talk about God, because this speech does not seem to be practical. After the upheaval of the Second World War, we in Germany had still expressly placed our Constitution under the responsibility to God as a guiding principle. Half a century later, it was no longer possible to include responsibility to God as a guiding principle in the European [Union] Constitution. God is regarded as the party concern of a small group and can no longer stand as the guiding principle for the community as a whole. This decision reflects the situation in the West, where God has become the private affair of a minority."

So the Church and the Christian must intentionally focus on God: "A paramount task, which must result from the moral upheavals of our time, is that we ourselves once again begin to live by God and unto Him. Above all, we ourselves must learn again to recognize God as the foundation of our life instead of leaving Him aside as a somehow ineffective phrase. I will never forget the warning that the great theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar [1904-1988] once wrote to me on one of his letter cards. 'Do not presuppose the triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, but present them!'.... And yet everything becomes different if one does not presuppose but presents God. Not somehow leaving Him in the background, but recognizing Him as the center of our thoughts, words, and action."

"....We talk about [Jesus Christ] in detail in theology, with learned words and thoughts. But it is precisely in this way that we run the risk of becoming masters of faith instead of being renewed and mastered by the Faith."

Attention to God, in the Church, leads Benedict to the Sacrament of Bread and Wine. Since United Methodists rejoice in Jesus Christ's "Real Presence" in Holy Communion, Benedict's words challenge Catholics and Methodists: "Let us consider this with regard to a central issue, the celebration of the Holy Eucharist. Our handling of the Eucharist can only arouse concern. The Second Vatican Council [1962-1965] was rightly focused on returning this sacrament of the Presence of the Body and Blood of Christ, or the Presence of His Person, of His Passion, Death, and Resurrection, to the center of Christian life and the very existence of the Church...."

But now "[w]hat predominates is not a new reverence for the presence of Christ's death and resurrection, but a way of dealing with Him that destroys the greatness of the Mystery. The declining participation in the Sunday Eucharistic celebration shows how little we Christians of today still know about appreciating the greatness of the gift that consists in His Real Presence. The Eucharist is devalued

into a mere ceremonial gesture when it is taken for granted that courtesy requires Him to be offered at family celebrations or on occasions such as weddings and funerals to all those invited for family reasons.”

Benedict responds vigorously to those calling for a new Church [presumably without “clericalism”]: .... “[W]hen thinking about what action is required first and foremost, it is rather obvious that we do not need another Church of our own design. Rather, what is required first and foremost is the renewal of the Faith in the Reality of Jesus Christ given to us in the Blessed Sacrament.” United Methodists, we must listen!

“[T]he Church today is widely regarded as just some kind of political apparatus. One speaks of it almost exclusively in political categories, and this applies even to bishops, who formulate their conception of the Church of tomorrow almost exclusively in political terms. The crisis, caused by the many cases of clerical abuse, urges us to regard the Church as something almost unacceptable, which we must now take into our own hands and redesign. But a self-made Church cannot constitute hope.

“Jesus Himself compared the Church to a fishing net in which good and bad fish are ultimately separated by God Himself. There is also the parable of the Church as a field on which the good grain that God Himself has sown grows, but also the weeds that ‘an enemy’ secretly sown onto it. Indeed, the weeds in God’s field, the Church, as excessively visible, and the evil fish in the net also show their strength. Nevertheless, the field is still God’s field, and the net is God’s fishing net. And at all times, there are not only the weeds and the evil fish, but also the crops of God and the good fish. To proclaim both with emphasis is not a false form of apologetics, but a necessary service to the Truth....

“Today, the accusation against God is, above all, about characterizing His Church as entirely bad, and thus dissuading us from it. The idea of a better Church, created by ourselves, is in fact a proposal of the devil, with which he wants to lead us away from the living God, through a deceitful logic by which we are too easily duped. No, even today the Church is not just made up of bad fish and weeds. The Church of God also exists today, and today it is the very instrument through which God saves us.

“It is very important to oppose the lies and half-truths of the devil with the whole truth: Yes, there is sin in the Church and evil. But even today there is the Holy Church, which is indestructible. Today there are many people who humbly believe, suffer and love, in whom the real God, the loving God, shows Himself to us. Today God also has his witnesses (*martyres*) in the world. We just have to be

vigilant in order to see and hear them....

“If we look around and listen with an attentive heart, we can find witnesses everywhere today, especially among ordinary people, but also in the high ranks of the Church, who stand up for God with their life and suffering. It is an inertia of the heart that leads us to not wish to recognize them. One of the great and essential tasks of our evangelization is, as far as we can, to establish habitats of Faith and, above all, to find and recognize them.

“I live in a house, in a small community of people who discover such witnesses of the living God again and again in everyday life and who joyfully point this out to me as well. To see and find the living Church is a wonderful task which strengthens us and makes us joyful in our Faith time and again.”

### Postscript

From the beginning of this personal reflection to its end, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI has spoken to the Roman Catholic Church—and to The United Methodist Church. Do we United Methodists have the ears to hear, the minds to inquire, and the hearts to receive? Because of the Holy Spirit working on us, we can indeed have the ears, the minds, and the hearts that are required. (Paul T. Stallsworth)♥

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- From a Christian point of view, here are four reasons why victimhood thinking is so misguided. First, alleging they have been mistreated, self-defined victims are convinced they need not repent or apologize for anything. But in reality, all people—particularly Christians—should repent and apologize, and that continually. Second, alleging they

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# Lifewatch

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have been mistreated, self-defined victims think they are okay (or "good" as in "it's all good") and need not change; they firmly believe everybody else needs to change. But especially in the Christian community, all should continually change by increasing in faith in and obedience to Christ, on the way to Christian perfection. Third, alleging mistreatment, victims believe justice demands they be paid everything they want for an indefinite period of time. But in reality, they can use their victimhood status as a means for getting what they want—often through emotional manipulation; that is, victimhood status can be a political (or power) ploy. In addition, most people fail in getting everything they desire—except for the demanding child who has weak, wealthy parents. Fourth, alleging mistreatment, victims think their grievances trump everything, to the point that they make demands for remedy, do not negotiate terms of remedy, and simply expect to be awarded what they demand. They find it impossible to enter into reasonable discussion with those who have allegedly mistreated them. But in reality, especially in the Christian community, all should be ready, willing, and able to enter into reasonable conversation about the most contentious issues in this life.

When victimhood status is claimed, those making the claim see themselves as morally (and perhaps spiritually) elevated and politically deserving. Claiming victimhood status is not helpful to anyone because it makes the remedy of problematic, unjust situations more difficult—if not impossible.

- Just when you are about to fall into the trap of thinking that Rev. John Wesley was committed to a ministry of advancing amoral or antinomian (or feel-good)

#### LETTERS/COMMENTS TO THE EDITOR:

Rev. Paul T. Stallsworth, Lifewatch Editor  
902 Pinckney Street, Whiteville, NC 28472  
910.642.3376 / paulstallsworth@nccumc.org

**HAVE YOU MOVED?** If so, please contact Ms. Cindy Evans  
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understandings of grace and love, his actual words jump off a page as if to defend him. In his sermon "The Deceitfulness of the Human Heart," Wesley notes: "Did that right honourable wretch, compared to whom Sir R[obert] was a saint, know the heart of man? He that so earnestly advised his own son never to speak the truth? To lie or dissemble as often as he speaks! To wear a mask continually! That earnestly counseled him not to debauch *single women* (because some inconveniences might follow), but always married women! Would one imagine this groveling animal ever had a wife or married daughter of his own?" (emphasis in the original) So, according to Wesley, "some inconveniences" might follow sexual sin. One of those inconveniences might be called a child, whose father would at first be unknown, but later probably identified. In his time, Wesley was correct to call out such disgusting instruction in immorality and the immoral behavior it unleashes. Today's United Methodist clergy would be correct as well—even when the instructor in immorality is Hollywood or a morality-free sex-ed curriculum being offered in local public schools.



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