

Report on

The
Consultation
on
Scriptural
Authority

and the Nature of God's Revelation

THE GENERAL BOARD OF
DISCIPLESHIP

THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



General Commission on
Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns

FOREWORD

In December 1999 in Nashville, the General Board of Discipleship and the General Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns jointly sponsored a Consultation on Scriptural Authority and the Nature of God's Revelation. This grew out of dialogues on theological diversity held November 1997 and February 1998 by the General Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns. The participants in those dialogues concluded in a paper titled, *In Search of Unity*, that much of the debate in The United Methodist Church on homosexuality hinges on how one reads the Bible and how one understands God's continuing revelation. At the end of this consultation, however, participants suggested that perhaps the real issue was our understanding of the nature of the church. Although the title of the consultation referred to "the nature of God's revelation," most of the presentations and discussions focused on biblical authority.

Participants included United Methodist bishops, agency staff, laity, and clergy from across the connection. Five presentations were given, each looking at the authority of Scripture from a different perspective. The sixth presentation was a closing summary that gave a sense of the meeting. The presentations and presenters were:

1. **John Wesley's Understanding of Biblical Authority and the Nature of God's Revelation**, Scott Jones, Perkins School of Theology, Dallas, TX.
2. **Biblical Authority from a Translation Perspective**, David Lull, Office of Bible Translation and Utilization of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA.

3. **Revelation and Biblical Authority**, Delwin Brown, Iliff School of Theology, Denver, CO.
4. **Biblical Authority as It Shapes Culture**, Rebekah Miles, Perkins School of Theology, Dallas, TX.
5. **Biblical Authority as Understood in Non-Western Culture**, Wesley Ariarajah, Drew University Theological School, Madison, NJ.
6. **A Closing Sense of the Meeting**, Bruce W. Robbins, General Secretary, General Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns.

Worship was an integral part of the consultation. Participants and presenters worshiped together at the beginning and close of each session. Joy Moore, Asbury Theological Seminary, Wilmore, KY, and Dan Benedict of the General Board of Discipleship, designed and led the worship times.

The papers, and the responses to them in discussions among the participants, form the basis of this paper. This is not a consensus report of the participants or presenters. It is, rather, an attempt to highlight some of the major themes and reflect upon them. It is offered to the church as a tool to continue the reflection and discussion. Betty Gamble, Associate General Secretary of the General Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns, and John Goch, writer and editor, compiled this document from the papers, presentations, conversations, and worship that formed the basis for the consultation.



SCRIPTURAL AUTHORITY AND UNITED METHODISM

The question for United Methodists is not, “Does Scripture have authority?” We agree on that issue. We appeal to Scripture from all sides of any issue. United Methodists across the theological spectrum agree that Scripture is authoritative. Where we disagree is how we use the biblical material to derive meaning and how we apply that meaning to our lives in authoritative and faithful ways. When we quote 2 Timothy 3:16, “*All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness [NRSV],*” do we understand it in the same way? Some of the questions we may ask are

1. What *kind* of authority does Scripture have?
2. How do we interpret Scripture?
3. How does the interpretation affect our understanding of authority?
4. How do we experience the power of Scripture in our lives?

This paper will not answer these questions to the complete satisfaction of all. It will define and illustrate some

important issues, raise questions, offer critiques, and suggest some directions in which United Methodists, as individuals, congregations, and as the general church can move to widen and deepen the conversation about the authority of Scripture.

We begin our journey with our points of consensus. We are, as a people, committed to Scripture. As one participant in the consultation said, “The Bible has different authority for different people. But it’s still our Book, and we take it seriously.”

The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church

Our commitment to Scripture is underscored in *The Book of Discipline* in the “Articles of Religion of The Methodist Church” and “The Confession of Faith of The Evangelical United Brethren Church.” These two documents are a key part of our doctrinal standards. Article V of The Articles of Religion states that Scripture contains all things necessary for salvation and that anything that is not found in Scripture, or proved by Scripture, we are not required to believe.¹

A similar dynamic is true of Article IV of “The Confession of Faith of The Evangelical United Brethren Church.” This article says the Bible “reveals the Word of God so far as is necessary for our salvation. It is to be received through the Holy Spirit as the true rule and guide for faith and practice.” Like Article V of “The Articles of Religion,” it goes on to say that whatever is not revealed in, or established by, Scripture is “not to be made an article of faith nor is it to be taught as essential to salvation.”² Several issues arise immediately. First, the article says that the Bible “*reveals the Word of God so far as it is necessary for our salvation* (italics added). It does not say the Bible *is* the

Word of God. The difference between *is* and *reveals* is crucial for the ongoing discussion of the Bible as the Word of God.

Second, the article states that whatever is not revealed in, or established by, Scripture is not to be made an article of faith. Many Christians accept the verbal inspiration of Scripture as a foundational faith confession. Some United Methodists believe that God inspired every word and that each word is of equal importance to every other word and, therefore, has to be believed. Others understand that in John 5:39-40 Jesus is saying that eternal life is not to be found in the Bible itself but in the Christ to whom the Bible points.

Again, there is a ready consensus on the basic principle of Article IV of the Confession but a great deal of confusion and disagreement about how this statement is lived out in the life of the church. Central to an understanding of authority is an understanding of Scripture as the Word of God.

The Word of God

Wesley Ariarajah reminds us that the “Word of God” means different things to different people. In the Bible itself, the meaning of this concept changes. It first meant the Torah, or the first five books of the Bible attributed to Moses. Then the prophets who came later spoke of themselves as bringing the word of the Lord to Israel. They meant they were bringing a message from God to the people of Israel *in the current situation*. So “Word of God” in Hebrew Scripture denotes a living, contemporary message or insight from God that spoke to the political, social, and religious situation of God’s people.³

Karl Barth identified three understandings of *Word* in the New Testament that have different meanings. First, the Word is Christ, the Word made flesh. Then the Word

means Scripture as it witnesses to the Word made flesh. In this second sense, the Bible is the Word of God, because it is the primary witness to Jesus Christ. A third sense of the Word of God is the preaching and teaching of the gospel message, another form of witness to the Word made flesh.⁴ In fact, there were those in the early church who were convinced that the oral tradition—what they heard directly from the lips of those who had been Jesus’ disciples and heard him teach—was more important than what they found in written form.⁵

Another way of looking at “Word” is as the *Logos*. In this view, Jesus is the Eternal Word, or *Logos*, the pre-existent Son of God (John 1:1). Then the Eternal Word becomes the Incarnate Word (John 1:14), Son of God made flesh for salvation. Finally, there is the Written Word, the witness to the Eternal and Incarnate Word. The written Word in this way of understanding has less power than the Eternal and Incarnate Word to whom it witnesses.

If a view of Scripture is taken which says that the Bible is not only the Word of God but also the *words* of God, serious questions are raised for the Christian when the words of the Bible seem to conflict with the values taught in Scripture itself.⁶ An example of this problem is illustrated by a conversation Wesley Ariarajah had with his young daughter. She was concerned about the passages that speak of God waging war, demanding the slaughter of innocent persons and wreaking vengeance. A key point for Ariarajah in those and similar instances is that the credibility of the *words* of the Bible stands over against our understanding of the *nature* of God. One way to avoid the conflict of *words* and *the Word’s revelation of God* is to understand Scripture as God’s message, in that it *reveals* the Word. As noted above, this understanding is consistent with “The

Articles of Religion,” “The Confession of Faith,” and the Gospel of John.

Scott Jones reminds us that John Wesley believed the Bible has a message that is consistent throughout the text.⁷ Wesley called this message the *analogy of faith*. John Wesley proposed that the content of the message is God’s way of salvation, which has three elements:

1. **Original sin**
2. **Justification by faith**
3. **Sanctification**

The analogy of faith became a standard of biblical interpretation for Wesley. Each passage of Scripture is to be interpreted in the light of this general meaning. The interpretation of a difficult passage begins by comparing it to the analogy of faith. This method differs from the practice of proof-texting, that is, finding Scripture passages to prove one’s point of view.

According to Jones, a good example of John Wesley’s use of this method is his stance against the doctrine of predestination. George Whitefield, Wesley’s friend and colleague, argued that Christ’s saving action on the cross was limited to an elect number and that certain persons were predestined to salvation and the rest to damnation. Against this, Wesley argued in his sermon, *Free Grace*, that predestination runs counter to the message of salvation contained in the Bible. The idea that God would save some and not others is contrary to the heart of what we read in Scripture. Wesley argued that texts that seem to support predestination have to be compared to the message of the Bible as a whole, that is, to the redeeming love of God through Jesus Christ and the possibility of salvation by faith for all.

When we use Wesley's analogy of faith and compare specific texts to the message of the whole Bible, Wesleyans understand that a doctrine of double, particular predestination is not justified by God's self-revelation in the Bible.⁸

There is power in this understanding of Word as *message*. It gives us a framework within which we can look at the Bible. In it the message is a definition of what is essential for salvation and by extension defines what is authoritative about Scripture. There are also some serious questions about the analogy of faith. It makes sense to many people but does not satisfy those who see the Bible as the words of God or those who use different criteria for faithful interpretation.

Historically God's message to the world, in its richness, has included other doctrines besides original sin, justification by faith, and sanctification. The historic creeds speak of creation, the relationship between the Father and the Son, the nature of Christ, the church, baptism, resurrection, and the work of the Holy Spirit.

It is interesting to note in a discussion of biblical authority that the opponents of the Nicene Creed fought against its adoption because the language of the formulation was not biblical and, therefore, was not God's revelation. The supporters of the Nicene Creed were equally sure that the principles stated in the creed were drawn from Scripture, though not explicitly stated in Scripture. The Nicene Creed stands as a hallmark of Christian doctrine in spite of its non-biblical language. Even before the creeds, the early Christian community used a *rule of faith*, based on its earliest confessions about Jesus, to determine what was a faithful witness to the Christian faith.

Wesley's analogy of faith implies that three doctrines, taken together as the plan of salvation, are more authorita-

tive than particular passages of Scripture. John Wesley's use of the analogy of faith, however, in no way diminishes his position on the primacy of Scripture. Scott Jones reminded us that Wesley argued that God is the author of Scripture. In his *Clear and Concise Demonstration of the Divine Inspiration of the Holy Scriptures*, Wesley said that the Bible must be "the invention either of good men or angels, bad men or devils, or of God." Jones went on to say that in contemporary language Wesley might say something like, "Look, either the Bible is telling the truth or it isn't. If it is lying, then throw the whole book away as worthless. If it is telling the truth, then take it for what it professes to be: the written word of God."⁹



INSPIRATION, TRANSLATION, AND INTERPRETATION

Inspiration

Participants and presenters in the consultation grappled with scriptural authority as they discussed inspiration, issues involved in translation, and models for interpretation. Wesley Ariarajah discussed three theories of interpretation, the first being the *Verbal Inspiration of Scripture*.¹⁰ He defines this theory as insisting that every word of the Bible is there because God wants it to be and, therefore, every word is infallible. Ariarajah then described two other theories of biblical inspiration. *Limited Verbal Inspiration* looks on the Bible as inspired but tries to also deal with historical and scientific inaccuracies. This view says that God inspired men and women in limited cultural and historical contexts. Since they were limited in their worldview, it is no surprise that the Bible has an understanding of the universe that we cannot accept or that there are errors in dates and places. These errors are not important in terms of salvation. At the time it was written, the Bible was verbally inspired, and that is its authority. The *Non-Textual Inspiration* theory says that the Bible is inspired in its teachings and principles, because it was

written by people who were inspired by God. Any inerrancy in the Bible is in the teaching and not in the details.

The second theory, *Limited Verbal Inspiration*, seems close to John Wesley's analogy of faith. It also stakes out a middle ground in the debate over the Bible: The Bible has authority in matters of faith and practice, but it is not inerrant. It needs to be studied critically in order to understand what it meant to those who first read it and how it applies to our life today.

Translation

Since most United Methodists read the Bible only in translation, we have to raise questions about what happens to inspiration and authority in the process of translation. Even the oldest Hebrew and Greek manuscripts often have different readings. This is why we find footnotes in the RSV and NRSV that state, "other ancient authorities read ...," indicating that there are other ancient manuscripts of this passage with different readings. The translators had to choose which reading to follow. Questions about the authority of Scripture usually gloss over the issue of whether or not a specific translation is more authoritative than others.

This was not the case, however, in 1952 when the Revised Standard Version of the Bible was published. This new translation challenged the authority of what many considered to be the inspired text, the King James Version. The word *version* in both translation titles reminds us that every translation is a version, or interpretation of the text, which tries to make an ancient document more meaningful for a different culture.

David Lull pointed out the controversy over the Revised Standard Version that arose over doctrinal matters as much

as the accuracy of the translation. The most celebrated example, of course, is the translation of Isaiah 7:14. The King James Version had said that a *virgin* shall conceive, and the Revised Standard Version had translated the same word as a *young woman*. The RSV was seen, by some, as denying the virgin birth of Jesus and thus could not be an authoritative version of the Scripture.

The functional authority in the dispute over Isaiah 7:14 is the doctrine. The original biblical text is actually open to different, competing doctrinal interpretations. Translations cannot solve doctrinal disputes, only mirror them. Not even the original biblical text can solve the disputes: Traditional doctrine is often too strong.¹¹ Doctrine functions in these instances as a “rule of faith,” or standard of what is essential Christian teaching.

Interpretation

Models of Interpretation

In addition to the problems inherent in translations as they relate to doctrine and culture, Rebekah Miles reminds us that there are different models of interpretation that also play a role in our understanding of scriptural authority.¹²

- ❖ The *propositional model* tends to be more conservative and emphasizes the objective truth of Scripture. It does not insist that the Bible is inerrant or infallible. One can focus on objective truth and still allow for errors in translation, particular worldviews of the biblical writers, and metaphorical and symbolic expression. The Bible, for this model, is authoritative because it is true. It corresponds to reality, to the way things really are.

- ❖ The *transformational (or formational) model* is more moderate and emphasizes the power of Scripture to transform lives. This model focuses less on objective, factual accuracy and more on the experience of the individual who encounters Scripture. This position, however, is not just surrender to personal experience. Lives are changed because we “take and read.” In the reading of Scripture, the Holy Spirit works in our lives, and we are transformed.
- ❖ The *narrativist model* is a post-liberal position that focuses on the character and identity of God, the community found in Scripture, and the way the narratives shape our Christian identity and character in community today. This model says that the stories in Scripture don’t have to be objectively, historically true to speak the truth about God and God’s people. What is important is that we are shaped in community by the truths of these stories. Wesley could be found arguing against the Calvinists’ doctrine of predestination on the basis of the character of God as he understood it from Scripture. In Wesley’s view, predestination makes a tyrant of God and goes against God’s gracious nature.

Miles suggests that we don’t have to choose among these models but that we have something to learn from each of them; and each of them has something to learn from the others. A comprehensive model of biblical authority needs to contain the central elements of all three models.¹³

Scott Jones points out that John Wesley used Scripture in five different ways: textual, explanatory, definitional, narrative, and semantic.¹⁴ These uses, or models, all appeal to the authority of Scripture:

- ❖ The *textual use* of Scripture means we begin with the text and take it seriously.
- ❖ The *explanatory use* calls on the authority of Scripture to explain other Scriptures or to justify conclusions.
- ❖ In the *definitional use*, Wesley appeals to Scripture for correct definitions that serve as an authority to influence the outcome of theological discussion.
- ❖ The *narrative use* of Scripture involves looking at scriptural and early-church precedents for authorizing actions.
- ❖ The *semantic use* of Scripture means that to say something with biblical words has a greater authority because of the source of the words.

Beyond these five uses, Jones says, Wesley would argue that the authority of Scripture is derived from its character as God's revelation to human kind. It is God's authorship of the text that gives it authority, and the analogy of faith constitutes the unity of its message.

Plurality of Interpretive Voices

Another dynamic of interpretation comes into play when we look at the plurality of voices in Scripture. An obvious example is that Paul and James do not agree on the questions of faith and works. Also, the four Gospels, Paul, and Hebrews all have different understandings of the person and work of Christ. Add to that the different perspectives of the Mosaic material, the prophets, the Deuteronomistic historian, the author of Chronicles, the wide variety of faith understandings in the Psalms, Ecclesiastes, and Job and it becomes clear that there are many voices and many messages in Scripture. Indeed, some assert that this diversity is itself the source of the Bible's power. Delwin Brown

argues that Scripture with a single message will become irrelevant when new situations and problems emerge, and only a rich, varied, multi-voiced Scripture will continue to be relevant.¹⁵

When the church developed the canon of Scripture, it clearly canonized diversity. How deliberate that diversity was is an open question, although there must have been an awareness of what was happening in the process of canonization. Perhaps the Bible does not have *an* authority but *many* authorities as it speaks with many voices and sometimes offers a variety of answers to the same questions.

Scripture speaks with plural voices to a plural people. Christians come from different parts of the world, different racial and ethnic backgrounds, and different settings. We come with eighth-grade educations and advanced degrees. Out of our differences we read and interpret the Bible in different ways. To take ourselves seriously as a people, we have to honor our diversity. To take the Bible seriously, we also have to honor its diversity.

Brown also reminds us that the Bible presents Jesus as one speaking with authority. The Greek word for authority, *exousia*, points toward a power to act or respond creatively. It has to do with creativity appropriate to an action. It does not command conformity; it commends freedom. In this sense, it is empowerment.¹⁶ Authority is that which *authors*, which gives being to, forms, calls to creativity. “The authority of Scripture is the creative power it manifests and therefore enables in those who inhabit it, its capacity again and again to create and re-create individual and communal identities.”¹⁷

From his point of view, Brown calls to task both conservative and liberal understandings of authority. Conservatives, he argues, ignore the diversity of Scripture;

liberals ignore its centrality to the Christian life. Both make the same mistake, assuming that authority is something to which we must conform. Authority is more than simply enforcing rules and making judgments. To limit authority to rules or doctrines is to deny the power of Scripture to change lives, the power to *author* Christian lives.

The United Methodist Quadrilateral

During the 20th century, United Methodists began to apply a method of scriptural interpretation that they found in John Wesley's teachings and writings, though it was not explicitly stated. What we now call the Wesleyan Quadrilateral was offered to United Methodists as a helpful tool to discern a faithful response to theological and moral issues. The Quadrilateral helps to weigh matters by Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. The Wesleyan Quadrilateral was discussed at the 1970 General Conference and adopted into *The Book of Discipline* at the 1972 General Conference. The church has struggled since that time to find the best way to articulate the relationship of Scripture to the rest of this equation.¹⁸

The use of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral helps us deal with thorny issues in the life of the church as each of the four elements supports the others and, at times, serves as a check or corrective. Wesley Ariarajah suggests that United Methodists in non-Western parts of the world would add another element to the quadrilateral—the community. He argues that we need to ask what Scripture is saying to the Christian community in its own context today. “The Scripture has no authority apart from the community, and the community has no common point of reference other than what they have decided would be their Scripture.”¹⁹ The question for non-Western cultures is not, “Is the Bible the revealed word of

God?” Rather, the question is, “What does God reveal to us in our situation as we study the Bible together?”

In Latin America, persons began reading Scripture in relationship to the poverty of the people. They were transformed by a new revelation, which was also an old one: God cares for the oppressed people in Egypt and wills to liberate them. A liberated people was then called to build a just society. This led not only to transformed individuals but, also, to changed societies.²⁰ The same was true in Korea where theologians advocating for democracy were thrown into prison. There they began to relate the Scriptures to the prisoners and downtrodden. When they returned to society, they were no longer able to see the oppressed as objects but as the bearers of God’s message of freedom. Things happen when the Bible is read over against the concrete realities of life. Individuals, societies, even nations, can be transformed when a community hears the Word of God in its own context.

United Methodists believe and hope that faithful reading and study of Scripture will result in transformed lives. We are reminded that St. Augustine’s moment of conversion came when, in a fit of despair, he heard a child’s voice singing, “Take and read.” He picked up a Bible and opened it to Romans, read, and found a new life. Martin Luther’s life was transformed when he read in the Psalms about God’s righteousness. John Wesley’s heart was strangely warmed as he listened to someone reading from the Preface to Martin Luther’s Commentary on Romans.

Scripture functions as revelation and authority as it is interpreted. But who does the interpreting, and for what purpose does one interpret? These questions have a great deal to do with authority. Simply to quote Scripture does not give ultimate authority. One has to ask, Why is the

Scripture being quoted here? What is the agenda behind the interpretation? Who is the person behind the interpretation? Is this something, or someone, to whom I want to give authority over my life? Both Satan and Jesus quoted Scripture in the temptation story, but they had different agendas and different reasons for using Scripture as an authority.



PUSHING THE QUESTIONS

As we struggle with the dynamics of inspiration, translation, and interpretation, we must also look at the role of divine revelation and ask if God still speaks to the church, or if the written Word is all the revelation we have. As one of the participants in a former consultation phrased the issue: Does God still speak directly to us with new revelation, or is revelation discovered as we read Scripture in new ways?²¹ Divine revelation and its relationship to Scripture were not discussed adequately at the consultation. These themes need to be explored further in conversations across the church.

We need to ask ourselves: Is Scripture the inspired Word of God because it was revealed at one moment in history, or is it the inspired Word because when we interpret and understand it correctly God shines through? Do the words force us back to Jesus, the Word made flesh, who is our ultimate authority? Does Scripture reveal him in ways that call us to the holiness of heart and life John Wesley taught? Does it transform our lives to witness to God's love and mercy as we face the concrete realities of our lives?

The word *canon* as it is often used refers to the writings of the early church that became our Bible. This collection of writings was accepted as the measure of Christian

life and faith, even though all the books of the Bible do not have the same point of view nor do they tell the gospel story in the same way. Yet, all are within the limits of faithfulness. When we refer to Scripture as a canon, we are talking about an authoritative measuring tool. In practice, we use other measuring instruments in addition to the canon, such as the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, an analogy of faith, a rule of faith, or the witness of our lives.

In the discussion at the consultation on scriptural authority in Nashville, Bishop Fritz Mutti recalled that a professor in his seminary spoke of the word *canon* as a measuring stick or ruler that measures what appropriately can be considered Christian. Bishop Mutti suggested that United Methodists are all somewhere on this measuring stick as we deal with controversial issues in the church. He proposed that different positions on homosexuality in The United Methodist Church are within the limits of faithfulness because their biblical foundations are found in the canon.

In a later session, Bishop Roy Sano offered another metaphor for United Methodists as we learn to discuss the controversial topics of our day. He likened those with differing theological positions to intercontinental ballistic missiles buried deep in silos during the Cold War. He suggested that the church is beginning the process of reconciliation by talking with each other and revealing where we are doctrinally and theologically. And, just as the first step in disarmament is to raise the missiles to reveal their positions, difficult, honest discussions such as this consultation on scriptural authority need to take place throughout The United Methodist Church under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.



A CLOSING SENSE OF THE MEETING

In the closing session of the consultation, Bruce Robbins offered a summary of what had happened during the consultation using four categories: gifts of the meeting, hopes for the church, tensions evident here and across the church, and possible avenues of forward movement.

Gifts of the Time Together

The participants gathered, experienced, and expressed deep satisfaction for what they learned or what took place; for example, 1) We learned about the “analogy of faith,” that John Wesley used and taught us that we have Scripture alone but never alone. 2) We caught glimpses of some challenges of translation of Holy Scripture: changes in the canon, layering of the textual base, the attitudes toward culture, and the difficulty of assessing a “best” translation. 3) We learned new models of Scriptural authority: propositional, transformational, and narrativist. 4) We looked at the difficulty of *a priori* norms because of the contingencies of life in community and at the metaphor of a measuring rod upon which all of us fall and how the rod seems to get longer. 5) We shared the joy of biblical images that came to us through reflection upon Luke 24.

Hopes for the Church

We found hope in the following ties that bind us together:

- ❖ We have a historic commitment to Christian conferencing and trust the Holy Spirit to speak to us through the means of grace and through God's gift to us of Christian unity.
- ❖ We recognize numerous degrees of consensus found through the Articles of Religion, doctrinal standards, theological principles, and the affirmation of the one God who works through us and within our midst.
- ❖ Clearly, United Methodists from the full range of opinions on Scripture and on homosexuality have a deep love for the church and yearn to see it whole and full of rich life.

Tensions Among Us

Even among this small group gathered we recognize tensions in how we view Scripture and the church, and we slip into portrayals of one another in less than the most generous ways. We recognize that our understanding of the church, our ecclesiology, often has radically different starting points. Some of us begin with pluralism, others with propositions of the unity of the Body of Christ. Within our United Methodist Church we experience deeper tensions: deep feelings of betrayal by the church leadership; huge expenditures of resources on controversies that deplete energy, mission, and evangelism; and, most important, a sense by many from different ends of the theological spectrum that our church lives in conflict with the gospel.

Avenues of Forward Movement

It is unlikely that new scientific evidence will sway the debate. It is unlikely that the issue of homosexuality will become less important to one side or the other. It is unlikely that attitudes toward Scripture will change. Thus we are convinced that we experience a divided church in crisis with vastly different, yet deeply held, commitments. One possible way forward is to find ways to create *safe space* that would allow people to remain in the church without feeling that they are abandoning the authenticity of the gospel of Jesus Christ. We need a continuing and trusted dialogue. We need relief for those who feel their apportionments are supporting a church in conflict with the gospel. And we need space for those who feel that the restrictions against inclusion of homosexuals force them to be either bigots or hypocrites.

The church has a deep need for prayer, dialogue among those who disagree the most, space for people to maintain their integrity, and the conversion of the Holy Spirit.²²

Endnotes

- 1 “The Articles of Religion of The United Methodist Church,” *The Book of Discipline*, 1996, p. 58.
- 2 “The Confession of Faith of The Evangelical United Brethren Church,” *The Book of Discipline*, 1996, p. 65.
- 3 Wesley Ariarajah, “Authority of Scripture and the Nature of Revelation: Biblical Authority in a Non-Western Context,” Consultation Paper, p. 2.
- 4 *Ibid.*
- 5 Papias of Hierapolis (ca. 70-150), in the generation immediately following the apostles, illustrates this view. See Michael W. Holmes, ed., *The Apostolic Fathers* (Baker Books, 1999), p. 565.
- 6 Ariarajah, *op. cit.*, p. 3.
- 7 Scott J. Jones, “Scripture Alone...Yet Never Alone,” p. 21. Consultation Paper. For a fuller exposition of the positions outlined here, see Scott J. Jones, *Wesley’s Conception and Use of Scripture* (Kingswood Books, 1995).
- 8 Mildred Bangs Wynkoop, *Foundations of Wesleyan-Arminian Theology* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 1967), gives helpful explanations of Calvinism, Arminianism, Wesleyanism, and various combinations of these traditions as they relate to “biblical predestination.”
- 9 Jones, *op. cit.*, p. 18.
- 10 Ariarajah, *op. cit.*, p. 4.
- 11 David Lull, “What Is the Authority of Scripture? Why There is No One True Answer,” Consultation Paper, p. 10.
- 12 Rebekah Miles, “Take, Read...and Then What? Biblical Authority and the U.S. Culture,” Consultation Paper, pp. 2-4. Miles borrows and modifies a typology of William Placher’s that he borrowed and modified from David Kelsey’s *The Use of Scripture in Recent Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975).
- 13 Miles makes a fascinating observation in her paper that, according to recent surveys conducted by George Barna and George Gallup, biblical illiteracy may be the greatest problem facing the churches. Among statistics cited were that only 42% of the general public knows who delivered the Sermon on the Mount, 80% believe wrong-

ly that the Bible says that “God helps those who help themselves,” 66% of Methodists could not name over five of the ten commandments. See George Barna, *The Barna Report: What Americans Believe: An Annual Survey of Values and Religious Views in the United States* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1991; George Gallup, *Religion in America:1996* (Princeton, NJ: Gallup Organization Princeton Religion Research center, 1996); and other works by these authors.

14 Jones, *op. cit.*, pp. 10-13.

15 Delwin Brown, “Authorized by the Book: A Plain Account of the Bible’s Authority,” Consultation Paper, p. 3.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 6.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 5.

18 Gunter, Stephen W, et al., *Wesley and the Quadrilateral: Renewing the Conversation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997).

19 Ariarajah, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

20 *Ibid.*, pp. 7-8.

21 Bishop Judith Craig made this observation as a participant in the Dialogue on Theological Diversity in The United Methodist Church, Dallas, 1998.

22 Bruce W. Robbins, “A Closing Sense of the Meeting: A Concluding Session,” Consultation Paper.

SUGGESTED FOR FURTHER READING

- Abraham, William J. *Waking from Doctrinal Amnesia*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1995.
- _____. "Revelation Reaffirmed" in *Divine Revelation*. Paul Avis, ed. London: Darton, Longman, Todd, 1997.
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