
RENEWAL



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AMICABLE SEPARATION?

Rev. Dr. Thomas W. Bentum

At the 2004 General Conference Rev. Bill Hinson stood and called the church to explore an amicable separation. His exact statement was, “I believe the time has come when we must explore an amicable and just separation that will free both [sides] from our cycle of pain.”¹ This open statement by an evangelical statesman sent shock waves through the church and created much misunderstanding. I was one of those who were shocked and confused by this suggestion. It seemed like evangelicals were making great gains in renewing and reforming the church, why a call to consider separation?

After this past New England Annual Conference and after reading Copeland’s biography of Bill Hinson, I am beginning to see why amicable separation is an important idea. A number of times I heard from the podium, by what I would identify as leaders in the progressive movement, a call to “break down the front door of the church” with their agenda. Although my progressive brothers and sisters would probably disagree with me, what I heard was a call for the hostile separation of our church. By the way, I did some research around the Northeast Jurisdiction and it appears that this theme was unique to our Annual Conference session.

Why do I identify this as a call to hostile separation? As I mentioned, I doubt the progressives see it that way. I believe they operate under the idealistic assumption that as they get the church to officially approve, for example, the acceptance of the homosexual lifestyle that the evangelicals will fall in line for the sake of the unity of the church. I don’t think that is what will happen. The front door of the church may be closed and tough to break down, but the back door is wide open and easy to get through. As the progressives attack the front door, I believe most evangelicals and many moderates will quietly (or perhaps not so quietly!) exit through the back door. There has been a continuous stream out the back door for many years, but a significant number have not left because the official core of the church is orthodox. If the central doctrines and positions of the church were to change radically, it is highly likely there would be mass exodus and perhaps an organized effort to start a distinctly separate denomination.

The suggestion that we have an amicable separation is not addressed to evangelicals to leave and start another church. It is a call to our progressive brothers and sisters to end the increasingly hostile attempts at attacking the core of the church. Instead of the hostile separation that they may cause, why not find an amicable, peaceful way? Is there not a just and peaceful way to come to terms with the fact that we are severely divided and that the mission of the church is only being hurt in the midst of it all?

Being on the Good News board gives me the opportunity to talk with evangelical leaders from all across our denomination and that includes theologians, pastors and lay people. There is much hope on all levels that the church is in the midst of tremendous renewal and reform. It is slow going but the signs are there. There is a sense that this is not a time to leave our denomination, but instead to unite around our core doctrines and standards and work together to carry out the mission God has given us. The words from the podium at our Annual Conference may be hostile and discouraging but they come from a shrinking minority across the church. Perhaps the progressives realize this too which has made the rhetoric increasingly hostile.

One of my great sources of encouragement is reading biographies of outstanding Christian men and women who are willing to make a difference in a wayward church. Someone made that suggestion to me while I was in

¹ Stanley R. Copeland, “Lord, He Went: Remembering William H. Hinson” Abingdon Press: Nashville 2006. p. 99.

college and I pass it on as a wonderful spiritual discipline. The latest biography that will be a great encouragement to you I have already referenced, Bill Hinson' biography "Lord, He Went" by Stanley Copeland. Biographies of people like Bill Hinson help give the larger perspective in the midst of the day-to-day struggles of being faithful in our church.

Keeping that sense of perspective is one of our greatest challenges in New England. I believe as evangelicals we should neither be pro separation nor pro unity. We need to be pro God's mission. That mission is making disciples of Jesus Christ. If there is an amicable and just way to solve the bitter conflicts of our denomination, for the sake of the mission, let us work toward that.

"PRAYER IS THE KEY TO HEAVEN..."

Robbin Grill

There was a hymn that was popular several years ago, the lyrics of which went:

 "Prayer is the key to Heaven,
 But faith unlocks the door.
 Words are so easily spoken;
Prayer without faith is like a boat without oars.
 Have faith when you speak to the Master
 That's all He asks you for.
 Prayer is the key to Heaven
 But faith unlocks the door."

Those words often run through my head. While it is just a song, it contains a lot of truth. Prayer is such an essential part of our lives, but without faith it is nothing. We can pray alone, in small groups, in crowds at stadiums – no matter where or when, God hears our prayers. The ERF Prayer team members pray individually in response to requests for intercessory prayer. Most of our requests go out to the members via e-mail. It would be nice if we could meet together frequently, but distance prevents that. One of the most exciting times is when we see prayer answered.

Just what is intercessory prayer? It is the act of praying on behalf of others, but goes beyond the "normal" kind of prayer for others. When one engages in intercessory prayer, the person praying is a mediator between God and the person or people being prayed for, closing the gap between them. The prayer is made fervently, with the expectation that God will act. For example, the sin of man brought a gap between God and man. Then Jesus was born, acting as the mediator on behalf of us, thus closing the gap between us and God when He died on the cross. He was the greatest mediator (intercessor) who ever lived. Because of what He did we can now intercede in prayer on behalf of other Christians, or for the lost, causing them to repent and seek after God. "For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus." (1 Timothy 2:5). "Who is he who condemns? It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us" (Romans 8:34).

God chooses mediators and puts it on our hearts to engage in intercessory prayer. In Ezekiel 22: 30-31, God is searching for anyone who can act as the person to close the gap between Him and men, but found none. There was no one who was giving up their own will and rituals to turn their hearts over to Him. It would require a person who has fully and whole-heartedly given him or herself over to Christ, submitting completely to the Holy Spirit as his/her guide. He or she would be giving all praise and glory to God, keeping a clean and open heart to hear God's direction, and possessing enough strength to stand against the enemy. "The earnest prayer of a righteous person has great power and wonderful results" (James 5:16).

Your ERF prayer team prayed together before each pre-Conference briefing. I had wonderful reports of those experiences, particularly from the New Hampshire group! The Holy Spirit was certainly moving! At Conference several of us answered the phone at the Upper Room Living Prayer Center. People call in from all over the country needing our prayers. I had hoped the response for participation in this would have been greater. Please pray about this and consider devoting a small amount of time to this next year.

Do you have a prayer request? Please send it to Robbin Grill at robbin@rrgcap.com or at randagrill@hotmail.com and the request will be added to the ERF prayer list. We need to hear more from our membership! Would you like to become a member of the prayer team? Are you called to pray for others? Contact Robbin. On a personal note, I can attest to feeling the prayers of the group when confronted with an unexpected heart catheterization and insertion of two stents this summer. I felt Jesus at my side throughout the procedures. Thank you so much for your prayers and your caring. God bless you, each and every one!

THE EMERGENCE OF CONFESSING CHRISTIANS

Thomas C. Oden

Mainline churches stand today not merely in a crisis of numbers, but in a deeper crisis of faith. Though often portrayed as a crisis of politics or demographics or moral values or sexuality, it is more profoundly a crisis of biblical authority and theological integrity. The confessing movement ventures into divisive political territory on the value of life and sexual ethics only because biblical faith requires it.

The decisive challenge for the mainline is not coming from some quarter outside the church, but precisely from within the churches themselves. Powerful voices within the denominational leadership grossly diminish Christian teaching, refuse to follow reasonable discipline democratically arrived at, and discriminate unfairly against those who disagree with them. What happens when those who pretend to represent historic Christianity wander far from it, and even inveigh against it?

The most blatant challenges have to do with evasive or equivocal assertions about the very center of Christian teaching: Jesus Christ. These are not ancillary points. Some reject his atoning work as unique Savior of the world and deny his resurrection and his teaching on the sanctity of marriage. Crucial doctrines cannot be side-stepped. The biblical teaching of creation has direct consequences for deciding about the creation of man and woman in God's image, and the value of life. The biblical teaching of the oneness of God has direct bearing on the use of witchcraft motifs in worship or the veneration of the goddess Sophia. The biblical understanding of God the Father, Son, and Spirit is not to be used merely as a political ploy for leverage in disputes on language fairness.

The crisis lodges precisely within the worshiping community. The mainline churches are now unready to confess with one voice the orthodox Christian faith in God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. To confess Jesus Christ as the only Son of God, Savior of the world, constitutes a particular stumbling block. Permissive leadership often looks the other way as opinions gain currency that are obviously contrary to ancient and historic ecumenical Christian teaching. No one calls them to task. Sometimes it appears that no one can. So worshipers have had to suffer through wild and idiosyncratic versions of the faith that they find nowhere in Scripture or classic Christian teaching. When secularizing church leadership is distracted by false gospels, the outcomes are disastrous. Finances are misspent. Maladministration is allowed to grow. Valuable mission resources are channeled into experimental grant-making for social service projects—some of them weird and entirely lacking in any clear Christian identity or proclamation of the one on whose behalf they offer compassion. Much of the deep continuity with the historic consensus of faith is being forgotten or imperiled. Many theological seminaries, where it is assumed that ministers will be rightly prepared in Scripture and moral reasoning, have been inundated for three decades with such far-ranging diversions as highly speculative Scripture studies, neopaganism, channeling, voodoo, sexual permissiveness, absolute moral relativism, and gay-lesbian-bisexual-transgender activism.

When such straying occurs, the purpose of renewing and confessing Christians is gently to call the churches to confess classic Christian teaching in good conscience without evasion or dilution. Who has suffered the most from these diversions? The faithful worshipers in the pews who are forced to listen to thin sermons and are still expected to pay the bills.

The mainline after modernity

It is now possible to speak confidently of the rebirth of orthodoxy in the mainline churches. To some modest extent it is also visible in their seminaries and legislative assemblies. Modernity is losing its power to intimidate. Modernity is the period and the ideology that prevailed in the time from 1789 to 1989, from the Bastille to the Berlin Wall. By postmodern, orthodox Christians refer to the course of actual history following the decline of modernity.

Youthful classic Christians are now well prepared by modernity to use the very methods of modern consciousness (that is: scientific, historical, hermeneutical, psychological, sociological, and behavioral change models) to detoxify the illusions of modernity that have eaten like acids into the bone of the faith, the family, the culture, and the mainline churches that have accommodated to the culture.

Confessing Christianity is not accurately defined as anti-modern. It is not merely a censorious negative reaction against modernity—for there is no reason to be opposed to something that is virtually dead. A frustrated anti-modern emotive reaction errs in overestimating the continuing resilience of modernity now in terminal crisis. Many in the renewing intellectual leadership of orthodoxy have already doubly paid their dues to modernity and now search for ancient wisdom long ruled out by the narrow dogmas of secular humanism. There is no way for us to reflect upon modernity except amid the collapse of modernity.

Confessing Christians do not despair over the plight of modernity. Rather, they celebrate the providence of God that works amid the wreckage of failed modern ideologies. They live amid withering forms of a tired Protestantism that has sold its soul to modernity. But the end of the elite, modern old-line is the beginning of a new, ecumenical re-centering committed to orthodox Christian teaching.

The seminaries

Most of the seminaries of the mainline have striven to adapt snugly to this vulnerable and passing modernity. The liberal old-line Protestant elites, gatekeepers, and bureaucrats have been slow to understand the moral language of the congregations they serve. Institutions long funded by evangelical donors and convictions have been taken captive. Dated modern habits of moral permissiveness, hyper-toleration, and secularism still have a stranglehold on many arteries of mainline church bureaucracies and their collusive academies.

But below the surface there is among these institutions an outlook of desperation and identity diffusion. The mainline seminaries, with few exceptions, are confused about who they are in relation to the church. They struggle also with their ambiguous relation to the university, but more desperately in their relation to basic Christianity as such. Their idealism itself has rendered them defensive and demoralized. The heart is gone from the idyllic nineteenth century song of inevitable progress. It has become a twenty-first century dirge with a heavy, hard-metal beat.

These tired, fading modern illusions are woven together into an ideological temperament that still sentimentally shapes the knowledge-elites of liberal Protestantism, especially its politicized bureaucracies and schools. They remain largely unprepared to grasp either their own weaknesses or their mission within this nexus of historical change.

Only a few denominational seminaries within the mainline have begun to reverse these trends and move toward classic biblical teaching: Among Presbyterian seminaries, Princeton, Dubuque, and Pittsburgh have taken the right turn. Among United Methodists, Duke has shown the most signs of regaining equilibrium, and among the Episcopal seminaries, Trinity Episcopal School of Ministry is healthy, and Nashotah House is returning to the fold. For most, it will take a long time to turn around tenure overloads.

In the absence of mainline seminary reform, viable candidates for ministry are more frequently electing to go to places like Asbury, Fuller, Trinity Evangelical, and Gordon-Conwell, despite punitive resistance from their denominational officers jealous of their rising importance. More United Methodist ordinands go to Asbury (which gets no support from the United Methodist General Conference) than to the officially supported Iliff, Claremont, and Ohio seminaries combined.

Once a seminary faculty has been filled with permanently tenured radicals, its members easily fall into the temptation of cloning themselves with look-alike future colleagues. The ensconced bureaucracies of hyper-tenured faculties have learned well the fine art of xeroxing themselves politically, repeating ever anew their own ideological biases, making sure that no one gets tenure who will challenge the prevailing ideological tilt. All this occurs under the surface, of course, and with a polite and tolerant smile.

The collapse of the armies of liberation

The description I am making may tempt some to think that I am exaggerating. I am reporting only what I have seen. I have been teaching and lecturing in mainline seminaries from 1959 to 2004. This is not hearsay, but eyewitness reporting from the line of fire.

“Liberated” is not a term used lightly. It is not a term applied by detractors to these wayward ideologues, but a term they constantly insist on applying to themselves. The subtext of “liberated” is: doctrinally imaginative, liturgically experimental, disciplinarily nonjudgmental, politically correct, morally broad-minded, and above all, sexually lenient and permissive. As a former full-time card-carrying liberator, I know from experience how mesmerizing this enchantment can be.

When the liberated have virtually no immune system against heresy, no defense whatever against perfidious teaching, and no criteria for testing the legitimacy of counterfeit theological currency, it is time for the worshipping community to act to guarantee faithful Christian teaching. The ordinary worshipers in the pews are coming to understand that they have a decisive interest in the quality and apostolicity of the ministries they have been asked to trust and support. Trustees of church-related educational institutions are increasingly demanding the right to know why clergy leadership is so prone to political absurdities, moral permissiveness, and ideological binges.

Most worshipers have been spared from knowing the details of the arcane machinery of mainline liberal seminary education. They have no reason to doubt that their divinity schools are like any other institution—to some extent reformable. But those of us who have spent a lifetime in Scripture-deprived theological education are those most wary of the stubborn fact that the present system, short of some mighty act of Providence, is highly resistant to reform, and indeed seems practically irreformable. The irreversibly tenured faculty is so intractable that, lacking some special act of grace, its reform seems virtually unimaginable. The tenure principle, which was designed to protect academic freedom, has become so exploited as now to protect academic license, neglect, incompetence, and at times moral turpitude, since once tenure is offered, it is virtually impossible to withdraw.

The trend toward sanity

If the liberated have the freedom to teach apostasy, the believing church has the freedom to withhold its consent. If the liberated teach counter-canonical doctrines and conjectures inimical to the health of the church, then the church has no irreversible moral obligation to give them support or to bless their follies.

The rhetoric of inclusivism has resulted in the fact of exclusion. This is especially seen in the willful exclusion of orthodox and evangelical Christians from leadership. Confessing Christians are at last learning how to communicate to absolute egalitarians how hollow the inclusion arguments sound to traditional believers who themselves have been so long marginalized.

What is happening amid this historical situation is a joyous return to the sacred texts of Christian Scripture and the classic guides of the ancient ecumenical faith. Young confessing Christians are those who, having entered in good faith into the disciplines of modernity, and having become disillusioned with its illusions, are again studying the Word of God—that Word made known in history as attested by prophetic and apostolic witnesses whose testimonies have become perennial texts for this worldwide, multicultural, multigenerational remembering and celebrating community.

Why an exit strategy is self-defeating

The abiding issue for many: Should confessing Christians be quick to look for an “exit strategy,” or should they seek the transformation of the church that brought them to faith and baptized them, by reaffirming their steady, durable commitment to remaining in it and transforming it? The confessing movement was earlier somewhat ambivalent, but more and more of the heart of the movement is saying: stay in. The timing to exit is poor. To leave the liberal bureaucracies just when they are collapsing is a singular misjudgment.

Within this frame of “discipline not separation,” it is still permissible for confessing Christians to discuss scenarios by which those who want to leave the disciplined community can do so. But this view, which is sometimes called “amicable separation,” must always be conceived as a gentle act of generosity to allow those whose conscience cannot abide discipline to go on their own without taking down the whole communion with them. It is not the faithful who want to exit. Nor is it the faithful who have a bad conscience about the polity and discipline and doctrines of the church. Those who cannot bear the thought of remaining in a church that they think is not free enough, not secular enough, not permissive enough, should not be restrained from leaving. There should be no barriers put in their way. They should not have to fight to recover their pensions and church properties. This is the notion of “gracious exit.”

This is not meant to malign or refuse to acknowledge the motivations of faithful Christians, who, for reasons

of conscience, choose to leave a mainline congregation, but to point to the alternative. The idea of “gracious exit” should never mean that orthodox believers exit or split from their churches, but rather that they make it easier for those who repeatedly reject Christian doctrine and discipline to take their leave. What confessing Christians properly mean by “amicable separation” is not that the growing evangelical influence in the mainline might leave the endowments and institutions to the collapsing liberal wing, but that they are committed to reclaiming them, and providing a fair plan to permit voluntary, peaceful departure of those who refuse discipline, allowing them to take with them their local church property.

This is hard to explain to a biased press that often wants to portray evangelicals as schismatic. The concept is clear in the minds of confessing Christians, but almost always distorted when reported. Amicable separation allows those whose conscience cannot abide discipline to go on their own way and to retain their assets. What part of that sentence is unclear? Its constant distortion is a willful act of misunderstanding. Believers who separate for reasons of conscience, when biblically informed, remain accountable to strong scriptural mandates against schism (1 Cor. 1:10).

The search for an apt analogy

Three analogies are often applied to this dilemma: the marriage or divorce analogy, the business partners analogy, or the holy communion analogy.

The marriage versus divorce analogy views the disciplined church and the permissive church as engaged in a conflict that could lead to divorce. Those who seek the continuity of marriage and family are trying to make the relationship more just. They are concerned about the children, even when the parents quarrel. To divorce is to give up on the promise of the family.

The business partners analogy views the question of remaining together more as a fiscal matter of whether property agreements can be made, or whether they must be divided up in a just way, if need be under a judge.

The communion analogy is entirely different: Its key metaphor is that of the penitent coming to the communion table. All are invited to the communion table, but only on the premise of repentance. Those who are penitent are the faithful who earnestly confess their sins and boldly confess the atoning Christ and receive forgiveness. Those who come to the communion table without repentance bring judgment on their own heads by their own choice.

The invitation to communion is open to all who repent and believe. Whether or not one is penitent is a matter of the heart. Only God knows the authenticity of repentance. Only God can judge the heart. The table is not barred, but the penitent church has a duty to warn rashly impenitent communicants about the consequences of their actions.

All three analogies are useful, but the most penetrating is the communion analogy, where the crucial matters are repentance and faith, not legal partnerships or separation of properties or the breakup of the family. This reframes the question to focus on where it ought to be: the grace of repentance at the communion table, and the willingness to seek the holiness of the church at that table.

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THE THORN IN THE CHURCH'S FLESH

Walter Ciesluk

Controversy was stirred up again in June at the 2006 New England Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church in Wenham, Massachusetts. This is really nothing new. New England, along with other Annual Conferences in Minnesota and Western Jurisdictions and a few in the mid-west, have a long history of testing the boundaries and challenging their perceptions of the Church's status quo. By a majority vote of the Conferences Delegates, consisting of equal clergy and lay representation, the New England Conference passed eleven resolutions to petition the General Conference, which meets every four years and is the only body empowered to establish church-wide law, to make significant changes in its *Book of Discipline*, the Church's book of order and policy. All of the petitions center around the Church's understanding of homosexuality and how it is to relate to persons who identify themselves as homosexuals, particularly those who are openly practicing their sexuality with others of the same gender. All the petitions are designed to overturn rulings adopted at the 2004 General Conference. The General Conference will now revisit these disciplinary changes at its meeting scheduled for spring 2008.

So continues the UMC's long, intense debate and battle on the controversial issue of homosexuality. It first appeared on the radar screen at the General Conference of 1972 and has been a significant topic between and at every General Conference ever since. There's been no shortage of energy expended in political activism, theological discourse and sociological rhetoric, study, debate, listening, labeling, demonizing, posturing, and judging on every side of the issue. And while this business has dominated our energies and attention over the course of three plus decades, our great church has lost its once significant influence to shape American culture and has endured a precipitous loss of approximate 40% of its membership. What has gone on in our great church is paralleled by a similar discussion in other mainline Protestant churches and the conversation within American society at large. Over these years, we have seen a decline in traditional values, the instability of marriage and the family, and generally, a decreased respect for the value of and practice of the Christian faith in American life.

Over the course of this three decade period, The United Methodist Church, along with other mainline Protestant denominations, have emphasized the message of *inclusiveness*. That is, that God's grace is available to all people, the good news of salvation is offered for all, and thus, there is a place in the church's fellowship and mission for every person. "God so loved the world," John said, "that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have everlasting life. God sent his Son into the world not to condemn the world, but that the world through him might be saved." This is where there is widespread agreement in the church that the church is called to inclusiveness, but how far one can stretch inclusiveness points to a point of great tension as well. In this debate, there are basically two sides. For our discussion, I will call them *progressives* and *traditionalists*. At the risk of oversimplifying, let me try to summarize both sides concerns and positions.

First, the *progressives*. These devout people of faith are deeply committed to seeing the ministry and fellowship of the church open to all people. Aware of the pain of some who feel excluded by the Church and society, they have committed themselves to realize the vision of an inclusive church and to work for a compassionate and just society where discrimination against any minority group is eliminated. Progressives desire to reconcile people to their "true" selves and the community of faith by accepting them as they are. With respect to homosexuality, progressives see homosexuality, while clearly a minority sexual orientation, as an expression of creation's diversity. They cite psychological and psychiatric findings indicating that the experience of a significant number of people indicates a same-sex attraction and has led them to conclude that they have an alternative sexual orientation. In other words, persons are born homosexual. Their sexual orientation is God-ordained, a gift from the Creator, and if homosexual persons are to live fully as God intended, this gift must be accepted, honored, and expressed. This orientation cannot be changed, nor is it necessary to "heal." The Bible's negative view of homosexual practice, primarily contained in the Old Testament law, should not be seen as binding on Christians today. Among the various reasons for this conclusion given are as follows: (1) Prohibitions in such passages are seen as an expression of cultural bias in the Bible and do not reflect the timeless word of God; (2) Such passages refer to acts of oppression and so cannot be interpreted to condemn our contemporary experiences and expressions of loving, respectful adult same-gender sexual relationships; and (3) Jesus never said anything directly about homosexuality, much less condemning homosexual practice. With these convictions and conclusions, *progressives* are inspired by a vision of a completely inclusive church and society.

Second, the *traditionalists*. These devout people of faith are deeply committed to seeing the ministry and fellowship open to all, yet are inspired by a vision of transformation. Nothing is impossible with God. They believe that Jesus has the power to heal people of their diseases and forgive sins, and the work of the Holy Spirit to birth fundamental inside-out change in the hearts, minds, and emotions of people. Likewise, concerned about people who feel excluded by church and society, they seek to love people where they find them and lead them gently, lovingly to repentance, faith, and healing. With respect to homosexuality, *traditionalists* see homosexuality, while acknowledging and respecting the experiences and conclusions of individuals, as a disordering of creation. Therefore, the practice of homosexuality is sin, a distortion of God's design. They cite the story of creation in Genesis 1 and 2. Indeed, God created each of us in his image and we see the diversity of humanity in our male and femaleness. Even as the fullness of God is known in the union of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, so the image of God is revealed in the marital union of male and female. Such unions of complementary genders produce stability and continuity for the family.

Traditionalists cite the long held view of the Church on this matter. Across the centuries, the Church, as Jewish tradition before that, has clearly taught that the practice of homosexuality is *not* God's expressed will and design for creation, certainly not God's best for His children. They question and challenge the recent conclusions of the psychological and psychiatric communities. They believe that such sexual confusion within youth can often be attributed to traumatic experiences in childhood, the result of dysfunction in families, and an expression of a fallen creation. They believe that with therapy and prayer sometimes, homosexual orientation can be healed. They cite programs that have helped people to discontinue homosexual practice and many success stories where persons have gone on to successfully marry or remain celibate.

When dialoguing biblically with their progressive brothers and sisters, traditionalists respond: (1) The Bible, in Old and New Testament, *always* portray same-sex intercourse in a negative light; and (2) While Jesus never said anything directly about homosexuality, when he did speak of marriage, he affirmed God's creation of human beings and the complementary nature of male and female. With these convictions and conclusions, *traditionalists* are led to love sinners, extend the healing ministry of Christ, and participate with them in a process of transformation. As a rule most evangelicals are persuaded to the traditionalist view.

So there you have it- two different groups within the Christian community with very different convictions and conclusion and visions about how to respond to this controversial issue involving real people. It would appear that the two groups have irreconcilable differences. So, the General Conference, at its 2008 meeting in Fort Worth, Texas, will once again take up the issue of homosexuality and consider the changes recommended by the New England Conference and other Annual Conferences who are likely to also recommend similar disciplinary changes. What will happen there no one knows for sure, but if past history is an indicator of the future, I can predict that these petitions are *not* likely to be adopted. While New England along with other Annual Conferences have a long history of testing the boundaries and challenging their perceptions of the Church's status quo, the strength of the church's membership, and thus, the power to affect change, is increasingly in other areas where traditionalists greatly outnumber progressives. While the progressives gained strength through the 70's and 80's, their influence peaked and the traditionalist have been gaining in strength ever since.

As for me personally, as I have studied the issues, wrestled with them, dialogued with others about them, and heard the real-life stories of people, and tested my own personal experience, I must confess that my present convictions lie with the traditionalists and the church's long-standing traditional understanding of this issue. I will continue to study, wrestle, dialogue, and listen and remain open to new insights from biblical scholars and medical science as I endeavor to discern God's truth.

Wherever we are in the debate and whatever perspective we are inclined to see most clear, we must trust that God's Spirit is at work among us. God is not through with the Church. As we seek to know God's heart and mind on this and every matter, as we pray and study and dialogue with an open heart, as we lay aside our prejudices and preferences to truly listen to God, God will reveal the truth. And God will again reform and transform the Church as it seeks to reconcile and transform in the name of Jesus Christ, to the glory of God the Father, in the power of the Holy Spirit!

This article was inspired and draws heavily on a sermon, "The New Birth, A Message for Trinity Sunday and an Interpretation of the 2006 MN Annual Conference's Controversial Resolutions", by Rev. Gregory P. Ciesluk, pastor of Norton Park UMC, Duluth, MN and Northwood UMC, Esko, MN.

RECENT BOOKS ON CHRISTIANITY AND RENEWAL

Introducing Apologetics, Cultivating Christian Commitment, James E. Taylor, Baker Academic, Copyright 2006

In his defense (apologia) of the Christian faith, James E. Taylor offers a balanced and comprehensive treatment of the core apologetic issues facing believers in the twenty-first century. Sample topics include: worldviews; the problem of evil; the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ; scriptural canonicity and authority; religious pluralism; postmodernism; ethical relativism

Each of the book's twenty-five chapters contains an outline, summary, list of basic terms, reflection and discussion questions, and guide to further reading. Chapter overviews and sidebars enhance this readable text.

What distinguishes this work is its tone, which is neither strident nor polemical. Instead, Taylor's arguments are sensitive, winsome, humble, and fair-minded, especially with respect to his treatment of philosophical and religious systems that challenge Christianity. Unique to Taylor's approach is his vision of apologetics as a discipline that should ideally lead to Christian commitment, discipleship, and spiritual transformation.

James E. Taylor is professor of philosophy and chair of the department at Westmont College in Santa Barbara, California. He formerly taught at Bowling Green State University, Bowling Green, Ohio.

Is Jesus the Only Savior? James R. Edwards, William B. Eerdmans Publishing, Copyright 2005

In this timely book for believers, inquirers, and skeptics alike, James R. Edwards faces head-on the question of whether or not Jesus is indeed the sole savior of the world. After tracing the currents of modernity from the Enlightenment to the Jesus Seminar, Edwards contends that the assumptions of the most skeptical historical-Jesus scholars are no more intellectually defensible than the claims of faith. He then assembles extensive support to show that Jesus considered himself the unique and saving mission of God to the world.

Edwards devotes the second half of the book to discussing Jesus as savior in light of contemporary cultural currents, specifically addressing the thorny issues of religious pluralism, moral relativism, postmodernism, and the quest for world peace. Illustrated with real-life stories, *Is Jesus the Only Savior?* gives a fair hearing to twenty-first-century concerns while upholding historic Christian faith.

James R. Edwards is professor of biblical languages and literature at Whitworth College, Spokane, Washington. He is also an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church (USA) and a contributing editor of "Christianity Today."

Kingdom Ethics, Following Jesus in Contemporary Context, Glen H. Stassen & David P. Gushee, Intervarsity Press, Copyright 2003

In this masterful and innovative book Glen Stassen and David Gushee join profound ethical reflections with faith in Jesus Christ, a life of discipleship, and the hope of the present and coming kingdom of God. The result is a fresh, challenging and comprehensive treatment of Christian ethics centered on the life and teaching of Jesus Christ. Drawing on detailed studies of the Sermon on the Mount, Stassen and Gushee shed light on the whole of biblical ethical teaching as it relates to a wide range of issues, including peacemaking, just war, nonviolence, sexuality and gender roles, marriage and divorce, race, economics, care of creation, prayer, and politics. Their work yields neither an impossible idealism, nor an abstract ethical system, nor a generic religious legalism. Rather Stassen and Gushee set forth a holistic ethic that motivates us and provides us with a practical basis for living under the lordship of Jesus Christ.

Glen Harold Stassen is Lewis B. Smedes professor of Christian ethics at Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, CA and David P. Gushee is Graves professor of moral philosophy at Union University, Jackson, TN.

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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

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