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# **RENEWAL**



***The Journal of the Evangelical Renewal Fellowship in New England***

***Walter Ciesluk, Editor***

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## **MEMBERSHIP MATTERS, PART III**

**Rev. Dr. Thomas Bentum**

We are once again at a potential crises concerning membership in the United Methodist Church. The first two times that I wrote about membership in our journal it concerned Judicial Council decision 1032. In case you have forgotten what that was about, in that decision the Council ruled in favor of Rev. Ed Johnson at South Hill United Methodist Church in Virginia who postponed membership to a constituent who refused to leave the homosexual lifestyle. His bishop, Bishop Kammerer, had previously removed Rev. Johnson from his congregation believing that he was wrong in this action. The Council disagreed with the bishop on the grounds that the pastor has full authority to determine readiness for ministry.

Now, according to our friends in Good News and The Confessing Movement, anger at the Judicial Council decision has motivated GLBT (gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender) advocacy groups to propose an amendment to the church's constitution. The amendment to paragraph 4, article IV would remove the list of those who cannot be excluded – "race, color, national origin, status or economic condition." What that effectively does is remove any barrier to any person wishing to be a United Methodist for any reason. All one has to do is declare they want to join the church and no one in the congregation and not even the pastor can stop them.

Like the Judicial Council decision, the amendment may have begun as an attempt to force the pastor's hand in accepting the homosexual lifestyle in a church member; however it is a far bigger issue than that. The source of this amendment like any action put on the floor makes little difference. Once it is on the floor it belongs to all of us and we must no longer be concerned with who made it or what their motivation was. I want to urge all of our ERF members and friends to not make this a GLBT issue. In the end this amendment will help no one. What it will do is solidify the separation of church membership from discipleship and that to me is the most critical issue of all.

In part 2 of my articles on membership I gave four reasons why membership discernment and particularly pastoral authority in determining membership are so important. Here they are again, except reworded to fit this new context:

1. Our purpose as a church, as clearly stated in the Discipline, is to make disciples of Jesus Christ. I believe that for too long we have neglected connecting membership to discipleship and therefore have fostered unhealthy congregations that are ineffective in their mission and ministry. Membership needs to mean something besides simply willingness. It needs to reflect readiness.
2. It makes sense to put the authority to determine readiness for membership in the hands of the chief spiritual director of a congregation, the pastor. The word pastor, after all, means, shepherd. The pastor's role is to shepherd the sheep. If you understand the nature of sheep, you don't want to take the analogy too far! But in the best sense of the word it means being entrusted with the authority to guide and direct out of love and devotion with the best interest of the sheep in mind. I see only chaos if the authority of the shepherd is completely undercut.

3. For too long we have neglected our historic roots dating back to the beginnings as a people movement called Methodists. The early Methodists took membership in the societies very seriously. Becoming a full member in early America even included a six month probationary period to determine readiness. It was part of the foundation of their success. Having fairly serious membership standards continues to be a cornerstone of growing churches even today.
4. Most importantly, membership in the United Methodist Church is about grace and redemption. Our membership vows are a wonderful means of grace leading people into a redemptive relationship with God and others. We dare not cheapen that experience by neglecting the need for discernment in readiness to take that step on the journey.

To me the possibilities of some very bad scenarios played out in our congregations because of this amendment are mind boggling. I hesitate to list even a few of them. They go way beyond the issues of sexuality because it opens the door to destructive lifestyles of all types that we would be forced to accept. If we are to connect discipleship with membership then we can not forfeit the authority of discernment.

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**UPCOMING ANNUAL ERF REFORM MEETING**  
**Rev. Dr. Thomas Bentum**

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The ERF board meeting will be held on March 28, 2009 from 9:30 a.m. to 3 p.m. at the Exeter United Methodist Church, Exeter, NH. Rev. David Midwood, president of Vision New England, will be the main speaker (See [biography](#)). Recently Vision New England did a survey of New England churches to find out what is working in terms of church growth and evangelism. We have invited Rev. Midwood to come and share their findings, help us understand their implications for us, and give us a better understanding how United Methodists can draw on their resources. If you are as frustrated as most pastors and laity at finding things that work in our unique culture, you need to come and hear what David has to say! A [flyer with an advanced registration form](#) for this event is now available on line.



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## PERSONAL THOUGHTS ON THE RESURRECTION

Walter J. Ciesluk

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### **Why I believe that the resurrection was an historical event?**

On my Christian journey, I have become aware of a large volume of apologetical evidence in support of the resurrection claims, and this evidence has helped me come to and ultimately strengthen my faith. The evidence is well documented and convincingly explained in many contemporary articles and books. All the evidence can be summarized into five main elements: 1) The New Testament contains numerous passages where Jesus himself foretold his death and resurrection, and these events came about exactly as he had predicted. 2) The resurrection is the only plausible explanation for the heavily guarded empty grave. 3) After He rose from the dead, Jesus appeared at least ten times to those who had known him and to as many as 500 people at one time. 4) The resurrection is the only reasonable explanation for the miraculous growth of the Christian church, which was born in the very city where Jesus was publicly killed and buried. 5) The transformed lives of the disciples from discouragement and fear to boldness, courage, and a willingness to die for their faith cannot be explained apart from their conviction that Jesus Christ was truly raised from the dead.

Can I or anyone prove the truth of the resurrection of Jesus? No! Can anyone disprove it? No! Is there a lot of mystery and unanswered questions associated with the resurrection? Yes! Ultimately, one has to make a faith decision. I have decided to trust in the truth of the resurrection and all its implications. I am confident that this decision is rational and plausible given the apologetical arguments developed by the Christian church. As an example of plausibility, Adam Hamilton in a recent series on “Where Science and Religion Meet” showed how the resurrection appearances could be rationalized from Einstein’s equivalency between matter and energy. And finally, if there is a God who created the world, then He or She is certainly capable of other miracles such as the virgin birth and the resurrection.

### **How does faith in the resurrection affect me?**

Because I believe in the resurrection, I am motivated to try to understand and act upon what Jesus said and did. I have put my trust in the teachings and promises of Christ. I trust what he says about his sacrifice, forgiveness of sins, requirements for salvation, moral and ethical behavior, and eternal life. I am striving to pray, study the scriptures, worship and serve the church. Although at times it is very difficult, I am trying to keep God’s moral law, be a witness for the gospel, and become more active in advocating and working for social justice.

### **What if I were to start to have doubts about the resurrection?**

To start with, Jesus himself made a lot of statements suggesting that he knew very well who he was. Although, He didn’t go around saying the words, I am God, everywhere He went, it is clear from all He taught and claimed, that He was conscience of being a man who possessed the attributes of God.” These attributes are reflected in much of His teaching which centered on Himself. “I am the way the truth and the life. “No man comes to the Father but by me.” “If you deny me before man, I will deny you before my father.” “I am the bread of life, he that comes to me shall never hunger.” “He that believes in me has everlasting life.” “He that has seen Me has seen the father, I am the door, by Me if any man enter in he shall be saved.” “I that speak to you am He, the Messiah.” “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.”

As C.S. Lewis says, “If all the things that Jesus said about himself are true, He clearly is of God and deserves are utmost attention and allegiance. Otherwise, he is a complete madman or liar, not worthy of our respect and attention. He is either a lunatic or the Savior of the world.” I personally don’t like the idea of following a madman or a liar. If the resurrection didn’t happen, I have to ask my sinful self: Why should I become a member of and support the church, or temple or mosque for that matter? Why should I be concerned about trying to live a moral and religious life? Why should I worry about social justice unless I think I am the subject of injustice. If I don’t really need a savior, why should I be motivated to try to follow Jesus? How can I be sure that religion is not an invention of humans, rather than a revelation from God? What’s wrong with being agnostic? I think that a lot of people are probably like me. Without a strong rational basis for faith, they are likely to not take religion very seriously and at best half heartedly follow Jesus?

## **What would be the impact on the Christian community if the church were to play down, hedge, or imply uncertainty about the resurrection?**

I believe strongly that the resurrection from the dead of Jesus Christ is the cornerstone of Christianity. Without the resurrection, we, the church, are just another social club, community charity, non-profit organization, another system of morality. If Jesus was not raised from the dead, then Christian beliefs don't amount to much, since Jesus himself said that he would be raised from the dead on the third day. Even St. Paul said, "If Christ has not been raised, our faith is futile and we are still in our sins....If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people to be pitied."

I feel that our churches can't be timid, equivocal, or evasive about boldly declaring the truth about Jesus. Anything in the church that sheds doubt on the resurrection weakens the faith. Sermons and pronouncements which espouse pluralistic or universal views of salvation, or reflect skepticism about His miraculous birth and resurrection, undermine the historical Christian faith and make it impotent.

I believe that the church must continue to defend the truth of the resurrection and the authority of scripture for knowing God's purposes and right living. We must make it clear that because of our sinful nature, we are separated from God and lost without a Savior, that God loved us so much that He provided us that Savior in the person of His son, who died on the cross as a substitute payment for our sins, and that our relationship with God can be restored by a profession of faith in His redeeming life, death, and resurrection.

If some claim that there are other ways to God, I believe we need to declare that God may have established such ways, but we are sure of only one way. Unless, we do this boldly, I believe that confusion about Jesus will happen in our churches and widespread general apathy and indifference to Him will remain in our communities.

I believe many people, including some of my friends and relatives, have a hard time accepting the resurrection of Jesus Christ, yet they are not aware of the strong evidence that supports it as a historical fact. As Christians, I believe we need to be prepared to help anyone who is seeking God or taking issue with the claims of Christianity to know why Christians can be confident in their faith.

### **Final thoughts**

In this day and age, everyone seems to have something to say about Jesus and it is easy for someone to become very confused about who He is. If we talk to a Buddhist or Hindu, they may acknowledge Jesus as a great holy man or enlightened teacher, but nothing more. Most Jews may concede that Jesus may have been a revolutionary rabbi, but clearly not Israel's promised Messiah. A Muslim will have great respect for Jesus as a prophet, but will deny that he was ever executed on a cross. Many biblical and theological scholars have not helped the situation very much by publishing numerous books in recent years, providing a myriad of viewpoints, some troubling, some puzzling, which tend to regard Jesus as a teaching sage, a religious genius, or a social revolutionary. In contrast, Christians claim that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God, Lord and Savior. The popular media seems to enjoy exploiting this great disparity of opinions and belittling those who have strong views about the uniqueness and exclusivity of Jesus Christ. In this kind of environment, it is very understandable why the un-churched and even some members of our churches can become skeptical, uninterested, and indifferent to Jesus' question, "who do you say that I am?"

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## DOES GOD ANSWER PRAYER AND DOES PRAYER CHANGE THINGS?

Tony Warren

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Does prayer change things? What is the purpose of prayer? Does God answer prayer? Many Christians have a difficult time answering these questions in light of scripture. This is partly due to their struggle with harmonizing the idea of God's sovereignty and immutability, with God's word that we should pray and our prayers will be answered. For many conclude that since God answers our prayers, this means that our prayer changes things. But while it is true that prayer changes things, the question is, exactly what does it really change? Does it work to change the mindset of those who pray, or does it actually change the mind of God? This is the question they struggle with. Because God is quite clearly omniscient, infallible and immutable. And yet prayers are declared in scripture to be answered. Thus this leaves many with a conundrum of sorts. For if God knows all, and He is infallible and perfect in all His judgments, how can He change His mind in accordance with the will of our prayers? In this we will endeavor to shed some light upon this very puzzling question.

First and foremost we should establish that the Holy scriptures are crystal clear that the mind of God is to do His will, not ours. Thus, any answered prayer must be considered in the light of that first principle. And perfect judgments are not judgments that will be countermanded. Would our humanistic judgments be better for anyone than what the mind of God had ordained, that He would allow it to supersede His perfect will and divine Providence?

### Job 23:13

- "But he is in one mind, and who can turn him? and what his soul desireth, even that he doeth."

Whatever is His will, He does! Clearly God's counsels are immutable, and there are no earthly interests or counselors by whom God may be persuaded to turn away from His ordained purposes and will. Thus if we pray for a blessing, and we receive it, it is not that we altered the course of things. It is that we prayed for what was in the purpose of God. i.e., God had always intended for us to petition Him (for our own sakes) for what was in His will to give us. In other words, His counsel stood sure and didn't change, it was just that we didn't know His counsel, and asked according to His foreknowledge and will.

### Psalms 33:11

- "The counsel of the LORD standeth for ever, the thoughts of his heart to all generations."

God doesn't change His counsel. Because the foreknowledge and immutability of God that is declared in the Scriptures, and implied in His absolute perfection, means He would not make a judgment that He already knew He would change. Unless it was already His will to change it. What many Christians don't fully comprehend is that the purpose of prayer is not as a means for man to change the counsel God, but as a channel for communion with God, that we are the one being taught some lesson and being changed.

### Isaiah 40:13

- "Who hath directed the Spirit of the LORD, or being his counselor hath taught him?"

We don't counsel God on what changes we want, prayers bring us closer to His teachings. His omniscience precludes Him from being surprised by any prayer that would subsequently change His mind. Since He knows the end of all things and of all matters, how could our prodding change His mind?

### James 5:16-17

- "Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. The *effectual fervent prayer* of a righteous man *availeth much*.
- Elias was a man subject to like passions as we are, and *he prayed earnestly* that it might not rain: and it rained not on the earth by the space of three years and six months."

We might assume from this that God had no intention of holding back rain, and then Elijah's prayer changed His mind. But assumption is the mother of most errors. In point of fact, God had every intention bringing this judgment of holding back rain, and inspired the effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man to bring it to pass. Note here the

qualification of the petitioner. He was a righteous man. Not righteous in the sense that he was a good person (*there is none good but God*), but in the sense that he was justified by faith, and thus Christ dwells within Him moving and guiding Him. His unending prayer is that the will of God be done, not his own. That's the key here. It was ultimately God's will that this is done, not Elijah's will. It is the Spirit that moved Elijah, and that works within us, according to God's will and purpose. It is what made Elijah's prayers effectual, according to God's will.

Does our praying really make a difference? The Biblical answer is yes. The difference prayer makes is in us and in those around us, not in God. Prayer is for our sakes, for it is through prayer that the believer is learning more about Himself through his lifeline to God. In this spiritual conduit of power he can better understand that the Lord is his only protector, foundation, strength and fortress. For it is in this conductor of prayer to God, that His will is revealed to His servants. It is how we consciously petition and receive power from on high, that we may live the life that God intends for us. The practice of petitionary prayer is very Biblical, and the truth of its efficacy is deeply rooted in the scriptures.

God desires us to petition Him that we may grow in grace and communion with God, by our identification with Him. It instills God-consciousness in an individual. For an integral part of the purpose of prayer is to assist us in aligning ourselves with God. In the act of repentance and petitionary prayer, God teaches us to submit to His will. Even as David, who both repented and prayed earnestly for the life of his son (2nd Samuel 12:16), but ultimately accepted what he subsequently learned was the will of God in the matter. In this we see demonstrated both his trust and His faith. Unlike humanistic man, he is not angry with God, not blaming God, not pointing an accusing finger at God, but growing in Grace whereby he can accept God's will. i.e., it's not that God was unforgiving, or that He couldn't spare David's son's life, but that David might learn and grow from this, to his own good, to the glory of God. The whole purpose of prayer is conformity with the will of God, not the commanding of our own, in self-gratification.

Again, "Does God answer prayer and does prayer change things?" ...Absolutely! For prayer, viewed in this very Biblical way, accepts God as sovereign and makes every prayer righteous, answered, and a blessing. And through those prayers we learn more about ourselves, and how to live nobly that we orient ourselves properly toward God. Let us then thank the Lord for the privilege of coming boldly before the throne of grace in humble prayer. May He graciously grant us the wisdom to trust in Him fully, that we possess the ability to succeed in all of life's noble and worthy challenges and endeavors, through His blessing of prayer!

Amen!

*Tony Warren is associated with the The Mountain Retreat.*

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## AND WHAT ARE WE READING FOR LENT?

Joseph Beardsley

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Lent is an opportune time to share one another's recommended devotional readings. All of us read works that become favorites and form our spiritual lives. Certainly the Wesleys had their favorites that they recommended.

As we seek faithful ways to keep Lent, we do well to appropriate the Wesleyan interest in the early Church. This is well documented by Albert Outler [John Wesley, esp. p. 9 and 119] and others. If they were to be consulted today, no doubt John and Charles would recommend the desert 'fathers' with their usual passion. John saw these as 'nearest the fountain and endued...with that Spirit by whom 'all Scripture was given.' His 'Address to the Clergy' names Basil, and 'above all, the man of a broken heart, Ephraim Syrus (the Syrian).' He also read deeply in Macarius the Egyptian and, by implication, Gregory of Nyssa. Thus Wesley lived out his emphasis on Tradition. Inspiration from the ancients' tradition can run very deep, Scripture of course being deepest.

A priceless resource here is the often-overlooked Eastern Orthodox Church. Their witness to unbroken Christian tradition is undoubted; their kinship to Wesleyanism is well-established. In more ways than I can tell here, I am indebted to all these guides mentioned above. Inspiration has been faithfully treasured for us; I value this opportunity to share some, even in so small a measure:

Abba Macarius was asked, 'How should one pray?' The old man said, 'There is no need at all to make long discourses; it is enough to stretch out one's hands and say, 'Lord, as you will, and as you know, have mercy.' And if the conflict grows any fiercer say, 'Lord, help!' [The Lord] knows very well what we need and shows us in [his] mercy.' [quoted in the Spiritual Formation Bible, p. 540] For Ephraim Syrus, see Wesley's Works III, 56-9.

The genuine and perfected Christian...with great enjoyment ... participates effortlessly...in all the virtues and all the supernatural fruits of the Spirit--love, peace, patient endurance, faith, humility, and the entire truly golden galaxy of virtue, as though they were natural. ...from the blessed Spirit he has received Christ's perfect peace and joy in his heart. Of such it may be said that he cleaves to the Lord and has become one spirit with him. [Macarius, quoted in the Philokalia, III 23]

Moses, who eagerly seeks to behold God, is now taught how...: to follow God wherever he might lead is to behold God. His passing by signifies his guiding the one who follows, for someone who does not know the way cannot complete his journey safely in any other way than by following behind his guide. He who leads, then, by guidance shows the way to the one following. He who follows will not turn aside from the right way if he always keeps the back of his leader in view. [Gregory of Nyssa, Spiritual Formation Bible, p. 114]

God became [human] so that [humans] might become God. [Patristic formula]

A blessed Lent and Easter to all!

*Rev. Joseph Beardsley is co-Interim Pastor of Aldersgate United Methodist Church, Rockland, ME.*

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## BENEVOLENT CONFUSION: WHY RELIGIOUS PLURALISM DOESN'T ADD UP

Philip Tallon

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According to the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life's 2008 poll, seven out of ten U.S. Christians believe that there are many different paths to God. Even the majority of evangelicals, normally the theological picture of conservatism, leaned toward the view that "many religions can lead to eternal life." This is surprising. Many newspapers have accordingly run stories on what would seem to be a shocking statistic. The news has also sent ripples of worry through the Christian community. The view that competing religious claims can be valid or that different religious systems can lead to salvation, also known as religious pluralism, seems to be on the rise in American Christianity.

This makes American Christians sound much more liberal than anyone would have expected.

More puzzling, though, is the data on evangelicals and mainline Protestants: these Christians held tightly to some traditionally conservative Christian views and yet at the same time leaned toward religious pluralism.

On Scripture, for instance, all but 12 percent of evangelicals believe the Bible to be the word of God, with over half of that number stating that it is literally true, word for word. Yet, at least 45 percent of the Christians who stated that they believed the Bible to be the true word of God, also think that there are many ways to God, despite Jesus' proclamation to be "the way."

Amongst mainline Christians a similar number of people praised Scripture yet also approved of religious pluralism. Sixty percent stated that the Bible was the word of God, yet 83 percent believed that multiple religions could get it (roughly) right. Only among Mormons (57 percent) and Jehovah's Witnesses (80 percent) did a majority number say that their own religion was the one true faith leading to eternal life.

This makes most American Christians sound confused, or worse.

But Christians, as the poll shows, don't have the monopoly on confusion. For instance, among atheists interviewed in the Pew Forum poll, 21 percent said that they believe in God. This seems like an even more obvious self-contradiction than affirming the Bible as the word of God while seeing other religions as paths to God. Like a few friends I have who call themselves vegetarians but still eat chicken, some Americans may simply like the sound of "atheist," without really knowing what it means. In a similar way, it seems likely that many Christians want to affirm some theological positions, but at the same time don't fully take into account what these positions entail.

If anything, what the poll really shows is that Christians want to be nice.

Looking over all the results, it is obvious that American Christians liked responding to questions with positive-sounding answers (such as affirming that the Bible is the word of God), but did not like negative-sounding statements (such as saying that there was "only one true way to interpret the teachings of my religion," or that there is only one way to God).

On the face of it, it does seem like a much nicer thing to say that many religions can lead to eternal life. It is clear that the Christians interviewed wanted to leave the door cracked for people of other faiths to attain eternal life, and so 70 percent gravitated toward the more apparently loving of the two options. And we are commanded to be loving, right?

So why, then, shouldn't Christians move toward religious pluralism?

Of course, there is the problem of consistency with Scripture. Any worthwhile view of Scripture takes seriously the words of Jesus as a guide for our Christian convictions. Jesus' proclamations contradict the idea that there are many ways to God. "I am the way, the truth, and the life" Jesus says in John 14:6, "no one comes to the Father but by me." Likewise, Peter says in Acts 4:12, "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved."

Additionally, there is a deeper problem with religious pluralism, in that it asks us to believe that competing religious views can be valid and equally effective. This differs in quality from Christian universalism (the view that all people will be saved through Christ), as well as Christian inclusivism (the view that some people who die without Christ's salvation could still attain it after death). Both of these views assume the necessity of Christ for salvation.

Religious pluralism, on the other hand, assumes that all religions can possess equal validity. Driving much of the momentum toward religious pluralism is a desire to extend compassion to other religious views. Pluralists have often pointed out that a loving God would be equally present to all people, even if their views differ from each other. But this immediately raises the question of how Christianity and Buddhism, for instance, can both have valid views of eternal life, when their conceptions of eternal life are so different? It is impossible to affirm both that we can experience a personal, eternal relationship with God in the afterlife and experience the nothingness of Nirvana at the same time.

George Bernard Shaw once noted that if we each have an apple and exchange apples, we each still have one apple, but if we exchange ideas we each wind up with two ideas. But this is not a net benefit if the ideas cancel each other out. Believing two contradictory ideas results in no ideas.

This is the core problem with religious pluralism: it offers, in a phrase borrowed from Richard John Neuhaus, a “view from nowhere.” Christians may embrace religious pluralism in order to affirm other faiths, but in the process they untether themselves from Christian revelation. In cutting against the words of Jesus, which tell us about the exclusivity of Christian truth, religious pluralism also cuts against the revelation of God’s unyielding compassion. The Bible tells us that God is love, but the Son of God tells us he is the only way to the Father. We cannot maintain our trust in God’s goodness without a trust in God’s revelation in Christ. We see God’s love from “somewhere,” and that “somewhere” begins with the red letters of the Bible.

So how do we interact meaningfully with other faiths?

It must be said that a belief in absolute truth does not require absolute condemnation of other religious views. There is still room for inter-religious dialogue. C. S. Lewis said it well in *Mere Christianity*: “If you are a Christian you do not have to believe that all other religions are simply wrong...you are free to think that all these religions, even the queerest ones, contain at least some hint of truth. When I was an atheist I had to try to persuade myself that most of the human race have always been wrong about the question that mattered to them most; when I became a Christian I was able to take a more liberal view. But, of course, being a Christian does mean that where Christianity differs from other religions, Christianity is right and they are wrong. As in arithmetic—there is only one right answer to a sum, and all the other answers are wrong: but some of the wrong answers are much nearer being right than others.”

What Lewis suggests is that a robust Christian theology should be able to recognize truth wherever it sees it, and affirm it. But Lewis also acknowledges that we should be able to recognize falsehood when it arises, and condemn it.

In this way, the Christian can pay a compliment to other religions that the religious pluralist cannot. By taking the apparently arrogant position of “first place,” a Christian can evaluate which other views deserve honorable mention. By taking a “view from nowhere” the religious pluralist makes the unfortunate mistake of trying to make the game more fun by not keeping score—thereby undoing the purpose of the game in the first place.

The best response to this rising pluralism, it seems to me, is a renewed Christian vision of Christ as presented in Scripture. If Jesus is reduced to merely the “way” to God, it can be easy to lose sight of why there cannot be other ways. If the Bible is merely “the word of God,” without any sense of the content of those words, we can lose sight of why there cannot be other words to other people. In place of this, the crisp vision of Christ presented in Scripture is a helpful remedy. It is not the idea of Christ that opens up salvation, but the actual Christ, a first-century Jew who really ate, drank, slept, wept, suffered, and rose from the dead.

A concrete vision of Christ makes ridiculous the vague affirmation of all religions as a way to God, because a concrete Christian vision sees that Christ is God. For the Christian, there is no blissful afterlife apart from the Triune God. Only renewed “optics” of salvation can help us to see that religious pluralism, however benevolent, is an unhelpful confusion.

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## MARRIAGE AND CIVIL UNIONS

### Dan Weaver

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The full court press is on to legalize marriage for homosexuals and for acceptance of practicing homosexuals at all levels of the church. The numbers keep shifting in society to encourage both of these. This article deals with only the first part.

The conservative position has been to hold the line at all levels to traditional practices and policies which are based on Scripture. As we search for a place to stand in support of Scripture perhaps we should learn a lesson from our cousins in Europe. In many European countries marriages are first of all civil unions, though the description may vary from our use of this term. Marriages must first be established legally by a secular state. If desired, couples choose to arrange church weddings for the blessing of the church and to bring their vows before God.

“French weddings traditionally are staid affairs. The wedding vows have been set by the government since Napoleonic times and no deviations are brooked. There are no skydiving marriages, no marriages at a nudist colony, or in the snow. You get hitched at town hall, in the mayor's office, by the mayor himself or his deputy--or you don't get hitched at all. That's the law. Afterward, you can have a church wedding if you wish, and the state doesn't care, but you aren't married unless you do the mayor first.” (*From online ad for French weddings*)

For clergy this would be the removal of state authority to legalize marriages. Perhaps such authority could be granted by application to the state, but would no longer be included in ordination. Therefore all couples seeking marriage would first be married by the state, then come to the church for blessings.

I see this cutting through some of the struggles we face. First, who has not struggled with couples who only vaguely are interested in the blessings of the church, but choose to be married by a clergyman since it comes in the same package with the legal ceremony. Some of them, perhaps most, would not bother.

The use of the civil union should be for all couples, heterosexual or homosexual. Some argue that since unions for homosexuals are not allowed legally, civil justice requires they should be included in all marriage benefits. This is a strong argument from a civil rights point of view. Therefore I supported the inclusion of civil unions in New Hampshire, though I was disappointed that it did not include heterosexual as well as homosexual.

This makes the conservative position clearer in regard to marriage of homosexuals. While supporting full rights for civil unions, the use of marriage in the church language would be retained. The church would be in a stronger position to retain the word marriage for a man and a woman since it no longer is related to civil justice issues.

The California Supreme Court's recent decision regarding the legality of the marriage laws for homosexuals involved the use of language. Implied in the decision was whether the word marriage should be the basic term used to designate couples in domestic relationships. The Court was not advocating the term marriage, only that whatever term used should not discriminate on the basis of gender. While granting approval, one of the judges was quoted as saying the state should get out of the marriage business and leave that to the churches. Since then several have made similar comments. Makes sense to me.

*Rev. Dan Weaver is a retired pastor in the New England Annual Conference*

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## RECENT BOOKS ON CHRISTIANITY AND RENEWAL

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### **Who Will Be Saved? William H. Willimon, Abingdon Press, Copyright 2008**

What does it mean to say that salvation is God's business and God's alone?

"Who will be saved?" is almost always a question about them, and rarely about us. Thinking itself wrapped securely in the everlasting arms, the church has spent much of its history speculating on whether God will allow anyone else to join the party.

But if we truly believe that salvation is God's business, and God's alone, then perhaps we should stop asking, "Who will be saved?" and ask instead, "How is God calling me to participate in the redemption of the world?" Rejecting the idea that God chooses some and not others, drawing on his Wesleyan heritage, and deepening his longstanding theological conversation with Karl Barth, Willimon reflects as a pastor and a theologian on God's intention that all would someday return from the far country into the loving embrace of the One who created them.

### **The Way the World Is, The Christian Perspective of a Scientist, John Polkinghorne, Westminster John Knox Press, Copyright 2007**

In this defining work distinguished physicist-turned theologian John Polkinghorne presents a reasoned account of the Christian view of the world. Drawing from his own experience as a scientist and theologian, Polkinghorne argues that Christianity presents a credible and compelling worldview that must be taken seriously even while fully recognizing the importance of science. Polkinghorne summarizes and comments on three views of the world –scientific, personal, and religious – and then demonstrates how studying the New Testament is similar to observational science, namely because the New Testament can be understood only by interpreting available evidence in ways that are sensible and consistent. In addition, Polkinghorne pays close attention to Jesus' deeds and words in the New Testament with special consideration to his death and resurrection. This brief book, which clearly and convincingly explores how science and religion address aspects of the same reality, includes a glossary of key ideas and persons in science and theology, making it an ideal introduction to the Christian faith for thoughtful people seeking to understand how to reconcile religion and science.

### **Parables and Passion, Jesus' Stories for the Days of Lent, John Indermark, Upper Room Books, Copyright 2006**

Discover new insights about the passion story through the lenses of Jesus' parables.

"Parables nudge us all to receptive insight," writes Indermark. "For those new to the Lenten journey, they give access to the holy through the ordinary. For those who have navigated this season many times, they allow an opportunity to experience Lent from a different perspective.... [Parables] take us deeper, revealing the approaching realm of the God who has come to us in One who teaches still in parables."

Lent offers a time to reflect on how we live compared with God's expectations. Our best example is to study how Jesus lived and taught in the presence of God. Through Parables and Passion you'll reflect on one parable each day of the season, one thematic chapter per week. The Prologue offers a reading for Ash Wednesday while the Epilogue provides readings for the final days of Holy Week. An included Leader's Guide outlines a six-week study.

Open your eyes and spirit to the sacred in the ordinary moments and people of your life. As the parables prove, when we fail to see the holy in life, we may lose sight of the sacredness of life. What better lesson to reinforce during the Lenten season!

John Indermark, a graduate of Eden Theological Seminary, is ordained in the United Church of Christ. He served as a parish pastor for 16 years before developing a ministry of writing that is now his full-time vocation.

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### **Purpose Statement**

*Confessing Jesus Christ as Son, Savior, and Lord, the Confessing Movement exists to enable the United Methodist Church to retrieve its classical doctrinal identity, and to live it out as disciples of Jesus Christ*

### **ERF Executive Team (1 July 2007-30 June 2009)**

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