

THE WORD OF GOD IN THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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A version of the following was presented at First United Methodist Church in Washington, NC on September 15, 2021. It springs, in large part, from Dietrich Bonhoeffer's observation (from his essay "Protestantism without Reformation," August 1939) that "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." (emphasis added) (PTS)

1. THE CHURCH RANKS DOCTRINE ABOVE THEOLOGY

The United Methodist Church contends that, while both doctrine and theology have their places in the church, there is a significant difference between them. The Book of Discipline states: "While the Church considers its doctrinal affirmations a central feature of its identity and restricts official changes [in doctrine] to a constitutional process, the Church encourages serious reflection across the theological spectrum." (from the 2016 Discipline's "Our Theological Task," Paragraph 105. Section 4, p. 80) Therefore, it can be said that The United Methodist Church has "doctrinal affirmations," and each United Methodist is invited to have theological reflections.

Consider the difference between doctrine and theology. Doctrine is what The United Methodist Church believes. Theology is what an individual United Methodist believes. Again, doctrine is what *we* hold to be true. Theology is what *you* hold to be true, what provides devotional detail and decoration for your daily discipleship. Again, The United Methodist Church has doctrine. At the same time, individual United Methodists, clergy and laity, have our own theologies.

The United Methodist Church has doctrine or "doctrinal standards." Those doctrinal standards are: The Articles of Religion, The Confession of Faith, John Wesley's Standard Sermons, and his Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament, plus The General Rules. (The Book of Discipline, Paragraph 104. Section 3, pp. 65-80).

At the same time, we United Methodists, clergy and laity, pay attention to all kinds of theologies—John Wesley's theology and Charles Wesley's theology, Karl Barth's theology and Dietrich Bonhoeffer's theology, St. John Paul II's theology and Richard Rohr's theology, African-American liberation theology and feminist theology, and on and on. But in The United Methodist Church, doctrine speaks for, and to, the whole church—unlike personally selected theologies.

2. THE CHURCH ACKNOWLEDGES THE WORD OF GOD

The phrase, "Word of God," is found throughout the faith and life of The United Methodist Church. To be specific, the Word of God is mentioned in the church's doctrine, Constitution, and worship services.

First, the Word of God is sprinkled throughout The Articles of Religion, one of the church's Doctrinal Standards.

- "Word of the Father" appears in Article II—Of the Word, or Son of God, Who Was Made Man.
- "Word of God" appears in Article XIII—Of the Church (which reads, in part: "The visible church of Christ is a congregation of faithful [people] in which the pure Word of God is preached...").
- "God's Word" and "Word of God" appear in Article XXII—Of the Rites and Ceremonies of Churches (which reads, in part: "...[N]othing [in the church's Rites and ceremonies shall] be ordained against God's Word;" and which reads, in part: rites and ceremonies, "which are not repugnant to the Word of God...," are acceptable in the church).

Now turn to The Confession of Faith, another of the church's Doctrinal Standards.

- "Word" appears in Article II—Jesus Christ (which reads, in part: "He is the eternal Word made flesh...").
- "Word of God" appears in Article IV—The Holy Bible (which reads, in part: "We believe the Holy Bible, Old and New Testaments, reveals the Word of God so far as it is necessary for our salvation.").
- "Word of God" appears in Article V—The Church (which reads, in part: "[The Church] is the redemptive fellowship in which the Word of God is preached by [those] divinely called...").

Turn now to the church's Constitution.

- "Word of God" appears in the Constitution's Preamble (which reads, in part: "[The Church] is the

redeemed and redeeming fellowship in which the Word of God is preached by persons divinely called....”).

- Also, the Constitution’s Restrictive Rules defend and protect church doctrine (The Articles of Religion and The Confession of Faith) from being “revoke[d], alter[ed], or change[d]” by a rogue General Conference. (Paragraph 17. Article I and Paragraph 18. Article II)

Finally, for a moment, think about the church’s liturgies. The Word of God is named in, and essential to, the worship services for the Ordination of Elders, Examination of Deacons, Consecration of Bishops, Presenting of Licenses to Local Pastors, and Celebrating the Appointment of a District Superintendent (see The United Methodist Book of Worship, 674, 676, 692, 703, 717, and 723). As most United Methodists know, the Word of God is also invoked weekly by worship leaders during the Sunday services of local churches: “This is the Word of God for the People of God....”

Please permit a personal note. On June 7, 1981, I was ordained an elder and presented with a Bible. At the front of my Bible, these words were inscribed: “Take thou authority to read the Holy Scriptures in the Church of God, and to preach the Word. Amen.” Signed: +William R. Cannon.

According to the doctrine, Constitution, and liturgies of The United Methodist Church, the Word of God should occupy a preeminent place in the church’s faith and life. We United Methodists should be ready, willing, and able to engage and explore, trust and obey, the Word of God.

3. THE CHURCH DEFINES THE WORD OF GOD

On May 1 of this year, the Word of God was powerfully and fully defined by Krystl Gauld, the Executive Director of Dignity Housing in Philadelphia, PA. During the Fifth Global Gathering of the Wesleyan Covenant Association at Frazer United Methodist Church in Montgomery, AL, she preached a sermon on Acts 10:3-5. She proclaimed that God, in the apostolic era, spread the Gospel throughout the world—by sending unexpected people, to exotic places, to accomplish unimaginable things.

At the end of her sermon (not at the end of a Scripture reading), Gauld boldly declared to the assembly: “This is the Word of God for the People of God.” Right on cue, her United Methodist congregation vigorously replied: “Thanks be to God. Amen.”

Think about that. This liturgical exchange between a preacher and a congregation, at the end of the preacher’s sermon, reminds us that the Word of God has three dimensions. First, the Word of God is the living Word: Jesus Christ. Second, the Word of God is the written Word: the Bible. And third, the Word of God is the proclaimed Word: the preached sermon.

By bravely declaring “This is the Word of God for the People of God” after preaching her sermon, Gauld invited the gathering to affirm that her sermon—which pointed to the living Jesus Christ, and which was based on, and faithful to, the Bible—should be received, understood, and celebrated as the Word of God. The congregation joyfully and loudly made that affirmation.

Remember that the Word of God has three dimensions: the living Word (“And the Word became flesh and lived among us....” [John 1:14]), the written Word (“All scripture is inspired by God....” [II Timothy 3:16]), and the proclaimed Word (“preach the word....” [II Timothy 4:2, RSV]).

4. IGNORING THE WORD: TWO EXAMPLES

The Word of God is not a matter of opinion or preference. However, many United Methodists speak as if, “You get your understanding of the Word of God. I get my my understanding of the Word of God. If your Word contradicts my Word, that is okay. It’s all good.” Well, that is *not* good or true (or beautiful).

Not everything that parades around as the Word of God actually is the Word of God. Attempting to preach or teach the Word of God, we clergy—even bishops, even seminary professors, even pastors—can miss the mark. Though claiming “special revelation” or “personal revelation” from God, we theologically-schooled folks can wander, ignore the Word of God, substitute personal opinions for the Word, forsake our ordination vows, and provide false ministry to the people we are called to serve faithfully and humbly.

Recently, two examples of personal revelation silencing the Word of God have arisen. Both involve United Methodist clergy.

First, on May 2 (the Fifth Sunday of Easter), Acts 8:26-40, on Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch, was a lectionary reading. I watched a video of a United Methodist pastor preach a sermon based on that passage. The sermon seemed faithful enough—until the preacher offered some emotional commentary on “Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter....” (Acts 8:32, which is quoted from Isaiah 53:7) Because of an alleged personal revelation from God while preparing the sermon, the preacher claimed that the “he” of v. 32 refers to the eunuch (because he could be considered partially slaughtered)—not to the Messiah (who

was, in fact, totally slaughtered on the cross, as the Church remembers and proclaims each Sunday). With that change of focus, from the Christ to the eunuch, the preacher went on to address “non-binary people” in the church today. In this case, private revelation misled this pastor, from Jesus Christ and Him crucified to a contemporary sexual agenda. Unfortunately, presumed personal revelation often leads a preacher away from the Word of God and into lands of plenteous preferences and opinions.

A second example. A United Methodist pastor at the Fifth Global Gathering wrote an article on the church and the Bible, life and abortion. Line after line, page after page, of the article reports on what the Lord had allegedly told him. Much of the article simply seems, to me, to be beside the point. It is all about personal experience, religious feeling, and plain-old emotion. It veers a long way from the Word of God. Precisely when The United Methodist Church desperately needs faithful preaching and teaching of the Word of God on life and abortion, this pastor gives us his feelings about a lot of things.

Here are two preachers claiming personal revelation: one on the eunuch and the non-binary, and the other on life and abortion. These examples of God-told-me preaching and writing are exactly what The United Methodist Church does not need. Today, The United Methodist Church cries out for faithful proclamation of the Word of God.

5. THE CHURCH DISCERNES THE WORD OF GOD

As noted above, The United Methodist Church believes in the Word of God. The church trusts the Word is alive and well and active in the church and in the world. After all, church doctrine declares: “We believe the Holy Bible, Old and New Testaments, reveals the Word of God so far as it is necessary for our salvation. It is to be received through the Holy Spirit as *the true rule and guide for faith and practice*. Whatever is not revealed in or established by the Holy Scriptures is not to be made an article of faith nor is it to be taught as essential to salvation.” (Article IV--The Holy Bible, The Confession of Faith, emphasis added)

So United Methodist doctrine asserts: The Bible reveals the Word, and the Bible provides the church with the authority for faith and guidance for life. So church doctrine instructs the church, its clergy, and its laity: In church life, start with the Bible revealing the Word to the church; again, begin with the Bible; first, go to the Bible! (The Wesleyan Quadrilateral has the same message: To discern the Word of God, start with the Bible. The Book of Discipline's section on “Theological Guidelines: Sources and Criteria” states: “Scripture is primary [that is, over tradition, reason, and experience], revealing the Word of God... our theological task...focuses on disciplined study of the Bible.” [Paragraph 105, p. 82]) Again, in The United Methodist Church, to discern the Word of God, church doctrine directs us to start with the Bible.

Then we must quickly add: We best understand what the Bible says, what the Word of God is saying, with the help of doctrine. Every passage from the Bible can be understood in many ways. So doctrine is required to assist the church in rightly understanding and in faithfully interpreting the Bible. When the Bible is read with doctrine, the church is greatly assisted in discerning the Word of God. (Remember: the Wesleyan Quadrilateral proposes tradition as a means to reach a faithful understanding of the Bible. Since tradition includes doctrine, doctrine becomes very useful in helping the church to interpret the Bible and to discern the Word of God.)

(The Quadrilateral's categories of experience and reason are not addressed in this article. Well understood, experience and reason can contribute to the task of discerning the Word of God. However, experience and reason always serve Scripture, and assist tradition [including doctrine].)

So, we have learned this: To search for and receive the Word of God, following the guidance of The United Methodist Church, we begin with the Bible and then interpret the Bible with doctrine's help. (Wesley's Explanatory Notes often provides a ready, efficient, doctrinal understanding of New Testament passages.) Said differently, doctrine directs the church to read the Bible; then the church best understands the Bible with the help of doctrine. The Holy Spirit's assistance, all along the way, helps the church faithfully discern and receive, trust and obey, the Word of God. Then the Word of God can inform and guide The United Methodist Church and the United Methodist disciple.

6. THE CHURCH TEACHES THE WORD OF GOD ON MARRIAGE

Since the founding of The United Methodist Church in 1968, every General Conference has considered the matter of human sexuality. Petitions were written and submitted. Discussions and debates took place in legislative committees and on the floor. The Bible and doctrine were called into play. Discernment among the delegates occurred. Prayers were offered. Votes were cast. Decisions were made. On the matter of human sexuality, these decisions have been more or less consistent with the witness of the Bible and the tradition of the Church.

On human sexuality, The Social Principles in The Book of Discipline now teach, in part: “We affirm that all persons are individuals of sacred worth, created in the image of God. All persons need the ministry of the Church in their struggles for human fulfillment, as well as the spiritual and emotional care of a fellowship that enables reconciling relations with God, with others, and with self. The United Methodist Church does not condone the practice of homosexuality and considers this practice incompatible with Christian teaching. We affirm that God’s grace is available to all. We will seek to live together in Christian community, welcoming, forgiving, and loving one another, as Christ has loved and accepted us. We implore families and churches not to reject or condemn lesbian and gay members and friends. We commit ourselves to be in ministry for and with all persons.” (from Paragraph 161G) *Human Sexuality*, p. 113, emphasis added)

The most controversial sentence reads: “The United Methodist Church does not condone the practice of homosexuality and considers this practice incompatible with Christian teaching.” From where does this controversial statement of United Methodist teaching arise? Most importantly, from Jesus’ teaching on marriage—Matthew 19 (and Mark 10). Responding to the Pharisees’ question about divorce, our Lord replies: “Have you not read that the one who made them at the beginning “made them male and female” [Genesis 1:27] and said, “For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh” [Genesis 2:24]? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.” (Matthew 19:4-6, NRSV)

Commenting on Jesus’ word on marriage in Matthew 19, Wesley states: “And where do we read of any other [than male and female]? Does it not follow, that God’s making Eve was a part of his original design, and not a consequence of Adam’s beginning to fall? By making them one man and one woman he condemned polygamy; by making them ‘one flesh’ he condemned divorce.” (Notes, Matthew 19:6) Wesley’s Notes on Mark 10:6 reinforce his comment on Matthew 19:6.

The Bible, the words of our Lord, and Wesley point to the Word of God for the people of God: Sexual expression is reserved for the man and the woman within the covenant of marriage. This is reinforced by Hebrews 13:4: “Let marriage be held in honor by all, and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled; for God will judge fornicators and adulterers.” (NRSV) So, the church’s Social Principle on human sexuality is built on the Word of God, as it should be.

7. RIGHTLY WEAPONIZING THE WORD OF GOD

The Word of God is outside us, beyond us, free of our grasp, free of our control. The Word of God is *God’s* Word. The Word of God is spoken by God, issues from God, for God’s creative and redemptive purposes and for the good of this world, including our good. The Word of God does *not* belong to us. The Word of God is *not* our servant. We—you and I—are but humble servants of the Word of God.

Now, consider the weaponization of the Word of God. To weaponize the Word is to turn the Word into a weapon. Here, it must be clearly declared that the Word of God must never be used as a weapon against others by the Church, by the laity, by the bishops and the clergy, by traditionalists or evangelicals, by liberals or progressives. The Word of God should never be grabbed by us, held by us, controlled by us, used like a weapon by us to attack others for our advantages and purposes.

However, we can and should rightly use the Word of God as a good and proper weapon. We should rightly use the Word as a weapon against the forces of sin, death, and the evil one who uses false ideas and lies. Remember that the armor of God includes “the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.” (Ephesians 6:17) “[T]he sword of the Spirit” (or “the word of God”) should be used as a weapon, but only in battle against sin, death, and the evil one.

In “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God,” Martin Luther has us sing, in English, about the enemy and his demise: “The Prince of Darkness grim, we tremble not for him; his rage we can endure, for lo, his doom is sure; one little word shall fell him./That word above all earthly powers, no thanks to them, abideth... God’s truth abideth still; his kingdom is forever.” (The United Methodist Hymnal, 110, Sts. 3-4)

“[O]ne little word shall fell him.” That “one little word” is the Word of God. God speaks His Word—through Jesus Christ, through the Bible, and through the sermon—and good, great, and glorious things happen.

Now, laity and clergy and bishops in The United Methodist Church, let us be servants of that one, little Word—and not another!

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