

**Is there a chasm across which we in the United Methodist Church are divided?
If so, what is the ground of that chasm?**

This question, presupposes several questions which seem to keep surfacing among United Methodists:

- ⇒ In the spirit of protestant reformation should there be another split?
- ⇒ Where have we located accountability for boards and agencies?
- ⇒ What is evangelical United Methodism?
- ⇒ Should those who practice homosexuality be ordained?
- ⇒ Should local pastors have voice in the general conference?
- ⇒ Is scriptural authority guaranteed by quoting from the bible?
- ⇒ Is political power a Christian prerogative?
- ⇒ What are the fundamentals of Christian faith?
- ⇒ What does it mean to affirm diversity?

And just who are we – those called United Methodist?

- ⇒ Conservative renewal movement members whose mean-spirited progress-resistant goals undercut the church's ability to support policies that renew the human community?
- ⇒ Bishops whose administrative responsibilities exhaust their theological musing into silence and compromise?
- ⇒ Liberals demonstrating life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness by re-categorizing civil rights and moral wrongs?
- ⇒ Agencies with programs that function more like businesses, educational organizations, and political parties than a set apart people bearing witness to a particular God.
- ⇒ Some silenced moral majority called Methodist in the middle?

(If I haven't offended you yet, know at least I'm giving it my best shot!)

No doubt, we are a pluralistic church. But is it 'diversity' that is reflected when agencies are mistaken for Methodism; campaigns replace evangelism; fund-raising is taken for stewardship; and institutions equal the church? ~~Actually diversity is when those whose substance is the same, can express it in various ways. It appears that we have lost this expression of diversity that recognizes that the world is not necessarily identical in our spheres of experience but can still share our understanding and values.~~

Maybe this on-going exchange of rhetoric between the right and the left, conservative and liberal, ins and outs allows us to think we are doing more than rearranging the proverbial chairs on the deck of the Titanic. Indeed our consciousness is jarred by examinations of lacking fiscal accountability, political irresponsibility, or immorality - whether expressed as abortion or war. ~~Righteous indignation or holy hostility is warranted for injustice, insincerity, and inadequacy, whether evident in commissions or curriculum.~~ But the rhetoric on the right at times fails to speak about racist views of society and the reality of privilege. At the same time, on the left, the discussion minimizes regard for faithful expression of Wesleyan Christianity.

Still, these labels assist both in practicing a prejudiced segregation as if to remove one or the other from the table will eliminate forever the kinds of tension filled disputes evident when the Israelites asked Moses for a return ticket to Egypt, or the early Christians questioned Barnabbas about the safety of eating meat. Disagreement is not unhealthy, for it means discussion IS taking place. What is of concern for us are the assumptions we share that bring us to the discussion.

Our conversations reflect too much a theology manipulated by ideological concerns. Seeking to speak as gay Christians or non-North American Christians or Southern Republican Christian (or whatever the adjective *before* Christian is) has obscured consideration of Christian speech as communication of the bible as a whole and its particular revelation of God. The stories we tell reveal the substance that defines us. But we don't tell our story as the Church. (I have permission to speak as an African American Woman, and Billy has claimed his Irish heritage to speak as a White male (now that's a twist on the rules of engagement). We allow the stories of the oppressed, the outcast and the other. But these narratives begin in the world that the biblical narrative describes as less than it was intended to be.)

Here lies the great divide. We have yet to realize that our modern methods of distilling rules and facts are holding us back from the very opportunities modern thinking offered. Postmodern quests for individual expression demonstrate credible options that revealed the short-sightedness of the general assertions of modern authorities. As our dean at Asbury Seminary has said, truth claims are insufficient for vital Christian (expression) since they are but statements capable of functioning as raw data in any narrative.¹ Postmodernity have provided an avenue to express **particular** realities, thereby posting limits to

¹ Adapted from Joel Green in Green, Joel B. and Michael Pasquerello, *NarrativeReading, NarrativePreaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003) 16.

diversity. In this attitude, we discover that our unity is most evident in the infinite expressions of those who bear witness to the God revealed in Christian Scripture.

By speaking in its own voice, Christianity offers something radically different and fresh in the world of ideas, signaling the church as a postmodern event because it exists as one way of telling the world. ~~The Church is a particular community who desires that the world understand the world in terms of a new world order, an alternative that is divinely revealed. I am not speaking of some pie-in-the-sky idealism. What distinguishes a Christian response from a non-Christian response is not random acts of kindness, but the perspective of hope that grows from a worldview that is accessible only from the bible's narration from creation to new creation. A minority report that distinguishes both our response to oppression, immorality, and materialism as well as our response to opportunity, generosity, and hospitality. The Church is the community who embody a social alternative that bears witness to the Creator.~~

~~Contemporary culture challenges United Methodism to offer a witness to God informed by the transformative resources inherent in the Wesleyan Christian tradition. The experience of God in light of the life and ministry of Jesus, informed by a Wesleyan tradition affords a distinct perspective that the world continues to need expressed. Such movies as *Bruce Almighty* and *Minority Report* asks questions deeper than "How do I access the Vending Machine in the Sky" and "Is capital punishment a Christian option?"~~

Pluralism therefore, is limited to those who gather to tell the story of the world as strangely narrated in Christian Scripture. That telling will be different for the oppressed than the power-brokers. It will be told differently by children in war-torn countries than middle-aged boomers in the Southern states of America. It will be told differently by those who accept this view in a Columbian prison than by those who accept this because my grandmother's great aunt taught Sunday School. It will be *told* differently, but the content - the story of the Creator of the universe who is forming a people capable of bearing witness to the kingdom as proclaimed by Jesus – this story, does not change. We, who are called United Methodist represent a portion of the people of God telling this narrative.

Thereby, so-called conservatives find suspect those who claim accountability to another narrative of God. The ideas put into focus best in Jesus proclamation of the kingdom are such that to risk another narrative threatens to toss out of the baby with the bathwater. In a debate that questions the commonly shared narrative of Christian Scripture, those who have this hope *should* hesitate to translate it from one narrative to another – whether that narrative is Western liberalism or Southern conservatism. Nonetheless, so-called liberals find equally suspect those who speak of grace and mercy but their lives are icons of Western capitalistic individualism. But when nationality, employment, marital status or anything else, calls into question God's Word, non-essentials have replaced the tradition, reason and experience of the historical Church.

Let me try to be clear, the extremes of our denomination have great voice – through caucuses and publications. But both seem to be heard only in their extremism. How does one speak of God's peaceable kingdom when raging war

on the ones who do not know the Prince of Peace? How does a moral wrong become a civil right? Somewhere, in all of our lives is a hunger to view ourselves not by our practices, purses or politics. We long to hear what only can be heard when one tells the story of the God who donated dignity to a lump of dirt and made male and female to declare his glory as what I like to call a divine facsimile.

The many stories of our postmodern culture, raise questions for the Christian witness. We can no more offer pseudo-moralisms of the 19th century than uncensored expressions of personal experience – both support an arrogant cultural imperialism, one modern, the other postmodern. Each generation must address the challenge of *what exactly United Methodist Christianity proclaims* for the existing culture. This is the question that when answered will shape our practices.

Such practices that are a result of living the story we tell. We have a thin line to walk today – to affirm the story of Scripture, and to understand what it means for us today. The question for contemporary United Methodists is not *is there a chasm across which we are divided*, but *can we dwell together in unity?*

The world, which reads the editorials and reports of General Conference, does not need to be entertained by shrill debates between literalists and process theologians. They should expect an alternative perspective from the people called Methodist. We have too much to articulate that speaks an alternative to the deterministic, risk-taking, hopelessness so evident in contemporary culture.

What is in our *confessional* wallet?