

THE ADVENTURE OF ORTHODOXY: “THUNDERING THROUGH THE AGES”

“People have fallen into a foolish habit of speaking of orthodoxy as something heavy, humdrum, and safe. There never was anything so perilous or so exciting as orthodoxy.... It was the equilibrium of a man behind madly rushing horses, seeming to stoop this way and to sway that, yet in every attitude having the grace of statuary and the accuracy of arithmetic.... She [the Church] swerved to left and right, so exactly as to avoid enormous obstacles.... The orthodox Church never took the tame course or accepted the conventions; the orthodox Church was never respectable....

“It is always easy to let the age have its head; the difficult thing is to keep one’s own. It is always easy to be a modernist; as it is easy to be a snob. To have fallen into any one of the fads from Gnosticism to Christian Science would indeed have been obvious and tame. But to have avoided them all has been one whirling adventure; and in my vision the heavenly chariot flies thundering through the ages, the dull heresies sprawling and prostrate, the wild truth reeling but erect.”

—G. K. Chesterton, Orthodoxy (1908)

AN ADVENTURER OF ORTHODOXY: BISHOP TIMOTHY W. WHITAKER

Bp. Tim Whitaker crossed the Jordan appropriately on Holy (or Maundy) Thursday, March 28. On April 8, his Service of Death and Resurrection was held at Johnson’s United Methodist Church in Machipongo, VA on the Eastern Shore of Virginia—near Keller, VA where Melba and Tim lived since his retirement from episcopal ministry. The remarks that follow are my attempt to witness to Bp. Whitaker’s boldly orthodox ministry beyond the congregations he pastored, throughout The United Methodist Church, and in the ecumenical arena as well. (Paul T. Stallsworth)

This worship service proclaims loudly—through liturgy, scripture, and song—that “Christ has died; Christ is risen; Christ will come again.” Because Christ *has* died...because Christ *is* risen...because Christ *will* come again, Timothy Whitaker was freed from the bondage of original sin, and forgiven his sins, so that he could bear faithful witness to Jesus Christ in The United

Methodist Church and beyond. After Tim was elected a bishop, his witness to Christ was deepened and extended.

In July 2000, Rev. Tim Whitaker was almost elected bishop. Near the end, he dropped out of the race so that another remaining candidate would win.

Six months later, a special episcopal election was called. Nominated on the first ballot, Rev. Whitaker soon withdrew from the race. In his withdrawal speech, he lamented that United Methodism turns its bishops into administrators who are not much interested in theology. However, on Ballot #13, with two candidates running neck and neck, Tim was drafted (against his will) back into the race. He attracted 77 votes. Then 194. And then 304. Finally, 395 votes secured the victory. More than a few sensed God’s providence in Tim’s election to the episcopacy.

Bishop Whitaker was sent to serve the Florida Area of The United Methodist Church. He led the Florida Conference, and appointed the clergy with care, from

2001 until 2012. But most importantly, he taught the clergy and laity of the conference. He did not teach his personal opinions. He taught the Church's apostolic faith. He taught the truth.

Bp. Whitaker's classroom was open to all. Clergy and laity, United Methodists and others, Floridians and others, were invited to attend—thanks to the reach of the conference website. There were high points in his teaching. In 2002, Bp. Whitaker defended the Church's doctrine on Jesus Christ over against another bishop's published, personal opinions. In 2005, Bp. Whitaker preached the first Gospel of Life sermon by a United Methodist bishop. Later, he stood up for apostolic Christianity and opposed the intentional taking of the fragile life of Terri Schiavo.

Let us be clear. In response to the aforementioned topics and others, many United Methodist bishops would have shrugged their shoulders and replied, "Whatever...it's a choice," and walked away. In contrast, Bp. Whitaker responded: "I will do what Jesus Christ, speaking through His Church and its apostolic faith, commands me to do."

To bless and educate young people, Bp. Whitaker helped establish the Angola Memorial Scholarship Fund for Quessua, a group of villages, churches, and schools in the East Angola Conference of United Methodism. He worked with Methodists in Cuba. He served on the United Methodist-Roman Catholic Dialogue. He led various writing projects for the Council of Bishops—such as "God's Renewed Creation." Always, his faithful witness was clearly proposed, and many benefited.

In the summer of 2012, Bp. Whitaker retired. Melba, Tim, and their belongings found their way to Keller, VA. Frankly, I believe that Tim retired to The Whimsy—his study behind Melba's house. For the last twelve years of his life, Tim occasionally preached or taught. Mostly, he wrote. Essays. Theological essays. His theological essays were distributed by email to small groups of "subscribers." Some of his essays were then posted on well known websites. His topics focused mainly on the Church's faith, history, and witnesses—from Moses to Jesus, from St. Paul to John Wesley, from Karl Barth to St. John Paul II. These essays were, are, and will remain brilliant. The last four that I received are: "Abraham: The Friend of God," "Learning to Die," "Our Sister Death," and "Teilhard de Chardin on Life, Thought, and Death."

Tim's papers should be gathered, organized, and archived for future reference. Some of his essays should be published as journal articles, some as books. That way, his witness to United Methodism, to the Church catholic, and to the world—which is so desperately needed today—can continue.

St. Ignatius of Antioch was Tim's favorite saint. An icon of Ignatius was strategically placed in the house for Tim to see often and remember. On his last journey from Antioch to Rome in 107, Ignatius wrote a series of letters to early churches. Once in Rome, he refused to deny Christ. So he died a martyr—at the reddened lions' teeth at Circus Maximus. St. Ignatius's example guided Tim's life, faith, and ministry. Like the saint of old, Tim was a servant, a humble servant. He was a humble servant of Jesus Christ. A humble servant of Christ's Church. A

humble servant of the Church's faith. A humble servant of the truth. Through Tim, God gave, is giving, and will give us (and many others) increasing faith and faithfulness.

Oh God/Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, thank You for the life, the faith, and the far-reaching ministry of your servant, Timothy Wayne Whitaker. Because of Your Son Jesus Christ—crucified, risen, coming again—be merciful to him. We trust You to receive his soul into the Communion of the Saints, and to resurrect his body from its remains when Christ returns in power and glory. Praise be to You, O God! Amen! ♥

NEUHAUS'S LAW

"Where orthodoxy is optional, orthodoxy will sooner or later be proscribed."
—Richard John Neuhaus (1936-2009)

POSTPONED GENERAL CONFERENCE 2020 RESULTS IN "A CHURCH OF THE WORLD"

The Highest Point

The highest point of the recent General Conference, as far as this observer is concerned, occurred as Bishop L. Jonathan Holston, of the Columbia [SC] Episcopal Area preached the Episcopal Address on the morning of April 24 (Wednesday). Toward the end of his sermon, he proclaimed that "we think the Church is as fragile as a piece of glass. But I believe the Church is standing on a firm foundation. Because God's Church is not defined by brick and mortar. My friend the late Rev. Bill Self has described it this way. The Church has withstood Roman imperialism, the ascendance of the Reformers, wars and rumors of wars, and heresies in each generation. The Church can withstand anything that our generation can throw at it too. The Church has been victimized by unprepared...clergy, tone-deaf musicians, manipulative laity, conflicted bishops, and greedy politicians. Yet the Church has survived. The Church has survived because the Holy Spirit has come alongside.... **The Church is never built for our pleasure. The Church is built for God's purpose.** And the Church should be a sign, a foretaste, an instrument of God's present and coming reign of justice, compassion, generosity, peace, and hope. My friends, that is God's purpose...."

After movingly quoting lyrics from "His Eye Is on the Sparrow," Bp. Holston preached with special conviction: "Friends, we may not have always been an obedient church. We may not have always loved our neighbors. We may not have always done the right things. But my God can free us for joyful obedience.... When God frees us up, we can become the people that God has called us to be.

"Are you ready to live in the light of God's victory already won in Christ? Let's go! Are you ready to love your neighbor? Let's go! Are you ready for joyful obedience? Let's go! Are you ready to be freed up? Let's go! Are you ready to be the people that God needs for us

to be? Let's go! Let's go!
 Let's go! Let's! Go! To God
 be the glory! To Christ be the
 glory! And may the Holy
 Spirit dwell in us now and
 forevermore Amen."
 ("Episcopal Address: April 24
 - General Conference 2020,"
[YouTube](#))

So powerful. So hopeful.
 Because Jesus Christ builds
 His Church, because His
 Church will defeat "the gates of Hades," the Church will
 persevere until the end of history. (Matthew 16:18,
 NRSV) As The United Methodist Hymnal declares in its
 Baptismal Covenant III: **"The church is of God, and
 will be preserved to the end of time,** for the conduct of
 worship and the due administration of God's Word and
 Sacraments, the maintenance of Christian fellowship and
 discipline, the edification of believers, and the conversion
 of the world. All, of every age and station, stand in need
 of the means of grace which it alone supplies." (p. 45,
 emphases added)

Bp. Holston's sturdy, orthodox vision of the
 persevering Church, as described above, deserves the
 attention and the thanks of all United Methodists. It is a
 vision that understands the Church as a covenant
 community. Unfortunately, Bp. Holston's vision of the
 covenantal church contrasts starkly with the rest of the
 General Conference that took place in Charlotte, NC until
 the evening of May 3 (Friday).

Roots of the Recent GC

May we be honest? Centrists and Progressives had
 their way. They won every vote at the postponed 2020
 General Conference in Charlotte. They dominated the
 conference. Of course many Traditionalists had already
 departed from The United Methodist Church, so the
 traditional influence in Charlotte was greatly diminished.
 In addition, tens of African delegates were unable to
 attend the conference—in large part because of
 administrative negligence. These realities help indicate
 why the Traditionalists had little influence on this
 General Conference.

Even so, it should be asked: From where did the
 Centrists' and Progressives' dominating energy and
 power come? Their dominating energy and power
 originated during, and increased after, the special General
 Conference of 2019. Consider the following narrative.

Since The United Methodist Church's establishment
 in 1968, from the merger of the Methodist Church and
 the Evangelical United Brethren Church, there was in the
 new denomination an unspoken uneasiness with ecclesial
 authority and Christian truth. Still The United Methodist
 Church remained tethered, more or less, to the "one holy
 catholic and apostolic church" (The Nicene Creed) and
 its faith.

Sunday after Sunday, in United Methodist
 sanctuaries throughout the world, the Word of God and
 the Sacraments were given rightful prominence. The
 Sunday liturgy, funeral services, weddings, the
 ordinations of deacons and elders, and the consecrations

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of bishops were practiced
 regularly. Denominational
 doctrine and discipline were
 respected, if not closely
 followed. Appointments were
 set, and pastors were sent by
 bishops and received by
 congregations.

Of course some clergy were
 entirely accepting of United
 Methodism, while some voiced
 concerns. Most laity were

grateful for United Methodism, while a few became
 discontented. Still, the vast majority behaved in ways that
 suggested they were bound by the church's covenants
 (including the baptismal, ordination, and consecration
 vows). Nearly all kept their vows and played by the rules.
 As a new, large, worldwide denomination, The United
 Methodist Church moved forward, while declining
 marginally in membership, through the decades.

There was one glaring exception to the imperfect,
 pragmatic unity described above. During its 1972 General
 Conference, the new United Methodist Church adopted
 the following language in its Social Principle on "Human
 Sexuality:" "...we do not condone the practice of
 homosexuality and consider this practice incompatible
 with Christian teaching." (The Book of Discipline [1972],
 Paragraph 72.C, p. 86) That statement ignited a church
 struggle over the denomination's teaching on
 homosexuality. That struggle increased in intensity every
 four years, as each General Conference voted to nuance
 and strengthen, not reverse, its position on homosexuality.
 The intensity reached its highest level during the 2016
 General Conference, so the conference voted to task the
 bishops with formulating alternate plans for the church to
 move forward and with calling a special General
 Conference that would adopt its favored plan. This, it was
 hoped, would end the growing church struggle over
 homosexuality.

The bishops did what they were asked to do. With a
 little help from their friends, they formulated alternate
 plans for a way forward, and they called a special General
 Conference during February of 2019 in St. Louis, MO.
 On the last day of this tension-filled gathering (February
 26), the General Conference voted 438-384 (53.28% to
 46.72%) to adopt the Traditional Plan as amended. **When
 the vote was announced, a disruptive demonstration
 against General Conference's adoption of the
 Traditional Plan began—with chanting and singing,
 shouting and screaming, lamenting and crying, all
 roaring in the background.** (You can watch and hear
 this unfold on the "GC2019: Afternoon Session 2, Feb.
 26" video on [YouTube](#) [start at 1:25:50f/1:27:26]. The
 demonstration continues on the "GC2019: Closing
 Session, Feb. 26" video, which is also available on
[YouTube](#). Know that the video does not fully capture the
 disruptive nature of the protest; the volume of the
 demonstration seems lowered in the replay.) Again, the
 protest was loud and long. Acting as if there was no
 protest in progress, the presiding bishop continued
 leading the conference to do its business. The loud, long

protest continued until General Conference 2019 concluded.

It is my contention that this loud, long demonstration intimidated many bishops. In fact, some announced publicly that they would not follow or abide by the Traditional Plan in their episcopal areas.

Furthermore, this demonstration must have energized Centrists and Progressives—bishops, clergy, and laity—to return to their annual conferences to work to pass anti-Traditional Plan resolutions and to elect 2020 General Conference delegates who would overturn the Traditional Plan. And that is exactly what happened. In 2019, annual conferences throughout The United Methodist Church elected the most liberal-progressive delegations they had ever elected.

Then, because of three General Conference postponements (purportedly due to Covid), the liberal-progressive delegations elected by 2019 Annual Conferences (in the heated aftermath of General Conference 2019) finally attended the postponed General Conference 2020 that met in Charlotte, NC in April-May 2024.

My point is this: the liberal-progressive power that was exhibited at General Conference in Charlotte was ignited and stoked by the loud, long demonstration at the end of the special, called General Conference 2019 in St. Louis. In other words, the anti-Traditional Plan demonstration at General Conference 2019 insured that the postponed 2020 General Conference would be liberal-progressive in its atmosphere and decisions.

Three Signs of Domination

From beginning to end, the recent General Conference was dominated by Centrists and Progressives. They were prepared, unified, confident, and bold. During the conference's first week, three incidents illustrate the audacity of Centrists and Progressives: Bishop Tom Bickerton's sermon, Rev. Adam Hamilton's examination, and Bishop Tom Berlin's order.

Bishop Thomas J. Bickerton, who leads the New York Episcopal Area and who was recently president of the Council of Bishops, preached at the General Conference's Opening Worship Service on April 23 (Tuesday). His sermon pulled no punches: "Don't you tell us [remaining United Methodists] that we don't believe in Scripture. Don't you tell us that we don't believe in the doctrine of the Church. And Lord have mercy, don't tell us that we don't believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. And do not, do not ever claim that we in this room do not believe in the power of the Holy Spirit." ["Opening Worship: April 23 - General Conference 2020," [YouTube](#), 35:06/2:01:46 and following]

Then the bishop became even more transparent and personal: "I've got to ask you a question. Do you want to be in this room? Are you willing to move forward in a spirit of hope and embrace a season of reformation? Are you committed to the revitalization of The United

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Methodist Church? Are you here to work for a culture marked by compassion, courage, and companionship? And it causes me to genuinely ask, and this is as genuine as I can be: If you can't agree to that, what are you doing here anyway? Maybe, maybe, just maybe, you're in the wrong place.

Because my sense is that **we are here not only because we love our United Methodist Church, we are committed to moving it forward with renewal, revival, and a reclaimed sense of purpose. And if you are not committed to that—a positive narrative of who we are and where we are going—you might just be in the wrong place.** And perhaps, just perhaps, in love, we might just ask you with integrity that you just leave us alone to do our work. We do not have any time for negative narratives and personal agendas. We don't have any time for vendettas and last-gasp jabs. Friends, we have work to do. Are you ready to do it?...? Furthermore, "[w]e have got to rebuild the church, and we've got to do it together." (emphasis added)

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Rev. Adam Hamilton—the senior pastor of Church of the Resurrection in Leawood, KS, and the prolific author of study books for United Methodist churches—served (with 69 others) on the Church and Society 2 Legislative Committee, which concerned abortion and sexuality. On the afternoon of April 24 (Wednesday), Church and Society 2 (as did the other legislative committees) met and elected its officers. With a bishop presiding, the committee nominated two of its members for chairperson. The committee then decided to allow for a brief, verbal vetting of the candidates before a vote was taken.

At that point, Rev. Hamilton raised his hand and was recognized to speak. He proceeded to ask one of the candidates if he had assisted United Methodist churches in disaffiliating. The candidate stood, answered in the affirmative, and noted that he would have helped more congregations to disaffiliate if he had been given the chance. At that point, that candidate's fate was sealed: he would not be, and was not, elected to chair the Church and Society 2 Legislative Committee.

Evidently, Rev. Hamilton had been given some "intel" on this particular nominee for chair. What is certain is that Rev. Hamilton was quite aggressive in raising the question that he posed. Only if this pastor knew that his committee was dominated by Centrists and Progressives would he have so pointedly questioned the nominee—after all, United Methodist pastors are not usually so confrontational in their face-to-face dealings with others.

(Here your editor must object to Rev. Hamilton's questioning of the nominee for two reasons. First, as

perhaps the most visible, powerful pastor in The United Methodist Church, in posing a question that seemed like it was meant for examination or cross-examination in a court setting, the reverend played Gotcha! against a much less powerful layman. That imbalance of power, playing out in front of a roomful of people, involved conduct unbecoming a United Methodist pastor. Second,

the argument could easily be made that Rev. Hamilton's three-bucket approach to interpreting the Bible, which he described in one of his books, did much more to destabilize The United Methodist Church than a layman helping some congregations to disaffiliate.)

Bishop Tom Berlin presided over a plenary session of the General Conference on April 27 (Saturday). He recognized Rev. Jerry Kulah, from the Liberia Annual Conference, to raise a point of inquiry. Rev. Kulah went to a microphone to ask if, and why, this General Conference did not allow for moments of personal privilege. The bishop answered by reading the personal-privilege process found in the Plan of Organization. Then the bishop noted that is the process now, and it was duly approved. Bp. Berlin concluded his conversation with Rev. Kulah with these words: "That is the answer to your question. That applies to all delegates. We thank you for your question. And I ask you now to be seated." ("Plenary: April 27 - General Conference 2020," [YouTube](#), 31:55f/2:10:05) Bp. Berlin's sharpness with, and implied disrespect toward, Rev. Kulah, a leading African delegate, could not have been imagined at a prior General Conference. It occurred during the postponed 2020 General Conference, in 2024, because Centrists and Progressives overwhelmingly outnumbered Traditionalists.

Major Decisions

The General Conference in Charlotte made many decisions, most of which will not be mentioned here. For months, Centrists, Progressives, and bishops had repeated their three goals for this General Conference: approve a regionalization plan for the denomination, adopt the Revised Social Principles, and remove from church teaching the language opposed to homosexual practice. Needless to say, these goals—and many more—were met.

What follows are some of the most important changes, in United Methodist doctrine and discipline, that were lopsidedly affirmed by General Conference.

***Regionalization** will allow regions of the church to "contextualize" their message, mission, and ministry to fit their own cultures. For this plan to be fully adopted, annual conferences throughout the denomination will need to vote to approve constitutional amendments in the near future. If regionalization passes the annual conferences, The United Methodist Church in the United States will be considered one region.

***The Revised Social Principles will now appear in The**

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Book of Discipline.

•The new Social Principle on abortion contains references to the "fetus," as opposed to "unborn child" and "unborn human life" found in the former Social Principles. The Book of Resolutions now includes support for abortion rights.

•Marriage is redefined. Consequently, sexual standards for clergy are loosened.

***Language opposed to**

homosexual behavior no longer appears in church teaching. Therefore, as far as the denomination is concerned, homosexual behavior is a matter of personal preference.

•Those who engage in homosexual activity can now be ordained and appointed. That is, homosexual behavior does not disqualify one from representative ministry.

•Clergy may, but are not compelled to, preside at same-sex services.

•Local churches may, but are not compelled to, host same-sex services.

•Church dollars can now support the acceptance of homosexuality.

•People who identify as LGBTQ must be included in all general-church boards and agencies.

Again, many more of General Conference's decisions could be listed. Reality does not require additional listings. The reality is that the General Conference in Charlotte created a new United Methodist Church, and that new United Methodist Church seems to align with elite culture of the West.

Making Sense of Charlotte with Bonhoeffer

There are many ways to think theologically about the decisions of the postponed 2020 General Conference. For example, it could be said that.... They misinterpreted Scripture, particularly on human sexuality. They led The United Methodist Church to depart from the Church's "faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints" (Jude 3, NRSV). They changed The United Methodist Church from a Church of the Covenant to a Church of Choice. They did not develop apostolic doctrine; they reversed or changed or abandoned apostolic doctrine (John Henry Newman, 1801-1890). All of those theological takes would be accurate and true.

Perhaps the most insightful perspective, for understanding this General Conference, is provided by Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945). His sermon "A Church of the World or a Church of the Word?"—which was preached at Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church in Berlin on May 28, 1933—is arrestingly relevant to The United Methodist Church shaped by Charlotte. Basing his sermon on the story of the golden calf (Exodus 32), Bonhoeffer differentiates between a church of the world (Aaron's church) and a church of the Word (Moses' church). He begins: "The unwillingness of the worldly church to wait, its impatience, is the first stage of its clash with the church of the Word. So it has always been, and so it will continue to be.

“...The worldly church, the church of the priests, wants to see something. Now it wants to wait no longer. It wants to go to work by itself, act by itself, do by itself, what God and the prophet [Moses] are not doing. [The people at the foot of Sinai are thinking and saying....] What is the use of the priest [Aaron], what is the use of the church, if they are only left to wait? No, our church ought to have something. We want to see something in our church. We do not want to wait. You priests, you are sanctified, you are consecrated. You owe us something. Arise, Aaron the priest, do your duty, attend to the divine service. God has left us, but we need gods. We need religions. If you cannot prevail with the Living God, make us gods yourself!”

Bonhoeffer nears the end of his sermon: “Church of the priests against church of the Word, church of Aaron against church of Moses—this historical clash at the foot of Sinai, the end of the worldly church and the appearance of the Word of God, repeats itself in our church, day by day, Sunday by Sunday. Time and again we come together for worship as a worldly church, as a church which will not wait, which will not live from the invisible; as a church which makes its own gods; as a church which wants to have the sort of god which pleases it and will not ask how it pleases God; as a church which wants to do by itself what God will not do; as a church which is ready for any sacrifice in the cause of idolatry, in the cause of the divinization of human thoughts and values; as a church which appropriates to itself divine authority in the priesthood. And we should go away again as a church whose idol lies shattered and destroyed on the ground, as a church which must hear afresh, ‘I am the Lord your God...,’ as a church which is humbled as it is faced with this Word, as the church of Moses, the church of the Word. The impatient church becomes the quietly waiting church, the church anxious to see...becomes the church of sober faith, the church with its own gods becomes the church which worships the One God....”

Bonhoeffer concludes by asking, “Who makes expiation [i.e., atonement or amends] here? It is none other than he who is priest and prophet in one, the man with the purple robe and the crown of thorns, the crucified Son of the Father, who stands before God to make intercession for us. Here, in his cross, there is an end of all idolatry. Here, the whole human race, the whole church, is judged and pardoned. Here God is wholly the God who will have no other god before him, but now also wholly God in that he forgives without limit. As the church which is always at the same time the church of Moses and the church of Aaron, we point to this cross and say, ‘This is your God, O Israel, who brought you out of slavery and

will lead you evermore. Come, believe, worship!’” (ed. by Geoffrey B. Kelly and F. Burton Nelson, A Testament to Freedom: The Essential Writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer [HarperSanFrancisco, 1990], pp. 221-224)

Those who have hearts and minds to understand, let them understand. And then trust and obey Jesus Christ—who is the Word, the only One who can lead the church of the world to repentance and reformation.

What Now Should Be Done?

After the postponed 2020 General Conference, more United Methodist clergy, laity, and congregations will conclude that they cannot stay in their denomination. They have their reasons for departure, which are often compelling. Each of us must decide: stay or leave, based on the Word as discerned by conscience.

After the first week of General Conference in Charlotte, my wife Marsha and I drove on Sunday

morning to Greenville, SC to deliver two boxes of books to a friend. Before handing over the books, we attended with the friend the Service of Worship at John Knox Presbyterian Church. The liturgy was inviting and faithful. The music beautiful and varied. The fellowship warm and genuine. The sermon bold and true. After the service, we were surprised to discover that this congregation was a part of the Presbyterian Church (USA). As you know, the PC (USA) experienced its own Charlotte—or several Charlottes—years ago. Even so, John Knox Presbyterian

Church remains both evangelical (focused on Jesus Christ and His transforming power) and catholic (committed to Scripture and Church Tradition).

Perhaps our visit to John Knox Presbyterian Church was providential. Perhaps it was a strong reminder that, because of the latest General Conference in Charlotte, United Methodists need not leave the denomination. With God’s help, we can stay put in The United Methodist Church, live as forgiven and faithful disciples of Christ, worship regularly in a local church, seek to reform the congregation and denomination through the Word of God, and offer faithful witness to Christ and His Church whenever that is possible. In a local church, our task is not to react to the decisions of General Conference; rather, our task is to respond to the Lord Jesus Christ, His grace and guidance.

In his public ministry, Karl Barth (1886-1968) once wrote that he and other theologians ought to do theology, during the catastrophe that was National Socialism in Germany, “as if nothing had happened.” By that, Barth did not mean that theologians should pay no attention to what was going on in the world; he meant that, while tending to the world and its happenings, their first attention should be

“...[the] church of Aaron against church of Moses—this historical clash at the foot of Sinai, the end of the worldly church and the appearance of the Word of God, repeats itself in our church, day by day, Sunday by Sunday. Time and again we come together for worship as a worldly church, as a church which will not wait, which will not live from the invisible; as a church which makes its own gods; as a church which wants to have the sort of god which pleases it and will not ask how it pleases God”

paid to the Lordship of Jesus Christ and His commands. Perhaps we should learn from Barth. In the wake of Charlotte, perhaps we, laity and clergy, should give our first and primary attention to Jesus Christ, and live out our discipleship and ministry “as if nothing had happened.”

The United Methodist Church, Charlotte made clear, has lost its way. It has departed from the covenant. In Bonhoeffer’s terms, it needs to wait for the Word. That reality should not deter United Methodists, clergy and laity and congregations, from trusting and obeying Jesus Christ. (PTS) ♥

BECOMING A CHURCH OF COVENANT

At the end of his life, Bp. Tim Whitaker emailed to family and friends some strikingly good articles from his files. One of the articles was entitled “God’s Covenant:

What It Means to Be Church,” which appeared in The Christian Century (January 9, 2007) . “God’s Covenant” was written by Professor Edwin Chr. van Driel, who is now the Directors’ Bicentennial Professor of Theology at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. After emailing the article, Bp. Whitaker chuckled when he said to me in a telephone conversation, “I thought you would like this article.”

The good bishop was correct.

Professor van Driel begins by writing clearly about covenant: “The idea of ‘covenant’ comes up frequently in proposed solutions to mainline [Protestant denominational] crises.”

He continues: “[Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury, 2002-2012] and others in the mainline are suggesting that the covenant is an agreement made between humans who think alike; and that once made, the covenant forms the basis of their church and their community.”

Then he describes the particularly Biblical understanding of covenant: “[W]hen scripture talks about covenant, something completely different emerges. Covenant, it turns out, is not an agreement between human beings after all, but a relationship initiated by God and sealed in baptism. In covenant with human beings, God reaches out to them and says: ‘You are mine.’”

So, “...we are not invited to the covenant or the table on the basis of our theology; we were invited to the covenant long before we even had a theology. We are invited to the covenant because of grace.” In other words, we are invited to the covenant because of our need of God’s grace, because of our need for forgiveness!

Then the good professor recalls a marvelous account

of God’s providence from the history of the Church: “In the 19th century, some of [the Netherlands Reformed Church’s or NRC’s] ministers denied the resurrection or the divinity of Christ; another minister famously claimed to be a follower of Buddha. The leadership of the church refused to uphold the church’s confessional standards. As a result, the majority of the church seemed to have lost its theological identity.

“In this situation **the orthodox minority found itself divided into two camps on how to respond. One camp thought the church’s theological character should be restored by its members appealing to the church’s courts and synod. If this did not help, the members would leave the church. This became known as the**

juridical way. For several decades the juridical camp made its appeals, and when these were unsuccessful, members of the dissenting group left and formed the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (RCN). **The other minority group in the NRC followed the medical way: its members believed that as long as one is not prevented**

from preaching the gospel, one should never leave the church. They believed that the medicine of the gospel itself can heal a sick church, and although they were weakened by the loss of orthodox allies, members of this group continued to focus on preaching the gospel.

“The result seemed

predictable. The RCN (the

juridical way) would become

a conservative bulwark, its

identity firmly protected by its

juridical structure. The NRC

would grow more and more liberal, with a slim and powerless conservative minority. But things turned out differently. One hundred years later the RCN found itself at the far left of the theological spectrum, and its international daughter churches, including the Christian Reformed Church in the USA, declared themselves in impaired communion with their mother church. Meanwhile, in the 1930s and 1940s a spirit of renewal began to stir in the NRC (the medical way). Liberals, middle-of-the-roaders and conservatives became discontented with the perceived theological wishy-washiness of the church.

“None of these groups (in the NRC) gave up its particular approach to the gospel, but all realized that a church which does not firmly confess its obedience to the gospel of Christ is null and void. In 1950 an overwhelming majority in the synod accepted a new, Christ-centered church order and restored the church’s ties to its confessional documents. **The preaching of the gospel—and only the preaching—had healed the church.** (bold emphases added)

The professor concludes: “If this is what it means to be church, being church will never be easy. We find ourselves joined together with people we disagree with, people we do not necessarily like. But that is exactly what God’s covenant is all about: God reaches out to people

“The result seemed predictable. The RCN (the juridical way) would become a conservative bulwark, its identity firmly protected by its juridical structure. The NRC would grow more and more liberal, with a slim and powerless conservative minority. But things turned out differently. One hundred years later the RCN found itself at the far left of the theological spectrum”

who are not likable—people who are sinners. It is only because God graciously embraces these imperfect human beings that any of us have a chance to be included in God's covenant.

"If this is what it means to be church, then being church is also profoundly countercultural If there is any place for the church to be countercultural...it is in situations in which we are called to remember our original covenant.

"You did not choose me but I chose you" (John 15:16). As a church we are called, formed, judged and renewed not by our own choices, but only by God."

This article and the professor who wrote it are quoted not to criticize those who have left The United Methodist Church and those who are contemplating a latter-day departure. Disaffiliation is, mostly, done. **This article and this professor are quoted to challenge both Global Methodists and United Methodists to remember:**

only a church of the covenant remains united, and only the preaching of the gospel heals the church.

Global Methodists and United Methodists, stay put in your churches! Right now and going forward, be faithful to the covenants you have made—especially when God through the covenant asks you to do what you do not want to do! And preach and teach and live the Gospel—the real Gospel, through which God forgives us sinners and sanctifies us—so that the church, and not just individuals, can be healed! (PTS)

♥

GET OUT OF THE WAY, AND LET THE WORD HAVE HIS WAY

Bishop William H. Willimon, who teaches at Duke Divinity School, preached the sermon at First Presbyterian Church in Spartanburg, SC on March 10. (It can be found and watched on [YouTube](#).) Bp. Willimon's sermon concerned Jesus preaching as reported in Luke 4. It included this truthful, powerful claim: "Jesus will preach. He will not allow any of your reservations to keep Him from saying what He wants. That's the Good News. He. Will. Preach."

Bp. Willimon recalled: "After service, this woman bustles up to me. In the sermon, following the lectionary, I had preached on forgiveness. 'Hey Jesus, how often should we forgive people? How about seven times?' Jesus says: 'Hey, no. I like these numbers. How about this: Seventy times seven times? Unlimited forgiveness.' Anyway, I preached that.

"And so this woman comes up to me. And she says,

'Do you mean to tell me that my abusive husband, who made my life hell for ten years before I had the guts to walk out on him.... Jesus Christ expects me now to try to forgive him?'

"I went into that defensive posture that we preachers take. 'Uh, uh, you know we only have twenty minutes in these sermons. I cannot properly qualify everything I need to qualify. Spouse abuse is a horrible evil. And, and I-I-I wouldn't say something like that to you, personally. But-but He did say seventy times seven. That's a lot of forgiveness. And-and elsewhere He said to forgive your enemies. I-I cannot think of a bigger enemy than your ex-husband. But, uh, uh, uh, so, so, I-I-I do think it is something like Jesus might have preached.'

"And she drew herself up to her full height. And she said, 'Thank you! Just checking!' And she went out.

"And I tell you. As I was divesting in my office afterwards, the Lord spoke to me. And the Lord said,

'Who told you that your job was to protect her from conversation with Me? When you look at her, all you see is a victim. [You, Will, are thinking:] Ah, you are a victim...contort your voice into a whine...keep your head down...all moral responsibility is off now. When I [God] look at her, I see a disciple. I am getting ready to turn the world upside down—with her. If you will just get out of the way, and let Me preach.'"

Preaching like that, only preaching focused on the Word of God, preaching

driven by the Word of God, can reform The United Methodist Church, the Global Methodist Church—indeed, the whole Church of Jesus Christ.

Trouble is "[t]he temptation to confirm, or at least to soothe, otherwise well-meaning people in their sinful behaviors and relationships can be intense." (Charles J. Chaput, Archbishop Emeritus of Philadelphia, "Cardinal Fernandez Misleads," [First Things](#) [April 2024], p. 9)

It is rumored that through His death and resurrection, Jesus Christ has won the war over sin, death, and the evil one. That includes victory over the temptations that each Christian, whether lay or clergy, faces. Thanks be to God! (PTS) ♥

YOU SHOULD KNOW THAT

• **After the General Conference in Charlotte, the witness of Lifewatch among Methodists is more important than ever.** Because of you, your prayers and your gifts, our witness to the Gospel of Life (on Christ's Church, life, and sexuality) has continued for over 30 years. Your gifts, no matter how small or large, have

"This article and the professor who wrote it are quoted not to criticize those who have left The United Methodist Church and those who are contemplating a latter-day departure. Disaffiliation is, mostly, done. This article and this professor are quoted to challenge both Global Methodists and United Methodists to remember: only a church of the covenant remains united, and only the preaching of the gospel heals the church."

sustained our witness. Our ministry does not have financial reserves, so Lifewatch is dependent upon you.

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Our heartfelt thanks to you for your gifts, past and present.

● **January 14, 2024 was Human Relations Day in The United Methodist Church.** A bulletin insert for the day declares in bold print: “Each of God’s children are equally important.” Does that include children in the womb, or not? Just asking.

● **On February 13, the General Board of Church of Society spent part of “An Afternoon Celebrating 100 Years of Social Witness” in The United Methodist Building** on Capitol Hill in Washington, DC. The Reverend Dr. Susan Henry-Crowe, the immediate past General Secretary, was the last speaker during this hour-long celebration. Her comments spoke to what is going on today: “The world is shattering, and many countries are becoming more authoritarian and nationalistic. It is

not unlike the early 20th century in the United States and the territories. This republic and the democratic processes are more fragile and frayed than in prior decades. Evidence for this can be seen in the facts that...the [US] Supreme Court had rescinded the rights of women to act in their best interests of themselves, their bodies, and their families [in the Dobbs decision]....” Going forward, “the journey for justice” of the General Board of Church and Society “is a journey of walking alongside the most vulnerable and the invisible, who are often overlooked

and cannot speak for themselves—children living in poverty, communities that are hidden, young people living with mental-health disease....” (“An Afternoon of Celebrating 100 Years of Social Witness,” [YouTube](#))

Why United Methodism, at its leadership levels, cannot see that the preborn child is “vulnerable,” “invisible,” “overlooked,” and speechless is baffling to

this pastor. This blindness toward the smallest child among us is most certainly a result of paying attention solely to the child’s mother, to “the rights of women to act in their best interests of themselves, their bodies, and their families....”

During Church and Society’s “journey for justice,” may its blinders be removed. It would not be the first time.

● **“Faith in Action” online contains “News and Views from the United Methodist General Board of Church and Society.”** The February 2024 issue of “Faith in

“... the journey for justice’ of the General Board of Church and Society ‘is a journey of walking alongside the most vulnerable and the invisible, who are often overlooked and cannot speak for themselves’ Why United Methodism, at its leadership levels, cannot see that the preborn child is ‘vulnerable,’ ‘invisible,’ ‘overlooked,’ and speechless is baffling to this pastor.”

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Action” offers an article entitled “United Methodists Educate for Reproductive Health, Rights and Justice.” By Rev. Laura Kigweba, the article advertises “a four-week virtual Lenten webinar series to educate United Methodists on the importance of Reproductive Justice, Rights, and Healthcare.” Three paragraphs into the article, a sentence begins with the highlighted words “Research has shown.” Clicking on that phrase takes the reader to a “CAP 20” website, which is a “Center for American Progress” website. CAP describes itself in this way: “The Center for American Progress is an independent nonpartisan policy institute that is dedicated to improving the lives of all Americans through bold, progressive ideas, as well as strong

leadership and concerted action. Our aim is not just to change the conversation, but to change the country.” (We are resisting the temptation to question, with a dash of snark thrown in, exactly how “independent” and “nonpartisan” CAP actually is.) For decades I have been under the impression that the Church, in proposing a moral vision, should lead the world. Not the other way around.

● **Harrison Butker**, the K.C. Chef’s kicker, stirred it up with his recent address at Benedictine College. Said he: “[I]f we are going to be men and women for this time in history, we need to stop pretending that the Church of Nice is a winning proposition. We must always speak and act in charity but never mistake charity for cowardice.” Amen.

● **Spotted on the back windshield of a car in a Food Lion parking lot in Wilson, NC:** “Once Small/Always/Strong/Fight like a Preemie.” This is a precious reminder of God’s providence and the little one’s natural willingness to struggle for life.

● **Vulnerari praesidio.** “Protect the most vulnerable.”

● **Magna est veritas, et prevalebit.** “Truth is most powerful, and will ultimately prevail.” ♥

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