

BONHOEFFER FOR TODAY

After enduring a decade of Adolph Hitler and National Socialism having their way in Germany, Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945), the Lutheran pastor and theologian who would be executed by the Nazis, wrote "After Ten Years: A Reckoning Made at New Year 1943." In his essay, Bonhoeffer asked hard questions of, and provided stirring challenges to, his contemporaries. Bonhoeffer's words remain relevant to United Methodists who hold that the Church is given by God (not self-generated by marketing, management, or majority vote) and the Gospel is revealed by God (not created by the clever). The following two questions and paragraphs are from the reprint booklet "Who Stands Fast?" (The Trinity Forum, 2009). (PTS)

ARE WE STILL OF ANY USE?

"We have been silent witnesses of evil deeds; we have been drenched by many storms; we have learnt the arts of equivocation and pretense; experience has made us suspicious of others and kept us from being truthful and open; intolerable conflicts have worn us down and even made us cynical. Are we still of any use? What we shall need is not geniuses, or cynics, or misanthropes, or clever tacticians, but plain, honest, straightforward men [sic]. Will our inward power of resistance be strong enough, and our honesty with ourselves remorseless enough, for us to find our way back to simplicity and straightforwardness?"

WHO STANDS FAST?

"Who stands fast? Only the man [sic] whose final standard is not his reason, his principles, his conscience, his freedom, or his virtue, but who is ready to sacrifice all this when he is called to obedient and responsible action in faith and in exclusive allegiance to God -- the responsible man, who tried to make his whole life an answer to the question and call of God. Where are these responsible people?"

BISHOPS AGAINST THE FAITH, LAITY FOR THE FAITH

St. John Henry Newman (1801-1890, an Anglican priest who became a Roman Catholic cardinal) was, and remains, a great teacher of the Church. According to Charles Stephen Dessain and his The Spirituality of John Henry Newman (1980), "[Newman] analyzed Church history and established with a wealth of quotations and erudition that during the Arian controversy in the fourth century [in which the Arians rebelled against the Church's faith] it was not the bishops who preserved the true doctrine, because the large majority of them followed the Arian heresy which was supported by the Emperor, but the simple faithful who resisted the heresy and often even died for the true faith. The proofs he gave for this statement are overwhelming and are known to all students of the Patristic age, but as has happened only too often in the history of the Church, facts that are distasteful to authority must be suppressed." (emphases added)

Unfortunately, in The United Methodist Church of today, these unfortunate realities seem to be recurring. (PTS) ♥

HOW BISHOP WILKE CHANGED HIS MIND

Before or during last August, Bishop Richard B. Wilke (retired) spoke conversationally in front of a video camera. His talk resulted in a 16-minute video that was posted on Ministry Matters (a website of the United Methodist Publishing House). A text of his talk was also made available at United Methodist News (whose website is umnews.org). The bishop's talk, according to United Methodist News, was titled "Gay daughter sent bishop back to Scriptures" (August 21, 2019).

A daughter or a son coming out to her/his parents, even if one or both of the parents are clergy, happens now and again these days. What makes Bp. Wilke's situation—as a father, pastor, and retired bishop hearing the statement of his daughter's homosexual lifestyle—especially notable is that he is the author, along with his now deceased wife Julia, of the Disciple Bible Study. Remember that the first Disciple Bible Study later expanded into four such studies. Furthermore, nearly three million people around the world participated in at least one of the studies, and countless of them were profoundly

influenced by their deep dive into Disciple Bible and Scripture. One should say that Bp. Wilke has demonstrated a singular interest in the Bible, studying the Bible, and helping many others to study the Bible.

The Bishop's Story

In his recent talk, Bp. Wilke reported his daughter coming out to her parents: "Thirty years ago our daughter Sarah shared with Julia and me that she is gay and that she had entered into a committed relationship. She came out to us when she was 27 years old. We never imagined this was anything that would touch our family. While I had never studied in depth the passages in the Bible that seem to condemn homosexuality, I felt the Bible was clear, and as a pastor and leader of the church I stood by what our United Methodist Book of Discipline said.

"Now, however, I was facing this matter as a parent. The night that Sarah shared her news with us, Julia and I talked, and we were immediately at peace with knowing that her homosexuality was not a result of her upbringing. We had raised all four of our children in a loving, Christ-centered home. In one way or another, all of our children have devoted themselves to a life of faith and service in the church. Sarah heard a call to mission at a young age, and over the years she has served in United Methodist roles ranging from director of an inner-city community center to religious publisher. She is a lifelong member of the church.

"The young woman before us that night wanted to be loved and accepted, but she wasn't a troubled, tortured soul. She was happy and whole, and Julia and I believed that her sexual orientation was how God had made her. That night we learned something new about our daughter, but we loved and cherished her just the same, if not more."

In response to what he had learned about his daughter, Bp. Wilke reported: "...I began my own journey." He heard "stories of struggle" from people with family members who had homosexual desire. "And I began a more in-depth examination of the Scriptures that address the issue of homosexuality. You may be surprised to know I hadn't fully done my homework here, but the truth is, if you have a big-picture grasp of the Bible as I do, then you will understand just how insignificant these few passages are." (emphasis added) (Bp. Wilke probably did not intend the underlined portion of this paragraph to come across as a bit prideful and self-elevating.)

As his presentation continued, Bp. Wilke "contextualized" various Biblical passages that read as if they oppose homosexual conduct. That is, he put such passages in their historical context. That contextualization tended to diminish the moral authority of the same passages for our time. He contextualized the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, the Holiness Code passages, and St. Paul's prohibitions; in each case, he made them more or less irrelevant to today's Church teaching on human sexuality.

Because Jesus was about "kindness and acceptance," love and hospitality, while recognizing that sins of a sexual nature can be real, Bp. Wilke concluded: "But I also believe from my own knowledge and personal experience that Christ Jesus can capture the heart of anyone—gay or straight—and lead them into faithful, stable and loving relationships.

"I am proud to be among the many parents, filled with the love of Jesus, who are putting their arms around their gay sons and lesbian daughters. I am grateful that my daughter has experienced the joy of a 30-year marriage, and our family has been blessed by their relationship. Christ beckons: 'As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.'"

**YOU ARE CORDIALLY INVITED TO ATTEND
THESE ANNUAL EVENTS, WHICH WILL TAKE PLACE ON
JANUARY 24, 2020 (FRIDAY)**

AT THE UNITED METHODIST BUILDING
100 MARYLAND AVENUE, NE
WASHINGTON, DC.

**9:30 a.m. LIFEWATCH SERVICE OF WORSHIP
Dr. David F. Watson, preaching**

3:00 p.m. LIFEWATCH BOARD MEETING

A Response to the Bishop

Let's review. Here is how Bp. Wilke describes the evolution of his position on homosexual conduct (within "a committed relationship").

1. He "felt the Bible was clear," and he "stood by what our United Methodist Book of Discipline said."
2. He learned "that [his daughter] is gay and that she had entered into a committed relationship."
3. Immediately upon learning of his daughter's situation, he "believed that [his daughter's] sexual orientation was how God had made her."
4. After conducting his personal study of what the Bible says about homosexuality, he is "proud to be among the many parents, filled with the love of Jesus, who are putting their arms around their gay sons and lesbian daughters."

Apparently, when this daughter revealed to her parents that she was in a committed, homosexual relationship, her father's heart and mind changed, on the spot, on the matter of human sexuality. As noted above, this kind of coming-out event—daughter or son to parents—certainly happens in households throughout American society. It has for years. Again, what distinguishes this case of a daughter coming out to her parents is that the father happens to be a clergyman, who is actually a bishop (now retired), who has done more to advance serious Bible study, among laity and clergy in The United Methodist Church, than any other person.

It seems that, in Bp. Wilke's case, parental experience and empathy overwhelmed Biblical witness and denominational teaching. That is somewhat surprising and unnecessary. After all, a Christian father and mother can certainly love a son or a daughter, who persists in living a lifestyle that opposes Biblical witness and Traditional teaching. That Christian love, of a father and mother for a son or daughter living in error, is not easily practiced. Such Christian love requires God's grace and guidance, restraint and resolve, sureness and steadiness. Let us never forget: God's love, Christian love, and Christian-parental love are not just about acceptance. Such loves must include the difficult practice of forgiveness and the fervent hope for transformation.

Jesus taught: "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:26, NRSV). In this stinging teaching, our Lord is warning His Church that the cost of discipleship involves difficult decisions that will not be popular, or understood, by many. God is a jealous God, and Christ is a demanding Lord. Christ is Lord of all, Christ is Lord of the Church, and Christ is Lord of each Christian's faith and life. He entertains no compromises with things that, or people who, compete with His Lordship. Even the children of Christian parents are not allowed to undermine or replace Christ's Lordship. Christ rules. Not one's children.

To repeat, what is most disappointing about Bp. Wilke's story is how easily his mind changed on the matter of human sexuality. Evidently, his acceptance of the Bible's witness and the church's teaching must not have had to do with truth. So when his daughter's coming out occurred, lacking grounding in the truth, the bishop yielded on the spot. No questions asked. No protests registered.

Too often, we United Methodists—laity and clergy—seem unconcerned about whether we believe the Church's doctrine and discipline, and the Christian's faith and life, are true. We just go along, and get along, most of the time. That is, until there is a snag or a disagreement in denominational life or congregational life or personal life. Then we tend to employ emotional and practical arguments that support our opinion and that get us through the occasional bump in the road. When the difficulty passes, we go our merry way.

It is better for the Church and the Christian to understand the Biblical and Traditional claims of the Christian faith as true. That would include, especially in our day, an understanding of marriage, based on the Bible's witness and the Church's tradition, that is considered to be true. Unfortunately, that was not evidenced in Bp. Wilke's recent talk. A bishop of the Church, especially one so dedicated to advancing the study of the Bible in the church, should have had the theological equipment to do better than wilt at his daughter's coming out.

Bp. Wilke claims to have "a big-picture grasp of the Bible." Unfortunately, his "big picture" seems to lack the Wesleyan receptivity of "the plain meaning of Scripture." Furthermore, his "big picture" ignores the claim of this strong book title: Unchanging Witness: The Consistent Christian Teaching on Homosexuality in Scripture and Tradition (edited by S. Donald Fortson III and Rolling G. Grams, B & H Academic, 2016), which happens to cover nearly 2,000 years. In addition, his "big picture" seems more comfortable with the claims of contemporary culture for the "sovereign self" than with the claims of the Church as a community with coherent doctrine and discipline. Maybe Bp. Wilke's "big-picture grasp of the Bible" is not quite as big as we—and he—might have thought.

In the end, may God have mercy on Bp. Wilke and Julia, on his daughter Sarah and her partner, on this pastor, on all of us, and on The United Methodist Church. (PTS) ♥

AN EXCELLENT LETTER

The following letter was sent by Rev. Paul Crikelair and much of the lay leadership of Cherry Valley United Methodist Church (Stroudsburg, PA) to the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference's bishop and 2020 General Conference delegates. What faithful pastoral leadership! (PTS)

September 22, 2019

Dear Bishop Johnson and EPA 2020 General Conference Delegates:

Grace and peace to you in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In the midst of all the plans and opinions being considered for the 2020 General Conference around the issues of human sexuality, we affirm that the Church is "one, holy, catholic and apostolic"—not called to split or divide—and that the teaching of our "one Lord, Jesus Christ" is clear: "Haven't you read 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'?" (Mt. 19:4-5)

One, holy, catholic and apostolic Church.

One Lord, Jesus Christ.

One man, one woman, one flesh.

May the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ strengthen you by His Holy Spirit for the challenges and opportunities in the days ahead, as we pray for you.

Blessings in Christ,

Rev. Paul R. Crikelair [and lay leadership]

NPRC: BORN ALIVE ABORTION SURVIVORS PROTECTION ACT

The National Pro-life Religious Council (NPRC) bears witness to the historic Christian teaching on the sanctity of human life, and the need to protect the smallest children.

Today we join together to call for the protection of children who are born alive after a failed abortion, and to support the efforts of our lawmakers on the state and federal level who are working for such protection.

We call attention to the fact that:

1. Children are in fact being born alive after failed abortion attempts.
2. Such children are being killed or left to die.
3. Existing law on the state and federal level is not sufficient to protect them.
4. There is a legislative proposal now before the U.S. Congress to provide sufficient protection.

The Centers for Disease Control, as well as several states, provide reporting about children born alive after failed abortions. Moreover, the testimony of firsthand witnesses, like nurse Jill Stanek, to the fact that some of these children are left to die without any medical care, have been public knowledge for decades.

Not all states provide protection for these children. On the federal level, although the Born Alive Infants Protection Act [now] defines such children as persons, no legal requirement exists for the provision of life-saving treatment for such children. Nor are there any sanctions for the failure to provide such treatment.

We therefore urge the swift passage of the Born Alive Abortion Survivors Protection Act both in the House and the Senate, in order to augment existing law and provide adequate protection for these children.

As disciples of Jesus Christ, we are called to bear witness to the sacred value of every human life, and to take appropriate action to protect the weak and vulnerable among us. It is in response to that sacred duty that we speak and call for action on this most urgent matter.

—National Pro-Life Religious Council, October 2019

FACING DEATH AND TELLING TRUTH

To this day, I count it a blessing to have lived most of my early years in the Garden City that is located in southwestern Kansas. I completed elementary school, junior high school, and high school there. And I was baptized, confirmed, and married at First Methodist Church (since 1968, First United Methodist



Lifewatch
Taskforce of
United Methodists on
Abortion and Sexuality

P.O. Box 306, Cottleville MO 63338

12/01/19

* Bishop Whitaker: "The Gospel Truth about Christ's Church for United Methodists"

* How Bishop Wilke changed his mind about homosexuality and the Bible

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Church) in Garden City. My roots remain deep in Garden City and in its First Church. Sue, my sister, makes that possible, for she still lives in our hometown, belongs to First Church, practices the piano there at least once a day, and picks up the latest news from various folks on the premises.

Last summer Sue telephoned to inform us that Kristin Henkle Johnson's husband had died. Kristin had grown up in the local Henkle family—a devout evangelical household that is "loyal to Christ through The United Methodist Church," as The Baptismal Covenant has United Methodists promise—at First United Methodist Church. She had completed her schooling in Garden City and then went on to study at Colorado College (CC) in Colorado Springs. While at CC, Kristin met Douglas Robert Johnson, who had spent his earliest years in the Philippines, Singapore, and Japan. They married in 1983, later settled in Denver, and raised seven (7), home-schooled children: Ian, Byron, Greer, Griffith, Blythe, Sylvie, and Tessa. Doug managed his own business, was involved with the Boy Scouts, and committed to leadership responsibilities in their local church.

To this large, blessed, talented, active family, uninvited tragedy came. Doug died on July 31.

After learning from Sue of Doug's death, I went to a computer, searched for and found Doug's obituary, and printed a copy. Extraordinarily well written, the obituary also presents a thoughtful witness to the Church's faith.

Two sentences, when taken together, point out the strong hope of the Church's faith. One sentence from the end of the obituary reads: "Tragically, after suffering from depression for several months, Doug succumbed to suicide on Wednesday, July 31, 2019."

The second sentence follows the list of surviving family members and reads: "But we do not grieve as those without hope."

On reading those two sentences, many United Methodists would think and/or maybe say aloud: "That should not have been written. Depression should not have been admitted. Suicide should have been kept secret."

This pastor disagrees. The Henkle family believes, truly trusts, the Gospel of Jesus Christ: that God the Father (with the Son and Spirit) created Doug, that Christ indeed died for Doug's sins and was resurrected for Doug's new life, that Christ through water provided Doug a way into the covenant community, that Christ through bread and wine visited Doug often, that Christ gave Doug the gifts of growing faith and struggling obedience, that Christ went ahead to prepare a place for Doug, that Christ met Doug's soul on the other side of the Jordan, and that Christ will return to this world in glory and Doug's body (or remains) will be resurrected for eternity. Only because of this living faith, the Henkle family could tell the sad, tragic truth about the end of their beloved one's life. The family did not boast, or parade around, their faith. After telling the truth about Doug's end, the family members simply went on to confess their existential condition, which again is based on the truth of the Church's faith: "we do not grieve as those without hope." (See I Thessalonians 4:13.)

What a powerful, beautiful, yet understated witness to the world.

Some time later, I discussed this obituary and its witness with a prominent professor and pastor. He recalled that he had been asked to preside at a memorial service for a respected, well known person who had suddenly died. Weeks after the deceased had been put to rest, the professor-pastor found out that suicide had been the cause of death. Evidently, after the death of their loved one, family and friends had gathered and agreed that suicide would never be mentioned or discussed. Everyone must have agreed to cover up the truth. So the presiding pastor was kept in the dark, not told the truth, about the deceased's case of death.

Not trusting the Gospel leads some (particularly "nice" people) to the obligation to edit out some of the messy realities of human life and death. On the other hand, trusting the Gospel, like the Johnson-and-Henkle family does, frees us to speak the truth in hope. Even when that truth is difficult to speak. That does not remove the heartfelt sorrow that strikes many when one falls. But merely speaking the truth at the time of death reminds us: the Truth who is Jesus Christ is greater, grander, more glorious, and more merciful than the tragic losses of this world and this time. (PTS) ♥

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

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