

WAY BEYOND A REVISION: THE UMC'S PROPOSED SOCIAL PRINCIPLE ON ABORTION

by Rev. Paul T. Stallsworth

Why Revise the Social Principles?

Due to action of The United Methodist Church's 2012 General Conference and to negotiation of church leaders, the General Board of Church and Society held listening sessions on the Social Principles throughout the church. From them, Church and Society learned that the Social Principles need to become "more theologically grounded, more globally relevant, and more succinct" (according to a 04/12/18 press release).

Then the 2016 General Conference voted to continue Church and Society's work in revising the Social Principles. On April 11, 2018, "The United Methodist Social Principles"/"Working Draft 1" was released. Church and Society aims to propose a complete revision of the Social Principles to the 2020 General Conference.

The Social Principle on Abortion: A Brief History

Since the birth of The United Methodist Church in 1968, the Social Principles' paragraph on abortion has been contested. The 1972 paragraph stated: "We support the removal of abortion from the criminal code, placing it instead under laws relating to other procedures of standard medical practice. A decision concerning abortion should be made only after thorough and thoughtful consideration by the parties involved, with medical and pastoral counsel." Following the United States Supreme Court's 1973 Roe v. Wade decision, which knocked down state laws against abortion, United Methodism reflected Roe; its 1976 abortion paragraph included this sentence: "We support the legal option of abortion under proper medical procedures."

Since 1976, many General Conferences have considered and debated petitions that would alter the church's teaching on abortion. Some passed. Gradually, the paragraph became more skeptical, critical, and prohibitive of abortion. That is, the Social Principle became more protective of the unborn child and mother.

In 2018, while The United Methodist Church's Social Principle on abortion (Paragraph 161K in the 2016 Book of Discipline) "support[s] the legal option of abortion," it also contains many phrases and statements that are protective of the unborn and mother. That Social Principle has now been rewritten—thoroughly.

The Revised Title

The revision of this Social Principle is boldly announced in its title change: from "Abortion" to "Reproductive Health." Why? "Abortion," as a title, might be considered too controversial, harsh, specific. In contrast, "Reproductive Health" might be understood as more medical-clinical, gentle, and general.

Against this retitling, four objections can be raised. First, the new title assumes that abortion is, as a matter of fact, just another medical procedure required for the "reproductive health" of women. However, many inside and outside the medical profession, especially those of various religious persuasions, would disagree. Second, should not a Social Principle dedicated to abortion, by commonsense, be titled "Abortion?" One would think so: a thing should be called what it is. Third, the Church through the ages has routinely used the word "abortion;" so United Methodism should regularly use the same word. And fourth, abortion names a morally significant (and objectionable) incident: that is the taking of the life of an unborn child. To put such a serious incident under the heading of "reproductive health" disguises and diminishes what happens to the child in the womb.

For these reasons, the title "Abortion" should remain.

The Revised Text

According to the three needed improvements reported by the listening sessions, how does the revision measure up?

Is the revision "more theologically grounded?" For starters, the revision mentions God once. But not Jesus Christ. And not the Holy Spirit. The Bible is cited twice, but not quoted. Church tradition is not referenced. The revision seems trapped in the modern worldview of individualism, public health, and social science. It seems anthropocentric (centered on humanity), and neglectful of God and God's creation, commands, and redemption.

Unlike the standing paragraph, the revision opens up very little to the presence and power of God. So the revision is not “more theologically grounded” than what was revised. Its theological grounding is reduced.

Is the revision “more globally relevant?” To be globally relevant, the revision would need to use terms that are universally understandable and applicable. The Church speaks the most universal language of all. Its words—for example, God and humanity, birth and death, good and evil, joy and suffering, love and loyalty, and so on—appeal to most people worldwide. While occasionally using such words, the revision reverts to a Westernized, individualized, medicalized mindset. This mindset results in the revision’s inability to affirm the humanity of the unborn. Such thinking is better suited for an international political agency than for a global Christian church. While the standing Social Principle on abortion is imperfect on the matter of global relevance, it lacks the revision’s predetermined Westernized agenda. So, on its global reach, the revision fails.

Is the revision “more succinct?” Yes. The revision is roughly one-third as long as the current Social Principle (approximately 220 words to 660 words).

Editing Out the Gospel of Life

When the standing Social Principle on abortion was revised, what phrases and sentences that were deleted? “Sanctity of unborn human life.” “Sacredness of the life and well-being of the mother and the unborn child.” “We support parental, guardian, or other responsible adult notification and consent before abortions can be performed...” “We cannot affirm abortion as an acceptable means of birth control, and we unconditionally reject it as a means of gender selection or eugenics....” “We oppose the use of late-term abortion known as dilation and extraction (partial-birth abortion) and call for the end of this practice....” “We entrust God to provide guidance, wisdom, and discernment...” “We mourn and are committed to promoting the diminishment of high abortion rates.” “They [the Church and its congregations] should also support those crisis pregnancy centers and pregnancy resource centers....” “We particularly encourage the Church, the government, and social service agencies to support and facilitate the option of adoption....”

These phrases and sentences emerged from historic, ecumenical Christianity’s witness for life and opposition to abortion—and were approved by General Conferences.

If the theologically superficial, globally distant, brief revision is adopted, as is, by the 2020 General Conference, that would basically nullify, in one vote, all General Conference decisions that have been protective of the unborn child and mother. That nullification, in one vote, would: silence the voices of many United Methodists around the world; increase distrust in The United Methodist Church today; set The United Methodist Church more strongly against the consensual teaching of historic, ecumenical Christianity on life and abortion; and lead

possibly to the destruction of more unborn children and bring harm to their mothers. That nullification, in one vote, would not be good. That nullification is unacceptable. (PTS)

A version of this article appeared earlier at <https://juicyecumenism.com> (April 30, 2018), a website of the Institute on Religion and Democracy.♥

ON THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH’S TEACHING ON HUMAN SEXUALITY

by The Reverend Dr. Leicester R. Longden

Lifewatch’s Special Report of March 15, 2018—“A Proposal to Replace Paragraph 161G) Human Sexuality in The Book of Discipline (2016)”—is now posted on the Lifewatch website (www.lifewatch.org). The Special Report invites readers of the report to respond. I do so by offering the following reflections.

The current paragraph on human sexuality in The Book of Discipline reads more like a policy statement about the place of sexuality in contemporary culture. In contrast, the replacement paragraph proposed by Lifewatch offers actual Christian teaching about the nature of human sexuality.

About the current paragraph in the Discipline, I note the following.

- There is only one explicit reference (and that is a negative one) to historic Church teaching—and that involves the “incompatibility” of homosexual “practice” with “Christian teaching.”
- Indirect references to the Church’s teaching (usually following the phrase “we affirm”) use terms such as “sexuality is God’s good gift,” “this sacred gift,” “individuals of sacred worth, created in the image of God.”
- There is a strong tone of social activism in expressions like “we deplore,” “[w]e call for strict global enforcement,” “struggles for human fulfillment,” and “we implore.”
- The overall tone and thrust of the current statement is a focus on “sexuality” and the ways the Church should be supportive (except for the limiting cases of extra-marital sex and homosexual practice) of this sacred gift. Apart from general appeals to “creation” and the Church as a “fellowship that enables reconciling relationships,” there is no attempt to base the statement on a Scriptural, theological, or traditional foundation.
- Granted that this is a paragraph in The United Methodist Church’s “Social Principles,” one cannot help but get the impression that this is a human-relations-policy document trying to negotiate the church’s way in a conflicted social environment.

(Reading the various expansions and reductions of this paragraph, through over forty years of General Conferences, does nothing to lessen this impression.) It is clear, too, that it is out of date, since now the surrounding culture is requiring acquiescence to new claims regarding transgender rights.

The Lifewatch proposal presents a very different perspective.

- The first paragraph names forthrightly that this is a proposal of Christian teaching in the face of cultural challenge.
- The next three paragraphs summarize the teaching of Jesus about marriage, which is situated in the Biblical, covenantal context.
- Paragraph five summarizes St. Paul's teaching, that the one-flesh union of marriage reflects the unity of Christ and the Church.
- The sixth paragraph states that it is this "Biblical witness in marriage which...grounds the Church's understanding of sexuality."
- The seventh paragraph shows how the Church for two millennia has "preached, taught, and practiced" this Biblical, dominical (taught by the Lord Jesus Christ), and apostolic understanding of sexual expression within marriage.
- The last two paragraphs show how the Church's teaching on sexual morality, in spite of constant "cultural opposition," has been "lovingly proposed as a witness to the world" and functioned as a positive "good for the people challenged by it and transformed by it."

On the basis of this comparison, I see the Lifewatch proposal as a distinct improvement on our present paragraph in The Book of Discipline.

There is one place I would welcome stronger assertion in the proposal: in the paragraphs which contain Jesus' words. In them, Jesus is not just making "statements" comparable to those of the worldly wise, which are always contextualized and revisable. Rather, Jesus speaks as the Word, the Son of the Father. In Church arguments over sexuality (and human nature), the very words of Jesus are crucial. They have the character of His words in the Sermon on the Mount, "you have heard that it was said, but I say to you...."

The theological question at stake for The United Methodist Church right now has to do with revelation and whether even Jesus has the authority to speak to us United Methodists about these matters. If He does not, then all moral traditions are up for grabs. If revelation to the Church is diminished or ignored, then there is no bulwark at all against antinomianism (the false teaching, which has existed in the Church from its beginning, that God's grace nullifies the necessity of obedience to God's law).

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WHO SPEAKS FOR THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH?

Does the Commission on a Way Forward speak for The United Methodist Church? No.

Does the Council of Bishops speak for The United Methodist Church? No.

Does the resident bishop of an episcopal area speak for The United Methodist Church? No.

Does a general board (or agency)—such as the General Board of Church and Society—speak for The United Methodist Church? No.

Does the general secretary of a general board (or agency) speak for The United Methodist Church? No.

Does a United Methodist seminary president speak for The United Methodist Church? No.

Well, then, who does speak for The United Methodist Church? General Conference. Only General Conference!

So states The Book of Discipline (2016, Paragraph 509): "Speaking for the Church—1. No person, no paper, no organization, has the authority to speak officially for The United Methodist Church, this right having been reserved exclusively to the General Conference under the Constitution...."

Late in February, the Council of Bishops received, from the Commission on a Way Forward, only Model 2 ("One Church Model," or what could be called One Church Model with the Local Option) and Model 3 ("Multi-Branch: One Church Model," or what could be called the One Church Model with Branches). That is, Model 1, which could be called One Church Model with Increased Accountability, seemed to be set aside.

Model 1 has been the model for which Lifewatch has witnessed and worked. After all, Model 1 maintains United Methodist teaching on human sexuality that is consistent with ecumenical and historic Christianity's teaching on the same. Model 1 also calls for The United Methodist Church—particularly, the church's bishops—to lead the way in keeping the church, clergy and laity and committees and boards and councils and conferences, accountable to the church's doctrine and discipline. No wonder the Council of Bishops and most bishops (active and retired) do not care for Model 1. Model 1 would require of them more vigilance in teaching the church's doctrine and upholding the church's discipline. Unfortunately, most bishops appear to have very little appetite for holding anybody accountable to anything—except, perhaps, to their own moral, theological, and ecclesiological preferences.

Because Model 1 appeared recently to be given short

shrift, and because Model 2 and Model 3 were recently given quite a bit of attention in the church's public square, many throughout The United Methodist Church were distressed. Fear not. Model 1 is not dead. At the beginning of May, the Council of Bishops decided to include Model 1 (The Traditionalist Plan), along with Model 2 and Model 3, in its report to General Conference. Then General Conference 2019 will—as always—get the last word.

Again, General Conference—and only General Conference—speaks for The United Methodist Church. Not the Commission on a Way Forward. Not the Council of Bishops. Not anybody else. And not anything else. General Conference, alone and exclusively, speaks for The United Methodist Church. Please pray for General Conference. (PTS)♥

FULFILLING OUR RESPONSIBILITIES, HERE AND NOW

General Conference 2019 convenes this February. That is several months away. That is a long time. That is a long time to wait.

However, during this time of waiting, all of us United Methodists have responsibilities to fulfill. Our responsibilities are important, pressing responsibilities that should not be ignored or put off.

1. Bishops should teach The United Methodist Church's doctrine (on human sexuality and other topics) and uphold the church's discipline (all of it).

They should not take the easy way. They should not prefer opinions over doctrine, silence over teaching, avoidance over action. They should be bishops of the Church; in The United Methodist Church that means they should carry out the will of General Conference, which is contained in The Book of Discipline, its doctrine and discipline.

2. Bishops should have some good, old-fashioned theological debates on the Council of Bishops.

They should get over their theology of niceness and political correctness. They should begin to take the truth—Christian truth, Gospel truth—seriously.

3. United Methodist laity—not just leaders of the laity, but all the laity—should get serious about learning about The United Methodist Church's current predicament.

Getting that deer-in-the-headlights look, when United Methodist conflicts are mentioned, is not helpful. The laity need to ask hard questions and learn what is going on.

4. Clergy should have an urgency to preach and teach the real Gospel, which focuses on the actual Jesus Christ, who is the Head of the Church.

Faithful ministry is not about pastoral silence, not about the avoidance of difficult matters, not about cowardly neutrality. Faithful ministry is about standing up and standing firm—in the pulpit, in the church-school class, on the floor of Annual

Conference, on the floor of General Conference—for Christ and for His Church.

5. All should remember that the current crisis in The United Methodist Church is, in disguise, a marvelous opportunity for this church—in which we have lived our lives with Christ (through Holy Baptism, Holy Communion, weekly worship before the altar and under the Word, Christian marriage, and Christian burial)—to become more fully and faithfully the Church of Jesus Christ.

If General Conference 2019 maintains (or improves) church teaching on human sexuality and increases accountability throughout the church's life, The United Methodist Church's unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity will be strengthened.

6. But if things go the wrong way at General Conference 2019—that is, should Model 2 or Model 3 be approved—acknowledge that The United Methodist Church could no longer be considered a Church in a substantive way.

Its unity would have been shattered into two or three preferential ghettos. Its holiness would have been compromised by the ideology of the Sexual Revolution. Its catholicity would have contracted to include only the Western world and its acolytes. And its line to the Apostle's teaching would have been broken.

7. If Model 2 or Model 3 is approved by General Conference, those who favored Model 1 (which includes the renewal groups, including Lifewatch) should not immediately form a new Methodist or Wesleyan denomination.

Instead, those who sense they are being pushed out of The United Methodist Church by the adoption of Model 2 or Model 3 (i.e., those who favored Model 1) should gather in a large, democratic assembly for Christian conferencing about, and discernment of, next steps together in following Jesus Christ. The Spirit of Christ would lead. (PTS)♥

STRONG TRUTH AND REAL FREEDOM

When matters related to life, abortion, and human sexuality arise with other United Methodists, we are often tempted to keep our heads down—if not run and hide. Unfortunately, that shows that we are not free; we are spiritually bound by “principalities and powers” to remain silent, to appear undecided, or to flee.

Dr. R. R. Reno, the editor of First Things, explains in “Bondage and Freedom” (First Things, January 2018) how this can happen to us. Dr. Reno's explanation most certainly helps us understand how we relate to The United Methodist Church today, to the Commission on a Way Forward, and to the 2019 General Conference. For historical assistance, Dr. Reno returns to the debates between Erasmus [1466-1536, a Catholic priest who was a Dutch Renaissance humanist and theologian] and Martin Luther [1483-1546, the Catholic priest and theologian who helped ignite and lead the Protestant Reformation].

According to Dr. Reno, “[*Erasmus*] emphasized free will in the Christian life in order to promote tolerance and a spirit of concord. Dogmatic modesty allows us to be less judgmental of the opinions of others. This spirit of accommodation helps prevent the Church (and society) from splintering over secondary matters. To put it in terms of liberty: We should respect the free choices of others. This freedom is not limitless. There are some authoritative truths that properly command us. But dogmatic modesty concludes that there are not many, and we can make up our own minds about most things.” Those United Methodists who favor the local option (Model 2) and the denomination with “branches” (Model 3) line up with Erasmus; they believe Christian teaching on human sexuality is a matter for “dogmatic modesty.”

“For example, ecclesiastical authorities want to maintain institutional peace. The same can be said for secular authorities. This impulse is not malign, but peace of this sort is ‘worldly,’ which means it requires accepting the limitations of human beings in a fallen world. In this framework, it’s very tempting to suppress or muddy truth in order to keep the system going. By contrast, ‘assertions’—authoritative truth-claims—stiffen our spines.”

But for Martin Luther, “[t]he clarity of God’s Word frees us from submission to the judgments and decrees of men. As Luther puts it in an earlier treatise, *On Christian Liberty*, ‘The Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none.’ This is the Pauline view of freedom, a view Luther develops elsewhere. Only as slaves of Christ can we attain freedom from the ‘world,’ which is ruled by the enslaving power of sin and death. For Luther, we should seek this all-encompassing spiritual freedom, not worldly peace or social concord.” Luther’s idea of freedom, in the United Methodist context today, is demonstrated by Model 1, which maintains Biblical teaching, church unity, and increased accountability.

Dr. Reno then notes how today, in society and in Church, Erasmus is “in” and Luther is “out.” “The weekend edition of the *Wall Street Journal* features regular columnists who tell us how brain science, psychology, and other scientific disciplines can help us cope with life’s challenges. These are counsels of adjustment, not galvanizing calls to action. This fits with our therapeutic culture. The dominant rhetoric in public life turns away from truth’s passions and toward cooler notions such as ‘healthy beliefs’ and ‘affirming attitudes.’ Recently, Cardinal Blase Cupich of Chicago urged the adoption of an ‘adult spirituality,’ a formulation meant to evoke the freedom born of dogmatic modesty rather than the presumed slavishness (and immaturity) of a more traditional spirituality. The Church needs to tone down its assertions so that people can make up their own minds about right and wrong.”

At the end of his essay, Dr. Reno turns to St. John Paul II and to us: “In his encyclical on moral theology, *Veritatis Splendor*, John Paul II explained how affirming

“Only a man who can say, ‘I will not’ is genuinely free. I will not ‘accompany’ the culture of death. I will not conform to the sexual revolution. I will not deny my Lord and God. The freedom to say no—no to evil, no to lies, no to groupthink and easy self-deceptions—is the grace of moral truth.”

truth sets us free. Asserting that there are intrinsically evil acts limits our choices. But in a deeper sense, these moral assertions provide the foundation for a culture of freedom. In a moral system in which everything depends upon circumstances or inner intentions, the resulting ambiguity favors the status quo. Without moral absolutes, we are left to our own devices, making us vulnerable to manipulation and intimidation. The principalities and powers that rule the ‘world’ punish dissent. Given our weakness, we find ways to avoid paying a price for moral truth. At best, we retreat into an inward dissent that maintains outward conformity. At worst, we exploit the supposed ambiguities of moral truth to rationalize our compromises and capitulations.

“By contrast, the clarity and force of traditional Catholic [*and Protestant!*] teaching about intrinsically evil acts plant the flag of rebellion. In *Veritatis Splendor*, John Paul II *asserts* these moral prohibitions, empowering ordinary people to take a stand. To hearken to the absolute and inviolable moral commandments of God, which are written on our hearts, does not lead to ‘childish spirituality.’ It’s the soul of freedom. Only a man who can say, ‘I will not’ is genuinely free. I will not ‘accompany’ the culture of death. I will not conform to the sexual revolution. I will not deny my Lord and God. The freedom to say no—no to evil, no to lies, no to groupthink and easy self-deceptions—is the grace of moral truth. It provides us with a natural anticipation of the supernatural freedom given in God’s Word.” (emphases added and [*Stallsworth’s comments*])

Those United Methodists with ears to hear, let us hear! And those United Methodists with hearts, minds, and mouths to speak, let us speak! (PTS)♥

THE POWER OF WITNESSING TO THE TRUTH: BISHOP MARION EDWARDS

What follows is a letter-to-the-editor which was published in First Things (August/September 2017). It is an attempt, a humble attempt, to respond to several letters which critiqued “A Disunited Methodist Church” (First Things, May 2017) It provides an example for how The United Methodist Church can live into Model 1 and become more fully and faithfully one holy catholic and apostolic Church.

“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.”

“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 (FL), Bishop Marion Edwards (NC) 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.” (PTS)♥

ST. CHARLES BORROMEIO: A MODEL BISHOP

St. Charles Borromeo (1538-1584) lived only 46 years; yet he accomplished so much for Christ and His Church. He was born into nobility; yet he lived simply and gave his excess to the poor. He had detractors; yet he earned doctorates in civil law and canon law. He had a speech impediment; yet he became a persuasive preacher and teacher of the Church.

By his uncle who would become Pope Pius IV, he was invited to work in Rome. There he helped conclude the work of the Council of Trent and complete the Roman Catechism in 1566. “By then, he had been ordained and appointed archbishop of Milan—a diocese nearly in ruins, due to an eighty-year absence of archbishops. But it was the largest archdiocese in Italy, with 3,000 clergy and 800,000 people, and needed to be

saved. Many religious and laity had fallen away from the Church, and many who remained were corrupt or wayward. Borromeo was undaunted. With a cheerfulness and determination that astonished his contemporaries, he traveled up and down his diocese, enacting vigorous reforms in line with Trent and the Roman Catechism. He convoked six provincial and eleven diocesan synods, founded seminaries to educate a new generation of priests, established hospitals, and set aside his large inheritance for the needs of the poor. He renewed religious life, and started a new congregation of secular priests, the Oblates. In 1576, when a plague struck Milan, many of the healthy fled, but Borromeo remained in the city, visiting the stricken and comforting the dying. In one extraordinary episode, he climbed a stack of corpses to give the Last Rites to a man who was still breathing and begging for the sacraments.

“He became a beloved figure—except amongst those who resented his reforms and disciplinary measures. For standing firm against evil, Borromeo was condemned and had his life threatened. But as one of his biographers (Cecilia Anne Jones, Life and Times of S. Charles Borromeo) commented: ‘He was not discouraged; he had continued to do what he could to regenerate Milan; to make the people live honest, God-fearing lives; how was this to be done, if sin and iniquity were allowed to stalk unrebuked through the streets of the city; if vices that sent a blush to the cheek of an honest citizen were allowed to go unpunished?’ One of his most famous teachings centered on Holy Communion: ‘The people should not only be urged to receive Holy Communion frequently,’ he wrote, ‘but also how dangerous and fatal it would be to approach the Sacred Table of Divine Food unworthily.’....

“Borromeo’s influence endures because he understood three things. First, that the role of a faithful bishop is not to accommodate or enable sin, but to teach the faithful what is right and wrong, according to the Gospel and Christ’s Church. Second, that all reforms begin within the individual heart, and consequently there will be no Church reform unless the people carrying it out live honorable and reformed lives themselves. Finally, that there is a monumental difference between true reform and false reform—and that Catholics [indeed all Christians!] should expose and flee from the latter if they have any regard for their eternal salvation and the salvation of others.” (William Doyno, Jr., “St. Charles Borromeo: Model Bishop, Holy Reformer,” 07.17.17, <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2017/07/st-charles-borromeo-model-bishop-holy-reformer>, accessed on 07/18/17, emphasis added, [*Stallworth’s comments*]) (PTS)♥

***Please pray for the ministry of Lifewatch
on Wednesday of each week.***

REMEMBERING RAMSEY: DIGNITY AND COVENANT

Every year “The Paul Ramsey Award [from The Center for Bioethics and Culture] honors those who have made an outstanding contribution to the bioethics discussion and are actively engaged in society; facing the challenges of the 21st century, profoundly defending the dignity of humankind, and enthusiastically embracing ethical biotechnology for the human good.” It “is given to those who have demonstrated exemplary achievement in the field of bioethics.”

As you may or may not know, Dr. Paul Ramsey (1913-1988) was one of the top Christian ethicists of last century. In his day job, he was the Harrington Spear Paine Professor of Religion at Princeton University, and he was the author of excellent books and articles. And he was a United Methodist. When the going was rough, Dr. Ramsey stood up faithfully and brilliantly, in The United Methodist Church, for the unborn child and mother, and against the Religious Coalition for Abortion Rights (or RCAR, the prior name of today’s Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice or RCRC).

All in all, Dr. Ramsey’s work “shines as an almost

lone beacon in the general darkness of academic bioethics, since his commitment to the sanctity and dignity of human life was paramount.” (<http://www.cbc-network.org/2017/12/paul-ramsey-award-winner-2018/>, accessed on 01/31/18)

It was Dr. Ramsey who once wrote: “At crucial points in the analysis of medical ethics, I shall not be embarrassed to use as an interpretative principle the Biblical norm of *fidelity to covenant*, with the meaning it gives to *righteousness* between man and man....

“I hold with Karl Barth that covenant-fidelity is the inner meaning and purpose of our creation as human beings, while the whole of creation is the external basis and condition of the possibility of covenant. This means that the conscious acceptance of covenant responsibilities is the inner meaning of even the ‘natural’ or systemic relations into which we are born and of the institutional relations or roles we enter by choice, while this fabric provides the external framework for human fulfillment in explicit covenants among men. The practice of medicine is one such covenant. *Justice, fairness, righteousness, faithfulness, canons of loyalty*, the *sanctity of life, hesed, agape* or *charity* are some of the names given to the moral quality of attitude and of action owed to all men by any man who steps into a covenant with another man....” (The Patient as Person [Yale, 1970], pp. xii-xiii, which is quoted by Dr. Herbert Ratner in Three on

“All in all, Dr. Ramsey’s work ‘shines as an almost lone beacon in the general darkness of academic bioethics, since his commitment to the sanctity and dignity of human life was paramount.’”

Abortion: “Protecting the Unborn.” “Abortion: A Review Article.” and “Feticide/Infanticide upon Request” by Paul Ramsey, a Child and Family Reprint Booklet [Child and Family, Oak Park, IL, 1978], pp. vi-vii

Thanks be to God for Dr. Ramsey. We United Methodists of yesteryear needed you and your faithful witness then, and we United Methodists of today need your faithful witness now. (PTS)♥

UNDERSTANDING THEOLOGICAL LIBERALISM

John Henry Newman [1801-1890, *an Anglican priest who later became a Roman Catholic and a Catholic cardinal*], had much to say about many things. But he wrote with special insight about liberal Christianity. For example, in his famous Biglietto Speech, he noted:

“Liberalism in religion is the doctrine [!] that there is no positive truth in religion, but that one creed is as good as

another, and this is the teaching which is gaining substance and force daily. It is inconsistent with any recognition of any religion, as *true*. It teaches that all are to be tolerated, for all are matters of opinion. Revealed religion is not a truth, but a sentiment and a taste; not an objective fact, not

miraculous; and it is the right of each individual to make it say just what strikes his fancy. Devotion is not necessarily founded on faith. Men may go to Protestant Churches and to Catholic, may get good from both and belong to neither. They may fraternize together in spiritual thoughts and feelings, without having any views at all of doctrine in common, or seeing the need of them. Since, then, religion is so personal a peculiarity and so private a possession, we must of necessity ignore it in the intercourse of man with man. If a man puts on a new religion every morning, what is that to you? It is as impertinent to think about a man’s religion as about his sources of income or his management of his family. Religion is in no sense the bond of society.” (<http://www.newmanreader.org/works/addresses/file2.html>, p. 2, accessed 01/30/18)

Commenting on “Liberalism in Oxford” [*which Rev. John Wesley had attempted decades before*], he wrote eighteen (18) propositions. Among the most pertinent to our time are the following.

“1. No religious tenet is important, unless reason shows it to be so....

“3. No theological doctrine is any thing more than an opinion which happens to be held by bodies of men....

“5. It is immoral in a man to believe more than he can spontaneously receive as being congenial to his moral and mental nature....

“6. No revealed doctrines or precepts may reasonably stand in the way of scientific conclusions....

“7. Christianity is necessarily modified by the growth of civilization, and the exigencies of times....

“9. There is a right of Private Judgment: that is, there is no existing authority on earth competent to interfere with the liberty of individuals in reasoning and judging for themselves about the Bible and its contents, as they severally please....

“10. There are rights of conscience such, that every one may lawfully advance a claim to profess and teach what is false and wrong in matters, religious, social, and moral, provided that to his private conscience it seems absolutely true and right.” (<http://www.newmanreader.org/works/apologia/liberalism.html>, pp. 6-8, accessed 01/30/18)

Theological liberalism is alive and well in The United Methodist Church today. It is a tradition—with propositional doctrines [!]*—*that has been around for a couple of centuries. It is a shame that United Methodist seminaries do not treat theological liberalism as a tradition to be critiqued with the help of Cardinal Newman, Karl Barth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, C.S. Lewis, and others. To be sure, theological liberalism has some gifts to offer the Church. However, at crucial times, its challenges to the faith of the Church must be met and the Church’s faith defended. If theological liberalism’s challenges are not met and the Church’s faith not defended, those challenges will dilute the word of God and the Church’s faith and morals. ([*Stallsworth’s comments*]) (PTS)♥

BARTH ON METHODISM

Now, after reading the article above based on quotations on theological liberalism from John Henry Newman, let’s fast forward one hundred years. Let’s consider what Karl Barth [1886-1968]*—*the outstanding, neo-orthodox, Protestant theologian of the twentieth century*—*had to say about theological liberalism and American Methodism. This is taken from Barth in Conversation: Volume I, 1959-1962 (edited by Eberhard Busch [Westminster John Knox, Louisville, 2017]), and from his May 16, 1961 conversation with Methodist pastors from Switzerland at a retreat center.

Critiquing Rudolf Bultmann [1884-1976], a leading theological liberal of his time, Barth notes: “He [*Bultmann*] did not want to abandon certain [*scriptural*] statements, but wants to ‘interpret’ everything, to be understood in the framework of its contemporary historical setting and its language, and by doing so show that everything, including the virgin birth of Jesus, has an existential sense, a connection to human life. So he understands that the scriptural statements are expressions

or perspectives in which the people of that time described their relationship to the cosmos and to their fellow humans. The error that I see here is that Bultmann wants everything to be centered upon human existence. [*But t*]he New Testament simply does not speak of that which concerns me. Naturally, it also speaks about this, but there is still an objective proclamation that I, first of all, have to acknowledge and that cannot be translated into statements about myself.”

A little later in the conversation, Barth quotes a theologian who demonstrates the me-centeredness of theological liberalism: “I, as a Christian, am for me[,] as a theologian[,] the actual object of my science [*theology*].” (p. 135) Self-absorbed theology, anyone?

Barth is then asked, “does the Methodist church in its proclamation and its existence exhibit deviations from the gospel from which it must be recalled?”

Barth responds at some length: “Are you aware that there is a relationship between the problem of liberalism and the problem of John Wesley? With Wesley, one can become a very good liberal. In America, Methodism is quite liberal. This is the case when one is about to make the human being the point of focus. You (the Methodists!) may not declare yourselves free of guilt or solidarity with liberalism as the point of departure. A great anthropocentric [*that is, man-centered*] train is at the doorstep. ‘Do you imagine, whoever you are, that when you judge those who do such things and yet do them yourself, you will escape the judgment of God?’ (Rom. 2:3). That is the only thing that I want to say to you. I will not say that you are becoming deviant, but the danger is there! As a good friend, I would advise you: Be careful! Place the emphasis more on Christ and less on the experience of salvation! Then it will not happen to you as it has with your American brethren who are caught up in liberalism. The overemphasis on the salvation experience resembles a person finding oneself on a downhill track, not knowing which way the ball rolls. One cannot discuss either Christ’s resurrection or the virgin birth or eschatology [*last things*] if the starting point is wrong [*that is, the individual person*]. When the human and his experience are decisive, everything begins to wobble and one finds oneself on boggy ground, so to speak. Liberalism has entered this boggy ground. It is not its denial [of this or that doctrine] that is bad, but that it has stepped onto his ground.” (pp. 138-9) (*emphases added*, [Busch’s comments], [*Stallsworth’s comments*])

Karl Barth’s critique of Methodism is now showing up in The United Methodist Church with a vengeance. There is entirely too much attention given to the individual, the individual’s experience, the individual’s religious experience, even the individual’s sexual experience. When that happens, the Word of God is forgotten and perhaps not heard. That is not as it should be. Barth said it more elegantly. (PTS)♥

YOU SHOULD KNOW THAT ...

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- Priests for Life worked with Abortion Free New Mexico to prove that abortions late in pregnancy are common in the United States. A woman, who identified herself and her child as healthy, called abortion providers in CO, DC, MD, NM, PA, and WA, and she scheduled abortions up to 32 weeks. “In a call to Southwestern Women’s Options, an abortion mill in Albuquerque, the caller, scheduling a 29-week abortion, was told that there is a priest affiliated with the ‘Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice’ [RCRC], who comes to the clinic regularly to give spiritual help during the procedure. ‘We don’t know how we’d do without them [sic], really,’ the clinic worker declared.” (“Priests for Life undercover

project shows third-trimester abortion is legal in the United States on healthy babies carried by healthy moms,” Priests for Life: Activating the Church to End Abortion, January 2018, p. 2)

A United Methodist can read such an article and offer a prayer of thanksgiving to God. Because of General Conference 2016’s action, The United Methodist Church as a denomination—including the General Board of Church and Society (GBCS) and United Methodist Women (UMW)—is no longer officially associated with RCRC.

- “The courage...to speak rests above all on the fact that the truth can be trusted to have its effects, in contrast to all those anxious efforts to be helpful through political arrangements, diplomatic ruses, and little doses of wisdom..., as if a ‘truth’ that appeared masked, dressed up, decorated, and hung with the garlands of human beautification in this manner could still make an impression on persons with a deep moral sense.” This stirring quotation is from Hans Urs von Balthasar [*1905-1988, a great Catholic theologian*] and his Bernanos: An Ecclesial Existence (Ignatius Press, 1996).

On the same page is this: “‘The way it [difficult truth] must be said’ is here the sober way, without pathos or bitterness, without the will to wound or to take a secret revenge, without servile grumbling or supercilious gloating. Rather, it must be that specifically Christian way of speaking that is close to sacramental confession in its gravity and to a physician’s advice in its objectivity and that finds its clean tone in the at once modest and proud competence of the baptized person who makes his home in the Church and there enjoys the full rights of citizenship.”

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● Daniella J. Greenbaum reviews Leon Kass' Leading a Worthy Life: Finding Meaning in Modern Times (Encounter Books, 2017) in Commentary (January 2018), and she notes the following: "Though he notes the myriad manifestations of the worthy life, Kass is no relativist. He attacks the 'mind-deadening and self-indulgent poison that truth, like beauty, lies only in the eye of the beholder, with each person freely 'constructing' reality according to his own tastes,' and he affirms that 'despite the lazy lure of relativism, we really do know in our bones that some opinions are truer, some books better, some lives and nations more admirable than others.' Those who hope to lead a worthy life must not fall prey to the notion that worth can be found anywhere and in anything." Here, a phrase comes to mind: truthful moral claims command attention.

● The great Russian writer Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910) once noted: "We are not ostriches, and cannot believe that if we refuse to look at what we do not wish to see, it will not exist." With each passing day, there are fewer United Methodists who act like ostriches.

● A word from the front—actually, from Pastor Junior Plunkett, who retired after 42 years as pastor in the North Alabama Conference of The United Methodist Church. This word captures the spirit of the age, which has crept into the churches: "I am against nothing, for to be against anything (even murder or rape) would mean that sin is real. I am for nothing, because if I preach the Bible or Jesus Christ, I only prove myself to be wrong." No wonder the average United Methodist pastor is tempted to retreat into studied neutrality—go ahead, call it hiding—when abortion and sexuality arise in conversation. The more faithful option: offer true, loving witness to the Gospel of Life. And fear not!

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

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