
RESPONSES TO “A DISUNITED METHODIST CHURCH”

“A Disunited Methodist Church,” by your scribe, appeared in First Things (May 2017). Published letters to the editor regarding the article followed in the August/September 2017 issue of the journal. Below are not only the published letters, but also two previously unpublished letters, on the article. I am profoundly grateful to all those who took the time to comment on the First Things article. And thanks to First Things for permission to publish again its letters and my response to them. (PTS)

As someone who recently decided to leave the United Methodist Church, I read Rev. Paul Stallsworth’s “A Disunited Methodist Church” (May) with interest. Stallsworth is a clergyman bound to the Book of Discipline who feels that many of his fellow clergy are pushing its boundaries, so he understandably emphasizes matters of governance. But his almost exclusive focus on difficulties presented by LGBTQ issues to the “three-branch” structure of the UMC misses the more fundamental problem. From this ignorant layman’s perspective, the UMC either does not know what it believes, or lacks the ability (the will?) to confess it clearly.

The Discipline serves as the norm and rule of the UMC; this is conveyed in the opening “Episcopal Greetings” of the 2016 edition, which states that the “Discipline defines what is expected of [the UMC’s] laity and clergy as they seek to be effective witnesses in the world as a part of the whole body of Christ.” It seems reasonable that such expectations would be founded in a clear exposition of Methodist theology, which would guide, shape, and govern the church in being “effective witnesses . . . of Christ.” Yet the Discipline is rather short on precise theological content. The sections on doctrine read like an essay on the development of Methodism in England and America, with the ostensible doctrinal standards—the Articles of Religion and Wesley’s basic rules—presented as historical documents, not normative definitions of doctrine and practice. The sections on social principles are approximately the same length as the doctrinal section, are more clearly formulated, and seem to carry more authority. The most robust doctrinal discussions in the Discipline are those of the “Wesleyan quadrilateral”: the shared authority of Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. Yet there is no clear articulation of the proper relation of these and the extent of their individual authorities.

Ultimately, I can’t help but think that if Stallsworth and others like him are truly interested in keeping Methodism “United,” perhaps they should cease waiting for a “latter-day St. Athanasius or even a John Wesley” to lead the church, and should instead work to produce a standard, normative confession of what such latter-day men would believe. Perhaps it is unreasonable to expect the UMC to be governed by something like the Book of Concord or the Catechism of the Catholic Church. But without a precise, shared confession of what it means to be a Methodist, what are laity and clergy supposed to be “effectively witnessing” to, and how can we expect anything other than the present chaos?

—*W. Matthew J. Simmons, Columbia, South Carolina*

O thou troubler of Israel! Thanks for your (utterly Wesleyan) tell-it-like-it-is courage. I agree that Methodism’s present dilemma is due to organizationally aping the federal government. Methodism is often called “the most American church” as though that’s a compliment. It isn’t.

Your wistful hope that the bishops are the key to sorting out this mess is touching. Too bad you weren’t around to plead for robust episcopal leadership in 1900. No General Conference in the past century has missed an opportunity to smack the bishops (and the annual conferences) by substituting coercive, restrictive, top-down legislation for episcopal leadership. You castigate the bishops for being bureaucratic wimps, but really that’s all they’re permitted to be. We defanged the bishops by creating the Judicial Council (a pretend Methodist Supreme Court), and it’s been downhill ever since. Today we’re in crisis because neither side in the sexuality debate can get the votes to force its point of view on the other.

There was once a day when the church depended upon bishops to pray, deliberate, decide, and lead. Now we Methodists get the gridlock we deserve. General Conference mimics the U.N. (and is as ineffective); the Council of Bishops is impotent (and has the nerve to criticize the chaos

of the Trump White House); and both groups stand around, wringing their hands and asking anxiously, “Has the Judicial Council issued a ruling yet?”

Put not thy trust in bishops! Pray that the Holy Spirit would again take an interest in United Methodism, shake our foundations, set us on fire, incinerate our Book of Discipline (except for the doctrinal sections), and reignite Wesleyan passion in us. Only God can get us out of this one.

—*Will Willimon, Duke Divinity School, Durham, North Carolina*

With Paul Stallsworth’s portrayal of the current division within the UMC over homosexuality I won’t quarrel. But I would note that Methodists have been divided and have divided their church in virtually every decade since arriving on this side of the Atlantic. Stallsworth introduces us as a church historically overseen by three governmental branches. But this arrangement dates only to 1939, when Methodism restructured itself in order to effect a reunification of the Methodist Episcopal, Methodist Episcopal South, and Methodist Protestant churches. It achieved that unity, but did so by segregating virtually all Methodist African Americans into a national black jurisdiction.

And that 1939 unification did not bring into the new Methodist Church those from the AME, AMEZ, and CME churches—earlier testimonies to Methodist embrace of racism and slavery. Nor were the largely white anti-slavery churches, the Wesleyans and Free Methodists, embraced. Not to mention many other nineteenth-century divisions over the authority of bishops, lay representation, Methodism’s appointment system, and local congregational prerogatives. Internal divisions have haunted the Methodist movement ever since its formal organization in 1773—far more than the few that led to schism. Truth be told, the UMC divides top to bottom.

—*Russell E. Richey, Duke Divinity School, Durham, North Carolina*

I worry that Paul Stallsworth overemphasizes the democratic character of the United Methodist Church and its executive leadership. Granted, the democratic processes and structures of the UMC are part of its North American DNA, but they are also a frequent stumbling block to understanding the church as God’s gift and creation.

One doesn’t have to believe in a centralist or papal polity to grasp the wisdom of Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger’s admonition to many post-Vatican II Catholics who called loudly for a “democratic church.” These Catholics wanted a church that arises out of “discussion, compromise, and resolution,” a church we can “make” ourselves. Ratzinger calmly noted: “Everything that one majority decides upon can be revoked by another majority. A church based on human resolutions becomes a merely human church. It is reduced to the level of the makeable, of the obvious, of opinion.”

Constant emphasis in United Methodist circles on the church’s democratic organization works against the gift-character of the church. Our pride in our democratic identity has led us to adopt the political practices (good and bad) of American civil polity in our denominational meetings. The process of electing bishops is a case in point. Slogans of inclusion, diversity, and civil rights are everywhere confused with the Kingdom of God. Congregations too often invite people into a safe space of “open hearts, open minds, open doors” rather than the liberating discipleship of following Jesus.

Executive leadership is necessary, but it will not be sufficient for the times unless it leads Methodists to distinguish between a bland organizational “unity” and the faith once delivered to the saints, which is constitutionally embedded in the doctrine and discipline of the United Methodist Church. Our ecclesiastical “democracy” needs to recover what Chesterton called “the democracy of the dead,” that memory by which we give a “vote to the most obscure of all classes, our ancestors.”

—*Leicester Longden, University of Dubuque Theological Seminary, Dubuque, Iowa*

I agree with much of what Paul Stallsworth has written about the reasons for the slow fracturing of United Methodism we see today. As an orthodox, evangelical United Methodist, I am in many ways saddened—but not surprised—by the dissolution of the tradition in which I was raised.

United Methodism began in 1968 amid the fervor of the ecumenical movement as an experiment in doctrinal pluralism. We actually codified a statement of pluralism in our 1972 Book

of Discipline. Rather than establishing this new church upon the bedrock of orthodoxy and a high view of Scripture, we attempted to create a “big tent” where many different theological and moral perspectives could find a home. From its beginnings, the United Methodist Church has been beholden to the spirit of the age.

It was only a matter of time before opposing theological currents within this “big tent” reached irreconcilable conclusions. Some say that Jesus is the true way of salvation, while others claim he represents one path among many. Some are committed to the idea that human life has inherent value that limits the choices we may make regarding its beginning and end. Others hold that choice is a value that supersedes the inherent value of human life. Some believe that God established marriage between a man and a woman as the proper expression of human sexuality. Others aver that there are a variety of acceptable expressions of human sexuality outside of traditional marriage.

In each of these examples, a great deal is at stake in the decisions we make. They will have far-reaching effects and touch on innumerable aspects of our ecclesiastical life. To pretend that we can inhabit the same church with such radically different theological and moral perspectives is an exercise in denial.

—David F. Watson, *United Theological Seminary, Dayton, Ohio*

Paul T. Stallsworth replies to published letters:

Rather than answer one by one each of the challenges posed by my correspondents, I will report what can happen when a bishop of the United Methodist Church stands up, proposes Christian truth in accordance with church doctrine (not just theological opinion), and points clergy toward church discipline.

It was 2002. A United Methodist bishop was making troubling, perhaps heretical, noises in the church. Following the critique offered by Bishop Timothy Whitaker (Florida), Bishop Marion Edwards (North Carolina) summoned his clergy to Raleigh. Hundreds of us assembled in a sanctuary. From the congregation’s pulpit, Bishop Edwards winsomely and powerfully taught the Church’s faith, with doctrine and discipline, in response to the noises. The clergy—most of whom were associated with various movements, schools, and theologies of the day—were galvanized. The truth of the Church’s faith, doctrinally presented by a bishop in the power of the Holy Spirit, compelled all of us. We were re-called to serve Jesus Christ and his Church—in the United Methodist Church. Because God willed it, a bishop renewed a part of the Church in the faith.

For this—across the entire United Methodist Church—I hope, yearn, and pray.

PREVIOUSLY UNPUBLISHED LETTERS

As a longtime reader of First Things, I read my friend Paul Stallsworth’s reflection on unhealthy ways that United Methodist bishops are leading in the present moment, particularly in response to the complexity of human sexuality, with interest. A few questions immediately arose: Can a liberal Protestant live a cruciform life, shaped by the cross? Can a generously orthodox theological vision lead to more inclusive sexual understandings of orientation? Are theological liberals the only ones who make organizational calculations? Does not a form of government that includes three branches disperse authority and invite division and disruption? Can one be a progressive and an evangelical? Is culture monolithic? Or does a global church function among numerous cultures? Is human sexuality simple, or is it indeed at times ambiguous, or to employ a more apt term, mysterious?

I contend that from the beginning American Methodism has included multiple theological streams, as noted in Thomas Langford’s Practical Divinity: revivalism, pietism, the social gospel, Boston personalism, neo-Wesleyanism, process theology, and theologies of liberation. This may indeed be an ecosystem of theological expressions that are parallel to the democratic impulse of America itself. This can be a strength and a weakness, and as America itself has become more deeply invested in the culture wars, the practice of holding these divergent theological perspectives together in one church is more contested. These realities suggest, for me, that Stallsworth’s diagnosis of the theological motivations of United Methodist bishops is inadequate.

My own hope for the church is grounded in a generous orthodoxy that begins with a deep and rich experience of the grace of God and moves toward a life of holiness. If Methodists are disunited, I would locate the strains in our connection in how holiness is defined. My contention is that the closer one comes to a life of holiness, the more humble one is in discerning this in one's own practice and in the lives of others. And indeed for Wesley that holiness was more related to the love of God and neighbor and a refusal to allow "opinions" to become an obstacle to fellowship and service together.

If we understand this challenge of our life together to be about holiness, we are engaged in a conversation that is worthy of the initial rationale for the existence of the people called Methodist. If it is about the culture wars between progressives and traditionalists, we have become conformed to the world, and we wait (in Stallsworth's words) "prayerfully, patiently, hopefully" for the renewing of our minds.

—*Kenneth H. Carter, Jr., Resident Bishop, Florida Area,
The United Methodist Church, Lakeland, FL*

The recent article submitted by Paul T. Stallsworth, "A Disunited Methodist Church," was able to articulate precisely my feelings about the current state of our United Methodist denomination and the jeopardy of her ministries. As a new, young clergy member, I have seen firsthand the "literal demoralization" among pastors—both those who attended seminary and those who completed a course of study [that is, theological education through weekend or summer classes]. It seems they have been taught to live into the lifestyle of a rebellious attitude by worshipping their god who is without wrath, and who is instead focused primarily on being "all about that grace." Being thrown into this uprising has been both discouraging and confusing for me. In a setting where I would expect to find orderly Christian brothers and sisters, I have instead found wandering sheep who themselves are in need of a shepherd.

Although I acknowledge that we are each responsible for our own actions, I cannot help but place responsibility on the seminaries which, and professors who, have taught pastors and have groomed them to model this progressive behavior. When it comes to racism or sexuality issues, these professors are quick to express opinions and dominate conversations. In fact, making others feel criminal for not agreeing with them seems to be their end goal.

I have heard time and again these words of John Wesley quoted (in my opinion, out of context): "Though we can't think alike, may we not love alike?" (*The Works of John Wesley*, Volume II, edited by Albert C. Outler, p. 82). I would urge those who quote this to read its sermonic context—Wesley's 39th sermon, "Catholic Spirit" (pp. 81-95)—in its entirety. In this sermon, Wesley repeatedly asks the question presented in II Kings 10:15: "Is thine heart right, as my heart is with thy heart?" (p. 81 and others).

His sermon is impressively thorough. From it, I present to you some of its words and pray that they enlighten our hearts and minds: "For from hence we may learn, first, that a catholic spirit is not *speculative latitudinarianism* [a tradition of excessive tolerance of theological differences]. It is not an indifference to all opinions. This is the spawn of hell, not the offspring of heaven. This unsettledness of thought, this being 'driven to and fro, and tossed about with very wind of doctrine' [Ephesians 4:14], is a great curse, not a blessing; an irreconcilable enemy, not a friend, to true catholicism. A man of a truly catholic spirit has not now his religion to seek. He is fixed as the sun in his judgment concerning the main branches of Christian doctrine. 'Tis true he is always ready to hear and weigh whatsoever can be offered against his principles. But as this does not show any wavering in his own mind, so neither does it occasion any. He does not halt between two opinions, nor vainly endeavour to blend them into one. Observe this you who know not what spirit ye are of, who call yourselves men of a catholic spirit only because you are of a muddy understanding; because your mind is all in a mist; because you have no settled, consistent principles, but are for jumbling all opinions together. Be convinced that you have quite missed your way: you know not where you are. You think you are got into the very spirit of Christ, when in truth you are nearer the spirit of antichrist. Go first and learn the first elements of the gospel of Christ, and then shall you learn to be of a truly catholic spirit" (pp. 92-93).

—*Sheena S. Cartrette, Mishop Springs United Methodist Church, Whiteville, NC*