

## HILLS TO DIE ON: 15 REFORMING TRUTHS FOR THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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*Readers, be warned! What follows is a bit heavy. You might consider reading it in segments—that is, a portion at a time. Also, think about discussing it in a church-school class. Or giving a copy to your associate pastor, pastor, district superintendent, and/or bishop. Thank you for your interest and patience in grappling with this document and its claims. Your responses are most welcome.*

Karl Barth (1886-1968), the great Reformed systematic theologian, once wrote that he aimed to do theology, during the catastrophe that was Nazi Germany, “as though nothing had happened.” By that, Barth did not mean that he should neglect the pressing matters of politics, totalitarianism, and war. Rather, he meant that, as a theologian, he owed his primary attention to the subject of Christian theology, to the living Jesus Christ and His body the Church.

We United Methodists should do no less. In the wake of the 2020/2024 General Conference in Charlotte, you and I, laity and clergy, should strive to give our primary attention to Jesus Christ, and to live our life together under Him in The United Methodist Church, “as though nothing had happened.”

We have heard it said, “That is *not* a hill I am willing to die on.” Thereby people admit what controversial matters on which they are unwilling to take a stand; they count the cost too high. In what follows, I list fifteen hills (or truths) on which we United Methodists *should be willing to take a stand*—to die on, so to speak.

Below, you will find the fifteen truths numbered and emboldened. Each truth is followed by at least one authoritative (that is, Biblical, creedal, doctrinal, theological, or constitutional) statement in plain text and within quotation marks. A brief theological commentary, in italics, describes how each truth can play a role in reforming the church.

### **1. The truth lives, so truth exists.**

“Thomas said to him [Jesus], ‘Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?’ Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life....’” (John 14:6, NRSV)

“...I am writing these instructions to you so that, if I am delayed, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and bulwark of the truth.” (1 Timothy 3:14-15, NRSV)

*Jesus Christ, once crucified and now risen from the dead, is the truth. His body, the Church, is “the pillar and bulwark,” the witness to and defender of, the truth. Because the Church receives revealed truth, the Church can and should challenge “the dictatorship of relativism” (Benedict XVI), the I-have-my-truth-and-you-have-your-truth philosophy, the expressive subjectivism, which is academically and ideologically fashionable today. The Church should strive to preach, teach, and practice the truth.*

### **2. Under the Lordship of Jesus Christ, The United Methodist Church should always seek the Lord’s determining guidance during our processes of making decisions.**

“The church is a community of all true believers under the Lordship of Christ....” (Preamble, The Constitution, The Book of Discipline [2016], p. 25)

*Therefore, Charge Conferences, Annual Conferences, Jurisdictional Conferences, and General Conferences should consciously conduct their Christian conferencing under, and according to, this Lord. Their discussions, debates, and votes should aim to discern, reflect, and follow the will of Jesus Christ for His Church. The United Methodist Church maintains a democratic polity, which includes freedom of speech, under the sovereign rule of the Lord Jesus Christ. His Lordship—not pragmatism, not societal approval—rules the church.*

### **3. Only Jesus Christ commissions the Church.**

“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, 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.” (Matthew 28:19-20a, NRSV)

“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.” (Article 6, The Barmen Declaration [which was written and adopted, to resist the Nazification of German churches, in 1934])

*Jesus Christ, the Gospel, and the Church are not means to achieve ends that are “arbitrarily chosen” by Christian leaders. The Church does not commission herself. She is commissioned by the One who is her living Lord. His commission requires today’s Church “teaching them to obey everything that I [Jesus Christ] have commanded you”—especially when that teaching opposes the conventional wisdoms of this world!*

#### **4. The Church is the community in which God regularly works through His Word and Sacraments.**

“The visible church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men [sic] in which the pure Word of God is preached, and the Sacraments duly administered according to Christ’s ordinance, in all those things that of necessity are requisite to the same.” (Article XIII--Of the Church, The Articles of Religion, Our Doctrinal Standards... [Paragraph 104. Section 3], The Book of Discipline, p. 68)

“...[The Christian Church] is the redemptive fellowship in which the Word of God is preached by men [sic] divinely called, and the sacraments are duly administered according to Christ’s own appointment...” (Article V--The Church, The Confession of Faith, Our Doctrinal Standards... [Paragraph 104. Section 3], The Book of Discipline, p. 73)

*The congregation is gathered, grounded, grown, and guided—and individual disciples are summoned, sanctified, and sent—by God through Word and Sacraments. Word and Sacraments are promised—though not exclusive—means through which God visits and addresses, judges and forgives, transforms and empowers His Church and His disciples.*

#### **5. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, the risen Christ Himself is personally present and active in Holy Baptism and in Holy Communion.**

During The Baptismal Covenant I service, the pastor prays: “Pour out your Holy Spirit, to bless this gift of water and those who receive it, to wash away their sin and clothe them in righteousness throughout their lives, that, dying and being raised with Christ, *they* may share in his final glory.” (The United Methodist Hymnal, p. 36)

During A Service of Word and Table I, the pastor prays: “...The bread which we break is a sharing in the body of Christ,” and “[t]he cup over which we give thanks is a sharing in the blood of Christ.” Distributing these holy gifts to the people, the pastor says: “The body of Christ, given for you...,” and “[t]he blood of Christ, given for you...” (The United Methodist Hymnal, p. 11)

*In Baptism (Romans 6) and in Communion (John 6), the “real presence” of Jesus Christ works on the congregation as a community and on each participating worshiper as a disciple. Generally speaking, Anglicanism and United Methodism understand the “real presence” of Jesus Christ in Holy Communion as a middling position—between Roman Catholicism’s transubstantiation (bread and wine become, in substance, His body and blood) and some Protestants’ memorial or remembrance (bread and wine recall or symbolize His body and blood).*

#### **6. At the beckoning of the Holy Spirit, the congregation gathers, as the body of Christ, to worship; then Christ sends His disciples into the world to fulfill their God-given vocations.**

“Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.” (I Corinthians 12:27, NRSV)

“[A]nd you show that you are a letter of Christ, prepared by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.” (II Corinthians 3:3, NRSV)

*Through Word and Sacraments, Jesus Christ assembles and encounters those who form His body, His Church made visible in the world. Then Jesus Christ sends His Church, as disciples, into the world to live out their vocations—as husband, mother, student, construction worker, medical doctor, citizen, and so on. Again, in worship, God’s people gather as one; then after worship, they scatter as many into the world. This understanding disciplines loose talk about the congregation “getting busy beyond the church’s four walls” and “going into the community.” Every day Christ’s disciples, in their countless vocations, do exactly that.*

#### **7. Jesus Christ establishes “doctrine and discipline” as essential, not optional, to His Church.**

On doctrine, “He [Jesus] said to them [His disciples], ‘But who do you say that I am?’ Simon Peter answered, ‘You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.’ And Jesus answered him, ‘Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.’” (Matthew 16:15-18, NRSV)

On discipline, Jesus declares: “‘If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church, and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.’” (Matthew 18:15-17, NRSV)

*In the four gospels, the word “church” appears exclusively in Matthew 16 and 18 in the verses quoted above. In Matthew 16, our Lord promises to build His church after Peter confesses this true doctrine: “You [Jesus] are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” In Matthew 18, our Lord mentions the church several times as He teaches basic discipline to His community. Through doctrine faithfully taught and discipline faithfully upheld, Christ guides His Church.*

#### **8. In obedience to Jesus Christ, clergy and bishops are expected to propose and defend church doctrine, as they promise in their ordinations and consecrations.**

St. John Paul II declared: “The Church proposes [church doctrine]; she imposes nothing.” (January 1, 2001)

Those who are ordained to be elders are asked and then promise: “...[W]ill you be loyal to The United

Methodist Church, accepting its order, liturgy, doctrine, and discipline, defending it against all doctrines contrary to God's Holy Word, and accepting the authority of those who are appointed to supervise your ministry?" *"I will, with the help of God."* ("The Order for Consecrations and Ordinations," The United Methodist Book of Worship [1992], p. 695)

Elders who are consecrated to be bishops are asked and then promise: "Will you guard the faith, order, liturgy, doctrine, and discipline of the Church against all that is contrary to God's Word?" *"I will, for the love of God."* ("The Order for the Consecration of Bishops," The United Methodist Book of Worship [1992], p. 703)

*Elders and bishops are ordained and consecrated, in part, to teach and defend church doctrine. After teaching or proposing church doctrine, they should give dissenters freedom to push back at the doctrine. Then, after dissent has been registered, elders and bishops should respond and defend church doctrine. This pattern—propose doctrine, receive dissent, and defend doctrine—is required of faithful clergy and bishops in Christ's Church.*

*Faithful Christian ministry often involves conflict. Therefore, in their ministries, elders and bishops should not seek to avoid, at all costs, disagreements. When attempting to avoid conflict, elders and bishops often refuse to teach doctrine (and/or uphold discipline); thereby they mislead the church and create harmful dysfunction in its life together.*

## **9. The "strange, new world within the Bible" is the world in which the Church and Christians live.**

"[W]ithin the Bible there is a strange, new world, the world of God.... [Entering the Bible's 'strange, new world,' w]e must openly confess that we are reaching far beyond ourselves. But that is just the point: if we wish to come to grips with the contents of the Bible, we must dare to reach far beyond ourselves. The Book admits of nothing less." (Karl Barth, "The Strange New World within the Bible" [first spoken in 1916] appears in The Word of God and the Word of Man [first published in 1928], p. 33)

"The Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation; so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man that it should be believed as an article of faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation...." (Article IV--The Holy Bible, The Confession of Faith, Our Doctrinal Standards... [Paragraph 104. Section 3], The Book of Discipline, p. 73)

"We believe the Holy Bible, Old and New Testaments, reveals the Word of God so far as it is necessary for our salvation. It is to be received through the Holy Spirit as the true rule and guide for faith and practice. Whatever is not revealed in or established by the Holy Scriptures is not to be made an article of faith nor is it to be taught as essential to salvation." (Article V—Of the Sufficiency of the Holy Scriptures for Salvation, The Articles of Religion, Our Doctrinal Standards... [Paragraph 104. Section 3], The Book of Discipline, p. 66)

*Living by faith in Jesus Christ within "the strange, new world within the Bible," and looking out onto this world, clergy and laity can discern when the activities and institutions of this world become overreaching, overpromising, and idolatrous. This includes political agendas, fashionable cultural trends, scientism, wealth, and entertainment without end. If not acknowledged, named, and kept in their places, such idolatries prevent the Church and the Christian from living within "the strange, new world within the Bible," from hearing the Word of God in fullness, and from receiving divine revelation.*

## **10. The Apostles' Creed and The Nicene Creed declare, and summarize, the Church's faith centered on Jesus Christ—which was established by the apostles in the power of the Holy Spirit.**

Lutheran theologian Professor Robert Jenson (1930-2017) boldly stated that the Bible tells "the story of the world."

*God, through the Bible, gives the Church one grand story to trust fully, to proclaim truly, to live hopefully. This story is declared, in brief, by the creeds. Neither the Church nor the Christian make up their own story or faith. The Church receives the Church's story (or faith) from the prior generation, and passes it on, without addition and without subtraction, to the next generation.*

Today's so-called "theology of grace" is The United Methodist Church's latest attempt to reinvent the Church's faith. This attempt arises from the theological tradition known as Liberal Protestantism. Liberal Protestantism believes that a "God without wrath brought men [sic] without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross." (H. Richard Niebuhr, The Kingdom of God in America [1937], p. 193) Guided by Liberal Protestantism, The United Methodist Church seeks to make apostolic Christianity more acceptable to modern and post-modern listeners. It downplays or eliminates elements of the Church's faith that offend contemporary sensibilities. What remains are assurances of "grace," "love," and "God is always with us"—all of which are seldom related to the crucified, risen, ruling, and returning Jesus Christ, and to humanity's sin.

## **11. Christ's Church offers "costly grace," not "cheap grace."**

"Cheap grace is the deadly enemy of our Church. We are fighting today for costly grace....

"Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate."

"Costly grace is...the door at which a man must knock.

"Such grace is *costly* because it calls us to follow, and it is *grace* because it calls us to follow *Jesus Christ*. It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life. It is costly

because it condemns sin, and grace because it justifies the sinner. Above all, it is *costly* because it cost God the life of his Son: ‘ye were bought at a price,’ and what has cost God much cannot be cheap for us. Above all, it is *grace* because God did not reckon his Son too dear a price to pay for our life, but delivered him up for us. Costly grace is the incarnation of God.” (emphases in the original, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, The Cost of Discipleship [Macmillan Paperbacks, 1963], pp. 45, 47-48)

*When a church speaks only of “grace,” “love,” and “God is always with us,” that church is offering cheap grace. That church must rediscover God’s costly grace. The Church is called to preach, teach, and practice the “whole counsel of God”—which includes sin and repentance and forgiveness, justification and sanctification and perfection, covenant and commandments, discipline and judgment, heaven and hell.*

## **12. Only prevenient grace, a gift from God in Christ in the power of the Spirit, can begin to free a person from the relentless grip of original sin.**

“Original sin standeth not in the following of Adam (as the Pelagians do vainly talk), but it is the corruption of the nature of every man, that naturally is engendered of the offspring of Adam, whereby man is very far gone from original righteousness, and of his nature inclined to evil, and that continually.” (The Articles of Religion, Article VII-Of Original or Birth Sin, Our Doctrinal Standards... [Paragraph 104. Section 3], The Book of Discipline, p. 67)

“The condition of man after the fall of Adam is such that he cannot turn and prepare himself, by his own natural strength and works, to faith, and calling upon God; wherefore we have no power to do good works, pleasant and acceptable to God, without the grace of God by Christ preventing [i.e., enabling] us, that we may have a good will, and working with us, when we have that good will.” (The Articles of Religion, Article VIII-Of Free Will, Our Doctrinal Standards... [Paragraph 104. Section 3], The Book of Discipline, p. 67)

“We believe man is fallen from righteousness and, apart from the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, is destitute of holiness and inclined to evil. Except a man be born again, he cannot see the Kingdom of God. In his own strength, without divine grace, man cannot do good works pleasing and acceptable to God. We believe, however, man influenced and empowered by the Holy Spirit is responsible in freedom to exercise his will for good.” (The Confession of Faith, Article VII-Sin and Free Will, Our Doctrinal Standards... [Paragraph 104. Section 3], The Book of Discipline, p. 74)

*According to United Methodist doctrinal standards, the human will is freed from the merciless hold of original sin if and only if prevenient grace from the Triune God initiates the freeing. Such grace frees the once-imprisoned to be able to turn from sin, to repent, and to say Yes to God. Without prevenient grace from God/Father, Son, and Holy Spirit at work in a person, “free will” is a figment of a religious imagination. Prevenient grace and its freeing power are understood, proclaimed, and taught by the church. Therefore, the Good News is truly good, and God’s grace is truly amazing.*

## **13. Christ’s call to the Christian involves death and life.**

“When Christ calls a man [sic], he bids him come and die.” (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, The Cost of Discipleship [SCM Press, 1948], p. 44)

*When Christ calls us, He does not promise us material improvement, more enjoyment, or greater success. He promises us forgiveness and freedom, gratitude and joy, vocation and purpose—that follow our death (to sin and evil), repentance, and obedience.*

## **14. Truly Christian love is sacrifice for the (actual or authentic) good of the beloved.**

“...God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.” (Romans 5:8, NRSV, which is regularly declared in the Pardon during Services of Word and Table)

*The greatest icon of Christian love is Jesus Christ suffering unto death, on the cross, for the salvation (i.e., the ultimate good) of the world and its sinners. Christ crucified warns the Church and the disciple against reducing Christian love to a bless-your-heart sentimentality.*

*God’s sacrificial love radically transforms people to become more loving. Likewise, a Christian’s love for another can make the beloved more virtuous and more faithful to God.*

## **15. Only the Word of God can reform The United Methodist Church.**

“God did not grant a Reformation to American Christendom. He gave strong revivalist preachers, men of the church, and theologians, but no reformation of the church of Jesus Christ from the word of God....American theology and the churches as a whole have never really understood what ‘critique’ by God’s word means in its entirety....” (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “Protestantism without Reformation,” No Rusty Swords, edited by Edwin H. Robertson [1970])

*Only the Word of God reforms the People of God. Time and again, that is demonstrated throughout the Old Testament, the New Testament, and Church history. Bonhoeffer recalls that truth when he claims that only the Word of God—presumably in three forms: living Word (Jesus Christ), written Word (Bible), and proclaimed Word (faithful sermon)—can bring reformation to a church in the United States.*

*We United Methodists, who have tried nearly everything under the sun to reform the church, would do well to consider Bonhoeffer’s claim.*

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