

A Study Series for Traditional United Methodists Who Long to Remain in The United Methodist Church

Presented by Chapelwood United Methodist Church, Houston, Texas

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This resource is designed for those who are United Methodist Christians who wish to wrestle with the complexities we face every day while remaining in our denomination. There is a lot of talk and even disagreement over how Methodists choose to engage in the work and ministry of Christ. Some Methodists wish to leave The United Methodist Church and go independent or join another denomination. We United Methodists are followers of Christ who value scripture, seek to live out a life of love and grace, and desire to model our lives around the life of Jesus Christ. We believe in Christ and that The United Methodist Church is still a powerful means for Christ to redeem the world. We created these resources specially for thinking Methodists...people who have real questions and desire authentic conversation. This is a key hallmark of Wesleyan Methodist – the willingness to engage in Christian conference. Unfortunately, our culture is driven by one-side propaganda that leads to decisions made without over engaging in an opposing viewpoint. We see it in American politics and now we see it in the United Methodist Church. We hope to equip you with biblical teaching, a better understanding of our United Methodist historical journey, and cast a powerful vision for a UMC moving in the future.

With so much fear and anger in the world, the debates around church breakups are usually filled with toxic negativity and ceaseless attacking of one another. Most of the attacks are filled with misinformation and distortions of the truth. The sad truth is the ‘holy’ side feels vindicated to act badly because ... well, they did it first. That doesn’t sound Christian at all; it sounds more like parenting five-year-old children.

We feel the best way forward is to present a theological, historical, and practical framework for people in the pews who love their church and want to live out their calling for Jesus in their communities. It is also designed to engage in positive discussion that leads to curiosity and the exploration of multiple views on the many concerns before us. It is a very ancient Hebrew way to engage in disagreement modeled by the Houses of Hillel and Shammai in the 1st century. These two schools had rigorous debates on matters of ritual practice, ethics, and theology which were critical to shaping of the Oral Law and Judaism today. Hillel tended to be more lenient and tolerant of the two and his school has been accepted as normative, but not without healthy and friendly debate. One of the great requirements of debate for members of the houses was that they must so fully understand the other position of the other house, that they could so persuasively communicate it as to convert someone from their own school. In our days, people won’t even listen to the other side of the disagreement before making their mind up.

It was very important that we make this resource a positive piece for everyone to use in ways that are helpful. We recognize that some will feel they must leave The United Methodist Church to best fulfill their mission for Jesus. That is their choice. We just hope those churches will engage in an open, fair, and fully holy discernment allowing both sides of the disagreements to share. If not, you will get one set of information from one side of the story. That is no discernment...that is manipulation. We also

recognize that many feel they can best fulfill their mission for Jesus by remaining in The United Methodist Church and helping to strengthen it, refine it, and equip it to be more capable of success in our mission. Even for churches remaining in The United Methodist Church, information needs to be shared about the disagreements that exist, so everyone realizes the conversations happening outside our churches.

This resource is created by people who have a traditional understanding of human sexuality, but desire to remain in The United Methodist Church. This resource is designed to help others who have a traditional understanding of human sexuality and are trying to discern if they now must depart the UMC or if they can stay without compromising their core beliefs.

We do not accept the false dilemma that has been presented – if you are traditional in your views on human sexuality, you cannot remain in The United Methodist Church. We reject that false dilemma and seek to help other traditionally minded Methodists realize that they can remain in the UMC as well. We also hope to help progressives see and understand that there are traditionalists who long to be at the table with all God’s children and long for a wide welcome to be available for everyone. We will address these and other concerns.

May God lead us all forward into his glorious Light!

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THE IMPORTANCE OF UNITY: GOD’S ORIGINAL WILL, PURPOSE AND INTENT

based on

The Genesis Project by Rev. Bob Johnson

As Traditionalist Methodists who value the Wesleyan Quadrilateral, any project such as this one must begin with scripture. Specifically, the first book of scripture, Genesis. I want to introduce you to what I call *The Genesis Project* and show you how it relates to being a Traditionalist Compatibilist within the United Methodist Church. The Genesis Project is concerned with bearing and reflecting God’s image in the world, and as we’ll see below, that image includes unity.

The Genesis Project is God’s project. It is first revealed in the Book of Genesis, the book of beginnings, especially chapters 1-2 in the stories of creation. By using the term, The Genesis Project, I mean God’s original will, purpose, and intent for all of creation, including humanity – before the Fall described in Genesis chapter 3.

The word *genesis* is a Greek word which means “beginnings.” We still use the word sometimes, as when we say, “That gave me the genesis of an idea,” which is very close to “That generated an idea.” So, in the Book of Genesis, we find revealed many things, including God’s *original* will, purpose, and intent for creation, including humanity. God’s original purpose, will, and intent stays constant throughout the entire Bible, Old and New Testaments. What God wants for us stays the same through the good, bad, and ugly of the Bible – and there’s plenty of ugly. The very last chapters of the Bible, Revelation chapters 21-22, reveal a new heaven and a new earth, and God’s new relationship with humanity. The description sounds remarkably like God’s original intent in Genesis 1-2! The Bible ends as it begins like bookends!

Our Human Vocation

The creation account in Genesis 1 reveals the Creator God making a dwelling place for himself by bringing order to primordial chaos. The six “days,” or six “stages of creation” indicate, to those who understand the world of the ancient Near East, that creation itself, heaven and earth together, is a kind of temple, a dwelling place for God. In the world of the ancient Near East, the world that existed when Genesis was written, gods were believed to inhabit temples. Building temples to their gods was part of the cultures of ancient peoples in Egypt, Mesopotamia, Sumer, Greece, and Rome. Temples to the gods have also been a feature of the Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh, Zoroastrian, and Jain religions, even to this day.

One feature common to all these temples, though they were built to honor very different gods, is that all of them were *buildings*. In all ancient temples (except the one in Jerusalem that Solomon built centuries later), there was an “image” or statue of the god whose temple it was. The purpose of that image was to bear and reflect the god honored there, making that god “real” in his temple. An example of this can be seen in 1 Samuel 5:1-5, where we read about the statue, or the image, of the Philistine god, Dagon, residing in his temple when the captured ark of God is brought in:

When the Philistines captured the ark of God, they brought it from Ebenezer to Ashdod; then the Philistines took the ark of God and brought it into the house of Dagon and placed it beside Dagon (i.e., beside the image of Dagon). When the people of Ashdod rose early the next day, there was Dagon (the image of Dagon), fallen on his face to the ground before the ark of the Lord. So, they took Dagon and put him back in his place. But

when they rose early on the next morning, Dagon had fallen on his face to the ground before the ark of the LORD, and the head of Dagon and both his hands were lying cut off upon the threshold; only the trunk of Dagon was left to him. This is why the priests of Dagon and all who enter the house of Dagon do not step on the threshold of Dagon in Ashdod to this day. (1 Samuel 5:1-5; NRSV)

Familiar with the way of gods and temples, an ancient reader of Genesis chapter 1 would have been able to read between the lines: The creator God has also placed into his temple his “image.” But the creator God’s temple is originally not a building but rather heaven and earth -- i.e., creation. The image God places into his temple is not a statue or “graven image,” but instead that image is cast in human beings made to bear and reflect God’s image, to spread the benefits of God’s being and creativity in the world, and to reflect the praises of the world back to its creator (Genesis 1:27).

This is the first fundamental truth of The Genesis Project – human beings are created to bear and reflect the image of God in God’s temple, which is heaven and earth:

So, God created humankind (HEBREW: ‘adam) in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. (Genesis 1:27)

God created humankind as male AND female – the last and greatest of his creation -- to *bear and to reflect God’s image in God’s “temple,”* which is the world we inhabit. Quoting N. T. Wright, “The image is a vocation, a calling. It is the call to be an angled mirror, reflecting God’s wise order into the world and the praises of all creation back to the creator.”¹

This helps us understand, at least in part, why God is so opposed to our making a graven image, which is forbidden in the second of The Ten Commandments. There are two problems with idolatry, even with making images of God. First, when we begin to worship something other than God, we are violating the First Commandment:

“I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:2-3, NRSV).

But the second problem has to do with making anything that is meant to bear God’s image. *We human beings are created to bear and to reflect God’s image!* When we create an idol to bear and to reflect God’s image – as the Israelites did in the famous “golden calf” incident recorded in Exodus 32 -- we are denying the very reason we were created in God’s image. It is OUR task as human beings created in the image of God to bear and to reflect God’s image in God’s temple of heaven and earth. Nothing that we create can ever do that.

But what IS God’s image that we are to bear and reflect? At least part of that image is revealed in Genesis 1:1-3:

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering

¹ N. T. Wright. *Surprised by Scripture: Engaging Contemporary Issues*, HarperCollins Publishers, 2014

*over the face of the waters. And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light.
(Genesis 1:1-3, ESV)*

We are shown in these verses that God, as later Christian theologians struggled to express, is a *community* of three persons in *one* being. We see God, the designer of all creation, conceiving heaven and earth to bring creation into being. Since God generates all that is, God may be considered the "Father" of creation. We also see God the "Spirit" described not as one who constructs the created world, but as one who "hovers over" it, as a protector or overseer. Finally, we see the "Word" of God. When God speaks the Word, "Let there be..." whatever God commands comes into existence. The Word of God is the agent of creation, the vehicle through which God creates. In the Gospel According to John, verses 1:1-3 reveal Jesus to be the creating Word of God dwelling in the flesh:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. ... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us (John 1:1-3, 14, NRSV)

So, the first three verses of Genesis reveal that God exists as a tri-unity of divine persons, what later Christian theologians came to call the Trinity -- Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This is reinforced in Genesis 1:27 on the sixth day of creation when God says, "Let us make man in *our* image..." Take note of the *community* (a word which derives from 'common unity') inherent in that pronoun. In fact, the Hebrew word translated in English as "God" is the word *elohim*, which is actually plural (Hebrew words ending in "im" are the plural form of the word). That is quite surprising in a fiercely monotheistic culture.

There is also the story of the three visitors to Abraham. Immediately after God makes a covenant with Abraham, chapter 18 begins with:

The LORD appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. He said, "My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. (Genesis 18:1-3, NRSV)²

Understanding God's nature as triune, as a *community* of divine *oneness*, makes sense of all this. The term "Godhead" is used as a kind of shorthand to refer to all three persons of the Trinity.

Because the Godhead exists as three persons -- Father, Son, and Holy Spirit -- in one God, *God exists as a community of divine persons*. Within the community of the Godhead, *God experiences oneness, intimacy, and wholeness*. This is key. As Eastern Orthodox writer, Sister Nonna Harrison, puts it:

² See Andrei Rublev's icon, *The Trinity*, also called *The Hospitality of Abraham*, based upon this story. Rublev was a 15th century Russian painter, and this icon is his most famous work, one of the most famous of all Russian icons. http://www.wellsprings.org.uk/rublevs_icon/rublev.htm

“The three divine persons are forever united with each other in mutual love, they dwell in each other. They collaborate continually, sharing as one in all their activities. ... Though they are three persons, they are one God, and they always act in unanimity.”³

God is thus the perfect model of oneness, community, intimacy, and wholeness. There is a oneness, a unity, within the nature of God -- Father with Son, Son with Spirit, Spirit with Father. And we are created to bear and reflect that image in God’s temple of heaven and earth.

This explains why Jesus, in his prayer in John 17, just before his death on the cross, prayed for God’s ultimate will to be done. Jesus prayed for the fulfillment of The Genesis Project, that is, that his followers *would experience being one* – with the Godhead, and with one another, which has been God’s will all along:

And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one. (John 17:11, NRSV)

...that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. (John 17:21, NRSV)

When God creates us in God’s image, we are created with a longing for oneness, also experienced as a desire for community, intimacy, and wholeness. We see this not only in Jesus’ John 17 prayer, but we see it also in 2 Peter 1:4:

Thus, he has given us, through these things, his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of lust and may become participants of the divine nature. (2 Peter 1:4, NRSV)

As bearers and reflectors of the oneness within God’s being, as participants of the divine nature, we are created with a longing for connection and intimacy with God and with others.

Remember, the Bible presents as God’s supreme achievement the creation on day six of human beings, who are to experience and reflect God’s oneness.

If our experiencing oneness, community, intimacy, and wholeness is God’s original and ultimate will, God’s highest aim for us, then these things deserve to be shared! So, God gave two directives to the humans for the increase of oneness, community, intimacy, and wholeness:

Then God said, “Let us make man (Hebrew: ‘adam, here meaning ‘human beings’) in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.” So, God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.” (Genesis 1:26-28, NIV 1984)

³ Sr. Nonna Harrison in the *St. Nina Quarterly*, Volume 3, No. 3.

The human beings' first assignment as bearers of God's image in God's temple of heaven and earth was to have children and to raise them so that they, too, would become reproductive and thereby fill the earth, spreading the blessing of oneness, wholeness, community, and intimacy. Gilbert Bilezikian⁴ calls this, "the *domestic* mandate."

Their second job is to care for God's temple – heaven and earth -- to look after it, to rule it and subdue it. Not to exploit it but to care for it as God cares for it. Think of a park ranger! This is the work God had undertaken when God tamed chaos "in the beginning" and brought order out of that chaos. Human beings, made in and bearers of the image of God, are to continue the work God began at creation. Again, following Bilezikian, we call this "the *dominion* mandate."

We can see that as those created in the image of God to bear and reflect God's image of oneness in God's temple of heaven and earth, we have four realms, or relationships, in which we are to bear and reflect oneness: in our relationships with God, others, creation, and self.

Unfortunately, we see all four of these relationships broken in Genesis 3 in "The Garden of Eden Incident," commonly known as the Fall.

Obviously, the relationship of Adam and his wife with God becomes broken. They do the very thing God told them not to do! The story starts with God as provider (Genesis 1:29). God provides the humans with food, meaningful work to do, and intimate relationships -- with God, Adam with his wife, and with the created world. That created world, the garden of Eden, is described as a paradise. And when these relationships are functioning with oneness as God intended them to function, Adam and his wife experience wholeness, or holistic health.

The relationship of Adam and his wife with God is so intimate that it is depicted as walking with God through the garden in the cool of the day (Genesis 3:8). But when God discovers their disobedience, Adam says:

"I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I WAS AFRAID..." (Genesis 3:10, NRSV)

Fear is not part of a relationship of wholeness. Because of their disobedience, because of their attempt to become their own gods, their oneness with God is broken.

Back in Genesis 1, where God's original purpose, will, and intent is first revealed, God creates human beings -- BOTH male and female -- in God's image, and God gives BOTH male and female the domestic and dominion mandates. There is no gender-based differentiation or role assignment in The Genesis Project. There is only partnership. There is oneness in the relationship between Adam and his wife. Adam had said when God first brought his wife to him:

"This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh..." (Genesis 2:23, NRSV)

When God discovers they have done the very thing which God told them not to do, God asked Adam:

"Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" (Genesis 3:11, NRSV)

⁴ Gilbert Bilezikian, *Community 101: Reclaiming the Church as a Community of Oneness*, Zondervan Publishing House, 1997

Adam replies:

“THE WOMAN whom YOU GAVE TO BE WITH ME, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate.” (Genesis 3:12, NRSV)

Rather than confess his sin Adam passes the buck! He blames his wife! Note the Scripture makes clear Adam was standing right next to her when she was tempted by the serpent:

So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, WHO WAS WITH HER, and he ate. (Genesis 3:6, NRSV)

Obviously, Adam’s wife did not appreciate being given the whole blame for something he participated in. Their oneness was broken.

And in case blaming his wife doesn’t get Adam off the hook, he blames God! “The woman whom YOU gave to be with me!” So, two of the four key relationships are now shattered.

What about the relationship with creation itself? God says:

“Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten of the tree about which I commanded you, ‘You shall not eat of it,’ cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life, THORNS AND THISTLES it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground...” (Genesis 3:17-19, NRSV)

The garden, formerly described as a paradise that produced all the food they needed, now will produce “thorns and thistles.” Only by the sweat of his hard work will creation yield food for them now. Their relationship of oneness with creation is broken.

When we have messed up our relationship with God, messed up our relationship with our significant other, and even messed up our relationship with creation, how do we feel about ourselves? Terrible. Guilt, shame, and fear come to characterize even our relationship with ourselves. So, the relationship of oneness with ourselves is broken.

By the end of Genesis 3, all four of the key relationships inherent in reflecting God’s image in God’s temple of heaven and earth lie in ruins. But God NEVER gives up on the original plan! God WILL fulfill The Genesis Project and does so in Jesus Christ.

The rest of the Old Testament is the story of Abram – later renamed Abraham – and his descendants. It is the story of God’s working through five covenants to heal the intimacy-killing virus called Sin. But through those covenants God works to fulfill The Genesis Project. It always remains God’s purpose, will, and intent that human beings be restored to oneness, community, intimacy and wholeness with God, with one another, with creation, and with self. This is so that we might bear and reflect God’s image in God’s temple of heaven and earth as we carry out our vocation – fulfilling the domestic and dominion mandates. This has been God’s purpose since “the beginning.”

Fast forward to the New Testament for a moment. God came back in Jesus to fulfill The Genesis Project. Jesus came to heal all the ways our oneness is broken – oneness with God, with one another, with

creation, and with self. Abraham's people failed at the healing task. They were blessed but failed to be a blessing and a light to the nations. Instead, they became part of the Sin problem themselves. So, God did what God had to do. God came in the flesh in Jesus of Nazareth as healer/savior to do what Israel had originally been called to do, to fulfill The Genesis Project.

God's desire for us to bear and reflect God's image in God temple of heaven and earth, and to do that in four key relationships, goes all the way back to "in the beginning." We must never lightly give up on our oneness with God, others, creation, and self. Bearing witness to oneness is a disciple's most fundamental call.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. St. Augustine wrote, *"You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you."* Discuss what you think he meant by that expression.
2. Read 1 Samuel 5:1-5. What was the purpose of an image, such as Dagon, in a temple? Read Exodus 20:4 and Deuteronomy 5:8. Why does God forbid the casting of graven images in the Ten Commandments?
3. Read Genesis 1:26-28. What is the significance that human beings ("*adam*," meaning humanity) are created in God's image?
4. Read Genesis 1:1-3 and John 1:1-3, 14. What do these passages tell us about God's nature that we are to bear and reflect? Where are we to bear and reflect God's image? How does this impact you as you think about being created with this vocation?
5. Discuss Eastern Orthodox writer, Sister Nonna Harrison's quote: "The three divine persons are forever united with each other in mutual love, they dwell in each other. They collaborate continually, sharing as one in all their activities. ... Though they are three persons, they are one God, and they always act in unanimity." What is she trying to say about God?
6. Read John 17:11, 21. How is Sister Harrison's idea related to what Jesus prays?
7. Read 2 Peter 1:4. What does the Bible mean when it says that we may, "become participants of the divine nature"? In what ways are you participating in the divine nature?
8. Read Genesis 1:26-28 again. What is meant by "the domestic mandate" and "the dominion mandate"?
9. Putting all this together, what is The Genesis Project? How does it help you to understand what authentic human living is?

For Further Reading: *The Genesis Project* by Bob Johnson

READING SCRIPTURE TOGETHER
Sharing a High Value of Scripture
by Teresa Rossy

The Primary Importance of Scripture

The founder of Methodism, John Wesley, believed that the living core of the Christian faith was revealed in Scripture, illumined by tradition, vivified in personal experience, and confirmed by reason. Scripture is primary, revealing the Word of God “so far as it is necessary for our salvation.” Therefore, our theological task, in both its critical and constructive aspects, focuses on disciplined study of the Bible . . . in that task Scripture, as the constitutive witness to the wellsprings of our faith, occupies a place of primary authority among these theological sources. (From the Book of Discipline, 2016 ¶105)

Scripture is inspired by God: Inspire is from Latin “breathe into.” God inspired the writings of the Bible by the Holy Spirit. How else could you explain its unusual construction: 66 books, 40 different authors (kings, fishermen, scholars, peasants) working independently over 15 centuries (60 generations mostly oral tradition) in three continents (Asia, Africa, Europe) and three languages (Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek) resulting in a single subject: God’s Love (main point) shown through Jesus Christ (main character). Over time, God spoke in Moses’ language to Moses; in David’s language to David; in Jesus’ language to Jesus; in Paul’s language to Paul, and John’s language to John. It is intended to be read as Story, with each author contributing their story to the larger Story.¹

The understanding that God’s word is something very close to God-dictated is “a definition that Paul himself did not give,” writes Adam Hamilton in “Making Sense of the Bible.” This idea, known as verbal, plenary inspiration, is not taught in the Bible. It came to be popular in modern days as a response to Enlightenment theologians who challenged Scripture, questioning almost everything in it. Some Christians in the 19th Century responded by articulating a doctrine of inspiration which said that every word of the Bible was chosen and inspired by God himself. This is labeled inerrancy or infallibility of Scripture and it leads to the cordoning off of the Bible so that it cannot be questioned.

“None of the historic creeds of the church, those from the first five hundred years of the Christian faith, mention an infallible or inerrant Bible or the idea of verbal, plenary inspiration, and none begin with an affirmation of faith in the scriptures. But for many, this has become the first and foundational creed of Christendom,” Hamilton in “Making Sense of the Bible” p. 140.

The Articles of Religion of the Methodist Church were adopted from the Church of England in 1808 when Methodism first became a denomination. By the Restrictive Rule, they cannot be changed by even our General Conference, the rule-making body of the church. These articles are numbered:

Article I -- Of Faith in the Holy Trinity

Article II – Of the Word, or Son of God, Who Was Made Very Man

Article III – Of the Resurrection of Christ

Article IV – Of the Holy Ghost

Article V – Of the Sufficiency of the Holy Scriptures for Salvation

In this ordering, one sees that in accordance with the traditional creeds of the church universal,

Methodist Christians begin with faith in the Triune God and follow our belief in God with reliance on Scripture.

For an overview of The Articles of Religion, Wesley's Sermons and Notes, and What United Methodists Believe about the Bible, [go to the article](#) by David F. Watson, dean of United Theological Seminary.

Scripture interpretation has been practiced throughout history by Jews and Christians. There is a rich history of interpretation of the progressive revelation of God's message to humanity that is revealed in the Bible. Jesus looked to the heart of the teachings more than the letter of the law. For example in the Sermon on the Mount, he says: "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire." (Matthew 5:21-22, NRSV)

Paul interpreted the Hebrew Scriptures to shape Christianity. So did James. Both use the example of Abraham's faith to make opposite arguments for justification by faith alone and faith without works being dead. (Read Genesis 15, Romans 4, Galatians 3, and James 2.)

Since the last letter was written (probably 2 Peter), church leaders have had continued conversations and debates about Scripture – beginning with what books to include in the canon. Origen of Alexandria and his theological successor Augustine of Hippo disagreed.

"Both saw Christian life developmentally, though each valued the beginning stage of faith differently. Origen expected purity and holiness from the visible Church, while Augustine allowed saints and sinners to mix for the sake of love. Origen saw eschatological punishment as temporary and pedagogical, inclining toward ultimate salvation (universalism), while Augustine thought unending penal justice serves God's glory (restrictivism)." ²

The reformers took issue with the Roman Catholic church's use of the Bible; the literalists pushed back against the Enlightenment thinkers, and in our day, Bible teaching varies across the spectrum of verse-by-verse, book-by-book studies to reading the Bible as allegory or as a puzzle to be put together. The point for us is to be aware of the influence unringing the many Bible studies and teachers we encounter in our quest to be shaped by Scripture.

Reading the Bible as a Whole Story is vital when interpreting and applying Scripture. The Story of the Bible begins in Genesis 1 and 2 with Creation. Oneness with God, self, others and the created world are on full display in these formative chapters. This is God's original intention for creation. In Chapter 3, oneness between God and humanity and the world falls apart and human brokenness enters in. We call it sin. This sin story plays out in families and communities until Genesis 12, when God begins again with humans – this time in the form of covenant community starting with Noah's family. God's plan is for us to live in covenant with God and with one another. This longest portion of Scripture is also called the story of Israel. "This covenanted community, which focuses on oneness with others, will shape the rest of the Bible," writes McKnight. (p. 73-74) "God's idea of redemption is community-shaped. Oneness cannot be achieved just between God and self; rather, oneness (unity) involves God, self, and others,

and the world around us.” Many of us Christians want to skip directly from Genesis 3 to the New Testament and get to the New Covenant created by God through Jesus Christ. And yet, even if we mistakenly do that, we find in the pages of the New Testament, right after the Gospels, the story of the Church (Acts – Jude), another covenanted community designed to reflect and usher in the Kingdom of God for the rest of the world – including the Gentiles. Finally the Bible ends as it begins -- in a garden beside a river of living water where Jesus appears inviting all persons to “come and drink.” Jesus is depicted as a bridegroom and the Church is his bride. Hope for redemption for all who will worship God is promised.

Consistency is important when interpreting and applying Scripture. Our tendency is to pick and choose; the task for careful readers of Scripture is to be aware of how we do so and through which lens. Scot McKnight, in his book “The Blue Parakeet” writes, “Too many of us don’t want to admit that we are picking and choosing. Even if we prefer (as I do) to say ‘adopting and adapting,’ we are doing something similar. But I think we need to face this squarely and honestly. I’ve learned that it is time to think about why and how we pick what we pick and why and how we choose what we choose. What can we do to get ourselves to face this question honestly? (p. 19) He goes on to suggest that we gather with a few friends and open the Bible to the hard passages and ask ourselves this question: “How, then, are we to live out the Bible today?”

There is an inner logic to our picking and choosing, but we need to become aware of what it is, says McKnight. For example, “Why take a stand on homosexuality as a sin but not divorce and remarriage and marriage to unbelievers?”

[Watch a video of McKnight:](#) What I Wish Every Christian Would Do When Reading the Bible

[Link to PDF and Video:](#) Methodism for Dummies, Part Two, How Do Methodists Read the Bible

From Asbury UMC, Highland Heights, KY

PRACTICAL APPLICATION ON DIFFICULT PASSAGES

A Case Study: Divorce and Remarriage in Scripture

Using divorce and remarriage as a case study for the dilemma our denomination faces around a Biblical view of the practice of homosexuality is the “closest we can get to apples-to-apples examples,” according to Rev. Dr. John Stephens, senior pastor of Chapelwood UMC in Houston. “Traditional Non-Compatibilists in the United States define their incompatibility around the issue of same sex marriage and LGBTQIA+ ordination. But they are actually compatibilists on other issues related to marriage (and ordination) as it relates to marriage between believers and unbelievers and divorce and remarriage. Not only are these comparable theological and Biblical examples, but they are also examples that were both once prohibited in our Methodist Book of Discipline, but over time were adapted and allowed, based on faithful interpretation of the Scriptures, tradition, reason, and experience of United Methodists.”

1. Marriage Between Believers and Unbelievers: Do Not Be Unequally Yoked

2 Corinthians 6:14-16a says, “Do not be mismatched with unbelievers. For what partnership is there between righteousness and lawlessness? Or what fellowship is there between light and darkness? What

agreement does Christ have with Beliar? Or what does a believer share with an unbeliever? What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God;”

“When I was growing up at St. Mark UMC in Columbus, Georgia, I remember my youth director talking about not being ‘unequally yoked’ which is the King James Version of ‘mismatched with unbelievers’. He always told the story about two people – one standing on a table and the other on the ground holding hands. “Which do you think will happen easier? The one on the table pulling up the person from the floor or the person on the floor pulling the person on the table down?” He said this is the same as dating or being married to an unbeliever. I tried the best I could in high school to follow the advice. I do think there is some value in it. I have counseled many couples of different faiths or different belief systems and those marriages can be difficult, but they can also work,” says Stephens.

2. Scriptures in the New Testament Regarding Divorce and Remarriage

In Mark 10:10-12, *“Then in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. He said to them, “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery with her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.”*

In Matthew 19:1-9, *“When Jesus had finished saying these things, he left Galilee and went into the region of Judea to the other side of the Jordan. Large crowds followed him, and he healed them there. Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?” “Haven’t you read,” he replied, “that at the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female,’ and said, ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh’? (Genesis 1:27, 2:24) So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, let no one separate.” “Why then,” they asked, “did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?” Jesus replied, “Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. (Deuteronomy 24:1-4) But it was not this way from the beginning. I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery.”*

Matthew 5:31-32, *“It was also said, “Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.”*

Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 7:10-15, *“To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord): A wife must not separate from her husband. But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife. To the rest I say this (I, not the Lord): If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him. For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. But if the unbeliever leaves, let it be so. The brother or the sister is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace.”*

And in Romans 7:1-3, *“Do you not know, brothers and sisters—for I am speaking to those who know the law—that the law has authority over someone only as long as that person lives? For example, by law a married woman is bound to her husband as long as he is alive, but if her husband dies, she is released from the law that binds her to him. So then, if she has sexual relations with another man while her husband is still alive, she is called an adulteress. But if her husband dies, she is released from that law and is not an adulteress if she marries another man.”*

Leviticus 20:10, *“If a man commits adultery with another man’s wife – with the wife of his neighbor – both the adulterer and the adulteress must be put to death.”*

3. The Methodist Book of Discipline on Divorce and Remarriage

From 1896, the Doctrine and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church South read, *“No divorce, except for adultery, shall be regarded by the Church as lawful; and no Minister shall solemnize marriage in any case where there is a divorced wife or husband living; but this rule shall not be applied to the innocent party to a divorce for the cause of adultery.”*

In the 1934 Doctrine and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church South, ¶173 states, *“The ministers of our Church shall be prohibited from solemnizing the rites of matrimony between divorced persons, except in case of innocent parties who have been divorced for the one scriptural cause.”* Outside of one’s spouse committing adultery and abandoning the marriage, there was no allowance for remarriage.

In the 1956 Discipline of the Methodist Church, new language was added to expand the allowance for remarriage by recognizing extra-Biblical situations: abusive relationships. ¶356 states, *“No minister shall solemnize the marriage of a divorced person whose wife or husband is living and unmarried; but this rule shall not apply (1) to the innocent person when it is clearly established by competent testimony that the true cause for divorce was adultery or other vicious conditions which through mental or physical cruelty or physical peril invalidated the marriage vow, nor (2) to the divorced persons seeking to be reunited in marriage. The violation of this rule concerning divorce shall be considered at act of maladministration.”*

This addition of extra-Biblical guidance was helpful as churches and pastors were faced with the dilemma of abused spouses in their congregations. It actually shows up in the 1940 version. **The concept of God’s redeeming grace coming alongside the least of these to allow for redemption through remarriage reveals a living interpretation rooted in the context of real life.**

In the 1968 Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church, ¶97 of the Social Principles has a section called Family Life.

On Marriage, it states: *“Marriage is an institution of divine appointment, upon the proper establishment of which are conditioned human happiness and well-being and the maintenance of the most important factor of civilization – the Christian home. Virtue and morality in society, stability and permanence of free*

government can be had only as the Christian home is maintained in its integrity. In view of the gravity of interests involved in marriage, the Church admonishes all young people as follows: (1) to cherish only worthy and ennobling thoughts on the subject of courtship and marriage. (2) to avoid undue haste, and practice intelligent deliberation in every step pertaining to this matter. (3) to enter into marriage only after a favorable personal acquaintanceship sufficient to insure compatibility and the blessings of a Christian home, and to do so only when it can be "in the Lord" (1 Cor. 7:39) and thus avoid being "mismatched with unbelievers" (2 Cor 6:14) in life's most intimate relationship."

On Divorce, it states: *"Since marriage is of divine appointment and the union of one man and one woman entered into mutually, it is sacred and morally binding so long as both shall live and ought not to be dissolved at will. When human failure results in placing the marriage in jeopardy, the Church strongly urges the persons involved to seek counsel with their minister in order to effect reconciliation so that the marriage may be preserved. The Church does not sanction or condone divorce except on the grounds of adultery.*

"Ministers of the Church shall not solemnize any marriage without first counseling earnestly with the couple. Whenever divorced persons seek marriage through the Church, ministers may only solemnize such marriages only after having ascertained the circumstances through counsel with those persons involved, and after they are satisfied that the divorced persons have sought for and received forgiveness and are seeking genuine Christian relationship not only in marriage but with God. Ministers may, if it seems desirable, consult with their fellow ministers and/or local church officials."

The statement on divorce now allows for remarriage after earnestly counseling with the couple. If the minister feels they are sufficiently seeking and received forgiveness and seeking Christian relationship with each other and with God, it sounds like they may perform the marriage. **This is a departure from the prohibition of remarriage in early Disciplines and is not in alignment with Mark 10:10-12, Matthew 19:1-9, Matthew 5:31-32, 1 Corinthians 7:10-15, and Romans 7:1-3 which states that anyone who remarries, except for adultery, is committing adultery.**

From 1984 Book of Discipline of the UMC, *"Where marriage partners, even after thoughtful consideration and counsel, are estranged beyond reconciliation, we recognize divorce as regrettable but recognize the right of divorced persons to remarry. ... We encourage an active, accepting, and enabling commitment of the church and our society to minister to the members of divorced families."*

In the 2016 Book of Discipline of the UMC, ¶161.C and D speak to marriage and divorce:
*C) Marriage—We affirm the sanctity of the marriage covenant that is expressed in love, mutual support, personal commitment, and shared fidelity between a man and a woman. We believe that God's blessing rests upon such marriage, whether or not there are children of the union. We reject social norms that assume different standards for women than for men in marriage. We support laws in civil society that define marriage as the union of one man and one woman.**

*Note that the addition in 1974 of "the union between one man and one woman" was added in the UMCs support of laws in civil society that define marriage that way.

D) Divorce—God’s plan is for lifelong, faithful marriage. The church must be on the forefront of premarital, marital, and post-marital counseling in order to create and preserve healthy relationships. However, when a married couple is estranged beyond reconciliation, even after thoughtful consideration and counsel, divorce is a regrettable alternative in the midst of brokenness. We grieve over the devastating emotional, spiritual, and economic consequences of divorce for all involved, understanding that women and especially children are disproportionately impacted by such burdens. As the Church we are concerned about high divorce rates. It is recommended that methods of mediation be used to minimize the adversarial nature and fault-finding that are often part of our current judicial processes, encouraging reconciliation wherever possible. We also support efforts by governments to reform divorce laws and other aspects of family law in order to address negative trends such as high divorce rates.

Although divorce publicly declares that a marriage no longer exists, other covenantal relationships resulting from the marriage remain, such as the nurture and support of children and extended family ties. We urge respectful negotiations in deciding the custody of minor children and support the consideration of either or both parents for this responsibility in that custody not be reduced to financial support, control, or manipulation and retaliation. The welfare of each child is the most important consideration.

Divorce does not preclude a new marriage. We encourage an intentional commitment of the Church and society to minister compassionately to those in the process of divorce, as well as members of divorced and remarried families, in a community of faith where God’s grace is shared by all.

Stephens points out, “While this language was added before 2016, notice the allowance and accommodation that cites the “high divorce rates.” We even advocate for reforms to reduce the divorce rates in society. Notice the deep pastoral concern as well for all the relationships affected by the divorce. There is an understanding of the need for broader concern to address very real pastoral concerns – no longer a simple prohibition.

“Notice our current position: divorce does not preclude a new marriage. There is no mention of any Biblical restriction at all or even a reference to it. We call for and encourage an intentional commitment of the Church and minister to respond compassionately to the members of the divorced and remarried families and welcome them into the community of faith where God’s grace is shared by all.

“As we consider this transition from the early 20th century to today, it is important to hear again the last line in the section on divorce – which no longer precludes a new marriage. Why did we make that change? Because we are a community of faith where God’s grace is shared by all.”

A LOOK AT HOMOSEXUAL PRACTICES IN THE BIBLE

By Rev. Bob Johnson

The quintessential feature of being a Traditionalist as we are using the term is having a high view of Scripture. A Traditionalist accepts that the Scriptures -- both Old and New Testaments -- are inspired by God even if written through the agency of human authors over centuries of time. A Traditionalist therefore gets very uncomfortable if he or she thinks they must deviate from Scriptural meaning to take a certain position, such as acceptance of homosexuality. That is what makes the current impasse in the United Methodist Church so uncomfortable for them.

Many Traditionalists have been taught, and they have long believed, that homosexual practice, i.e., same gender sexual relations, is a sin condemned by the Bible. Indeed, the language of the current United Methodist Book of Discipline “does not condone the practice of homosexuality and considers this practice incompatible with Christian teaching.” Thus, belonging to a denomination that if not condoning, at least fails to condemn homosexuality, causes the Traditionalist to question whether s/he can remain with theological integrity in that denomination. There are plenty of denominations, including the new Global Methodist Church, where homosexuality is condemned as a sin. Must the Traditionalist belong to one of these denominations?

Yes, if the Bible really does condemn all homosexual practice as sin. But does it? Is that view of homosexuality REALLY what the scriptures teach?

I conclude that this question is much more complex and not quite as clear cut as Traditionalists have been taught to believe. It's so easy to accept what another who we respect has taught us, or what a Book of Discipline declares. The word “homosexual” never appears in either the Old or New Testaments, of course, because that is an English word. Therefore, we are forced to deal with the concept in the Bible's original languages and cultural contexts. To truly be a Traditionalist, to truly be a person with a high view scripture, we must not take the easy way. We must actually do the hard work of diving into the languages, cultures, and concepts of the scriptures we love to accurately hear what they reveal.

There are generally considered to be seven biblical passages that appear to condemn homosexuality as a sin, four in the Old Testament and three in the New. These passages are:

1. Noah and his son Ham in Genesis 9:20-27
2. The men of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19:1-11
3. Levitical laws condemning same-sex relationships between men in Leviticus 18:22
4. Levitical laws condemning same-sex relationships between men in Leviticus 20:13
5. The vice list in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10
6. The vice list in 1 Timothy 1:10
7. Paul's words in Romans 1:26-27

One thing to notice right off the bat when reading these passages, they all deal with same sex relations between MEN; there is nothing about same sex relations between WOMEN. If same gender sex is being condemned in general, wouldn't we expect lesbianism to be condemned as well? Why, then, is it not?

Space does not afford me the luxury of commenting on all these passages. Other people have done an excellent job of doing so. Instead, I'd like to focus on the Sodom and Gomorrah story, and two of the three New Testament passages. Again, my goal is just to illustrate how a Traditionalist Compatibilist can hold these scriptures in high value and still with theological integrity belong to a denomination that does not condemn committed, loving homosexuality as a sin.

Let's begin with the Sodom and Gomorrah story, since the word "sodomy" and "sodomite" derive from this story and these words are often taken to be synonymous with homosexual practice. I suggest you read the story in Genesis 19:1-11. It's telling that the NRSV, in translating both 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 and 1 Timothy 1:10, in contrast to other translations, uses the word "sodomites" rather than "homosexual." Other translations use "men who have sex with men" (New International Version - NIV) or "abusers of themselves" (King James Version - KJV). Because "sodomy" is often equated with homosexuality, this is significant.

The words "sodomite" and "sodomy" derive from the famous incident in the Old Testament where the Lord destroys the cities of Sodom and nearby Gomorrah for their sin.

Then the LORD rained on Sodom and Gomorrah sulfur and fire from the LORD out of heaven; and he overthrew those cities, and all the Plain, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and what grew on the ground. (Genesis 19:24-25, NRSV)

What in the world had they done to deserve that fate?

It all goes back to an incident concerning Abraham's nephew, Lot, and his family. Two angels of the Lord, who appeared as ordinary men, came to Sodom where Lot lived. Lot, who recognized them as visitors to town but not as angels, offered them hospitality by inviting them to stay overnight at his home and be refreshed by a home-cooked meal. So, the visitors agreed to stay with Lot.

The men of Sodom, from the youngest to the oldest, upon hearing that there were two strangers in town, went to Lot's house:

Before they had gone to bed, all the men from every part of the city of Sodom-- both young and old -- surrounded the house. They called to Lot, "Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us so that we can have sex with them." (Genesis 19:4-5, NIV)

Technically, what the NIV translates as "have sex with them" is the Hebrew "know them." But there is no doubt that in the Hebrew of the Old Testament, "know them" is a euphemism for "have sex with them."

So, this story is clearly condemning homosexuality, right? If it were, isn't it strange that Lot goes outside to offer these men the *heterosexual* use of his engaged-but-not-yet-married daughters?

Look, I have two daughters who have never slept with a man. Let me bring them out to you, and you can do what you like with them. But don't do anything to these men, for they have come under the protection of my roof." (Genesis 19:8, NIV)

What is really being condemned is the lack of hospitality and the violence of rape intended by the men of Sodom on these guests of their city. These men, for their own pleasure, were violating the Middle Eastern obligation of hospitality for the guest, an important cultural value even to this very day.

One of my Old Testament professors in seminary, Dr. William Power, once told us this story. On a cruise there was an American family with a young son, and the Pakistani national soccer team. It happened one evening that several of the soccer players and this American family with their son ate dinner together at the same table on the ship. The young boy was thrilled to dine with such sports heroes. The next day the ship docked, and the family rented mopeds to explore the island. The young boy suffered a terrible accident and was hospitalized in serious condition when his moped slid off an embankment. He desperately needed blood. The entire Pakistani soccer team volunteered to donate and ended up saving the boy's life. When he was recovering, several members of the team visited him in the hospital. The boy asked, "Why did you all donate blood to save me? We hardly even know each other?" The captain of the team replied, "Because we ate together. Where we come from, that makes us family. And you do whatever it takes to help family." He was expressing an attitude still common in that part of the world today.

Lot ate with the two angels from God. He was obligated to protect his new "family." But the obligation to offer protection and hospitality to visitors also fell upon the men of Sodom, in whose city the visitors rested. But they did not fulfill their obligation. Instead, they sought the violence of rape to fulfill their own lustful wants. That is what is being condemned by the destruction of Sodom. That is what "sodomy" is. Not homosexual practice as the committed love and devotion of one person for another person of the same gender as that term is used today.

Let's look now at the two "vice list" New Testament passages in 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 and 1 Timothy 1:9-11:

Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites (GREEK: arsenokoitēs), thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers -- none of these will inherit the kingdom of God. And this is what some of you used to be. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God. (1 Corinthians 6:9-11, NRSV)

This means understanding that the law is laid down not for the innocent but for the lawless and disobedient, for the godless and sinful, for the unholy and profane, for those who kill their father or mother, for murderers, fornicators, sodomites (GREEK: arsenokoitēs), slave traders, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to the sound teaching that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me. (1 Timothy 1:9-11, NRSV)

The Greek word translated by the NRSV as "sodomites" is *arsenokoitēs* or *arsenokoitōi*. It literally means "people of the man-bed." It is made up of two parts. The first is *arrhēn* or *arsēn*, which itself derives from *airō* meaning "to lift up, take up," or figuratively, "to raise." So, *arrhēn* or *arsēn* means male in the sense of "strong for lifting" as opposed to *anthropos* which means "man" in a general sense. The second part is *koitē*, meaning "a place for laying down, resting, or sleeping" as in a bed or couch. It also can refer to the marriage bed. The ending *oi* or *tēs* means "people of..." Putting all these word parts

together, we get “people of the man-bed,” which is why it is often translated by the modern English word “homosexual” (male with male variety).

So, it appears these two passages are condemning male homosexual practice pure and simple, right. Let’s dig into the culture of the time a little before accepting that premise.

Parsing a word in any language like this to extract meaning is misleading at best and dangerous at worst, even in English. For example, if someone just learning but not yet familiar with English did this, they would think they should park their car on a parkway and drive it on a driveway. That could easily get them hurt because a parkway is for driving and a driveway is for parking! We would want our new English-speaker to know more about the broader cultural contexts of these expressions before settling on the meaning of finely parsed words. And so must we in hearing what these scriptures are revealing.

The letters of 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy, both authored most likely by Paul, were written in the latter half of the first century A.D. when the Roman Empire ruled. Male with male sex was common and accepted under one important cultural caveat. (Female with female sex is rarely mentioned in surviving documents of the period and not at all in the New Testament.)

A Roman citizen's political liberty (*libertas*) was defined in part by the right to preserve his body from physical compulsion, which included both corporal punishment and sexual abuse. This is the cultural value lying behind the stories of Paul saving himself from further punishment at the hands of Roman authorities by revealing that he was, in fact, a Roman citizen. Roman society was patriarchal and ruled by the male head of the household. Masculinity was seen as the capacity to govern oneself and others of lower status. Lack of self-control, including in managing one's sex life, indicated that a man was incapable of governing others; too much indulgence in "low sensual pleasure" threatened to erode the elite male's identity as a cultured person.

In the Roman system, sexual conquest was a common metaphor for imperialism, i.e., the expansion of the Empire by conquest. The "conquest mentality" was part of a "cult of virility" as it still is in much modern sports culture. “Trash talk” and the threat of conquest is valued today to establish one’s dominance in the ensuing contest.

This “cult of virility” particularly shaped Roman homosexual practices. The Roman ideal of masculinity was not threatened by same sex relations so long as one caveat was observed: that the freeborn Roman man of virility take the dominant role. Modern scholars of Roman history and culture view expressions of Roman male sexuality in terms of a "penetrator-penetrated" binary model. Allowing himself to be penetrated threatened his liberty as a free citizen as well as his sexual integrity. But being the “conqueror,” i.e., the penetrator, was acceptable. This explains why pederasty, i.e., man with boy sexual relations, was socially acceptable in Roman culture. The use of the boy was acceptable in the submissive role as a symbol of conquest.

It was expected and socially acceptable for a freeborn Roman man to want sex with BOTH female and male partners. But when engaging in sexual activity outside marriage a Roman man was supposed to act on his desires only with those of lower social status, such as slaves and prostitutes (who were often slaves). Gender per se did not determine whether a sexual partner was acceptable, so long as the caveat of the freeborn male playing the dominant role was observed. While it was considered immoral to have sex with another freeborn man's wife, his marriageable daughter, his underage son, or with the man

himself, and sexual use of another man's slave was subject to the owner's permission, same sex relations were thus not considered immoral per se.

So, the Roman culture's view of homosexuality -- the cultural umbrella under which Paul wrote these two lists of vices -- was not one of mutual love and commitment. It was one of submission and dominance, which could easily lead to violence, rape, and abuse, especially of young boys and slaves. It was the prevailing culture's acceptance and even promotion of dominance of one over another, the antithesis of "love thy neighbor," that Paul was condemning. That would explain why female with female same sex relations is not even mentioned. One can make a similar case for the other vices on Paul's lists being the antithesis of either "love God" or "love neighbor." "Love" itself was not being condemned.

I have not even attempted to deal with all seven scriptures dealing with issues of same sex relations. But I have attempted to show how these three scriptures can be read with high regard by a Traditionalist and still be compatible with a denomination that does not condemn homosexuality as a sin. But we must do the hard work of dealing with original languages, cultures, and concepts to hear what our beloved scriptures are actually revealing.

A Note on The Methodist Book of Discipline on Homosexual Practice

Throughout this study, we present how United Methodist polity has evolved over time in response to societal changes. Methodists first publicly debated this issue at the 1972 General Conference, when this language was added to the Social Principles: *"Homosexuals no less than heterosexuals are persons of sacred worth."* To which was added by the conference: *"though we do not condone the practice of homosexuality and consider this practice incompatible with Christian teaching."* ¶161G 2016 Book of Discipline

Subsequent actions by General Conference (the UMC law-making body that meets every four years) added in 1976: *We do not recognize a relationship between two persons of the same sex as constituting marriage" and banned the use of church funds "to promote the acceptance of homosexuality."*

In 1984, GC bans ordination: of *"self-avowed practicing homosexuals are not to be accepted as candidates, ordained as ministers, or appointed to service in the UMC."* And in 1996, ceremonies to celebrate homosexual unions by clergy or in UMC churches was banned.

These two prohibitions against same-sex marriage and ordination of practicing homosexual ministers have stood through every subsequent General Conference and Special General Conference.

A WESLEYAN VIEW OF GRACE

A distinctive value of Methodist theology is our view of grace. We commonly speak of God's grace experienced by persons in three movements: Prevenient Grace, Justifying Grace, and Sanctifying Grace. These characteristics of grace show God's love and care for us.

Human Worth

The following language affirms human worth in the UMC Book of Discipline.

We affirm our unity in Jesus Christ while acknowledging differences in applying our faith in different cultural contexts as we live out the gospel. We stand united in declaring our faith that God's grace is available to all, that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

Grateful for God's forgiving love, in which we live and by which we are judges, and affirming our belief in the inestimable worth of each individual, we renew our commitment to become faithful witnesses to the gospel, not alone to the ends of earth, but also to the depths of our common life and work. (2016 Book of Discipline, Preamble to the Social Principles)

Sanctification

After a person has experienced the prevenient grace of God that leads one to conversion, or justification, then the rest of life is taken up in the process of sanctification. Methodism's founder John Wesley called this idea "entire sanctification." According to Kevin Watson, in his book "Perfect Love," Methodism's big idea is that "salvation brings not only forgiveness and pardon but also empowerment and freedom to live a faithful and holy life entirely and right now. This is our grand depositum – the treasure that God has entrusted to the particular people called Methodists."

Methodist lay person Teresa Rossy serves as Director of Adult Discipleship at Chapelwood UMC in Houston. She writes, "While our preachers famously must answer "yes" when the bishop who ordains them asks if they are going on to perfection in this life as well as in eternity, I believe that all Christians should be able to answer this question similarly. If not, what's the point of pursuing God with all our heart, mind, and strength as Jesus taught His followers? If not, what's the role of the Holy Spirit in the life of believers and in the body of Christ?"

"Because I have been taught, shown, and encouraged by the Methodist way of reading Scripture to believe that I am first a child of God, created in God's image (Genesis 1:26-27), when I encounter my own brokenness and sin, I do not spiral down into despair or permanent discouragement seeing no way out. Instead I see the hope of forgiveness, restoration, and wholeness that Christ offers me through his loving, persistent indwelling in my life. Piece by piece, attitude by attitude, circumstance by circumstance, God is leading all Christians on a journey toward entire sanctification.

"I believe this is possible for all persons. The root of the question around full inclusion of LGBTQIA+ persons is whether or not we believe that non-heterosexual orientation is a form of human brokenness. Is it something to be redeemed by God's grace or something to be celebrated as a creation gift? Does same-sex marriage fit into God's holiness code as laid out in the Bible? If not "Biblically justified," could gay marriage be part of God's circumstantial will (See Leslie Weatherhead, "The Will of God") in our current culture and faithful discernment of God's will today? If a community of Christians discern that homosexual practice is sinful; it must be realized by all who desire to stay in unity, that many other sinful practices afflict us all and that everyone needs the sanctifying grace of God."

McKnight writes in "A Fellowship of Differents," about a Third Way for churches to view these divisive issues. "The two principles of the Third Way then are: the progressive nature of our own growth in

redemption and the importance of the local church as the context for that growth. Christians are in a process of transformation, all of us without exception.” (p. 135) Although not a United Methodist, McKnight presents a compatibilist viewpoint.

An Example

Dr. John Stephens shares this conversation: As one pastor asked me not long ago, “How can a Methodist church say to remarried couples, whose second marriage is clearly condemned by the plain meaning of scripture, ‘You are welcome and wanted ... we will bless your marriage ... we will accept you and your spouse into full communion...’ while saying to the two mothers raising their adopted child together, ‘I love you ... you are welcome to come to this church ... but your marriage is an abomination and in defiance of God’s Word?’”

For further dialogue about what the Bible teaches about homosexual practice and the church’s response, watch this presentation by Kevin Watson and Kirk Soulen, recorded Dunwoody UMC in 2109. Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XkNCmsatTIE>

¹For more on this, see “The Blue Parakeet” by Scot McKnight.

²From the Oxford Handbooks Online, excerpts by Michael Cameron, professor of Historical Theology at the University of Portland, Oregon.

Reflection Questions

I want to know one thing, the way to heaven – how to land safe on that happy shore. God himself has condescended to teach the way: for this very end he came from heaven. He hath written it down in a book. O give me that book!! – John Wesley

1. What was your earliest experience with the Bible?

2. John Wesley encouraged regular meetings among Methodists, giving each other permission to hold one another accountable. The main question to ask was: How is it with your soul? Next, was this one: How have you studied God's Word this week?

Others your group can use to reflect on the impact of Scripture in our daily lives are:

What is your favorite/usual way to study the Bible?

What is your favorite Bible story about Jesus?

How to Approach a Bible Passage

Pray and ask the Holy Spirit to guide you as you study God's word.

Identify the genre. Different books of the Bible are approached in different ways just as different literary types are approached differently. For example, would you read a history book in the same way that you would read a book of poetry?

When was it written? What do you know about the historical and cultural context? What did it mean to the first hearers? Most study Bibles have introductory material at the beginning of each book that provides this information. After reading the background information and the passage, ask, What is the same today? What has changed?

Ask the "so what" question – What do you think it means for us today? Sometimes the answer might be "not much." Many times you'll find that the message is the same for us today as it was for the first hearers. These are the immutable, unchanging truths of the Bible.

Next question – "now what?" What do I need to change in my life if I take this passage seriously? What concrete thing can I do this week to show that this passage is meaningful to me?

A LOOK BACK AT AMERICAN METHODISM

Historical Framework

by Dr. Wick Stuckey

The prospect of division in the Church is as old as the Scripture itself. Even in the first century church, believers in Corinth threatened to divide over which leader to follow, and the Apostle Paul called them to unity:

“Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose. For it has been reported to me by Chloe’s people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. What I mean is that each of you says, ‘I belong to Paul,’ or, ‘I belong to Apollos,’ or, ‘I belong to Cephas,’ or, ‘I belong to Christ.’ Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?” (I Corinthians 1:10-13).

The word translated here as “divisions” is from the Greek word *scismata* from which we get the English word “schism.”

On March 30, 1786, John Wesley wrote a famous sermon entitled “On Schism”. In it, he states that schism is evil in itself:

“It (schism) is evil in itself. To separate ourselves from a body of living Christians with whom we were before united is a grievous breach of the law of love. It is the nature of love to unite us together, and the greater the love, the stricter the union. And while this continues in its strength, nothing can divide those whom love has united. It is only when our love grows cold that we can think of separating from our brethren. And this is certainly the case with any who willingly separate from their Christian brethren. The pretenses for separation may be innumerable, but want of love is always the real cause; otherwise they would still hold to the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace. It is therefore contrary to all those commands of God wherein brotherly love is enjoined: to that of St. Paul, ‘Let brotherly love continue;’ that of St. John, ‘My beloved children, love one another;’ and especially that of our blessed Master, ‘this is my commandment, that ye love one another, as I have loved you. Yea, ‘By this’, saith he, ‘shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye love one another.’”

Throughout the history of American Methodism, there have been occasions for schism, and while some have resulted in division, many have not. It may be helpful to look back at the history of our Church to identify when schisms did occur and the issues that actually caused them, and to see other issues over which the Church threatened to divide but remained united.

INSTANCES OF SCHISM

(See Lovett Weems Timeline on Schisms in the American Methodist Church)

Prior to the American Revolution, American Methodism existed as a rather informal organization under the guidance of preachers dispatched by John Wesley from the United Kingdom. When the United Kingdom lost the war, almost all of the preachers returned to England, with only Francis Asbury remaining in the former British colonies. The American preachers turned to him for leadership. The Methodist Episcopal Church (MEC) was organized in 1784. Asbury and Thomas Coke were named as Bishops, and the church grew rapidly. At this point, the question of schism, as opposed to individuals simply walking away from the group, was largely academic. The MEC had few assets, and that is what

schism is primarily about – who gets what assets. Methodists organized with at least an informal understanding that property was to be owned in common by the whole church, like the Episcopalians. This differed from Baptists and Congregationalists, among whom the property in which congregations worshipped was largely owned and controlled by the local church.

While the issue of race would dominate the causes of schism in Methodism through the mid-twentieth century, one other issue competed with race to disturb the church's peace – the power that had been ceded to the episcopacy (Bishops), especially the power to station ministers.

As early as 1792, one James O'Kelly demanded the right to appeal the appointments made by the bishops and eventually led a small group away into what he called the **Republican Methodists**. The more substantive challenge to episcopal rule came in 1830 when a group of prominent ministers focused their grievances on demands of restructuring the church with the inclusion of laypeople in the general conference, the elimination of the office of bishop, and the election of presiding elders (i.e., district superintendents). When their challenge was rebuffed, they left and founded **The Methodist Protestant Church**.

Ultimately, the first round of schisms in Methodism were rooted in racism and control of church property. The **African Union Church**, founded in 1805, the **African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church**, founded in 1816, and the **African Methodist Episcopal Zion (AMEZ) Church**, founded in 1821, were formed because of racial issues rather than theological differences. These new African American denominations substantively copied the MEC doctrine, worship and organization (complete with bishops), with one major exception. The centralized control of local church property was weakened, and local church trustees were given greater control of local church properties.

In the decades leading up to the Civil War (1861-1865), the MEC had, at least formally, taken a stance against slavery. Yet as the church continued to grow in slave states, the MEC began to weaken its position as southern membership grew. Through the 1830's abolitionist sentiments grew in the northern conferences. MEC church leadership favored a gradual elimination of slavery rather than abolition, which they viewed as extremist. In 1843, pro-abolitionist reformers withdrew and formally established the **Wesleyan Church in America**. In addition to their stance on abolition, they continued to complain about abuse of power by bishops, thus creating a non-episcopal association of churches. They also joined forces with the emerging Holiness movement, urging piety among laity, modesty in dress, and adding specific prohibitions against any compromise with slavery, use of alcohol or tobacco, or participation in secret societies (Freemasonry). Like all previous schismatic groups, the Wesleyans maintained the MEC's Articles of Religion as no doctrinal issue was at stake.

While the abolitionist issue was largely settled by the withdrawal of the Wesleyans, the issue of slavery arose again at the 1844 General Conference, where Bishop James Andrew of Georgia had inherited slaves. He felt he could not simply free them due to anti-manumission laws, so a debate arose on the floor of the Conference. The General Conference acted, again over the issue of slavery, and the **Methodist Episcopal Church, South (MECS)** was formed.

In another seemingly minor issue, the sale of church pews, a small group demanding the "freeing" of pews would not withdraw, but in a rather unique moment in Methodist history, were expelled from the church for insubordination. Their efforts at reinstatement failed and, in response, they formed the **Free Methodist Church** in 1860.

At the conclusion of the Civil War and the end of slavery, a final division based on race occurred. The MECS had brought some 200,000 African Americans into membership and invested considerable money constructing facilities for their use. Their continued fellowship as free people seemed impossible, so by

General Conference action in 1870, the MECS voted to assist their African American members to create the **Colored (now Christian) Methodist Episcopal Church**. This was the second time schism in Methodism was facilitated by the action of a General Conference.

With slavery behind them, a new issue would disturb several larger Methodist denominations in the post-Civil War years – the Holiness movement. Leaders in this movement included revivalist Phoebe Palmer (1807-1874). Several of the older schismatic groups such as the Wesleyans and Free Methodists aligned with this group. The **Church of the Nazarene**, founded by retired Methodist Minister Phineas Bresee, emerged from the Holiness movement.

As can be seen from this overview of schism in the American Methodist Church, the issues causing such divisions centered around race, slavery, episcopal authority and personal holiness. Throughout its history, the church has faced other challenging issues which did not produce schism. These issues shall be examined next.

ISSUES THAT DID NOT LEAD TO DIVISION IN THE AMERICAN METHODIST CHURCH

Creation of a segregated Central Jurisdiction and its dissolution

In the United States, the Methodist Church is divided into broad geographical areas known as jurisdictions. These provide program and leadership training events to support the annual conferences. Every four years the jurisdictional conferences meet to elect new bishops and select members of general boards and agencies. Historically, these jurisdictions are based on geography. However, in 1939 the Methodist Episcopal Church, the Methodist Episcopal Church South and the Methodist Protestant Church merged to create the Methodist Church. The Southern church only agreed to the merger after a compromise created a jurisdiction based solely on race. This was called the **Central Jurisdiction**. Nineteen black annual conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church were placed into the Central Jurisdiction. Thus, the Methodist Church was officially a segregated organization. Almost as soon as the Central Jurisdiction was established, attempts began to get rid of it. This was finally officially accomplished in 1968 with the formation of the United Methodist Church. However, in reality, the mergers of the remaining segregated annual conferences were not complete until 1972.

Not ordaining women and ordaining women

In 1770, the first Methodist woman was appointed a class leader in the United States; In 1817, women were allowed to hold prayer meetings but denied a license to preach. Mary Bosanquet Fletcher (1739-1815) was an early lay preacher credited with convincing John Wesley that some women should be allowed to preach. Women were ordained as ministers as early as the late 19th century. In 1866, Helenor M. Davisson was ordained a deacon in the Methodist Protestant Church. Anna Howard Shaw, after being refused ordination by the General Conference of the Methodist-Episcopal Church in 1880, that same year joined the Methodist Protestant Church and was ordained by its New York Annual Conference. Ella Niswonger was the first woman granted full clergy rights by the United Brethren Church in 1889.

In the discussion of ordination of women, the church had to deal with various passages of scripture to discern whether they were absolute, or whether they were a product of the cultural context in which they were written, and thus subject to later contextual interpretation. (See I Timothy 2: 11-12, I Timothy

3:2, and I Corinthians 14:34-35). These passages were ultimately seen as reflective of the original culture in which they were written and not as absolutes.

The ordination of women clergy in the Methodist tradition was authorized in 1956. The United Methodist Church has ordained women pastors since it was first established in 1968, with the merger of the Methodist Church and the Evangelical United Brethren Churches. Today, twenty-seven percent of United Methodist pastors in local churches are women, compared with less than one in 100 in 1972. There are currently 17 women bishops leading in the 66 episcopal areas in the United Methodist Church. Women currently comprise half of all students enrolled in United Methodist seminaries and seeking ordination.

Admitting women as lay delegates

Women were not allowed to serve as lay delegates to the General Conference until 1922, when eighteen women were seated as the first female lay delegates to the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church. Today the rights of women to full participation in all facets of leadership in the church are codified in ¶ 162 (F) of the Book of Discipline of the United Methodist (BOD), which reads in part:

‘We affirm women and men to be equal in every area of common life...We affirm the importance of women in decision-making positions at all levels of Church and society and urge such bodies to guarantee their presence through policies of employment and recruitment.’

Smoking and Drinking Alcohol

The Social Principles of the United Methodist Church (See ¶ 162 L&M) BOD have consistently affirmed long-standing support of abstinence from these substances as in the best interest of the health of individuals and society. Yet use of tobacco products and alcohol by church members has not proved ultimately divisive.

Death Penalty

While the United Methodist Church is deeply concerned about crime throughout the world, it is opposed to use of the death penalty and does not see it as a deterrent to crime. Furthermore, the death penalty effectively denies the redemptive power of Christ to work in a person’s life. See ¶164 (G) BOD states:

“We believe that the death penalty denies the power of Christ to redeem, restore, and transform all human beings...We believe all human life is sacred and created by God and therefore, we must see all human life as significant and valuable. When governments implement the death penalty (capital punishment), then the life of the convicted person is devalued and all possibility of change in that person’s life ends.”

Strong law and order proponents may differ with this position, but such disagreement has never risen to a level which may threaten the unity of the church.

Abortion

The issue of abortion has long remained a contentious matter in society, especially since the U.S.

Supreme Court decision of *Roe v. Wade* in 1973, authorizing a constitutional right to receive an abortion. The church states its mediating opinion on the matter in ¶161 (K) BOD, which states, “*Our belief in the sanctity of unborn human life makes us reluctant to approve abortion. But we are equally bound to respect the sacredness of the life and well-being of the mother and the unborn child.*”.

On June 24, 2022, the U.S. Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade* in the case of *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization*. This decision returned to the States the power to regulate abortions on a state-by-state basis. This opinion overturns almost 50 years of legal precedent and promises to be a volatile matter for the country. Hopefully, the church will respond with wisdom and compassion.

Vietnam War

During the Vietnam War, perhaps more than in any other war in recent history, the U.S. was strongly divided over its participation. A compulsory draft was imposed and many of those forced to take up arms did so not from a sense of patriotism or duty to country, but as required by law. Some citizens felt this war was justified. Many did not. The United Methodist Church has consistently opposed war and encouraged peaceful settlement of all disputes among nations. See ¶164 (I) and 165 (C) BOD.

Divorce and Remarriage

Please see the detailed discussion of divorce and remarriage in Reading Scripture Together section of this study.

Helpful links: Interactive timeline of Methodist events and people in American History from the Association of Religion Data Archives: <https://www.thearda.com/timeline/tlDenom20.asp>

ATTEMPTS TO CREATE A PATH FORWARD THROUGH GENERAL CONFERENCE

While the United Methodist Church has steadfastly held to its stance prohibiting same-sex marriage and the ordination of gay clergy, these issues have continued to be sources of contentious debate at General Conferences and Annual Conferences for decades. United Methodist bishops in various jurisdictions have refused to enforce the provisions of the Book of Discipline dealing with same-sex marriage and ordination of gay clergy.

Amid growing concerns for the denomination's future, the 2016 General Conference authorized the formation of a commission to deal with church teachings on homosexuality and find ways to help the church stay together. The Commission on the Way Forward was formed and submitted proposals that were considered by the delegates at the 2019 Special Called General Conference. This General Conference was held in order to focus solely on the issues of same-sex marriage and ordination of gay clergy and, ostensibly, to settle these matters once and for all.

Delegates to 2019 General Conference included equal numbers of lay and clergy members elected by annual conferences around the world. Bishops presided and facilitated the work of the delegates but could not vote. The General Conference is the only body that approves church policy and speaks officially for the denomination.

The 2019 General Conference delegates passed by a 438-384 vote the Traditional Plan, which retains restrictions against "self-avowed practicing homosexual" clergy and officiating at or hosting same-sex marriage ceremonies and requires stricter enforcement for violations of church law.

The Traditional Plan was one of the plans that came out of the work of the special commission. The One Church Plan, which would have left questions of marriage up to individual churches and clergy, and ordination requirements up to conferences, was defeated.

The Traditional Plan as approved includes:

- An expanded definition of "self-avowed practicing homosexual" to include people "living in a same-sex marriage, domestic partnership or civil union or is a person who publicly states she or he is a practicing homosexual."
- The creation of the council relations committee, as part of the Council of Bishops, to hold bishops accountable to restrictions related to homosexuality.
- Minimum penalties for clergy convicted at trial of performing a same-sex wedding. Those penalties include one year's suspension without pay for the first offense and loss of credentials for the second.
- The requirement that Boards of Ordained Ministry examine and not recommend candidates who do not meet standards regarding sexuality. It also empowers bishops to rule a candidate out of order.
- The requirement that annual conferences certify only Board of Ordained Ministry nominees who will "uphold, enforce, and maintain the Book of Discipline related to ordination and marriage of practicing homosexuals." The General Council on Finance and Administration will withhold funds and use of the cross and flame logo for conferences that fail to do so.

- Multiple changes to the complaint process under church law. These changes include requiring that bishops not dismiss complaints without reasons given; involving those making complaints in the just resolution process; allowing the church to appeal "errors of church law or administration" of church trials.

The delegates also approved an Exit Plan (The Taylor Disaffiliation Petition)

<https://peopleneedjesus.files.wordpress.com/2019/04/taylor-disaffiliation-petition-as-amended.pdf>

for churches that want to leave the denomination with their property. Local churches that elect to leave must pay unpaid apportionments and pension liabilities. This plan for Graceful Exit was subsequently ruled constitutional by the Judicial Council of the UMC. By its own terms, this exit plan is only available to churches until December 31, 2023.

In addition, delegates approved a timeline for 2019 legislation to take effect in church regions in Africa, Europe and the Philippines 12 months after the 2020 General Conference.

Response to the 2019 General Conference

The Protocol of Reconciliation and Grace Through Separation

The approval of the Traditional Plan at the 2019 Special Called Session of the General Conference left most Centrists and Progressives extremely disappointed. In response, a diverse group of representatives from United Methodist advocacy groups with contrasting views and bishops from around the world was formed to collaborate on a proposed agreement for the separation of the United Methodist Church that had the unanimous support of all parties involved. This 16-member group came together as an outgrowth of a consultation initiated by bishops from Central Conferences located outside the United States. Meeting over several months in 2019, the unofficial group reached an agreement for a mutually supported pathway for separation. The “**Protocol of Reconciliation & Grace Through Separation**” (the **Protocol**) was achieved on December 17, 2019, and publicly announced on January 3, 2020. A statement issued by the group said, “The undersigned propose restructuring The United Methodist Church by separation as the best means to resolve our differences, allowing each part of the Church to remain true to its theological understanding, while recognizing the dignity, equality, integrity, and respect of every person.”

The document’s signers included representatives from Europe, Africa, the Philippines, and the United States, and included persons representing UMCNext; Mainstream UMC; Uniting Methodists; The Confessing Movement; Good News; The Institute on Religion & Democracy; the Wesleyan Covenant Association; Affirmation; Methodist Federation for Social Action; Reconciling Ministries Network; and the United Methodist Queer Clergy Caucus; as well as bishops from the United States and across the world. The representatives pledged to work together to support the proposal and develop legislation to implement it at the 2020 General Conference which was to have met in Minneapolis in May

The Protocol anticipated the formation of a new traditionalist Methodist denomination. Once formed, the new church would receive \$25 million over the next four years and give up further claim to the UMC’s assets. An additional \$2 million would be allocated for potential additional new Methodist denominations which may emerge from the UMC. Acknowledging the historical role of the Methodist movement in systematic racial violence, exploitation and discrimination, the Protocol would allocate \$39 million to ensure there is no disruption in supporting ministries for communities historically marginalized by racism.

Under the Protocol, conferences and local congregations could vote to separate from The United Methodist Church to affiliate with new Methodist denominations created under the agreement within a certain time frame. Churches wishing to stay within the UMC would not be required to conduct a vote. Provisions exist for entities that choose to separate to retain their assets and liabilities. All current clergy and lay employees would keep their pensions regardless of the Methodist denomination with which they affiliate.

Under the Protocol, all administrative or judicial processes addressing restrictions in *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist* related to self-avowed practicing homosexuals or same-sex weddings, as well as actions to close churches, would be held in abeyance until the separation is completed. The Protocol also referenced a plan which calls for a special general conference of the post-separation United Methodist Church. The purpose of the Special Session would be to create regional conferences, remove the current prohibitions against LGBTQ persons, and to repeal the Traditional Plan.

The full text of the Protocol is cited here:

<https://www.unitedmethodistbishops.org/files/websites/www/pdfs/signed+umc+mediation+protocol+statement+-2020.pdf>

Since the passage of the Protocol, the COVID Pandemic has prevented any convening of a General Conference. Thus, the Protocol was never added to the agenda of a General Conference. The date of the next General Conference is proposed for 2024.

The Global Methodist Church

In light of repeated delays in holding the next General Conference of the United Methodist Church, on May 1, 2022, a new Traditional denomination, the **Global Methodist Church (GMC)** was launched. Many United Methodist churches are currently entering times of discernment about whether to disaffiliate with the United Methodist Church and join the GMC or some other Wesleyan denomination.

Watch a video and read transcription by Dr. Lovett Weems, director of the Lewis Center for an overview of recent events in UMC conferences.

<https://www.umnews.org/en/news/postponing-general-conference-may-be-a-good-thing>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wNfOGd-bVLM>

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. In his book, "What's Different about the United Methodist Church?" Bishop Bruce Blake holds up the Methodist ethos of openness to change. "General Conference meets every four years because if the church waits longer the polity is going to be out of date in God's changing world."
2. Is the understanding that God created a changing world experienced as a threat or an invitation in your life? What about the life of your congregation?
3. Consider the changes that have taken place in the life of the church over the last several years. Which ones do you find yourself regretting the most? Which ones energized you? Why?
4. What changes would you like to see in your congregation in the next three to five years that might make it a more attractive, meaningful place to worship and serve?

Reflection questions from "What's Different about the United Methodist Church?" by Bishop Bruce P. Blake, 1997, (pp. 43-46)

A HOPEFUL FUTURE FOR THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

By Rev. Dr. John E. Stephens

In October 2021, a group of over 700 United Methodists from across the United States met in Kansas City to discuss the future of The United Methodist Church. The group represented over 250 of the largest 400 churches in the UMC and over 150 young clergy longing to cast a vision for the future of the UMC. We sought to engage in what Wesley called “Christian Conference” (he never spoke of “Christian conferencing”) - conversations among smaller groups, inviting the Holy Spirit to speak - conversations he described as infused with grace and seasoned with salt. Wesley suggested these be about an hour long. We engaged in seven of these conversations, praying, listening, and then discussing our topics together.

We started with a lament that ultimately ended in hope, focused on the challenging times we’ve been living in these last few years. We shared our challenges, looked at the data on worship attendance and offerings in our congregations as we continued to move through the pandemic, and we searched for the positive things that have come during this season. We ended that session with a summary of the Protocol of Reconciliation and Grace Through Separation and the Christmas Covenant – a regional option designed by Central Conference United Methodists in Africa and Philippines that would give United Methodists across the globe a nimbler denomination.

We then discussed what we value most in The United Methodist Church and why we’ve been drawn to this church. The question was asked; “What do I value most about the UMC?”. The top five responses were:

- Emphasis on God’s grace
- Passionate faith in Jesus lived by serving others
- Theology shaped by Scripture interpreted with the aid of tradition, experience, and reason
- A wide welcome for all people
- A church for thinking people

We will unpack these with more detail in a bit.

We also discussed what we valued about our UMC structure and what we believe must change in the future United Methodist Church. Among the top things we hope to see change:

- The General Church structure
- Inclusion of LGBTQ persons
- Revisit apportionment formulas and our levels of bureaucracy
- Creating a simplified Book of Discipline

We spoke about theology in The United Methodist Church and participants and panelists were clear in their desire to retain The United Methodist Church’s current doctrinal standards. This is important to highlight amid so much negative propaganda shared about the United Methodist Church. If you listen to certain voices of those who are leaving the UMC, you’d think United Methodists are not even Christian. When I first started hearing some of these stories on videos and in write ups, I thought, “they are just confused”. But I have moved on from that. I know many of these people personally and have for 30

years. I've seen what they have written to their churches and recorded on videos, and I can only speak truth – a lot of what is being said and written about The United Methodist Church are lies, half-truths, and hearsay. But here is what over 700 of us from across the USA, and so many more I've been in contact with across the country profess as United Methodist:

“We are Orthodox” – This wasn't even discussed very long because everyone in the room was surprised this would be in question! Every pastor and lay person in the room looked at each other with a smile on their face asking, “wait, they actually think our denomination doesn't believe in the resurrection of Jesus, virgin birth, power of the Holy Spirit, grace of God, the Apostle's Creed, and on and on?” I chalk this one up to those late-night, cable news talking heads who found a couple of crazy stories, distorted them beyond recognition, and they put them out as fact to define 6.4 million United Methodists and 38,000 clergy. I've been in ministry 30 years, served in two conferences, two jurisdictions, I've traveled for national gatherings and meetings, been to General Conference ... do some strange things occur from time to time? Sure. But is the United Methodist Church somehow now some crazed anti-Jesus movement? Definitely not. And it won't be.

“We are Evangelical” —Everyone gathered in our meeting for the future of the United Methodist Church had a love and passion for Jesus. And we also have a fire to share the gospel of Jesus Christ to the world in need. United Methodists now have a powerful window, a wide door, of opportunity before us to birth new United Methodist Churches in communities all around us in places where UMCs are leaving to join another denomination. I receive e-mails and calls almost every day about heartbroken United Methodists whose churches are voting to leave the UMC, but they are not allowed to invite anyone in from the UMC to get the other side of the story. There will be a great fertile land ready to receive seeds of Christ. People are hungry for the Jesus who sat at every table and spent time with sinners and tax collectors. The new missional frontier isn't to gird up our walls against the cultural slippery slopes, our mission for Jesus is to get outside the cloistered and gilded communities and meet people where they are ... where Jesus is.

In October 2021, we also heard from a team of young clergy who had been working on what they hoped for the future of the UMC. There were over 150 young clergy in attendance and many more have been added to their ranks across the US. They are excited about the future of our church and have a dedication to Jesus that is infectious. Overall, our gathering lifted up some of the important aspects about what we value most in the UMC and what we long for in the future.

WHAT DO WE VALUE MOST ABOUT THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH?

An Emphasis on God's Grace

As Wesleyan Methodists, God's grace is a central part of our theological understanding. John Wesley formulated a wonderful expression of the relationship between grace and life. This is very important for Methodists to keep in mind: John Wesley was not about doctrinal rigidity. He never developed a systematic theology. His theology was practical and was implemented in real time with real people in real situations. Therefore Methodists have historically been evangelical and socially active. Wesley taught a beautiful concept of God's grace at work in the different seasons of our lives.

Wesley taught that Preventive Grace is the grace that goes before everyone – no matter who they are

or where they are from or what they think about God. It goes before every person to prepare the soul for receiving God in our lives. Even non-Christians may allow prevenient grace to be at work giving them the capacity to do good things in life. This is how Methodists believe people who are not believers of Jesus can do good works in the world...they are responding to prevenient grace. In this prevening grace, God seeks us out, longs for our relationship, and meets us around every corner. Prevenient grace is also referred to as Preventing Grace – that grace that prevents us from ever being so far removed that we do not have the capacity to say yes to God.

Justifying Grace is the work of grace that justifies us before God. It redefines our status once we say yes to Jesus Christ. Wesley believed that at the moment of justification, we were also regenerated – our heart is changed. This goes beyond our status alone and moves into an intimate relationship with Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit. These two moments – justification and regeneration – happen together as we cross the threshold where grace is showered on everyone, to accepting that grace as a follower of Jesus.

Sanctifying Grace is the work of grace that continually works to move us toward holiness of heart and life ... to empower us to love more fully. John Wesley taught that we could move toward holiness of heart and life and reach 'Christian Perfection' – not perfection in a legal sense, but perfection in love and motive. This reveals itself in how we interact with God, others, ourselves, and the creation. The image of breathing in the grace of God and exhaling good works is a wonderful Wesleyan image. Sanctifying grace is extremely important in the days we find ourselves in the United Methodist Church. Sanctifying grace isn't about purifying our doctrine and holding everyone to a rigid practice. For Wesley, sanctifying grace was about loving purely, completely, divinely ... to love as Jesus loved. And when we look at the way Jesus loved and lived, we don't find a Savior who demands obedience to a set of doctrines ... we find a Savior who calls us into the margins to love the least and the lost. Jesus is willing to sit at the table with everyone without condemnation. When we see Jesus sit at the table with tax collectors and sinners, he isn't condoning their sin...he is condoning their sacred worth before God. The love and acceptance of the table is what leads to transformation. Jesus embodies this grace.

The emphasis on the grace of God is central to our theology and practice. Therefore United Methodists are willing to intersect with a broken and incomplete world filled with broken and incomplete people. Because we know the power of grace. This doesn't lead us to pull away from humanity to form cloistered communities of like-minded people in tribal gatherings. This grace propels us into the chaotic world in the same way Jesus was led toward Samaritans, tax collectors, and prostitutes.

As Wesleyan Methodists, our central focus on God's grace does not compel United Methodists to move away from the world, but to move toward the world – even in its confusion and brokenness -- to meet the world where they are and proclaim the gospel in those spaces.

Passionate Faith in Jesus Lived by Serving Others

United Methodism is about passionate faith that serves others. John Wesley had a profound experience of the Holy Spirit at Aldersgate Street during the reading of the Preface of Romans. He knew at that moment that Christ had died to save him! At that moment, faith became more than an academic

endeavor, it was a personal relationship that empowered his life. This passionate faith of John Wesley never led him to separate himself from the world. On the contrary, Wesley did not create a movement of holiness that drew away from the broken society. Wesley moved into the broken society and invited them to join him in the movement toward holiness.

Holiness of heart and life was not simply personal piety ... some personal holier-than-thou type of attitude. Wesley taught that true faith moved one into the world to help meet the needs around us. He viewed this in a holistic way. Justification and regeneration were vital, but he knew that without food, clothing, healthcare, and education, focusing only on the soul would be insufficient for the fullness of life Jesus offered. Therefore, Methodists value education, healthcare, and social needs as an integral part of our faith. We move into the world ... not away from the world.

The United Methodist Church has started hospitals and schools across the world. United Methodists lead the way in disaster relief across the globe. United Methodists build clinics and orphanages because our history is about sharing our passionate faith through serving others. John Wesley started a school and authored a book on medical care. He was a man of the world who engaged in the world. While some of his ideas might seem out of date today, others were ahead of his time. The people of his day insulted him as an 'enthusiast'. Today we would call him traditional on theology and progressive on social issues.

Theology Shaped by Scripture, Interpreted with the Aid of Tradition, Experience, and Reason

While it has been attributed to Wesley, it was Wesleyan scholar Albert Outler who coined the Wesleyan Quadrilateral. This concept taught that scripture is primary in all things, but we interpret scripture through the aid of tradition, experience, and reason. There are some Methodists, especially those who are looking to leave the UMC, who no longer believe in using this framework. There is a lot of work being done to undermine the idea of the quadrilateral. They believe it lessens the importance of scripture, but that is not at all what the quadrilateral states. Scripture, for Wesley and for United Methodists, is primary. It always has been and always will be.

Wesley was deeply formed by reading the early church fathers, some of which were even questioned as heretics in the 2nd century! In the modern struggle of securing 'pure orthodoxy', we forget the influences of John Wesley and Christians for 2,000 years. These Christian thought leaders didn't arrive at their theology in a vacuum. They didn't use the Bible alone without any other resources to help shape their beliefs in God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. While this idea of the Wesleyan quadrilateral may seem to be a 20th century invention, this is the way Christians have interpreted scripture and worked out theology for 2,000 years.

United Methodists have a section in our Book of Discipline called the Theological Task. It can be found in paragraph 105. I think it is very important to point out here a distinct difference between United Methodism and Methodists who are departing the UMC. The doctrinal standards, articles of religion, Wesley's sermons and notes, and even our historical allegiance to the creeds of the church are all identical. What the new Methodist denomination, the Global Methodist Church, omits is Our

Theological Task. Let me unpack a bit of that here.

When I was working on the Indianapolis Plan, a group representing all sides of our denomination and a precursor to the Protocol, one activity we engaged in was to break up into our groups – traditionalist, centrist, and progressive - and come up with descriptors for each Methodist offering. This was in the summer of 2019 before the Protocol was created. Centrists, the group I was a part of, gathered and used United Methodist language from our framework of beliefs and theological task to form our descriptors for the next iteration of the UMC:

- UMC is orthodox — we referred to it as a ‘generous, Wesleyan orthodoxy’- including creeds, articles, confessions, sermons, explanatory notes, and our theological task which is:
- Critical and Constructive (testing various expressions while having every generation appropriate creatively the wisdom of the past and seek God in our midst to think afresh regarding God)
- Individual and Communal
- Contextual and Incarnational
- Essentially Practical
- The UMC is Evangelical – we believe in the centrality and authority of the Bible, of the Cross, of Conversion, and faith actively at work in the world.
- The UMC believes in the importance of the Bible to shape and form our lives every day.

After we presented our descriptors, a heated debate ensued about how centrists and progressives couldn’t use that language even though these descriptors have been a part of Methodism and The United Methodist Church since our inception. Instead of allowing each group to describe itself, it was decided the Indianapolis Plan would not include descriptors of new expressions for any group. If you read the Transitional Book of Doctrines and Discipline of the Global Methodist Church, it aligns identically from The United Methodist Book of Discipline: UMC paragraphs 102 Our Doctrinal Heritage, 103 Our Doctrinal History, and 104 Our Doctrinal Standards and General Rules. But the new denomination did not include paragraph 105 - Our Theological Task. This is an intentional omission.

Paragraph 105 says, ***“The theological task, though related to the Church’s doctrinal expressions, serves a different function. Our doctrinal affirmations assist us in the discernment of Christian truth in ever-changing contexts. Our theological task includes the testing, renewal, elaboration, and application of our doctrinal perspective in carrying out our calling “to spread scriptural holiness over these lands.”***

The Book of Discipline of the UMC goes on to say the theological task is Critical and Constructive; Individual and Communal; Contextual and Incarnational; Essentially Practical.

The bottom line is this: if you only have doctrine without allowing the Holy Spirit to work in us to test,

renew, elaborate, and apply ... then we become exactly what Wesley feared ... a dead sect, having the form of religion without the power. And this will be the case, Wesley said, 'unless they hold fast to the DOCTRINE and the SPIRIT.' It feels like the splintering of the denomination is rooted in doctrinal purity. It feels like the cultural and political division in our society has worked its way into this denominational divide. Of course it is easy to point to outliers in The United Methodist Church that fall outside of our doctrinal standards. They do exist. There are people who say and do things that don't align with our theology. But they don't represent United Methodist theology. A new denomination with no members and no churches that only exists on paper can easily attack a denomination that is almost 60 years old and find all their outliers. There are no outliers yet in the GMC who teach or proclaim things contrary to their Discipline ... because they don't exist yet. But every church in human history includes outliers. A new expression will as well. How will they be dealt with?

Our Book of Discipline gives us the guardrails of belief. Our Theological Task reminds us that the gospel intersects real life, real people, real contexts, and real pain points in life. A church with only doctrine, will be a legalistic church. A church with doctrine and spirit will be more chaotic, but it will be a church rooted in the fulfillment of the law as Jesus proclaimed.

A Wide Welcome for all People

Our denominational divide is about human sexuality, specifically marriage and ordination of LGBTQ+ persons. Why then are we hearing from those departing that it is more about theology, Biblical authority, and doctrinal standards? Well, first they believe human sexuality is closely tied to these theological standards. But the bigger reason is if a group wants to tear down an entire denomination based on the argument of human sexuality alone, that won't be sufficient to cause people to leave the UMC. They tried this for years and Methodists are tolerant people. We may not agree about human sexuality, but we want everyone to be welcome and a part of our church family. And when we say part of our church family, we mean equal and full parts of our church family. Not children of God who live a life 'of abomination' that we tolerate for their attendance and tithes. That, my friends, is not a good sales pitch. These new Methodists will say with a smile, "everyone is welcome, and everyone is loved." And I believe they believe that is true. But will LGBTQ+ people be able to join every GMC church? Will they be able to join if they are married? Will their child be able to be baptized in the church? Will their child be able to go through confirmation? Could that couple serve as a table leader in that confirmation class? Could they chaperone the confirmation retreat? Could LGBTQ+ work on staff in the new Methodist church? These are a few questions recently asked of a GMC pastor by a group of other pastors as we served on a task force together to learn more clearly how to communicate each denomination's allowance on what is acceptable and what is not acceptable. And I must add: The United Methodist Church is still an exclusive church in many ways, so it's not like the UMC can carry a banner for inclusion on this topic.

But for 50 years, the division has been about one thing – our disagreement over human sexuality. As a traditionalist on this issue, many have asked me, "How can you be traditionalist and remain in The United Methodist Church?" For me, the answer is easy, but I understand how it may be more difficult for others. Let me share my personal evolution.

When I was 14 years old, my father left our family. He had multiple affairs and finally worked up the courage to leave. He remarried and started a new family. For many years, I read the Bible about divorce and felt it was very clear. No one can be remarried unless their spouse commits adultery and leaves them. One must be the innocent party to remarry. This is clear from Jesus and from Paul. There is no exclusion, no amount of time in 'time-out', no exception because you are heterosexual, etc. If you remarry, you are committing adultery and the one you marry is committing adultery. There is no statute of limitations. If you leave your spouse for any reason, you must reconcile with the one you leave or remain unmarried. That's it. That's the list.

The Methodist Church taught this for many, many years. We even prohibited pastors from remarriage people who had been divorced unless they were the innocent party. That aligned with scripture and that was in our Book of Discipline. If a pastor married someone who had been divorced, they would be removed from ministry as a pastor.

For much of my ministry, I believed that LGBTQ+ people were children of God who could join the church, but not really participate in any way – like what the Global Methodist Church is proposing. I was against marriage and ordination of LGBTQ+ persons. Two things happened for me:

First, I learned more and more about LGBTQ+ people from serving with them and doing life together. I saw their love for Jesus and the pain of being excluded from their churches. I heard more times than I can remember, "do you think I would have chosen this?" Through the years, I've been in the trenches of ministry with many Jesus-loving LGBTQ+ people who loved and served as well, and often better, than others in the church. But I couldn't get past the Biblical prohibitions.

Second, what changed for me in scripture wasn't scripture. The Bible remained the same. I realized that I have made some intellectual and theological moves in all my years of study that were nuanced and subtle ... faithful to scripture, but changes, nonetheless. The biggest 'A-ha' moment for me was on Divorce and Remarriage. We've laid that out in this study. The scriptures are clear – just as Adam and Eve were created in the Garden – which is foundational for my traditional understanding – they were also ONE flesh. Divorce was allowed by Moses because humanity's hearts were hardened. Jesus said, "that was never God's intent." So, Jesus clarifies the law ... the fullness of it. You are not to be divorced for any reason at all. The only way to be remarried is if your spouse commits adultery and leaves you. If they stay, you must forgive them and remain with them. If you leave your spouse and remarry, you commit adultery and the one you marry commits adultery. No gray ... no statute of limitations ... clear as day. Every time I share this story and push traditionalists who are non-compatible on this issue, I confront them on divorce. How does one make the move to allow remarriage (outside of adultery) but not make the same interpretive move on same-sex marriage? The latter is far vaguer in the Bible. Divorce and remarriage are very clear. And this is why the Book of Discipline of the Methodist Church prohibited remarriage of divorced people by clergy since its beginning and only changed it in the mid-20th century due to the increasing rates of divorce in society. I can now make a theological argument rooted in Wesleyan grace as to why I remarry those who have been divorced even though Jesus has tough words on it. That leads me to ask myself, at what place does that graceful move have a cutoff point? Again, we aren't talking anything goes. We are talking celibacy in singleness and fidelity in life-

long Christian covenantal marriage. People who add in all the crazy sexual perversions are trying to get you to at shiny lights in the distance, so they don't have to explain the big issues in front of us.

A Church for Thinking People

United Methodists have always been unique in how we pair our passions and our heads. We are a thinking people. We are a faithful people. We don't ask people to check their heads at the door when they come into church.

I remember the first time I ever participated in Disciple Bible Study. I was shocked in the very first chapters as we had to discuss Genesis 1, 2, and 3. We discussed whether the story of creation was literally seven days or meant something more. The writers of Genesis were not scientists ... they were theologians. I remember the very serious discussions and disagreements over all that! But the group bonded over a love of scriptures and their differences which could be fleshed out in a safe space. We don't have that anymore. Our churches divide by political affiliation more than our shared love of Jesus. In our gathering in Kansas City, we discussed our shared view of scripture. When we spoke about scripture, we discussed its importance in our lives and faith. We noted that scripture is our primary source for faith and practice. Participants understood that scripture is written by humans, inspired by the Spirit, and bears witness to the grace of God, preeminently seen and heard in Jesus. We heard the words offered by the young clergy to clarify what we mean when we speak of the authority of scripture. We noted the continuing importance of interpreting scripture with the help of the tradition of the church, reason, and scholarship, and in the light of our experience of the Spirit in our lives and community.

We also had a session where we turned our attention to human sexuality and sexual ethics. We didn't seek to resolve all questions related to sexual ethics in a one-hour conversation. We did affirm that covenant love is central to a Christian understanding of marriage, and that marriage is intended to express the love that Christ has for the Church. We reaffirmed that celibacy in singleness and fidelity in covenantal marriage was a key part of our understanding of human sexuality. We asked if clergy should be required, allowed, or forbidden from officiating at same-sex weddings. 92% of the over 700 gathered said same sex marriage should be "allowed, but not required" based on the context, the pastor's discretion, and the local church discretion.

We then turned to a vision for the UMC going forward. We spoke about closing the gap between the world as God intended it, and the world as it is. We shared over 100 pages of visions for how God might use the UMC to help our world look more like the Kingdom of God.

We have a great message as United Methodists. We have an approach to the gospel that will speak to an increasingly non-religious age, helping people find Christ. We have amazing resources for pursuing those visions God gives us to pursue. We believe, and we think many other United Methodists agree, that we have an exciting future ahead.

WHAT'S NEXT?

By Rev. Dr. John E. Stephens

God is not finished with The United Methodist Church, but we still have some rocky roads to travel. I offer three basic reflections and encourage you to find your place in these:

A Season of Discernment for Everyone

We should all be in a season of discernment in these difficult days about everything in life. In the UMC, many churches are in discernment. But what I am hearing are stories of churches ignoring everything, but more so churches that are being given only one side of the debate while other voices are stifled. I have seen the letter to the congregations myself. Honestly, they are shameful. They repeat gossip that has been proven to be untrue, they lift up events that are not United Methodist or even include United Methodists yet declare that is the future of the UMC.

I have worked for amicable separation for many years. I want people to be where they can best serve Jesus. I worked with a group from Indianapolis which set the stage for the Protocol. I supported the Protocol. I worked in our conference to negotiate a reduced pension payout for churches using pension reserves we all helped build, and I am working with Houston Methodist Hospital to be supportive of expanding governance to include other Methodists. I'm not asking for any gold stars; I just want to be a witness for Jesus in a hard time. I only ask the same of others.

Unfortunately, this season has led many to darker natures. I encourage you, pastor or lay person, DS or Bishop, UMC or GMC or Independent to bear witness to the light of Christ. Stop attacking one another. Discern your future based on vision, not fear. Fear is a tool of the devil and will not lead one to a productive future. But too many decisions are being made on fear. I choose love.

In your discernment – not only HOW you go through the process matters, but what you include in your process matters. Invite someone to present from the GMC. But also invite someone to present from the UMC. Make sure they are both strong folk who are passionate and educated about the future of each church. This is how you do discernment. It is an abomination to claim holy discernment and cut off one side of the conversation.

This is NOT about only two choices: UMC and GMC

According to several caucus leaders who are encouraging churches to join the new Global Methodist Church, they state, "you only have two choices...the UMC or the GMC." To date, this doesn't seem to be anywhere near the truth.

As of July 30, 2022, 87 churches voted to disaffiliate and were approved by their conferences in North and South Georgia. Of the 70 in North Georgia, only 1 joined the GMC to date. In South Georgia, of the 17 that disaffiliated only one joined the GMC. It is projected that 62 more churches may disaffiliate in South Georgia in August 2022, but on that list only four have committed to GMC.

This is data and can be interpreted many different ways. Some say these churches are just waiting to see what GMC does. But Georgia is my home state, and I am deeply connected to many of these people and churches. From what they tell me, most of them plan to remain independent. The denominational

division for them is partly the theology, but they see this more as their opportunity to be autonomous and independent. That leads to some crazy and fun stories, but that is for another time.

Let's GO!

When I arrived at Chapelwood UMC in the summer of 2014, I really believed the next 10 years of ministry would be the most amazing and explosive and life-giving of my entire life. I realize many don't live in Houston, but bear with me ... the economy was humming, the church was at an all-time high. There was energy in the church and in the city. There was creative thinking and new ministry being birthed. We started new campuses/communities reaching every demographic in Houston with the good news of Jesus. As far as church work and ministry, it was amazing.

In 2015, the Supreme Court legalized same-sex marriage across the USA. The United Methodist Church already had a prohibition against same-sex marriage but now that every state could recognize marriage, the conflict in the United Methodist Church grew. In our 2016 General Conference, the delegates agreed to have a special session in 2019 to solve the issue of LGBTQ+ inclusion, marriage and ordination, once and for all. The 2019 General Conference upheld the existing restrictive rules. Even before this, and after, there were some clergy violating the Book of Discipline on marriage and some Bishops violating it on ordination. I must remind people – yes these are violations, but it is important to at least understand why they violate those rules. To hear some, the bishops break every rule. That's not true. Pastors and bishops who do break the rules break them because they believe the rules are unjust. Just as we fought against unjust laws during the Civil Rights days, many feel they are breaking the unjust rules in this case for equality and freedom. You don't have to agree, but I hope we can at least try to understand. There is a big difference between an amoral person who disregards every rule and a principled person who breaks an unjust law or rule. Again, you can disagree, but they are not the same person.

Well, as you know, we are here at the splintering of our United Methodist Church. I am sad to say this ... but I am glad we have arrived. Since 2015, and since long before, these disagreements over human sexuality have taken all the oxygen in every room. Every time we gather to innovate for ministry, or strategize for mission, or fund for evangelism ... this issue takes all the time and energy. We've been locked inside for far too long. It's time to go.

I look at the current splintering as a season of refining fire. God is putting us through our paces. Some of us didn't handle it well. Some of us were not good witness with our anger and our fear. That is for God to judge. The damage we may have done to the church and the kingdom of God is on all our hands.

I feel a new wind in the UMC. People are hopeful. And I believe the message we've laid out here is the message the world needs more than ever before. Let's go into a new and changing world with the most amazing message every proclaimed. Let's meet Jesus in all the margins of our world – where he is already at work – and join him there.

Let's Go, United Methodists. We've always done big things, but the biggest thing we've ever done is before us