

THE GOSPEL TRUTH ABOUT CHRIST'S CHURCH FOR UNITED METHODISTS

by Bishop Timothy W. Whitaker

A crisis of unity or a crisis of identity?

Over the last several years, especially leading up to the 2016 General Conference and since then, the public discourse in the United Methodist Church has been mostly about unity. In my opinion, the conversation about the unity of the Church has been a reaction to a much more fundamental issue, and that is the identity of the Church.

If the laity and clergy do not share a common belief about the identity of the Church, then there is not going to be any unity. The true crisis of the Church concerns its identity, and the frantic attempts to patch together the institutional unity of the Church are the result of the loss of a common identity.

There is a crisis in the Church, but it is a crisis of identity before it is a crisis of unity.

When we deal with our crisis as if it were about unity, particularly in the sense of institutional unity, we approach it as if it is a problem to be solved. We Americans especially like to think that every crisis is a problem that we can fix if we are pragmatic enough, clever enough, and energetic enough. So far, we have not been able to fix the problem of unity, and it seems that we have run out of ideas to do so. If the real issue before us is identity, then it is much deeper than an institutional problem that can be solved by our own efforts.

The identity of the United Methodist Church is not a new concern of mine. When I was thirty-eight years old, I wrote an article that was published in the May, 1987 issue of *Circuit Rider*. The title of the article was "A New Identity for the United Methodist Church." The first sentence in that article states, "Throughout the United Methodist Church there is a deep anxiety about the future of our denomination that approaches a state of panic." I explained, "Our problem is not merely a failure of action, it is also a loss of identity."

The changes in the institutional identity of American Methodists

Now I acknowledge that the issue of identity is complex and multi-layered. As is true of the topic of unity, identity can be understood either in an institutional sense or in a theological sense. I want to address the issue of the identity of the Church in a theological sense, but let me first say just a few words about the identity of the United Methodist Church as an institution and its historical ancestry.

At the level of institutional life and history, the United Methodist Church inherited changes in the identity of American Methodism from its main predecessors, the Methodist Church and the Churches which preceded the Methodist Church.

When Methodism was exported from England to America, it should have been obvious that Methodism in America could not exactly be the same as it was in England. Methodism in England had its challenges, but England was a civilized country with an established Church. Methodism in America faced the challenge of becoming known in colonies which bordered a vast western frontier soon to be settled. Moreover, the days of the established Churches in some colonies, like Virginia, were numbered, and Methodism would have to learn to thrive in wide-open competition with other Christian institutions. In this new setting, what would become of the theological and spiritual heritage of Methodism which had been bequeathed to American Methodists by John and Charles Wesley?

Methodism in America found its first great success when it was scorched by the fires of the Second Great Awakening. Revivalism was congenial to American Methodism with its strong emphasis on personal experience, but revivalism also altered Methodism in significant ways. For example, the strong Eucharistic piety taught by John and Charles Wesley could not take root among American Methodists who became committed to the revivalistic system of protracted meetings and the "anxious bench." So then, as a result of being shaped by revivalism, American Methodism became quite different in many ways from the original Wesleyan movement in England. The reason that it is not easy today to recover the original Wesleyan heritage is because American Methodism lost much of its connection to that heritage when it submitted to the influence of revivalism.

I think revivalism affected Methodism in another way. Methodists became adjusted to the notion of being popular. Revivalism made Methodists, Baptists, and Presbyterians the most popular Christian groups in America. This was the beginning of what later became known as American mainline Protestantism. Sydney E. Ahlstrom, one of the premier historians of American religion, called the heyday of American mainline Protestantism "the Protestant Empire," and Methodists had a secure place in this religious empire.

At the end of the nineteenth century, Methodism maintained its place in the Protestant empire by

embracing theological liberalism. The churches that had become popular during revivalism would not remain as popular if they did not adjust to a more urban, educated, and modern society. Theological liberalism fitted into the worldview of a modern society with its concept that the Bible is a record of our search for God rather than the story of God's Word to us, its dismissal of the creeds as Hellenistic corruptions of religious intuitions of faith and precepts of morality, and its emphases on "life" rather than doctrine, an optimistic view of human nature, and an idealistic belief in progress. In his *A Religious History of the American People* (1972), Ahlstrom observes, "In Methodism, where religious experience rather than doctrine was the major concern, the liberal cause became almost as pervasive [as in Congregationalism], and in Northern Methodism as nowhere in the nation it penetrated to the grassroots."

By becoming theologically liberal, Methodism lost some of its identity as both an orthodox expression of the apostolic and catholic faith, and an embodiment of the Wesleyan heritage. One of the leading theologians in the Methodist Church in the early twentieth century was Edwin Lewis (1881-1959) of Drew Theological School. In 1934 Abingdon Press published his book, *A Christian Manifesto*, lamenting what liberalism was doing to the Methodist Church and all the churches. He wrote, "So great has been the folly of the church in our time. On the one hand, we have whittled down the everlasting gospel of the Son of God to make it more acceptable to the ears of modern men, and at the same time that we have done this we have called upon the church to undertake the most grandiose schemes of world-conquest; and, on the other hand, we have soft-pedaled the Christian doctrine of regeneration, filled our churches with people who are strangers to the deeper movements of the Spirit of God, and have even intrusted the leadership of the church to men who think of the church simply as an organization aimed at purely social and practical ends, who judge the 'success' of a given church to be in proportion to its 'busyness' with a thousand and one things of chiefly secular import and who think that membership on a general committee of some sort is a form of Christian saintship."

So then, Methodism came to America from the Wesleyan movement in England, and it began to develop in its own particular way on this continent. Revivalism made it popular, and liberalism made it more respectable to a changing American culture in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Methodism in America seemed to be constantly changing and losing its identity as an extension of the Wesleyan movement.

Mainline or Methodist?

I think a large part of the crisis of identity in the Methodist Church today can be understood as a matter of losing, over time, our distinctiveness as Methodism as we became more and more a part of mainline Protestantism. The title of a book by Scott Kisker sums up the question facing us today. The title is *Mainline or Methodist?*

The defining characteristic of mainline Protestantism is its close relationship with the dominant surrounding culture. As defined by the Lutheran theologian David Yeago, I am using "mainline" to describe "those church traditions in the modern West that have close and friendly relations with cultural and social modernity. The term is no longer sociologically accurate—*oldline* or *sideline* would capture the real situation more precisely—but it is still useful as a description of the self-understanding of these communities." [Note 3 in "Crucified Also for Us under Pontius Pilate" by David S. Yeago in *Nicene Christianity: The Future for a New Ecumenism* (2001), Christopher R. Seitz, Editor]

It is so important to mainline Christians to stay close to the dominant culture so that the identity of the Church is shaped more by the surrounding culture than its own tradition.

In the choice between being mainline or Methodist, count me in as Methodist. Methodism which flows from the thought and work of John and Charles Wesley is a rich heritage in historic Christianity, and it has its own "Way" of being church and being Christian.

The more fundamental question of the identity of the church

Yet there is a much more fundamental question than the question, What does it mean to be Methodist?

The real question for every Christian communion, and for every Christian, is, What does it mean to be *church*, Christ's church? Here I am thinking about the church not as a particular institutional form or as a particular theological and spiritual heritage, not as a Methodist institution, but ontologically. What is the true being of essential identity of the church?

The essential identity of the church is given to us by divine revelation. The church is not something human beings created, and it is not something we are free to make in our image. What the church *is* is a given. What the church *is* is posited by divine revelation. It is a gift we receive and hand on from generation to generation.

Since what the church is comes from divine revelation, we need to pay special attention to the scriptures, which contain the witness of the prophets and the apostles to God's revelation.

The humanists had a wonderful Latin motto which was also later adopted by many at the Second Vatican Council. The motto is *ad fontes*. This Latin phrase came to mean, "to the sources." If we want to understand something, then we must go back to its original sources. This Latin phrase literally means, "to the springs." When we return to the original sources of a thing, we also get in touch with the vitality and freshness

from which the origin of a thing flows. What we need to do today is to pay attention to what it means to be church according to the witness of the prophets and apostles in the scriptures as received in the catholic tradition.

Methodism is a particular theological and spiritual heritage, but every heritage is only an expression of the larger living Christian tradition of the apostolic and catholic faith. Sometimes we speak of Wesleyan theology as if it were the whole of Christian theology, but it is not. Wesleyan theology is a particular heritage that rests upon the foundation of the Christian tradition which came before it for 1,700 years.

In his *The Reformed Imperative* (1988), the late John H. Leith (1919-2002) of Union Theological Seminary in Virginia describes the sources of Christian theology in terms of a pyramid. Leith, a Presbyterian theologian, is speaking to those of us who are part of the Protestant heritage. He says that the first tier of the pyramid is the Bible, which provides the broad base for all Christian tradition. Leith writes, “Generally the tradition has insisted that only the doctrines that are supported out of a broad range of scripture, and are the sense of scripture, are authoritative in the life of the church.” The second tier in the pyramid is also very broad, and that is “Catholic Christianity,” the Christianity of the creeds: the Apostles’ Creed, the Nicene Creed (325-381), the Chalcedonian Definition (451), the doctrine of the Trinity, and the theology of Athanasius and Augustine. Leith says that the next tier of the pyramid, which is not as broad as that of the Bible and Catholic Christianity, is “classical Protestant theology,” the writings of Martin Luther in 1520, some of the early writings of Zwingli (1484-1531), Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1536), and homilies of the English Reformation. Leith does not discount the influence of medieval theology, but he thinks that the theology of the Reformation has greater authority for Protestants. The next tier is rather narrow as one approaches the peak of the pyramid. It would be the particular heritage of a Christian communion. For Methodists, this would be the teaching of John Wesley and the hymns of Charles Wesley. Finally, at the very top of the pyramid is “the restatement of biblical, Catholic, and classical Protestant theology” on this side of the Enlightenment and of the nineteenth century. Leith is referring here to the contributions of theologians like Karl Barth (1886-1968), who helped Protestants overcome the three things that came into being following the Enlightenment and theological developments in the nineteenth century—liberalism, fundamentalism, and the social gospel—which are no longer viable in the forms in which they became fixed.

I mention Leith’s pyramid because it is a reminder that we cannot do theology, including ecclesiology, only by addressing the issues posed by modernity. We cannot do theology only by understanding our own heritage—in our case, our Wesleyan heritage as Methodists. We must realize that the scriptures as received in the catholic tradition have to be the primary sources of our theology.

Why we need to recover a biblical view of the church

I am going to give a sketch of what is a biblical view of the church. But before I do, I want to offer an explanation of why I think it is essential to recover a biblical view of the church. Returning to the sources of the witness of the prophets and apostles in order to understand what the church *is* needs no justification because Christianity is a faith in divine revelation mediated through history. Nevertheless, I want to add one thing that may help us to sense the urgency to recover a biblical view of the church.

Recovering a biblical view of the church is urgent at this moment in history because we are now aware that Christendom is dead. The crisis of identity of the United Methodist Church is not only the result of losing our Methodist substance by becoming just another mainline American Protestant body. We Methodists share in a much bigger crisis facing all churches of the West in the late modern era—the collapse of the cultural establishment of Christianity as the religion of the West. Beginning in the fourth century, the church began to play the role of the religion of the culture. In this role, the church was given the authority to influence the culture, but it was also expected to support the ideals and values of the culture. But that arrangement has been dying for a long time, and now it is apparent to many of us that it is basically over. Societies in the West no longer want Christianity as the religion of the culture. Indeed, they do not want any faith to play the role of the religion of the culture. Instead, they celebrate pluralism within the context of a dominant secularist worldview. But this historic cultural shift has left the churches reeling. For 1,700 years Christianity has been the religion of the culture, but now the culture has said that Christianity is being rejected from this role, and the churches feel the anxiety of no longer having a secure role in society. The churches are losing influence, members, and many of the privileges they enjoyed in an earlier time.

In my judgment, Christians need to turn to the primitive church of the first three hundred years as providing the model for how to survive and thrive in a pluralistic society that is either indifferent to the church or hostile toward it. Instead of being the religion of the culture, the primitive church functioned as a distinctive community living an alternative way of living within every society where it existed.

It think it is simplistic to think of the primitive church as “withdrawing from society.” The primitive church was pleased to pray for the state and its rulers, and to provide social services to the needy that made a positive contribution to the world. It had its own philosophers and was developing an intellectual tradition that interpreted all of reality. It had its own symbolic world and art. It was a society which not only provided an extended family for its own members but also maintained a connection to other communities around the world

as part of a “holy internet.” Most of all, it deeply nourished the spirits of its members with its liturgy, preaching, and teaching. The primitive church was not hiding from the world, but it lived in the world as an alternative society. The primitive church had a sense of its own dignity as a distinctive community. Cyprian of Carthage (d. 258) spoke of the “majesty of the people of God” and asked, in so many words, “What is the dignity of Rome compared to the dignity of the Catholic Church?”

I believe that the primitive church was living according to the biblical view of the church, and it did this for three hundred years in an environment which was often violently hostile.

So then, living today in the rubble of Christendom, the way forward for the church is to emulate the primitive church by being a distinctive community with an alternative way of living in accordance with a biblical view of the church. God may have permitted the church in the West to function as the religion of the culture for a while, but God is now acting to call the church to discover its own true identity for a new time.

Let me now give an overview of how all the scriptures fit together to present a coherent vision of the church.

The Hebrew scriptures/Old Testament

We have to pay attention to the Hebrew scriptures/Old Testament because it is impossible to understand what the New Testament says about the church without grounding our understanding in the Hebrew scriptures/Old Testament.

I am going to present only one text which I believe illumines the message of the Old Testament which is pertinent to our understanding of the church. The text is Exodus 19:5-6. The context of this text is the theophany of YHWH to Moses on Mount Sinai. Verses 5-6 are a crucial part of the LORD’s speech to Moses: “Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites.” (NRSV, here and following)

There is nothing obscure about this message. The LORD, the God who liberated the Israelites from bondage in Egypt, is now making a covenant with them so that they will be God’s own people among all the peoples of the world. They will be the people on earth who know and obey the LORD their God. Their identity is to be “a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.” Israel is set apart from all other peoples to live according to God’s rule rather than live like all the other nations. Even though Israel is set apart from all other peoples, it has a mission to perform on behalf of all other peoples. Israel is “a priestly kingdom:” in its worship and life, Israel is called to represent all other peoples before the one, true living God. Furthermore, God’s call of Israel is an essential part of God’s eschatological plan: God’s call of Israel to be “a priestly kingdom and a holy nation” is the beginning of God’s action to establish God’s rule over all of creation, for the LORD says, “the whole earth is mine.”

As Exodus 19:5-6 discloses, the message of the Old Testament is that Israel is chosen by the LORD to be a distinctive people among all the peoples of the world and a people who live an alternative way of life under the rule of the LORD their God.

The vocation of Jesus of Nazareth

In my opinion, one of the biggest problems in mainline Protestantism is that the real Jesus is obscured by a fog of idealism and sentimentality.

Rather than try to back up that generalization about mainline Protestantism, I will only present my understanding of the true aim of Jesus’ vocation. During His public career, what was Jesus really trying to do?

To understand Jesus’ vocation, we have to remember two facts—a fact about the beginning of Jesus’ career and a fact about the end of Jesus’ career.

The first fact is that, at the beginning of his public career, Jesus saw his own vocation in connection with the work of John the Baptist. John initiated a powerful movement of national repentance for the purpose of restoring Israel to its true identity and mission as God’s own people. By connecting himself with John, Jesus was continuing John’s movement of restoring Israel as God’s own people.

The second fact is that, at the end of his public career, Jesus was rejected by the chief priests and handed over to the prefect of Judea to be crucified. The question is, Why did Jesus have to die? I am not talking now about what Jesus intended his death to mean according to what he said at his last supper with his disciples. I am not talking now about the theological meaning of his death—what God was doing in the death of Jesus. I am talking about why the Jewish rulers, the members of the Sanhedrin, acted to get rid of Jesus and to hand him over to Pontius Pilate to be crucified. I think the only plausible explanation of why Jesus had to die was because his vision of the identity and mission of Israel clashed with that of the members of the Sanhedrin and was considered by them to be an existential threat. Jesus’ vision of Israel not only clashed with that of the Jewish rulers, but also with that of the Pharisees, the Essenes, and others. Jesus did not die because he went around telling people God loves them and they should love one another or because he offended religious leaders by criticizing them for being legalistic or hypocritical. Jesus died because he was the leader of a movement to restore Israel in a way that was a threat to the status quo and the interests of those who had a different vision of what Israel is and how it should live.

The heart of Jesus' message was the coming of the kingdom of God. Jesus told parables about what the coming of the kingdom is like, but the Gospels never define the term "the kingdom of God." We are secure in believing that the kingdom of God is God's reign or God's rule. It is also clear that Jesus taught that this rule of God is both present and future. In terms of the present, God is beginning to act through Jesus' words and works to establish God's rule. In terms of the future, at a time known only to God the Father, God's rule will be established on earth as it is in heaven. But what is usually totally missing in any discussion of the kingdom of God is how there is no kingdom without subjects. When Jesus spoke of the kingdom of God, the people who heard him heard Jesus talking about "Israel." After all, Moses had taught that God's Word says, "the whole earth is mine," and that from all the peoples on the earth God chose Israel to be "a priestly kingdom and a holy nation." Simply put, God's plan is to establish God's rule over all the earth, and the place where God rules on earth is where God's people know and obey God. When Jesus came preaching that the time had come when God was beginning to rule, Jesus surely envisaged the beginning of the consummation of God's rule over all the earth, but also the restoration of Israel as essential to the consummation of God's rule.

To restore Israel, Jesus traveled all over the territory that had belonged to Israel in the time of David and Solomon. He called everyone to be a part of the restored Israel by following him. And to make clear to the people what he was about, Jesus designated twelve of his disciples to be the equivalent of the twelve princes of the restored Israel.

The testimony of Acts to the beginning of the church

Luke's second volume, which we call the Acts of the Apostles, sheds much light on how the first Christians understood the church.

At the beginning of Acts, the apostles ask the risen Jesus, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" (1:6) Note the equivalence of the "kingdom" and "Israel" in the question. The answer the apostles received from Jesus was that what the future holds is not for them to know, but they are going to "receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon [them]," and "[they] will be my witnesses" throughout the world (1:7-8). Then the rest of Acts is the story of the birth and growth of the Church in and beyond Jerusalem with members being not only Jews but also Gentiles. In other words, the story of the church that is told in Acts is the story of the restoration of Israel which was instituted by Jesus the Messiah and which is constituted by the Holy Spirit.

The gospel proclaimed by the apostles

There is a technical name in the New Testament for the message of salvation that was originally proclaimed by the apostles. The name is *euangelion*. What is striking about this name is that it is in the singular. At the time, except in the New Testament, this word in the singular almost never appears anywhere in either Jewish or Gentile literature or artifacts. The significance of the apostles' choice of an almost unique word whose construction is singular—a word which was hardly ever used by anyone else—is that there is only one message of salvation. The English word "gospel" is the best translation of *euangelion* because "gospel" is also in the singular. The English translation "good news" is quite accurate, but I think many people tend to think of "news" as being plural, probably because when we watch the news on TV it is about many things. Of course while the word "news" is plural, it can function as a construction in the singular, which is what is intended whenever scholars translate the singular, *euangelion*, as "good news." But I still prefer "gospel" because it conveys the sense that there is one particular message of salvation proclaimed by the apostles.

The letters of Paul contain about 63 occurrences of the word *euangelion* or "gospel." Mark describes his story of Jesus as the "gospel." The word "gospel" does not appear in either the Gospel of Luke or the Gospel of John, except in the titles added to these books. But Luke does have the word "gospel" twice in Acts. In Acts 15:7, Luke depicts Peter using this word when he speaks of his mission to the Gentiles at the conference of apostles in Jerusalem. In Acts 20:24, Luke depicts Paul using the word "gospel" in his farewell speech to the elders of the church in Ephesus. Even though Luke does not use the word in his Gospel, in Acts he depicts both Peter and Paul using it, making the point that this was the technical term used by all of the apostles. By putting the word "gospel" on Peter's lips, Luke intends for us to understand that this word was first used by Peter and the college of apostles in the mother church of Jerusalem.

I think there are two texts which give us a definite understanding of the message of salvation proclaimed by all of the apostles. In Romans 1:1-7, especially verses 3-4, Paul cites a common apostolic formula. In 1 Corinthians 15:1-11, especially verses 3-5, Paul cites another common apostolic formula which he himself had received and which he handed on to others. As Romans 1 shows, the message of the gospel is news from God to the world about Jesus. Jesus has been revealed to be the Messiah of Israel, the Lord of the world, and the Son of God. (Of course, the Hebrew "Messiah" is rendered as "Christ.") 1 Corinthians shows that, because of the fact that Jesus the Messiah was crucified and buried, the gospel is also an announcement that the Messiah died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures and that he was raised from the dead in accordance with the scriptures.

These two texts in Romans and 1 Corinthians are extraordinary both historically and theologically. But I wish to point out only one simple thing: both texts are about how the gospel is the one message to the

world from God that Jesus is the Messiah who died for the sins of many and who was raised from the dead to bring newness of life. In his *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, Origen (184-253) rightly observed that the content of the gospel is “simply Jesus;” the gospel is news about the person of Jesus and the work of Jesus for us.

If Jesus is Messiah, then his people, the church, is the Israel that is united with the Messiah Jesus who has come and who will come again. In the New Testament, the English word “church” is a translation of *ekklesia*, and *ekklesia* is the Greek word used in the Septuagint to translate the Hebrew words [*Edhah* and *qahal*] that mean the “assembly” or “congregation” of God’s people which is “called out” from the world. When, in 1 Corinthians 11, the apostle Paul writes about the “coming together” of the church to eat “the Lord’s supper,” what he is saying is that the church that eats the Lord’s supper is the assembly of Israel that comes together centered around the Lord who is Jesus the Messiah. Also, one of Paul’s major images of the church is “the body of Christ.” Note that Paul does not teach that the church is “the body of Christians,” but the church is “the body of Christ.” This means that the church is the body of the Messiah, and so, of course the church is Israel.

The apostolic teaching about the church as Israel is made very plain in 1 Peter 2:9, which echoes Exodus 19:5-6, “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people....”

The identity of the church today

Based on the biblical view of the church, our conclusion must be that the ontological identity of the church is to be that part of Israel that is centered around Jesus Christ and that includes both Jews and Gentiles.

We should view genealogical, observant Jews as also being still a part of Israel because God does not revoke God’s calling and gifts. In fact, in the era after Christendom, we Christians need to grow closer to our elder brothers and sisters, the Jews, and learn from them how to survive and thrive as a distinctive people who practice an alternative way of living in the world.

I think our task today is to recover the biblical view of the church as the people called to live as Israel in the world, to be a distinctive people who live an alternate way of life. This task is not going to be accomplished quickly but over generations, but each generation can do its part to reform the church. We know it is possible to be the church without playing the role of the religion of the culture because this is what the primitive church did for three hundred years. This task is also not going to be easy because we have learned too many bad habits during Christendom, especially in that part of Christendom known as mainline Protestantism. It is going to be hard because we shall have to learn to live counter to culture rather than in a close and cozy relationship with culture. At the same time, we must also show solidarity with the world because this is the world for which Jesus the Messiah died and was raised. Solidarity with the world is not conformity to the world because we are called to be in the world, but not of the world.

Now is a moment of decision for the people who claim to be the church. We shall have to choose whether we will live in fear of God or in fear of the world.

My wife Melba has a paraphrase of Maximus the Confessor (d. 662) in his “First Century of Various Texts” in *The Philokalia*, numbers 40-41. She sums up his teaching by saying, “when you make peace with the world, and all its passions, you make war with God.”

I will conclude with this simple observation. Notice that in the Old Testament Israel is defined as the “assembly” or “congregation” of God’s people. In Paul’s letters in the New Testament, “the church of God” always exists as a particular congregation in a city. While it is true that all congregations are a part of a communion with one another, the life and work of the church takes place in a congregation in a particular time and place. So then, no matter what might ail the universal church or our own particular communion, the United Methodist Church, there is nothing to prevent any of us from being the church right now where we are. What is written in the Augsburg Confession of 1530 and incorporated in the nineteenth article of the Articles of Religion of the Church of England and then included as the thirteenth article of the Articles of Religion of the Methodist Church becomes a practical, working definition of the church by which we may live: “The visible church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men [and women] in which the pure Word of God is preached, and the Sacraments duly administered according to Christ’s ordinance, in all those things that of necessity are requisite to the same [in all those matters that are necessary for proper administration].”

May the peace of the Lord be with you and all who are of the church of God.

Timothy W. Whitaker, November 15, 2019

On November 15, 2019, Bp. Whitaker first presented a version of “The Gospel Truth about Christ’s Church for United Methodists” to the laity and clergy gathered at First United Methodist Church in Wilson, NC. Dr. J. Warren Smith, of Duke Divinity School, responded to the bishop’s presentation. Bp. Whitaker has served as a layman, a pastor, a district superintendent, and a bishop in The United Methodist Church. As a retired bishop, he resides with his wife Melba in Keller, VA, where he rides his bicycle, picks up roadside litter, and writes thoughtful theological essays.

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