

A WITNESS FOR LIFE

by Susan Swander

I share with you the story of my three abortions and my healing from Post-Abortion Trauma (PAT). I have two goals in sharing the horrors of my 36 years of suffering from PAT. First, I want to tell all post-abortive parents that there is hope and healing. Second, I want to make sure that all parents considering an abortion are aware of the horror that awaits them because abortion providers will not give them all of the relevant information. They will not speak of Post-Abortion Trauma.

At 18, in 1968, I was sexually active and got pregnant. The father, who was a one-night stand, was long gone. I did not want my parents to know about my promiscuity, so I went to some radical pro-choice friends who helped me get drunk and get an abortion in Mexico. Six years later, I was having an affair with a married man who insisted that I get an abortion when we got pregnant. And then, in 1991, my married friend and I were pregnant again. For a second time, I was given a choice—him or an abortion. I had my third abortion.

After each abortion, I do remember a sense of relief at not being pregnant, but that relief did not last very long. My drinking and my promiscuity increased dramatically. I discovered drugs. I started a deadly relationship with food and yo-yo dieting. I fell in love a dozen times and could not make one of the relationships work. I was married and divorced twice. This spiral into hell lasted for 36 years.

My healing began in small ways—in 1981 with the birth of my son, in 1985 with God's gift of sobriety, and in 1997 with my return to Catholicism. In the fall of 2003, I saw a box ad in a church bulletin for Rachel's Vineyard retreats for post-abortion healing. I went to the Rachel's Vineyard website and wept buckets of tears as I read it. It was the first time in 36 years that I really looked at my abortions for what they were—the loss of my three children.

It took me awhile to get up the courage to call, but thank God I did. I attended a Rachel's Vineyard retreat in April 2004. What a remarkable, healing experience this weekend was. Words do not do justice to the love, compassion, and understanding I found during the retreat. Perhaps most importantly, I met and named my three children—Luke, Grace, and Benjamin. I found forgiveness—from them and from God. I am learning to forgive myself. Each time that I share my story, I heal a little more. At my retreat, I promised my children that I would no longer hide them and that I would share our story whenever I could.

Miss Swander writes from Waldport, OR.♥

A CHARACTER FLAW IN UNITED METHODISTS?

Do most of us United Methodists have a character flaw?

Because of the grace of God embodied in Jesus Christ and crucified for the sins of the world, we are given baptism and justification (or the pardon of our sins) by faith. And because of the grace of God embodied in Jesus Christ and resurrected for the transformation of the world, we go on to Christian perfection by faith. And yet, as grateful recipients of these saving gifts from God, do most of us United Methodists still have a flaw in our character?

Think about the following scene. With various United Methodist characters, it is reenacted countless times each day. Certain difficult issues (such as life, abortion, and human sexuality) arise in everyday church life—in personal conversations, small-group discussions, committee-meeting deliberations, and our many conferences. And what happens? Too many of us United Methodists—laity and clergy, professors and bishops, especially those of us who are evangelical or orthodox—get that deer-in-the-headlights look on our faces. We shrink, sometimes quite literally, to avoid the challenging issue(s) at hand. Even after all the Bible studies we have attended, after all the Wesleyan tradition we have absorbed, after all the ecumenical knowledge we have gained, and after all the church doctrine and church discipline we have accumulated, the vast majority of United Methodists would rather do anything else than engage the difficult matters on the table. If there is any engagement at all, it often comes down to this unfortunate declaration of retreat and surrender: “Go ahead and make up your own mind on these issues, it is up to you. Choose what is comfortable for you.”

This squeamishness is all over The United Methodist Church. The Council of Bishops and resident bishops refuse to teach church doctrine and uphold church discipline. They often seem to run and hide from such tasks. Most clergy will not, under any circumstance, preach or teach United Methodist doctrine on human sexuality. The laity who lead, or most of them, are no different. Even long-time reform and renewal leaders, clergy and laity, can back away from the task of proposing and defending our church's doctrine and discipline. Apparently, most United Methodist leaders, clergy and laity, would rather divide The United Methodist Church into two churches—or create a jerry-rigged denomination that contains three different self-chosen communities within it—than stand up for traditional Christian teaching on human sexuality. No doubt about it. We United Methodists have a very hard time doing the hard thing: standing up for Jesus Christ, His Church, and His Church's faith when that is not

going to be popular. Many simply cannot, so we will not, do it. We lack the courage.

BUT WHY?

So most of us United Methodists avoid, like the plague, church doctrine and discipline on challenging matters. Why does that happen? Why does that routinely occur?

Some would say that most of us United Methodists simply do not want to hurt anybody's feelings or that we do not want to offend anybody; therefore, we opt to avoid talking about hot topics. That is simply admitting that we United Methodists are caving in to the political correctness that is committed to non-offensiveness and that pervades American society. That is just another way of saying we simply lack the courage necessary to stand up for the Church's faith.

Perhaps there is a deeper reason than lack of courage, methinks. And that deeper reason is that we do not really believe in truth. We do not believe there is such a thing as truth.

If United Methodists actually believed in truth—who is Jesus Christ, what He teaches, and what is consistent with His reign—we would be willing to stand up and offer witness on the most challenging matters confronting The United Methodist Church. If we believed that the Church's teaching on life, abortion, and human sexuality is true, really true, we would be empowered by the presence and power of the Holy Spirit to offer faithful witness on these challenging matters. If we believed that the Church's teaching on life, abortion, and human sexuality is true, really true, we would be willing to fight like Christians—for truth, with love and with patience.

So perhaps our alleged character flaw is actually a flaw in our faith. We United Methodists might need to learn to trust anew in the truth, the actual truth, of the Church's faith—which includes the Church's teaching on life, abortion, and human sexuality.

A MESSY FUTURE

It is no secret that this pastor believes, in obedience to Jesus Christ, The United Methodist Church should remain unified. Also, I believe, in obedience to Jesus Christ, The United Methodist Church should faithfully teach church doctrine and uphold church discipline. Maintain unity. Teach doctrine. Uphold discipline. That is the future of The United Methodist Church, I believe, and I hope.

This hoped-for future places demands on all of us. It asks all of us to step up. We—laity, pastors, professors, district superintendents, bishops, and the Council of Bishops—need to teach church doctrine faithfully. For years we have shirked that responsibility. Now is the time to teach. The Council of Bishops needs to step forward and be the first to teach church doctrine. Then all the rest of us need to follow—resident bishops, district superintendents, professors, pastors, and lay leaders. All of us can and should ask God to give us what we need—including wisdom, courage, and a non-defensive, loving spirit—to teach the truth about church doctrine engagingly, winsomely. It will not be easy for any of us. Knowing that we are standing on the truth of the Church's faith, it will be possible—with God's help.

This hoped-for future corrects a utopian vision to which some evangelical, orthodox, and centrist United Methodists have fallen prey. They honestly believe that, if The United

Methodist Church is divided into two denominations or turned into a council of churches, all the current disagreements will simply fade away. Are they serious? Are they kidding? That will not happen! Not now. This is a post-Me-Generation era. This is a Sovereign-Self season. This is the Internet interregnum. In our time, there will always be arguments—even, especially, in The United Methodist Church. Get used to it. So the unity of The United Methodist Church, as she remains one (God willing), will be a messy unity, a covenantal unity. The Book of Discipline will always allow for dissent, so dissent there will always be. Arguments—over the same old matters and over new matters—will happen. When the faith of the Church is faithfully taught—by the Council of Bishops down to the teachers of local church-school classes—the dissent and the disagreement will not rattle the whole church.

Again, United Methodist unity in the future will be messy. There will be no “safe spaces” that lack disagreement and dissent. United Methodism's future unity will not look like the Methodist Church's unity during the 1950s—quiet and busy, superficial and thin, and lacking disagreements. Nor will United Methodism's future unity have the feel of a mountaintop experience at a summer church camp—which always fades away in a matter of days. Our future unity will be messy: it will demand the teaching and defending of doctrine, it will invite dissent, and it will require the upholding of discipline. That is hard work that relies on the help of the Holy Spirit, who is the Spirit of truth.

Right now, I believe Jesus Christ is calling bishops to be bishops, pastors to be pastors, lay leaders to be lay leaders. That means teaching. Even when teaching will be opposed by some. That teaching will allow The United Methodist Church to remain united—even if the unity is a messy unity that involves plenty of disagreement and contention within the bonds of covenant. With no denominational utopia in sight, we United Methodists should get ready for the long slog to and through a messy unity. Through it all, The United Methodist Church is Christ's Church. He will provide all that is needed by His Church. And He will help us overcome our character flaw. (PTS) ♥

LIBERALISM'S RISE, METHODISM'S FALL

The Rise of Theological Liberalism and the Decline of American Methodism (Seedbed, 2017), written by Dr. James V. Heidinger II, has been available for a few months. It could not be more relevant for United Methodists today.

Here is the full blurb on the book that your editor submitted: “In 1916, Karl Barth, the twentieth century's greatest Protestant theologian, reminded the Church of ‘the strange new world within the Bible.’ More recently, Robert Jenson, an American Lutheran theologian, wrote about the Bible being ‘the story of the world.’ Both Barth and Jenson made their proposals for the Church's faith over against those who would illegitimately, theologically accommodate that faith to the demands—demands!—of those who think they are the smartest and most sophisticated of all, who are part of the elite culture of the West. Now, in his The Rise of Theological Liberalism and the Decline of American Methodism, Dr.

James Heidinger brings a strong critique, that is similar to Barth's and Jenson's, to American Methodist history, thought, and life. Dr. Heidinger has done his historical and theological labor with thoroughness; and he has written up the results of his research with clarity. As this book makes quite clear, Heidinger is not one voice alone crying in the wilderness. There are others, many others, who desire a reformation of The United Methodist Church in the Church's historic faith. Indeed, today, beneath all the contemporary tensions and conflicts over human sexuality lies a deep yearning for such a reformation of the Church. Dr. Heidinger's book will sustain and broaden that yearning. And Dr. Heidinger's book will make that reformation if not more probable, at least more possible. Strongly recommended. Perfect for study in church-school classes and covenant groups."

To understand exactly how The United Methodist Church drifted into the paralysis the church now finds itself, The Rise of Theological Liberalism and the Decline of American Methodism is necessary—absolutely required—reading. This is a sad story of elite Methodists, with good intentions galore, misleading and harming their church. Obtain a copy. Read it. Consider it. And discuss it, with others, in depth.

And while you are visiting the Seedbed website (www.seedbed.com) to order your copy of Dr. Heidinger's most recent book, you might also order a copy of his readable, informative, and brief book About Abortion: 10 Things a New Generation of Christians Should Know (Seedbed, 2014). It, too, is ideal for group study. (PTS) ♥

HERESY AND SCHISM

If that title does not get your attention, no title will.

As you know, two words in the above title are seldom used by United Methodists today. They are too explosive.

The first word of the title is never uttered in public by United Methodist laity and clergy. In fact, your editor has never heard one United Methodist call another United Methodist a "heretic." (I have to force my fingers to tap the keys h-e-r-e-t-i-c.) Furthermore, it is certainly not helpful, at this point in our denominational life together, to call another a heretic. Presently, it would be achievement enough, in theological clarity, to claim that another is offering false teaching. Again, claiming that would be a true achievement in theological clarity. And it would certainly have to be theologically defended.

The third word of the above title is used, though infrequently. When the word "schism" (or a form of it) is employed, it is usually offered as an accusation or an indictment of the actions or intentions of those on the other side of the aisle. It is a word that cannot be used casually.

DEFINING TERMS

Heresy is "the formal denial or doubt of any defined doctrine of the Catholic faith," according to The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church (1983). (It would be fitting and proper for us United Methodists to go with this definition by changing "the Catholic faith" to "the catholic faith." After all, the faith which Rev. John Wesley served, preached, and taught was the catholic faith of the Church

through the ages and around the world.) The heretic is one who "refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector" (Matthew 18:17, NRSV). The heretic exercises his own preferences and will, sets aside the doctrine of the Church, and chooses his own teaching.

Schism is the "formal and willful separation from the unity of the Church," according to the aforementioned dictionary. The definition goes on: "Schism is distinguished from heresy in that the separation involved is not at basis doctrinal; whereas heresy is opposed to faith, schism is opposed to charity." Interesting.

Today, in The United Methodist Church, it seems that progressives are tempted by heresy, and the evangelical-orthodox are tempted by schism.

Jaroslav Pelikan (1923-2006) was one of those larger-than-life theological giants. For years, he was the Sterling Professor of History at Yale University. Toward the end of his life, he wrote many books, including Credo: Historical and Theological Guide to Creeds and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition (2003, Yale). In the middle of this book, "10.2 Heresy and/or Schism," a brief section, appears.

For your information, the first paragraph of 10.2 follows. Comments from your editor are enclosed in brackets ([...]). "Thus orthodoxy and morality, creeds and deeds, dogmatics and ethics, are affirmed to be inseparable by Christian confessions of all parties. [For generations, liberal Protestants have attempted to separate creeds from deeds, and then they have emphasized deeds over creeds.] One reason for their inseparability is that the true venue for both is not merely the faith and life of the individual but the faith and life of the church catholic. Heresy as a pertinacious [relentless] violation of faith, and schism as a pertinacious [relentless] violation of love, both are sins against the church. [Emphasis added.] According to the formula of Basil of Caesarea [330-379, bishop who advanced the orthodox doctrine of The Nicene Creed], heretics such as the Manichaeans [people deeply influenced by Manichaeism, a religion that at times was so influential it competed with Christianity] were 'men who were altogether broken off and alienated in matters relating to the actual faith,' while schismatics such as the Cathars [dualists or Gnostics who were especially successful in southern Europe between the 1100s and the 1300s] or Valentinians [followers of Valentinus (100-160), who was a gnostic Christian theologian and who was an unsuccessful candidate for the bishop of Rome] were 'men who had separated for some ecclesiastical reasons and questions capable of mutual solution.' Or, as Augustine [354-430, a great theologian, philosopher, and bishop of western Christianity] put the same distinction in Latin, heretics (including the Manichaean sect, to which he himself had once adhered), 'in holding false opinions regarding God do injury to the faith itself,' but schismatics (including the Donatist sect [a northern Africa group that believed only the blameless belonged in the church], against which he contended in North Africa), 'in wicked separations break off from brotherly charity, although they may believe just what we believe.' Or, in the words of Augustine's mentor Ambrose [337-397, bishop of Milan, Italy], 'though schismatics kept the faith towards God, yet they kept it not towards the church of God.' Yet such a way of speaking about *heresy* and *schism* and of distinguishing between these terms can be misleading...

"[T]he Church's duty remains: to propose, in a loving and winsome way, true doctrine."

Nevertheless, the content of the distinction as it was eventually formulated does reflect a way of thinking, if not always a way of speaking, that is long established." (pp. 288-289)

As The United Methodist Church, through its Commission on a Way Forward, sorts through the challenges at hand, Pelikan's thoughts are helpful. Let us remember, in perhaps softer language: false teaching is one way to commit wrong against the Church, and division of the Body is another way to commit wrong against the Church.

But the Church's duty remains: to propose, in a loving and winsome way, true doctrine. If some in the Church are offended by the teaching of true doctrine and are so committed to false doctrine that they willingly engage in ecclesiastical disruption, they must leave the Church, willingly or unwillingly. Never, ever, should those who are committed to teaching true doctrine willfully leave or divide the Church. That is a wrong committed against the Church.

The third verse of "The Church's One Foundation" has the Church sing: "...we see her [the Church] sore oppressed, by schisms rent asunder, by heresies distressed..." Being the Church is not a picnic. Being the Church requires opposing schism with sacrificial love and heresy with true teaching. God help us do that. (PTS) ♥

THE UNIVERSAL CHURCH COMES BEFORE THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Here is some Roman Catholic theology that is helpful to The United Methodist Church today.

"A Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of the Church as *Communio*" (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, June 28, 1992) notes "the principle that the universal church (*ecclesia universalis* [not the church of Rome]) is in its essential mystery a reality that takes precedence, ontologically and temporally, over the individual local churches." That would seem to include the claim that the universal Church "takes precedence, ontologically and temporally," over The United Methodist Church. In other words, the universal church is prior to the local churches. Rev. John Wesley looked for guidance to those first three centuries of the Church's existence—what he called "primitive Christianity." Likewise, we United Methodists can find guidance in the universal church.

Where are there glimpses of the universal church? Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger replies: "There is, first of all, baptism. It is a Trinitarian, that is, a thoroughly theological event, and means far more than being socialized into the local church.... Baptism does not arise from the individual community; rather, in baptism, the door to the one church is opened to us; it is the presence of the one church, and it can come only from her from the Jerusalem that is above, our new mother. In baptism the universal church precedes and creates the local church.

"On this basis the letter of the Congregation for the

Doctrine of the Faith can say that there are no strangers in the church. Everyone in it is at home everywhere.... Anyone baptized in the church in Berlin is always at home in the church in Rome or in New York or in Kinshasa or in Bangalore or wherever, as if he or she had been baptized there. He or she does not need to file a change-of-address form; it is one and the same church. Baptism comes out of it [the universal church] and delivers...us into it....

"Anyone who speaks of baptism is automatically dealing with the word of God, which for the entire church is only one, and which always precedes the church in all places, calls it together, and builds it up. This one word is above the church and yet in it, entrusted to it as to a living subject. In order to be really present in history, the word of God needs this subject; but this subject cannot subsist without the vivifying power of the word, which makes it a subject to begin with. When we speak of the word of God we also mean the Creed, which stands at the center of the baptismal event. It is a way the church receives and appropriates the word, which is in a sense both word and response. Here too the universal church, the one church, is quite concretely and palpably present...."

Cardinal Ratzinger even quoted Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976, the doctor of "de-mythologizing" the Bible and a leading liberal theologian) to support his case on the precedence of the universal church over local churches: "...the church's organization grew primarily out of the awareness that the community as a whole takes precedence over the individual communities. A symptom of this is that the word *ekklesia* [church] is used [in the New Testament] to refer, in the first instance, by no means to the individual community but to the people of God.... The notion of the priority of the church as a whole over the individual community is further seen in the equation of the *soma Christou* [body of Christ], which embraces all believers." (Theology of the New Testament, Third Edition, Tübingen, 1958, p. 96)

Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, later Pope Benedict XVI, also declared: "The church is not there for itself, but to serve God's presence in the world."

He also stated: "...[C]reation is conceived in such a way that there is a place in it for God's will. But this will needs a people that lives for God's will and makes it the light of the world."

Later, Benedict XVI once said, "the Church is not 'merely a structure that can be changed or demolished at will, which would have nothing to do with the reality of faith as such.' A 'form of bodiliness belongs to the Church herself.' This form, this body, must be loved and respected, not put on the rack." (emphasis due to relevance)

Finally and powerfully, Matthew Schmidt warns: "Just as we can be moved by visions of unity, we can be beguiled by promises of comfort." (emphasis due to relevance)

The above quotations were taken from Joseph Ratzinger's "The Local Church and the Universal Church" (11.19.01) at www.americamagazine.org/issue/351/local-church-and-universal-church (accessed on 05/26/17) and from Matthew Schmitz's article "Burying Benedict" (05.22.17) at www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives;2017/05/burying-benedict (accessed on 05/23/17). (PTS) ♥

THEOLOGICAL LIBERALISM'S LEGAL ESTABLISHMENT

Before, and now after, the United States Supreme Court's decision in *Trinity Lutheran of Columbia, Inc. v. Comer*, there was some interesting commentary on American history—particularly regarding the history of the Blaine Amendments. The Blaine Amendments are amendments to constitutions—which failed at the federal level and succeeded 38 times at the state level—that deny governmental support for religious, particularly Roman Catholic, schools. “Prejudice and the Blaine Amendments” (www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2017/06/prejudice-and-the-blaine-amendments, accessed on 06/28/17)—which is by Philip Hamburger, the Maurice and Hilda Friedman Professor of Law at Columbia Law School—contains some fascinating and relevant historical claims.

Recall that, in American history and life, nativists are those who favor the native-born over immigrants. Mr. Hamburger describes the nativists' anti-Catholicism: “Their animosity against the Catholic Church arose not so much from the doctrines of their particular churches as from their broader theologically liberal concerns about church authority. They complained that the Catholic Church's assertions of authority (including its hierarchy, its creeds, and its dogmatic claims of truth) threatened the mental independence of individuals. Catholic claims of priestly and especially papal authority thus seemed to prevent individual Christians from choosing their own faith, as necessary for salvation; they also seemed to prevent citizens from thinking and voting independently, as necessary for democracy.

“Many theological liberals thus found themselves aligned with nativism. Although theological liberals viewed the Catholic Church as the model of what they disliked in religion, they typically expanded upon this narrow animosity to develop a broader hostility toward all hierarchical churches, Catholic or Protestant.”

In the late 1800s, “Liberals” organized themselves into “Liberal Leagues” to increase their political power in American society. Hamburger goes on about the Liberals' anti-Catholicism and their animosity toward all religious authority: “Like nativists, those who organized as Liberals despised the Catholic Church, and like run-of-the-mill theological liberals, they also detested hierarchical Protestant churches. But they took their theological animosities further than typical theological liberals, for they were against all Christian churches—indeed, sometimes against all distinct religions. Whereas most theological liberals remained Christian, the ‘Liberals’ were drifting out of their churches toward a more generic theism or even atheism. It therefore should be no surprise that many of them were (as put by the founder of the Liberal Leagues) ‘hostile to the fundamental principle of Christianity....’”

But the Liberals were not completely committed to secularism. Hamburger explains: “While the Liberals understood the Catholic Church as the prototypical danger, and were broadly predisposed against all Christianity and other organized religion, they were not entirely anti-religious. Many, in fact, were theists. And most were devoted to various expressions of individual spirituality, including

spiritualism and Auguste Comte's Religion of Humanity. It therefore would be a mistake to understand their animosities as ‘secular’ in the contemporary sense; instead, they took aim at Catholicism and other organized religion from their own theological position. The Liberal Leagues attempted to give legal effect to their heterodox vision of religion under the slogan ‘separation of church and state’.... (emphasis added)

“Judges tend to miss all this because they see religious divisions in terms of denominational differences, such as Anglican versus Baptist or, at most, Protestant versus Catholic. But what matters...is another sort of religious difference: that introduced by theological liberalism.

“...[T]he most profound division in American religion since the Founding has been the division between the theologically liberal and those who are theologically more orthodox. Theological liberalism has split one church after another—to the point that the theologically liberal in different churches often have more in common with each other than with the more orthodox in their own churches. Indeed, the theologically liberal attack on ecclesiastical authority has become the preeminent fact of American religious life.... (emphasis added)

“....Nativists and other theological liberals allowed their fear of ecclesiastical institutions to lead them into theological warfare against the Catholic Church and sometimes against all ecclesiastical bodies, and the legal results are ugly....

“....In fact, the Blaine Amendments are among the clearest examples in the nation's history of a state establishment of religion—and the only reason they have not been recognized as such is that they establish a theologically liberal vision of religion. The formal establishment of relatively orthodox churches came to an end in the early nineteenth century, and the Blaine Amendments mark the political ascendancy and establishment of theological liberalism—an establishment not of any particular, let alone orthodox church, but of a vision of individual spirituality unimpeded by ecclesiastical authority.”

American history helps us understand today's events, churnings, and trajectories—in The United Methodist Church and in American society. (PTS) ♥

YOU SHOULD KNOW THAT

• Your support for the witness of Lifewatch—including your prayers, your notes and letters, and your financial gifts—is essential to sustain our witness for the Gospel of Life in The United Methodist Church and beyond. Remember that a gift to Lifewatch can be given in three ways. First, you can send a check to Lifewatch/P.O. Box 306/Cottleville, MO 63338. Second, you can give stocks by first contacting Mrs. Cindy Evans in the Lifewatch office. Third, if you are over the age of 70-1/2, you may give a gift from your IRA as a tax-free distribution. (This means a gift [up to \$100,000...!] can be transferred from your IRA directly to Lifewatch and can count toward your minimum required distribution without being considered as taxable income.) If you are contemplating an IRA gift, please first communicate with Mrs. Evans in the Lifewatch office. And know that Mrs. Evans and I are sincerely grateful for your steadfast support of all kinds. (PTS)

● After the Judicial Council handed down Decision 1341, which responds to the matter of Bishop Karen Oliveto (who practices a homosexual lifestyle) being the resident bishop of the Mountain Sky Episcopal Area, it is understandable that the Western Jurisdiction College of Bishops wrote “a message” on the decision. No surprise there. Social location trumps historic, Church doctrine.

But the message’s last paragraph was interesting: “We [the WJ College of Bishops] continue to pray for the work of the Commission on a Way Forward, as they lead us into a new vision for our life together as The United Methodist Church. Our church.”

No kidding. “Our church” appears as the last words of the last paragraph of the message. The Western Jurisdiction bishops want to remind all other United Methodists that The United Methodist Church belongs to the western bishops, too.

To reply to this rather juvenile assertion of possession, I will call on George Weigel, a Catholic lay theologian: “It is Christ’s Church, and the Church celebrates the sacraments through Christ’s power and the grace of the Holy Spirit. During Lent, a season in which the great sacraments of Baptism, the Eucharist, and Penance come into high relief, it is good to think on that, pray over it, give thanks for it—and perhaps resolve, in the future, to avoid imagery and language that suggests that ‘this is *our* Church.” (“On ‘Owning’ the Church” [03.22.17], www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2017/03/on-owning-the-church, accessed on 05.26.17)

● I will just put this out there. Please forgive the candor.

The crisis in The United Methodist Church is not the division and disruption caused by dissenters who will not abide by church doctrine and church discipline. Instead, the actual crisis in The United Methodist Church is the lack of episcopal leadership—a Council of Bishops and resident bishops who will not stand up for the church, her doctrine and her discipline.

There will always be dissent in the church—individual or organized, popular or unpopular, driven by the world or not, peaceful or disruptive. But also, there should be bishops, who have been consecrated to stand up for the church. Not having such bishops, who stand up to doctrinal dissent and disciplinary disruption, is the source of the present crisis in The United Methodist Church.

Stop and think about it. The resident bishops of The United Methodist Church are well paid—salaries of \$150,000 and more—with many, generous benefits. They fly to meetings around the world. They often stay at expensive, many-starred hotels. They regularly enjoy sumptuous meals. And we United Methodists, laity and clergy, are paying their way.

George Weigel notes that “Catholic black humor has it that, after a man is ordained a bishop, he’ll never again eat a bad meal or get a straightforward answer.” (“A Hillarian Lesson for Church Leaders,” 05.17.17, www.firstthings.com/we-exclusives/2017/05/a-hillarian-lesson-for-church-leaders, accessed on 06/04/17) Perhaps that could also be “Methodist black humor,” applied to the men and women who are consecrated United Methodist bishops, as well.

Maybe our church’s bishops, so grandly supported, have

gotten the idea that they are above it all—that is, above our church’s doctrine and discipline. They have grown to think that, from their elevated perch, they can make up their own doctrine, and get around the established discipline, all to satisfy their own preferences and preferred outcomes.

However, bishops are not kings and queens over church doctrine and discipline. They should be servants of Christ and servant leaders of Christ’s Church who uphold their church’s doctrine and discipline. If they cannot do that, in good conscience, they should surrender their offices to those who will.

● On Mother’s Day, May 14, an email went out from the General Board of Church and Society. It stated, in part: “We celebrate the joy of motherhood. We also remember the millions of women and girls around the world who face life-threatening injury and death because of lack of access to family planning information and services including contraceptives, prenatal care, safe delivery and postnatal care. Every woman has the right to access these services so that she can prevent or delay pregnancy, have a safe pregnancy, and survive childbirth so that she can help raise her children. We believe that Jesus had this in mind when he said he came so that we may have abundant life (John 10:10).” Could it be said that this is an example of Scripture, even the words of our Lord, being used to serve an ideological purpose? Sadly, methinks so. Especially if “family planning information and services” includes abortion.

● On July 14, 2017, The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights sent a letter to U.S. Senators. The motivating reason for the letter was to express opposition to the American Health Care Act (H.R. 1628) and to the repeal of the Affordable Care Act (or Obamacare). This letter also opposed the “defunding” of Planned Parenthood. Planned Parenthood, you will remember, is the largest provider of abortion in America—328,348 in 2015. The letter was signed by tens of left-of-center organizations dedicated to the defense and advancement of the Sexual Revolution—including MoveOn.org Civic Action, People for the American Way, and, closer to home, the National Council of Churches and The United Methodist Church--General Board of Church and Society. Even after the 2016 General Conference voted to withdraw two agencies of The United Methodist Church from the pro-choice (or pro-abortion) Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice (RCRC), our apportionment dollars paid to the church are apparently still working to promote the governmental support of abortion. Our apportionment dollars at work. Unfortunate.

● Strong for a Moment like This: The Daily Devotions of Hillary Rodham Clinton, by Dr. Bill Shillady, is just out from Abingdon. The Summer-Fall 2017 Cokesbury catalog Voices promotes, at full throttle, the book. Strong for a Moment like This is the catalog’s first book (on p. 1), and last book (on the back cover), advertised. During the same week the catalog arrived, there were news stories about Secretary Clinton speaking at (and in favor of) Planned Parenthood (again) and starting up her “resistance” PAC. Methinks I will pass on reading the daily devotions she reads. (By publishing and advertising this book, is Abingdon guilty of dabbling in the culture wars? Or is Lifewatch guilty of culture-wars skirmishing for bringing up Abingdon’s work? Perhaps both

are guilty—but Abingdon started it.)

● Ellen Wilson Fielding nicely captures the spirit of the age: “I recently found myself on a plane with someone who was lamenting the angst she and other millennials feel about discerning their purpose in life....

“The best solution to what she saw as the doomed pursuit of an unknowable purpose was to simply decide on the direction of her life at any point based on what she wanted—not in a mean or selfish way, but in a way that made the decision, so to speak, a matter of reading her own pulse. And if she changed her mind about what she wanted, as was likely to happen often enough in life, well, all those other people she knew who were trying to work out their life’s purpose were changing their minds too, but in a more muddled way under more illusions about the need and ability to know what life was all about.” (“Make Choices,” The Human Life Review, Fall 2016, p.9) Choices based on feelings. Man, what we need around here is something with foundation, structure, direction, and staying power....

● Mr. David Mills reviews, quotes from, and comments on Wesley J. Smith’s Culture of Death: the Age of ‘Do Harm’ Medicine (Encounter Books, 2016): “‘Put simply, bioethics seeks to create the morality of medicine, define the meaning of health, and define when life loses its value (or has less value than other lives).’ It ‘has ossified into an orthodoxy and perhaps even an ideology.’ That orthodoxy is cold utilitarianism.” (Human Life Review, Fall 2016, pp. 76-77) Utilitarianism, we remember, is a morality that bases the degree of goodness of an action on how many it makes happy. It is all over the place, but it is a long ways from being Christian.

● Here is a way to think more penetratingly about political correctness.

“Political correctness operates as a twin process of saturation and suppression. We’ve been saturated by all

things transgender in TV, movies, the Internet, all media, college campuses, and so on. The effect and intent of this saturation is to desensitize people to it.

“At the same time, we get a lot of jamming or suppression of any voice that might question the preferred agenda. Civil discourse takes a hit. Comedy takes a big hit. Friendship takes a hit. The red flag here is that such censorship—and increasingly, government-sponsored censorship—is central to pushing through this whole agenda. We can see examples of this in laws that enforce the transgender view of reality through punitive measures, including huge fines such as the New York City maximum fine of \$250,000 for ‘misgendering’ someone....

“One-on-one dialogue, freely spoken, is how we arrive at a finding of what’s real and what is true. It’s how we develop friendships and how we live in civil society. The net effect of political conditioning [or correctness] is to shut down civil society and real conversation by inducing self-censorship and uncertainty in people trying to navigate the saturation and suppression of discourse dictated by the politically correct view of gender ideology....

“As with all agitprop [political propaganda], political correctness works by manipulating in each of us the primal and universal human fear of being cast out of society.”

“One of the greatest experts on propaganda, Jacques Ellul [1912-1994, French philosopher and Christian theologian], wrote that ‘Propaganda ceases where simple dialogue begins.’”

The author of the above comments, from “A Creature of Political Correctness” (Human Life Review, Fall 2016), is Stella Morabito. She writes for The Federalist. She once worked as an intelligence analyst and focused on propaganda and media analysis.

Political correctness probably surrounded and protected the pro-choice ideology long before it, in a matured and well

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developed way, wandered over to do the same for transgenderism and the "gender ideology."

● Vice President Pence said the following, and much more, at the massive 2017 March for Life in Washington, DC: "You know, life is winning in America. And today is a celebration of that progress that we have made in this cause. You know, I've long believed that a society can be judged by how we care for its most vulnerable—the aged, the infirm, the disabled, and the unborn.

"We have come to an historic moment in the cause for life. And we must meet this moment with respect and compassion for every American.

"Life is winning in America for many reasons.

"Life is winning through the steady advance of science that illuminates when life begins, more and more, every day. Life is winning through the generosity of millions of adoptive families to open their hearts and homes to children in need. Life is winning through the compassion of caregivers and volunteers at crisis pregnancy centers and faith-based organizations who minister to women in towns across this country.

"And life is winning through the quiet counsels between mothers and daughters, grandmothers and granddaughters, between friends across kitchen tables, and over coffee at college campuses. The truth is being told. Compassion is overcoming convenience. And hope is defeating despair.

"In a word, life is winning in America because of all of you...." (Human Life Review, Winter 2017, p. 95)

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THANK YOU!

● "If you believe in the Gospel what you like, and reject what you don't like, it is not the Gospel you believe, but yourself." So claimed St. Augustine during his long, faithful ministry. How true that was, is, and will be.

● Lutheran pastor Richard Wurmbrand (1909-2001), who stood up against Communism in Romania, once wrote that Christians can be placed in two groups: "those who sincerely believe in God and those who, just as sincerely, believe that they believe. You can tell them apart by their actions in decisive moments." (Rod Drehrer, The Benedict Option, p. 121)

● "A dead thing goes with the stream, but only a living thing goes against it," declared G.K. Chesterton. (The Benedict Option, p. 173)

● "The death of a culture begins when its normative institutions fail to communicate ideals in ways that remain inwardly compelling," wrote Philip Rieff (1922-2006), the cultural critic who authored the powerful book Triumph of the Therapeutic and who taught for years at the University of Pennsylvania. (The Benedict Option, p. 204)

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

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