

The Church's Catholic Substance

This issue of Lifewatch is dedicated to the subject of the Church's "catholic substance," and to The United Methodist Church's need for it. Catholic substance includes the Christian faith and practices that are universal (that is, catholic) across the churches—and around the world and through the ages. The Church's true teaching and faithful practices—on life and abortion, and on marriage and sexuality—are most definitely part of the Church's substance that is called catholic.

Some time ago a couple of American Lutherans declared that "real churches don't kill babies." Through this strong claim, they were assuming and announcing that the Church's catholic substance contains moral teaching that is protective of the unborn child, mother, and father, and that is defensive of the marital union that best sustains child, mother, and father. God's gift of catholic substance is essential to the life and well being of Christ's Church—including The United Methodist Church.

GEOFFREY WAINWRIGHT, THE METHODIST TEACHER OF CATHOLIC SUBSTANCE: REST IN GOD'S PEACE

Dr. Geoffrey Wainwright crossed the Jordan on March 17, 2020. From 1983 until 2012, Dr. Wainwright served as a Professor of Systematic Theology at Duke Divinity School. Deeply devoted to ecumenical theology, he handed on to his students commitment to Christian unity, as he served many projects that advanced God's gift of unity among the churches. His writings—especially his Doxology: The Praise of God in Worship, Doctrine and Life: A Systematic Theology (1980) and his contribution to "Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry" (Faith and Order Commission, WCC, 1982)—constructively and significantly influenced world Christianity. A man of the academy and a man of the Church, Dr. Wainwright, in his retirement lecture, both taught some theology and led the singing of some Charles Wesley hymns that were illustrative of the evening's theological points. Throughout his ecumenical ministry, he deepened the catholic substance in all the churches, which in turn revealed even greater unity.

While United Methodist centrists/progressives center on love and United Methodist traditionalists on truth, Dr. Geoffrey Wainwright was dedicated to both love and truth. His dedication to both love and truth was demonstrated in his service of both the churches' unity and the churches' doctrine. He knew that unity and doctrine go together; they are not competing goods in the life of Christ's Church. One Lord. One faith. One baptism. Dr. Wainwright poured out his life for God's calling of the Church to be the Body of Christ—that is, to love and to seek unity, and to serve the truth and to sustain doctrine.

Lifewatch is so deeply thankful that Dr. Wainwright was one of our Advisory Board members for years. He was a great encourager of Lifewatch's witness to the Gospel of Life within, and beyond, The United Methodist Church.

Thanks be to God for Geoffrey Wainwright—his good life, his true faith, his faithful ministry, his present life with the triumphant Communion of the Saints, and his future life resurrected at the End and Forever! (PTS)

AN OPEN LETTER TO ALL UNITED METHODIST BISHOPS: REPENT AND REFORM

Day of Pentecost

May 31, 2020

Dear Bishops:

Pentecost Day grace, peace, and power to you and yours. Because of our many weaknesses, more exposed by recent events in church and society, all of us truly need God's power in our lives. Now!

I hope that you and yours are surviving the most dire effects of the Coronavirus pandemic, and turning your good health into good works.

As you well know, the pandemic led to the postponement of the 2020 General Conference. Whenever it occurs, the next General Conference will most likely decide the future of The United Methodist Church. (How many times have we heard or said, read or written, that comment?)

I believe that the next General Conference, in deciding the church's future, will go in one of two ways. (Though with General Conference, there is always a possibility of indecision or no decision.)

The first way is most likely. It is advocated by many leaders (including some of you), and it is the best-known plan in the denomination. The first way has the next General Conference passing the "Protocol of Reconciliation and Grace through Separation" (hereafter, the Protocol)—with or without amendments. Passage of the Protocol would, of course, result in a "separation" (or division or schism) of The United Methodist Church. This separation would seek to limit damages by minimizing lawsuits.

The second way is unlikely in the extreme. The second way would begin with heartfelt, pre-General Conference repentance of The United Methodist Church, and continue with the determined willingness of General Conference to seek to reform the denomination into being more fully Christ's Church—one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. You, the bishops, would lead the church's repentance (by setting the example of how to repent) and reformation (by teaching the church's faith and doctrine).

Allow a clarification. The reformation to which I refer is

a re-formation of the church—not an awakening, conversion, or revival of individuals, good as that might be. Recall Dietrich Bonhoeffer considering American Christianity’s “Protestantism without Reformation:” “God did not grant a Reformation to American Christendom. He gave strong revivalist preachers, men of the church, and theologians, but no reformation of the church of Jesus Christ from the word of God. Those churches of the Reformation that came to America either stand in deliberate seclusion and distance from general church life or have fallen victim to Protestantism without Reformation....American theology and the churches as a whole have never really understood what ‘critique’ by God’s word means in its entirety....” (emphasis added, 1939).

So the choice is clear: either the next General Conference passes the Protocol which separates the church, or you the bishops repent and begin to reform the church. Separate or repent/reform.

This elder and pastor has been outspokenly critical of you, the bishops of the church. I still am. I firmly believe that you have failed—some more, some less—in your episcopal leadership of The United Methodist Church. I have written as much. I believe you need to repent—to turn from ambiguity and error, and toward God for forgiveness and renewal.

But also, I believe all United Methodists—all clergy (including the writer of this letter) and all laity—need to join you in repenting. All of us have turned the “catholic substance” of The United Methodist Church—including Biblical interpretation, liturgy, doctrine, and discipline—into matters of choice and preference. All of us have transformed the Bible into our own, private, devotional book, and have not allowed God to speak through Scripture to shape and to guide and to judge the church. All of us have changed The Baptismal Covenant into the partisan or personal contracts that we find easiest to abide by. All of us have substituted self-chosen theologies for church-forming doctrine. All of us have ignored or weaponized doctrine. All of us have altered church discipline into a smorgasbord from which we pick and choose what we like, and we refuse the rest. All of us have prioritized our fellowship with people who think like us over fellowship with all types of United Methodists (even our opponents). All of us have acted as if our comfort level and our self-expression are the most important things in this world, as if our personal preferences should override the church’s doctrine and discipline. All of us have redefined Moses, Jesus, Paul, and the Wesleys—and their words—to fit our presuppositions about God, the Gospel, and the world. All of us, fearing confusion and chaos in the church, have trusted management principles and technocratic professionals to save the church. All of us have been proud. All of us have contracted and kept a “party spirit.” All of us have been impatient and demanding.

Only you, the bishops of The United Methodist Church, can lead clergy and laity out of our miasma, in which each

sovereign self reigns supreme, and into the challenge of repenting and reforming The United Methodist Church to become more fully and faithfully the Church of Jesus Christ. What, exactly, would that require?

Every Pentecost Day all of us have preached and/or heard sermons about the outpouring of the Holy Spirit giving birth to the Church. All of us believe that the Church, in mission and ministry, should follow the guidance of the Spirit. If we truly believe that the Church’s faith and life, ministry and mission, and pilgrimage toward the New Jerusalem radically depend upon the Holy Spirit, then we, as a church, should be willing to start anew by repenting, by opening ourselves to the personally-transforming and communally-reforming power of the Spirit’s wind and fire. Then, by the grace and Spirit of God working among us, the words that describe The United Methodist Church’s “distinctive doctrinal heritage”—“catholic, evangelical, and reformed” (“Our Doctrinal History,” The Book of Discipline [2016], Paragraph 103, p. 65)—can truly shape and guide the next Methodism.

So, bishops, it is up to you. You can help pass the Protocol and lead The United Methodist Church into a separation, which will result in at least two denominations trying to reform themselves without repentance. Or you can lead The United Methodist Church toward repentance and reformation.

Again, only in the power of the Holy Spirit of God can you be enabled to lead The United Methodist Church to repent and reform. I, perhaps alone, believe that can actually happen. Let’s be honest. We United Methodists have tried everything else to turn around, and break the logjam in, the church. Following repeated failures over decades, many are now demonstrating their willingness, even eagerness, to vote to separate the church to save the church. But a church is never, ever saved by division. Perhaps it is time for all of us to throw up our hands, admit that we have made a mess of things in The United Methodist Church, acknowledge that denominational solutions are above our calling and competence, and ask the Lord to join us in our storm-tossed boat. The earliest church, composed of the first disciples, did something like that long ago (Matthew 14:32-33). When our Lord finally got into the boat with them, the storm ceased. Asking the Lord to join our threatened boat might, just might, cause today’s winds to subside. The Lord Jesus Christ might, just might, lead us to get serious about becoming and being more fully and faithfully His Church—by repenting and reforming.

So now and in the days to come, be faithful, to Christ and His Church, for the sake of the world.

In Christ,
Rev. Paul T. Stallworth
Lifewatch Editor and President

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CHRIST'S CHURCH FEATURES FIGHTING AND CATHOLICITY. UNITED METHODISTS, EMBRACE THAT!

Leading to the the precipice of “separation”—which, let’s be honest, is actually an efficient schism which attempts to avoid expensive lawsuits—many United Methodist leaders (traditionalists, centrists, and progressives) are showing through their words and plans that they think United Methodists cannot now bear the burdens of being the Church. The Church of Jesus Christ. The Church under Christ’s Headship. The Church under His Lordship. The one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church. Right now, United Methodism’s leaders seem to be conceding: we are not up to the task of becoming, and being, the Church in its fullness.

United Methodist leaders’ unwillingness to commit to maturing into the Church can be discerned in two characteristics of contemporary United Methodism: in the repetition of “we’re tired of fighting” and in the lack of interest in pursuing catholic substance.

“We’re Tired of Fighting”

The traditionalists say, “We’re tired of fighting.” The centrists/liberals say, “We’re tired of fighting.” The progressives say, “We’re tired of fighting.” Nearly all United Methodists say, “We’re tired of fighting.” United Methodism’s contemporary confession of faith might well be, “We’re tired of fighting.” “We’re tired of fighting” is the mantra now heard and read around the United Methodist world. It is hypocritically said even by those who have not, even for a moment, entered the church fight over the decades.

In The United Methodist Church, the fighting continues. Here is how. Centrist/liberal/progressive bishops, clergy, and laity violate church laws related to human sexuality in The Book of Discipline. (That, just to be clear, should accurately be described as an act of fighting.) Such violations of church law are seldom, if ever, met with due process, or disciplinary calls to accountability, from the larger church. (Again, just to be clear, that is fighting in a passive gear.) Time passes. Apparent disciplinary breaches become hazy and are forgotten in their Annual Conferences. Due-process deadlines are broken or forgotten. (For a third time, just to be clear, such careless or forgetful behavior is fighting against The Book of Discipline.) Yes, the fighting continues.

As a thought experiment, consider whether the fighting among United Methodists will be stopped by denominational separation. Assume the Protocol of Reconciliation and Grace through Separation—which might well be translated into a formula, such as: Reconciliation = Grace + Separation = No More Fighting!—is approved by the next General Conference. Moreover, assume the separation occurs. So the post-separation United Methodist Church begins its new life with a familiar, if smaller, cast of characters. At the same time, a traditionalist denomination begins to take shape. In those two, new denominations, will the fighting actually end? Of course not. Here is why.

The new post-separation United Methodist Church will have many arguments, that will often turn bitter, about its moral teaching and disciplinary practice. For example, will the post-separation United Methodist Church be satisfied with offering its clergy and laity, congregations and Annual Conferences, choices as to what they believe about human sexuality and marriage and ordination? Or will this new church believe homosexual practice is totally, morally acceptable? That decision will involve fighting, lots of fighting. Will the marriage and ordination of those who practice homosexual behavior be matters of choice, or will they be demanded, in the new United Methodist Church? That, too, will involve fighting. Will a transgender agenda be proposed to the post-separation United Methodist Church soon after it adopts the full acceptance of homosexual behavior? That, too, will involve fighting. All of this fighting, between centrists/liberals and progressives, will most probably feature much drama and incivility.

The new traditionalist denomination will have its own fighting going on. In a new denomination starting from the ground up, those fights will concern both the broad character and the minute detail of the new church—its doctrine and discipline, mission and ministry, present self-understanding and future character. Will it focus on the Word of God as the center of its life? If so, what will that mean? Will it be deeply sacramental? Liturgical? Will its preaching be doctrinal? Should its moral teaching be regularly proposed (or avoided)? How will it protect its clergy from accommodating themselves to the more conservative currents in American society? Will the new traditionalist church attempt constructive engagements with the post-separation United Methodist Church? Where? How? And budgets? Salaries for denominational executives? Benefits? Again, be warned: all of this, most certainly, will involve some, or much, fighting.

The point is this: in this world, people who are serious about being the Church will be involved in what is called fighting. Ecclesiastical Christianity requires “fighting”—that is, standing up for the Gospel and for the Christ-led Church, and defending the Gospel and the Church from their detractors and dissenters. In this world, in Christ’s Church, there is no way to escape this fighting. Fighting has been going on in the Church since the first day Christ established the apostolic community. And fighting will continue in the Church until Christ returns in glory to set all things right, beginning with the Church. This fighting should always be attempted with love and in truth. But it is still fighting.

For the next General Conference to adopt the Protocol, because a majority of delegates say “we’re tired of fighting,” would be nonsense. It would demonstrate disconnection from reality, from the Church’s long history. Fighting, in one form or fashion, is always required by faithfulness in Christ’s Church.

With God’s help, United Methodist can grow into being the Church—by realizing that, in a sense, **God requires fighting in the Church**. That is why St. Paul urges his readers—from Ephesus to Nashville—to “[p]ut on the whole armor of God....” (Ephesians 6:11) (United Methodists would seem mighty silly if we put on God’s “whole armor,” sat down, and whined, “We’re tired of fighting.”) That is

why the Church engages (does not seek to avoid) serious disagreements! That is why, under Christ's Lordship and His Spirit's guidance, the Church resolves such disputes in truth and love! That is why the Church allows those resolutions to be tested and challenged! That is why the Church allows for dissent, as long as it is conducted within the Church's discipline! United Methodists can mature into Christ's Church—which is about living life together with doctrine and discipline (which includes some necessary fighting), not existing apart with choices and room for more choices (which includes the sanctimonious self-congratulation: "At least we're not fighting").

"We're tired of fighting." That might be the most popular claim spoken and written by United Methodists these days. It signals an unwillingness, among United Methodists, to work at becoming and being the Church. But in Christ's Church, there is always a willingness to fight, to stand up.

Limited Interest in Catholic Substance

This is the second signal that United Methodists are resistant to growing into the Church: on both sides of the aisle, United Methodists are weak in their commitment to the Church's catholic substance—particularly the substance of its faith, but also the substance of its practices and its structures.

"What in the heck do you mean by catholic substance?" the guy in the peanut gallery asks.

Well, St. Vincent of Lerins (monk and theologian, who died in 435) wrote a maxim or rule on catholicity. In his rule, St. Vincent challenged his brothers and sisters in the Church of his day: "all possible care must be taken, that we [that is, the Church] hold that faith which has been believed everywhere, always, by all." St. Vincent's catholic-substance challenge pushes United Methodists today: "all possible care must be taken, that we [The United Methodist Church] hold that faith which has been believed everywhere, always, by all."

Generally speaking, United Methodists are not so interested in the Church's catholic substance (or catholicity). United Methodists are busy, practical people who, when they are gathered as Church, are more committed to doing than to being and thinking. This tendency toward activity is evident today in The United Methodist Church (which would carry on after a separation, if the Protocol passes General Conference) and in the Wesleyan Covenant Association (which would most certainly play a major role in the formation of a new denomination, if the Protocol passes).

First, to the catholic-substance deficit in The United Methodist Church. Back in September of 2019, United Methodism's Committee on Faith and Order released "Sent in Love: A United Methodist Understanding of the Church." It is a long and thoughtful document, which was written by some of today's best and brightest United Methodist

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theologians. "Sent in Love" borrows The Nicene Creed's four marks of the Church—"one holy catholic and apostolic"—and explains what they mean to United Methodists and to The United Methodist Church.

"Sent in Love" was a perfect context for the Committee on Faith and Order to set forth, in the boldest possible terms, The United Methodist Church's commitment to catholic substance or catholicity. Unfortunately, the committee reduces the Church's catholicity to the Church's widespread presence

throughout this world and universal outreach (reflecting God's love of all) to this world. The actual title of the pertinent section—"Called to be Catholic—The Saving Love of God is Meant for all People"—suggests this reduction of meaning. The document states: "The catholicity of the church means both that God's saving love is universal, but also that in every local and specific situation in which God's love draws people together in Christian community, there the fullness of the church is present." (Par. 72) That sounds good. That rings Wesleyan. But why does "Sent in Love" not point The United Methodist Church toward what the Church has everywhere and always believed (and practiced)? Why does "Sent in Love" not push United Methodists' understanding of catholicity beyond their Wesleyan world? "Sent in Love" reduces catholic substance from an ecumenical reality to a Wesleyan concept; that legitimates The United Methodist Church believing and practicing whatever it chooses—with regard to human sexuality and any other topic.

By the way, "Sent in Love" does something similar to the meaning of apostolicity—or the apostolic nature of the church. That section is titled "Called to be Apostolic—The Saving Love of God Empowers a Missional Community." The document emphasizes that The United Methodist Church is sent in mission, and it sends people to be in mission throughout the world. "Maintaining the apostolicity of the church," the document notes, "requires that a concern for continuity in the essentials of faith and practice be matched by an equal concern for an outward reaching missional perspective." (Par. 56) That is, apostolicity for United Methodists involves balancing continuity with apostolic faith with concern for missional outreach. In other words, the document is determined to "contextualize" the apostolic faith—in the service of mission. Too often contextualizing the apostolic faith leads to accommodating the same faith, and accommodating the faith leads to compromising the faith. With the best of missional intentions, the contextualization of the faith leads to the destruction of the faith.

So "Sent in Love" redefines catholicity and apostolicity in missional ways. Unfortunately, those redefinitions deemphasize catholic (and apostolic) substance.

The Wesleyan Covenant Association (WCA) also seems to give short shrift to the catholic substance of the Church. Early in March of this year, around thirty United Methodists, who support WCA in one way or another, met in Atlanta.

During their meeting, they engaged in “vision casting.” They produced a document on WCA’s vision for the new traditionalist denomination that will form after “separation” from The United Methodist Church—if the Protocol passes the next General Conference. That document demonstrates the catholic-substance deficit of the WCA-led effort.

Again, according to the stated vision of a new traditionalist denomination, the catholic substance (or catholicity) of the Church seems not to be of major concern. Here is some readily available evidence. First, the title of the vision-casting statement—“Reimagining the Passion of a Global Wesleyan Movement”—uses the word movement, not the word church. If WCA is serious about catholic substance, would the substitution of movement for church have happened? Would a “Global Wesleyan Movement” really have catholic substance? Second, the word church does not appear in the statement until its fourth paragraph: “We will be a church that is truly global in nature....” In the first three paragraphs, the words movement, expression, covenant community, and connection are used as substitutes for the word church, which through the ages has been the usual word to describe the People of God gathered around Jesus Christ. Third, while highlighting “The Church’s Culture and Mission,” which is a very important task, this vision statement declares that the post-separation, traditional denomination will be “[m]ore movement than institution.” Once again, WCA hesitates to say that it will be forming a church, an institution in service of the Gospel.

Consider WCA’s preference for movement over institution. A movement suggests something dynamic and cool. An institution implies something predictable, perhaps rigid, and definitely less desirable. Still, our Lord “instituted” the Sacrament of Holy Communion—that is, He gave His people an institution through which He might be remembered by, and be present with, His people. Also,

Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit established and enlivened the Church. That Church was dynamic, like a movement, from the beginning. But it was still the Church, an institution that by God’s grace and providence has survived through the ages. And that Church, from its beginning, took on catholic substance. Act 2:42 offers a snap shot of the Church’s earliest catholicity: “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching (that is, apostolic teaching) and fellowship, to the breaking of bread (that is, Holy Communion) and the prayers (of the Church).” (NRSV) In its earliest days, the Church had plenty of catholic substance. But WCA seems resistant to catholicity.

Crisis = Opportunity

Above, two points have been made. First, United Methodists of all kinds sigh that “we’re tired of fighting,” which is of course a necessary part of being the Church. And second, United Methodists of all stripes carry an understanding of the Church that seems short on catholic substance.

So where do these realities among United Methodists lead? What should United Methodists do? What direction for The United Methodist Church is most faithful to Christ and His Church?

In response, this pastor proposes three points.

First, United Methodist bishops can and should repent, lead the entire church in repentance, and then teach and follow the stated doctrine and discipline of the church.

Second, when disputes (that is, “fights”) arise, the participants involved can and should conduct their disputations with love and in truth, within The United Methodist Church’s discipline, and without manipulative politics. No exceptions.

And third, there can and should be a massive teaching effort, throughout The United Methodist Church, that would

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06/01/20

- * Bp. Timothy Whitaker:
Catholic Substance in Methodism?
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thicken (or increase) the catholic substance of the church. The bishops could and should lead this effort.

Impossible? Of course.

But God the Spirit has accomplished stranger things. Like call and send a beer-drinking monk named Martin Luther to reform the Church. Like call and send an up-tight Anglican priest named John Wesley to preach the Gospel to people in country fields and city squares, and to attempt reform of the Church of England. (PTS) ♥

YOU SHOULD KNOW THAT

- Thank you for helping to sustain Lifewatch’s witness for the Gospel of Life in The United Methodist Church and beyond. As you know, your financial gifts to Lifewatch can be made in three ways. First, you may write a check to “Lifewatch” and send it to Lifewatch/P.O. Box 306/ Cottleville, MO 63338. Second, you may give stocks by first contacting Mrs. Cindy Evans in the Lifewatch office. And third, if you are over the age of 72, you may give a gift from your IRA as a tax-free distribution. (This means a gift [up to \$100,000...!] can be transferred from your IRA directly to Lifewatch and can count toward your minimum required distribution without being considered as taxable income.) If you are considering giving a gift from your IRA, please first communicate with Mrs. Evans in the Lifewatch office. During these turbulent times, Mrs. Evans and I are grateful beyond words for you, for your prayerful support, and for your financial support. (PTS)
- A friend in pastoral ministry recently emailed this lovely story about his mother: “Mother shared a story that as a young single woman, she was living with her mother. She

was so ill that she was unable to go to work. Her mother had already buried two children of strep infection, and here she was so ill that she was only able to stay up for a few hours before returning to bed. Some of the people in their town would complain to her mother about her laziness in trying to get gainful employment. When she was able to sit up, she would seek the face of the Lord. She did not understand why she was having to go through such an ordeal. She could not see a future for herself. One day, while reading a devotional, the message got through to her that we are unable to do anything on our own. She surrendered to God saying, ‘Lord, I am unable to fulfill your will for my life. You’re going to have to do that for me.’ It made all the difference in her life. The Mayo Clinic told her she would never have children, and I am the third of five medical miracles. ‘Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.’ (John 15:5, NRSV)”

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

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