

## **2010 LIFEWATCH SERMON: “THE ONCE AND FUTURE CHURCH”**

by Bishop Scott J. Jones

Two days ago, I testified before the Judiciary Committee of the Kansas State Senate. It was holding hearings on two bills that would abolish the death penalty. I was given six minutes in the group of persons urging that judicial executions be ended. I quoted from the Social Principles of The United Methodist Church to support the moral part of my argument, and then added practical and economic factors that were compatible with our church's doctrine.

Following our group, several persons spoke in favor of retaining the death penalty in Kansas. One of them was a young woman whose boyfriend was murdered by the Carr brothers. She spoke movingly about why they deserved to die. She then identified herself as a Christian, and as a United Methodist. She spoke respectfully of me, but then said that many United Methodist pastors supported the death penalty, and that many United Methodist lay persons, like herself, disagreed with their bishop. A pastor from the Kansas East Conference was in the room and afterwards said to me that the hearing had gone well, and that he was shocked to learn that United Methodist clergy disagree on this issue. (His tongue was firmly in his cheek on that one!)

Now I am preaching the annual Lifewatch sermon addressing the issue of abortion. Do United Methodist clergy and laity all agree on this issue as well?

I am grateful for the invitation from the Taskforce of United Methodists on Abortion and Sexuality for the invitation to preach here today. My guess is that there are differences of opinion within the membership of that group, and I know there are differences between members of that group and other groups within our church. My goal today is to offer two frameworks as a way of exegeting the deep logic that underlies our denomination's official teaching in the Social Principles. I support the position contained there, and I believe it in fact offers the best possible witness to American culture from a Wesleyan Christian perspective. The first framework is the shape of United Methodist doctrine. The second is the religious context of American culture.

## **FIRST FRAMEWORK: THE SHAPE OF UNITED METHODIST DOCTRINE**

The Biblical text I have chosen for this message is Hebrews 12:14 (NRSV), “Pursue peace with everyone, and the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.” Mr. Wesley used this verse 29 times in his published sermons; and, along with other texts that talk about Christian perfection (such as Matthew 5:48), he continually holds up the image of holiness as the goal of the Christian life. Holiness was his passion beginning in 1725, and after 1738 he developed a mature theology that I have called “the extreme center.” At the heart of Wesleyan theology is the conviction that salvation by grace through faith has at least three moments: repentance, justification, and sanctification.

In “On God's Vineyard,” Wesley recounts the origins of the Methodist movement by referring to this verse from Hebrews: “Two young Clergymen, not very remarkable any way, of middle age, having a tolerable measure of health, though rather weak than strong, began, about fifty years ago, to call sinners to repentance. This they did, for a time, in many of the churches in and about London. But two difficulties arose: First. The churches were so crowded, that many of the parishioners could not get in. Secondly. They preached new doctrines—that we are saved by faith, and that ‘without holiness no man could see the Lord.’ For one or other of these reasons, they were not long suffered to preach in the churches.”

Later Mr. Wesley used the image of a house to summarize his doctrines: repentance is the porch, justification is the doorway, sanctification (or holiness) is the house. We see the pursuit of holiness in light of the whole way of salvation, which Wesley regards as the main theme or general tenor of the Bible. This balance between justification (entry into the Christian life) with sanctification (the goal of the Christian life), along with his emphasis on both grace and good works, lead many of us to characterize Wesley's theology and United Methodist doctrine as occupying “the extreme center.” Even our way of talking about holiness has this approach: we balance personal holiness and social holiness.

Some of the General Rules, which still guide our church, are very personal: Methodists are to avoid

drunkenness, should never smuggle, should speak well of magistrates and, more positively, should do good of every possible sort as far as possible to all people. Spiritually, they were held accountable for using the means of grace—in his phrase, “attending upon all the ordinances of God.” To my personal dislike, this includes fasting and other practices which I wish Jesus had never talked about.

Wesley’s passion for holiness was applied to the social issues of his time. He opposed slavery, and the economic forces that diverted corn into distilled liquor. He set up alternative medical systems, because no one was delivering adequate health care to the poor. As modern society has gotten more complicated, our Wesleyan witness for social justice has taken on more and more complex issues, seeking to apply Biblical teachings to issues and situations radically different from those faced by our foremothers and forefathers in the faith.

The pursuit of holiness, both personal and social, is deep in the DNA of Wesleyan Christianity. We are committed to seeking holiness for ourselves, and to helping others move toward that goal. Yet, we know that holiness is a gift from God—something God does in us by grace. Not only that, but holiness itself is complex and involves many different aspects.

This is the first framework for discussing abortion—United Methodist doctrine is characterized by the extreme center. We hold in creative tension commitments that others find so opposite that no one can credibly hold them at the same time. We believe in both personal and social holiness. We believe in evangelism and social justice. We believe in preaching and the sacraments. We believe in episcopal hierarchy and democratic processes of governance. We believe in strong doctrinal statements, and yet we welcome diverse positions on matters of opinion. We believe in corporate worship and small groups for discipleship.

This sometimes leads to confusion as other persons, espousing simpler and cleaner positions, claim that we have compromised far too much with the other side. Between the alternatives of pro-choice and pro-life, there are many on either extreme who find our balanced United Methodist position mushy and unclear. The extreme center is not a comfortable place to stand. At the same time, there is a danger inherent in our approach. Holding things in tension can become so tiring or confusing that we drift into the dead center, where we actually do become mushy and never stand for anything.

#### SECOND FRAMEWORK: THE RELIGIOUS CONTEXT OF AMERICAN CULTURE

The second framework is related to how we United Methodists relate to American culture at large. John Wesley believed in the first part of this verse, “pursue peace with everyone.” Wesley’s efforts at remaining

within the Church of England are well known, as are his efforts to build good relationships with other evangelicals of his time. But in his efforts to participate in the shaping of English culture during the eighteenth century, Wesley could appeal to a common religious base. England was by its very nature a country with one legally established church that, in theory and to some extent in practice, united the vast majority of its people into one liturgy, one doctrine, and one ecclesiastical hierarchy.

We no longer live in a Christian country. Indeed, in the sense in which the Church of England mirrored the government and societal structures of that country, there was never a time when all of the United States had a single established church. The direction of our country was clearly set in 1791 with the ratification of the Bill of Rights, and there would be no established religion for us. Eventually, the states that had established churches followed the federal government’s example as well.

While Protestant Christianity was informally dominant in many parts of the country until the middle part of the last century, the 1954 US Supreme Court decision, which prohibited officially sponsored prayer in public schools, began the more complete disestablishment of Christianity in American culture. Other cultural changes have eroded our ability to shape American culture according to Christian principles. In the last 50 years, the media elites who run our movie, art, television, and Internet vehicles of communication have become increasingly hostile to organized religion in general and Christianity in particular. Universities, many of which were founded by religious groups a century or more ago, now are places dominated by a “culture of disbelief.” In addition, the migration of persons from non-European parts of the world means that religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam play an increasingly larger role in American culture. It has been estimated that there are more Muslims in America than Episcopalians. This constitutes a radical change from the founding days of the American republic.

Another change, driven by the philosophical convictions of the baby-boom generation in the 1960s and fueled by rapid technological innovation, is the increasing role of individual freedom. More and more of our culture can be experienced alone or in isolation from others. Robert Putnam’s *Bowling Alone* chronicles the many ways in which community has declined in our country since 1964, and the opportunities for individuals to shape their own beliefs, value systems, and social networks apart from community pressure and influence.

These demographic and cultural changes mean that our Wesleyan drive for social holiness faces significant intellectual and political challenges that did not exist during the abolitionist, temperance, and civil rights movements. We cannot appeal to Biblical principles as common ground for all Americans. We cannot appeal even to the existence of God as a warrant that will always work. We cannot always appeal to the need to make a common decision. Instead, there is great

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diversity of religious expression, there are many competing religions in the marketplace of ideas today, and even the philosophy that all persons should be free to “do their own thing” is alive and well. In such a situation, given the decline in communal acceptance of moral values, Christian claims to impose our moral values on others are not well received and appear to be negative and punitive.

Taken together, these changes mean that Christians must adapt their approach to social holiness. In the debate about abortion, for example, Biblical teachings and classical Christian convictions will not carry the day either in judicial rulings or legislative deliberations. The appeal to individual autonomy is incredibly powerful.

I believe that we are no longer living in Christendom where churches can directly shape the values, laws, and practices of any country. Instead, we are facing the situation described so cogently by Loren Mead in his 1991 Once and Future Church. The early Christians before Constantine knew they lived in a hostile culture, and yet sought to bear witness to the reign of God by building communities whose values were more in harmony with God’s will than the surrounding culture.

#### SERVING SOCIETY IN THREE WAYS

We must remain engaged with the larger culture and nurture our corporate commitment to use every resource we can to end evil and promote Biblical values. I continue to believe in the promise God spoke to Solomon as contained in 2 Chronicles 7:14 (RSV): “if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land.” But we cannot quote this verse as if the United States is like Israel in the 10th century BC. We are not one people with one religion, one temple, one form of worship, and one priesthood, all in service to one God we all know. We cannot even agree on one set of fundamental values except those enshrined in the Constitution and especially the Bill of Rights. Instead, I believe our calling as Christians is to serve the culture in three ways.

First, we need to clearly announce God’s call for holiness with specific teaching about the behaviors and attitudes that are pleasing to God. This requires a greater willingness to name personal and social sins with clarity. Too often our preachers and our churches have watered down the gospel for fear of offending persons. In our drive to be nice, in our effort to talk about God’s grace, in our commitment to tolerate different views on matters of opinion, we have quit talking about repentance, sin, and holiness. When we United Methodists do talk specifically about sin, it is usually to condemn the sins of others who are not present rather than looking at our own lives confessionally.

Second, we need to create communities that foster

growth toward holiness through the means of grace. We need to always have before us Romans 3:23 (RSV): “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” We need to create discipling communities that engage sinners with love and the grace of Jesus Christ, that lead them through justification toward entire sanctification so that they may participate in God’s transformation of the world. This is our mission. It is not something we are doing, but the grace of God active through us.

Third, we need to build consensus with other partners—including Christians, followers of other religions, agnostics, and atheists—to move our society toward a greater degree of personal and social holiness. We need to cast our vision of social holiness in terms that will connect with the teachings of Buddha, the Koran, the Book of Mormon, and atheistic ethical teachings so that we might help God’s will be done even by those who do not follow Jesus.

#### RE-FRAMING UNITED METHODIST PARTICIPATION IN THE ABORTION DEBATE

What does this re-framing mean for United Methodists and the abortion debate in the United States?

First, let me give my summary of United Methodist teaching on this issue. In my understanding, the Social Principles paragraph on abortion (Paragraph 161J, The Book of Discipline [2008]) can be summarized as teaching “abortion should be legal and rare.”

The fundamental teaching of our church on this issue is that human life is sacred, and the sanctity of life extends to the fetus. There is no teaching here on when life begins. There is no teaching here about determining viability outside the womb as a key determiner. Rather, I believe our commitment to the sanctity of human life means that we welcome the possibility of new life developing, and we believe that pregnancy is an opportunity for affirming that life. Therefore, anything that intentionally ends a pregnancy is wrong. Abortion is sin. Like the death of an infant outside the womb, abortion is a cause for grieving and sorrow. While miscarriage is usually a medical problem that is a grievous tragedy, the intent to cause an end to a pregnancy rises to the level of sin.

Our doctrine notes a crucial phrase: “We recognize tragic conflicts of life with life that may justify abortion, and in such cases we support the legal option of abortion under proper medical procedures.” This is our way of stating that, while abortion is always a sin, there are occasional situations where the only realistic options are sinful ones. Things happen. Stuff occurs. There are times when the options are so bad that all of them violate God’s laws. The words “tragic conflicts of life with life” should be taken very strictly. There are times when the mother’s life is so in danger that it is genuinely a choice of either the mother or the fetus living. There are times when continuing the pregnancy is so unacceptable that the least sinful thing to do is carry out the abortion.

Here we face a dilemma. Who gets to make the decision about what rises to the level of a “tragic conflict of life with life,” and what is the least sinful thing to do? We, as Christians, also value the liberation of women, and much of the abortion debate has centered around the right of women to control their own bodies. We are appropriately hesitant to give to the government the right to determine sensitive issues like the decision to end a pregnancy.

Here is another problem. Given the cultural change to individual freedom and the constitutional values of limited government and the rights of the individual, which have brought so many blessings to the United States and the rest of the world, outlawing abortion would have two tragic consequences. First, it would remove the sensitive decision away from the individual and her physician. Few of us want the “tragic conflict of life with life” to be determined by government agents. Whether those agents are courts, police forces, medical examining boards, or district attorneys, we think our commitment to freedom requires the locus of the decision to remain with the individual, her family, her church (if she is Christian), and her medical advisors. Second, the tragic consequence of outlawing abortion would be the deaths of many women who would seek illegal back-alley abortion providers. We must judge real-world consequences of our policy decisions, and the future of America in the 21st century means that we cannot go back to a 1950s world where abortion did not happen legally. The negative consequences far outweigh the positive benefits and the net gain for social holiness. This is a hard calculation to make, but we must be as realistic as possible.

At the same time, our doctrine teaches that it is sinful for abortion to be used as a means of birth control. The vast majority of abortions in the United States are done as a means of birth control. People have irresponsible sexual intercourse—either unprotected by birth control measures or without regard to the possibility of pregnancy—and then want to avoid the consequences of their actions. In some cases, their fornication—sexual intercourse outside marriage—is already a sinful act, and now another sin is being committed to relieve the persons involved of the consequences of their behavior by destroying the beginnings of a new life.

#### WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

Realistically, as long as any abortion options are legal, there will be abuses and people who choose sinful behavior. We have seen that with gambling, environmental degradation, and divorce. Living in a society that values individual freedom inevitably leads to more sinful behavior than we would prefer. What is a Christian to do? For those who agree that abortion is tragic and for those who will go so far as to say that it is sinful behavior that should be avoided as much as possible, what can be done?

The first step is to create communities of holiness

*“We need to recognize that access to an abortion is not a right.”*

that use the means of grace to help people through personal crises. We need to teach that abortion is sinful and that it is to be chosen only when other alternatives are more sinful. We need to create small groups of people where women in a crisis pregnancy can receive encouragement to do the right thing. Our congregations should surround a woman who is carrying the baby to full term with the love, emotional support, and financial support she will need. Adoption services are essential. A highway billboard I see regularly in Kansas says “Millions waiting to adopt,” but I wonder how a scared young woman struggling with an unintended pregnancy can connect with even one of those million families who would love to raise and care for her child.

We need to connect with other partners in our society to reduce the number of abortions in the United States. We need to strengthen our laws against late-term abortions except in well defined circumstances, because our courts have concluded that viability outside the womb is in fact a value that is sufficiently widely held that it can be sustained in law. Again, we need to be clear that reducing the number of abortions is a goal.

A number of steps could help move toward such a goal. We need to commit ourselves to greater availability of family planning resources so that unintended pregnancies happen less often. We need to recognize that access to an abortion is not a right. While we United Methodists believe that persons have the right to health care, abortion is not normally a health care issue. Rather, it is a sinful behavior. Proposals in the recent health care debate to provide tax funding for abortions are very misguided. What you fund with tax dollars will increase. Our policy, as an Anglo-American culture since the early 18th century, has been to tax behaviors that have bad social consequences, in essence dis-incentivizing immoral actions. In Kansas, I am advocating an increase in the cigarette tax, because allowing smoking to be relatively inexpensive is bad public policy. While taxing abortions is both unfeasible and wrong, we need to find ways of dis-incentivizing abortions. We should be subsidizing positive alternatives to abortion that provide life-giving options that enhance personal and social holiness.

As a church, we should be supporting the existence of crisis pregnancy centers that will provide support and counseling to young women and their families in difficult situations. Christian counseling always has a value-laden point—we are seeking to help people reach holiness. So our counseling is giving support and help in reaching the goal that the gospel prescribes for all persons. Where abortions are prevalent, United Methodist congregations should be offering help to those in need.

I said earlier that we need to adapt to our new context of living in a pagan culture. Christianity once knew how to do this very well. When Aristides was writing to the emperor Hadrian, he highlighted the Christians' care for the most vulnerable in Roman society. He wrote: "[Christians] love one another. They never fail to help widows. They save orphans from those who would hurt them. If they have something, they give freely to the man who has nothing. If they see a stranger, they take him home and are happy, as though he were a real brother. They don't consider themselves brothers in the usual sense, but brothers instead through the Spirit, in God."

At our best, we United Methodists do the same. Once we realize that women in crisis pregnancies are among the least of these, and that our commitment to the sanctity of human life means we should do all in our power to welcome new life rather than end it prematurely, helping create communities of love for the unborn will come much more easily. The early Christians did it in a hostile society. We can do the same in our time and place. The Church, that once was, will be again an agent for caring for the least among us.

*Bp. Jones delivered this sermon on January 22 during the 2010 Lifewatch Service of Worship, which took place in Simpson Memorial Chapel at The United Methodist Building in Washington, DC. Bp. Jones is the episcopal leader of the Kansas Area of The United Methodist Church.♥*

## **A RESPONSE TO "THE ONCE AND FUTURE CHURCH"**

by Rev. Paul T. Stallsworth

Those in the Lifewatch community, as well as many other United Methodists, are most grateful to Bishop Scott J. Jones for preaching the 2010 Lifewatch Sermon. Bp. Jones' sermon is well organized and quite provocative, as indicated by the response that follows. Motivated and directed by Wesleyan categories and concepts, especially the joining together of personal holiness and social holiness, Bp. Jones' sermon will prove to be helpful to The United Methodist Church as we continue to struggle with the challenge posed by abortion.

A summary and a critique of Bishop Jones' perspective on abortion follows.

### **THE BISHOP ON ABORTION**

Bp. Jones' sermon reflects current United Methodist teaching on abortion. That teaching, which is found in the Social Principles at Paragraph 161J in The Book of Discipline (2008), is summarized by the bishop in a single sentence: "[A]bortion should be legal and rare." This sentence situates United Methodist teaching on abortion in what Bp. Jones calls

"the extreme center"—that is, not strictly pro-choice and not strictly pro-life. The bishop's extreme-center perspective begins in this way: "[H]uman life is sacred, and the sanctity of life extends to the fetus." Therefore, "anything that intentionally ends a pregnancy is wrong. Abortion is sin." While contending that "abortion is always a sin," Bp. Jones also believes "there are occasional situations where the only realistic options are sinful ones... There are times when continuing the pregnancy is so unacceptable that the least sinful thing to do is carry out the abortion." Therefore, following Paragraph 161J ("We recognize tragic conflicts of life with life that may justify abortion, and in such cases we support the legal option of abortion under proper medical procedures."), Bp. Jones contends that abortion should be legal. After all, he continues, "outlawing abortion would have two tragic consequences." First, it would take away decision-making capacity, on whether or not to abort, from the pregnant woman and her support system and place it in the hands of a governmental agency. This would diminish her freedom. Second, outlawing abortion would drive pregnant women into the dangerous care of "illegal back-alley abortion providers." Therefore, "[t]he negative consequences [of outlawing abortion] far outweigh the positive benefits... This is a hard calculation to make, but we must be as realistic as possible."

What can The United Methodist Church and United Methodists, grounded and guided by the teaching outlined above, do about abortion in American society? Bp. Jones urges "creat[ing] communities of holiness that use the means of grace to help people through personal crises" and "connect[ing] with other partners in our society to reduce the number of abortions in the United States." This would include United Methodists "strengthen[ing] our laws against late-term abortions..." "committ[ing] ourselves to greater availability of family planning resources..." "dis-incentivizing abortions," "subsidizing positive alternatives to abortion..." "supporting the existence of crisis pregnancy centers..." and "offering help to those in need." All the while, Bp. Jones maintains The United Methodist Church, in its response to abortion, is in the extreme center.

### **THE FLAW: MORALLY PRO-LIFE, POLITICALLY PRO-CHOICE**

The sermon's title suggests a long, historical view of the Church. The title's implication is that the early Church's faithfulness offers a vision for the future Church's faithfulness. To be more specific, the title's assumption is that the present Church (in this case, The United Methodist Church), located on a time line between the early Church and the future United Methodist Church, is not now exactly where she needs to be (in this case, on the matter of life and abortion). The Lifewatch community, too, believes that The United Methodist Church needs the vision of the early Church, on life and abortion, in its future.

Why? Because Lifewatch contends that official United Methodist teaching on abortion, Paragraph 161J, is deeply flawed. And why is Paragraph 161J deeply flawed? Because it makes two sets of claims—moral-theological claims about the humanity of the unborn and legal-political claims about the legality of abortion—that are inconsistent, that cannot stand together. That is, Paragraph 161J calls the unborn a “child” and morally disapproves of abortion; and yet, the same paragraph insists on politically maintaining the legal right or “option” to abort the unborn child. It is as if the church does not really believe in the humanity of the unborn, because the church then stands back and affirms the legality of abortion. If the church truly believes its own moral teaching about the unborn child, the church would not then politically advocate for a generalized “legal option of abortion.”

Bishop Jones’ moral-theological claims for the humanity of the unborn are true, in accord with consensual Christian teaching from the earliest Church onwards and in accord with the moral reasoning of all about justice. The unborn is a child. Therefore, abortion is a violent attack of the strong against the weak. (A scared, desperate woman is not strong. But once inside an abortion clinic, she can permit a strong agent to act lethally against her child.) Abortion is the will to power exercised, in the rawest and roughest way, against those who cannot defend themselves. As Bp. Jones plainly asserts, abortion is a sin. Why is abortion a sin? Because abortion is the taking of an innocent human life. Abortion always involves the killing of an innocent little one and the harming of the little one’s mother.

But Bp. Jones and The United Methodist Church then pivot away from the humanity of the unborn child and support the legality of abortion. The intention of the bishop and the denomination is to make sure that medically safe abortions are available in extreme circumstances, when they are presumably required. Remember the bishop’s summary of denominational teaching: “Abortion should be legal and rare.” But have the bishop and the denomination inquired into the results of maintaining “the legal option of abortion” during the last 37 years? Over 50,000,000 abortions have been performed in the United States since Roe v. Wade was handed down in 1973. Nearly 50,000,000 abortions have been performed since the phrase, “the legal option of abortion,” first appeared in the language of the Social Principles in 1976. Around 1,250,000 abortions will be performed this year. A bishop and a church that teach the humanity of the unborn child should find these numbers morally disturbing, even revolting. A bishop and a church that teach the humanity of the unborn child should clearly see that these numbers do not represent the rarity of abortion for which they hoped. Therefore, it seems that the reform of church teaching would be in order.

## REFORM UNITED METHODISM, TOO

In his sermon, Bp. Jones lists many things, most of which are laudable, that United Methodist congregations, laity, and clergy can do to promote life and limit the number of abortions. However, the bishop might also have considered what our general church can do to change the status quo on abortion in our church and in our society. For starters, the bishop might have encouraged our denomination to reform its social principle on abortion (Paragraph 161J), to make the church’s legal-political position on abortion more consistent with its moral teaching on the unborn. Furthermore, Bp. Jones might have explicitly challenged the political engagements of the General Board of Church and Society, which routinely promote a pro-choice/pro-abortion agenda, as demonstrated in the recent debates on health care reform. In addition, the bishop might have raised the issue of the General Board of Church and Society and the Women’s Division/General Board of Global Ministries affiliating with the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice (RCRC), a political lobby that advocates for the right to all abortions in all circumstances.

If and when The United Methodist Church strengthens Paragraph 161J and removes itself from RCRC, United Methodists, clergy and laity, will be in a better position to play a constructive part in the legal-political debates on abortion in the larger society. The United Methodist Church, its laity and clergy, will then work politically for the protection of the unborn child. Of course United Methodists, on our own, will never determine public policy in this area or in any other area. United Methodists, even with the help of other Christians, will not and can not impose our political will on the American people. But the voice of United Methodists and our church should be a part of the public discourse that leads to the determination of public policy on abortion. (This is a task that the early Church, not living in a democratic environment, did not have. But this challenging task is ours.) United Methodists will need to join with many others to support pro-life public policies, and to learn to speak in public a persuasive language (like Martin Luther King, Jr.’s language) that is moral-religious and that appeals to most of the American people.

American democracy will “outlaw abortion,” which Bp. Jones opposes, only when the majority of the American people are ready to do so. Such a decision would certainly not involve an absolute, national ban on abortion. Instead, if and when Roe is overturned by the US Supreme Court, all fifty states will be set free to deliberate, debate, and decide their state statutes on abortion. Until and after that happens, United Methodists should speak up for the one we call in our Social Principles an “unborn child.” For United Methodists, this should not be a matter of choice or taste or political preference or political party. For United Methodists, this should be compelled by Christian teaching, by moral truth, and by the current destruction of millions of unborn children through abortion.

## CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Bp. Jones provides a service by reminding United Methodists of John Wesley's joining together of personal holiness and social holiness. With regard to abortion, personal holiness honors the sacredness of human life in our lives and in our churches; and social holiness would have us vigorously defend the sacredness of human life, especially for the weakest among us, in our society. Keeping personal holiness personal and allowing social holiness to justify the continuance of pro-choice laws makes no Wesleyan sense. True social holiness does not enter into cost-benefit analyses or utilitarian calculations. (In a cost-benefit mode, the bishop declares that "the negative consequences [of outlawing abortion] far outweigh the positive benefits...") True social holiness asks and answers only one question, Is this God's will for humanity? Both personal holiness and social holiness stood against slavery in America and the destruction of the Jews in Europe. Both personal holiness and social holiness should stand against abortion and abortion rights in contemporary American society.

The phrase "the extreme center," while of some usefulness, might lead us astray. It rings of Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.'s book on American politics entitled The Vital Center (1949). Indeed, one would have to say that the extreme center has more to do with the political positioning of the church than with the teaching of the church. When a church teaches, for example on abortion, the question is not: Is this church teaching in or from the extreme center? Rather, the question should be: Is this church's teaching on abortion faithful to the Church's Scripture and Tradition? In her teaching and practice, the Church's

aim is to be faithful to Jesus Christ, whether or not that is in the extreme center.

"The Once and Future Church," by Bishop Scott Jones, offers a starting point for considering the church's response to abortion, and it offers some practical Christian teaching along the way. However, it fails to see the alarming injustice of a single abortion, as it fails to note how that singular injustice is multiplied millions of times throughout American society, year after year. Therefore, the sermon sets forth a word to The United Methodist Church that is too accommodated to the present version of Paragraph 161J, to the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice and its pro-choice/pro-abortion politics, and to a society that hosts 1.25 million abortions per year.

"Pursue peace with everyone, and the holiness without which no one will see the Lord." (Hebrews 12:14, NRSV) To "[p]ursue peace with everyone" would be, at a minimum, to pursue protection for everyone—through love and justice, support and politics, teaching and preaching. Certainly, "everyone" includes many different people, who come to mind. But it also includes the unborn child, who is not so readily available to the mind's eye, but who is the one most in need of protection.

*Rev. Stallsworth is the pastor of St. Peter's United Methodist Church (Morehead City, NC), the editor of Lifewatch, and the president of the Taskforce of United Methodists on Abortion and Sexuality.♥*

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**Lifewatch**  
Taskforce of  
United Methodists on  
Abortion and Sexuality

P.O. Box 306, Cottleville MO 63338

03/01/10

\* Lifewatch Sermon: "The Once and Future Church," Bp. Scott J. Jones

\* A Response to "The Once and Future Church"

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on the "Make a Donation" icon, on our homepage at [www.lifewatch.org](http://www.lifewatch.org). Also, by donating stocks, you can support Lifewatch's mission and ministry. For more information about giving stocks, simply contact Cindy Evans in the Lifewatch office. Thank you, in advance, for your faithfulness in supporting Lifewatch's witness within The United Methodist Church and beyond.

- As noted above, the Lifewatch website is located at [www.lifewatch.org](http://www.lifewatch.org). Every once in a while, you should visit our website and sniff around. Back issues of [Lifewatch](http://www.lifewatch.org) are located under "Newsletters," and many other items of interest are posted. Thanks, in advance, for taking a look.

- The mainstream media tend to overlook the annual March for Life in Washington, DC. Each year, celebrating the gift of life and protesting against lethal attacks on innocent human beings, tens of thousands of youthful, joyful marchers make their pilgrimage up Capitol Hill. For an inspirational look at what happened on January 22, 2010, watch "Media Malpractice at the March for Life" at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=8knMYK-IX4U](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8knMYK-IX4U). It is amazing.

- "Biblical morality is inseparable from Biblical doctrine, and Biblical doctrine is inseparable from the community of believers." This is a good, strong, truthful word from Jaroslav Pelikan, the late, great Church historian at Yale. ([Christianity Today](http://www.christianitytoday.com), April 2009, p. 56) Morality, doctrine, and Church. They go together. If one weakens, then all weaken. If one strengthens, they strengthen together. Because of this

reality, Lifewatch is intensely interested not only in the life issues and human sexuality but also in doctrine and The United Methodist Church.

- It has been said before, but Mary Meehan, a senior editor of [The Human Life Review](http://www.humanlifereview.org), says it very well: "Some of us who went through the anti-war struggles of the 1960s and 1970s are now active in the right-to-life movement. We do not enjoy opposing our old friends on the abortion issue, but we feel that we have no choice... It is out of character for the left to neglect the weak and helpless. The traditional mark of the left has been its protection of the underdog, the weak, and the poor. The unborn child is the most helpless form of humanity, even in more need of protection than the poor tenant farmer or the mental patient. The basic instinct of the left is to aid those who cannot aid themselves. And that instinct is absolutely sound. It's what keeps the human proposition going." (quoted by Nat Hentoff in "My Controversial Choice to Become Pro-life," [The Human Life Review](http://www.humanlifereview.org), Summer 2009, p. 26) ♥

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