

# STAYING AT THE TABLE THE GIFT OF UNITY FOR UNITED METHODISTS

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than the rest of the Church; laity have to wait until they get to the other side. This is surely unthinkable for a church that was born as a holiness movement and that takes seriously Wesley's teaching on grace. Third, it would reflect a clericalism that puts ordination logically ahead of baptism in our vision of the Church. The clergy are the first-class Christians; laity can get in with the luggage. On the contrary, the conditions for baptism are logically primary; ordination takes place on the other side of the covenant of baptism. Fourth, and most important, the implications for baptism and Christian initiation are staggering. This move would make moral considerations secondary in the life of faith. United Methodism would have a lucky-dip conception of what is at stake morally in being a disciple. This would put us totally at odds with the standards of early Methodism, which made refraining from doing evil a condition of membership for its societies. It would also saddle us with a bizarre theology of baptism and Christian initiation.

The preliminary conclusion to be drawn is obvious: the proposal to split the difference on homosexuality is not some splendid middle way that will preserve the unity of the Church; it is a recipe for further turmoil and division in the UMC.

## LONNIE D. BROOKS

In his essay, "God's Gift of Unity for United Methodism," Bishop Jones has given the Church his own gift, and I am certainly grateful for his leadership in this matter, as I have been for some time on many others. Most United Methodists who have been involved in the connection beyond the local church know that it was his vision of the unifying nature of commitment to mission that led to the Church's adoption of the mission statement at the General Conference of 1996. Now our mission statement rolls as easily off the tongue as if it had always been there: "The mission of the Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ." So it is fitting that Bishop Jones refers to a lack of agreement on mission as one of the two just causes of separation of the Church, the other being doctrine.

It is considerably easier, I think, for us to come to agreement on the nature of our mission, however, than it is on what our doctrine ought to be, especially if we are given some latitude, as we are, in how we define who is a disciple and what discipleship means. The real rub, then, is doctrine.

Bishop Jones has identified four levels of doctrinal sources of authority within the UMC. They are (1) Scripture, (2) constitutional standards, (3) acts and works of General Conference such as *Book of Discipline*, *Social Principles*, and *The Book of Resolutions*, and (4) liturgy and hymnody. Within category 2, Bishop Jones identified five standards, as follows: (a) the Articles of Religion, (b) the Confession of Faith, (c) the General Rules, (d) Wesley's Sermons, and (e) Wesley's New Testament Notes. I am bold to suggest that within this category he calls "constitutionally protected standards" there is an important hierarchy on which Bishop Jones might have profitably put more emphasis.

To begin with, not all the standards he puts in this category are constitutionally protected. In Judicial Council Decision 358 (JCD 358) the Council decided several important questions. It reaffirmed prior decisions that theological decisions were the purview of the General Conference, not of the Council, and specifically stated that the reference to Wesley's Sermons and Wesley's Notes as doctrinal standards was not a new

standard of doctrine as adopted by the General Conference, since the language of neither the Articles of Religion nor the Confession of Faith was changed by that action. That essentially said that as long as the language of those two standards is not changed, it is the General Conference alone that decides whether or not any new standard of doctrine violates the first Restrictive Rule, which says, "The General Conference shall not revoke, alter, or change our Articles of Religion or establish any new standards or rules of doctrine contrary to our present existing and established standards of doctrine" (§11.7). Just as important, JCD 358 established that Part II of the *Book of Discipline* in which reference is made to Wesley's Sermons and Wesley's Notes as doctrinal standards is not part of the UM Constitution. It is that reference by which Wesley's Sermons and Wesley's Notes are made doctrinal standards, meaning that by a majority vote of General Conference they can be rejected as doctrinal standards. That puts them in a much lower position on the hierarchy of standards than the first three.

But not even the first three are on the same level. The Articles of Religion (the Articles) and the Confession of Faith (the Confession) together are in a category of protection that is unique in UM polity. The Articles and the Confession are subject respectively to the first and second Restrictive Rules. Changing either standard requires a two-step process in which General Conference must first remove the Restrictive Rule by proposing an amendment to that part of the Constitution by at least a two-thirds majority, then at least three-fourths of the members of the annual conferences voting in the aggregate must affirm General Conference's action. Then, if that obstacle is overcome, General Conference must propose the desired change in either the Articles or the Confession.

The General Rules, while subject to the fifth Restrictive Rule, are not given the same level of protection as the Articles of Religion or the Confession of Faith. To change the General Rules requires the same two-step process as for changing the Articles and the Confession, but no three-fourths supermajority of the members of the annual conferences is required. The normal constitutional amendment process of two-thirds is all that is required for the removal of the fifth Restrictive Rule guarding the General Rules.

Bishop Jones has proposed parts of the Articles, the Confession, and, in another work, the General Rules as in need of some changes. I support that proposal, but I acknowledge that making changes will be tremendously difficult, if not impossible, particularly in the Articles and the Confession. Bishop Jones identified the vitriolic anti-Catholic articles as some of those ripe for change. My personal favorite is Article V of the Articles, which says the following:

The Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation; so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man that it should be believed as an article of faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation. In the name of the Holy Scripture we do understand those canonical books of the Old and New Testament of whose authority was never any doubt in the Church. The names of the canonical books are:

Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, The First Book of Samuel, The Second Book of Samuel, The First Book of Kings, The Second Book of Kings, The First Book of Chronicles, The Second Book of Chronicles, The Book of Ezra, The Book of Nehemiah, The Book of Esther, The Book of Job, The Psalms, The Proverbs, Ecclesiastes or the Preacher, Cantica or Songs of Solomon, Four Prophets the Greater, Twelve Prophets the Less.

All the books of the New Testament, as they are commonly received, we do receive and account canonical. (p. 60)

It is this article, among other things, on which our commitment to Scripture as the first doctrinal standard is established in our Church law. So this article is at ground zero in our discussion of doctrinal standards. The sentence that ought to be the focus of some considerable discussion, in my judgment, which goes right to the heart of the debate about the degree to which Scripture is an unambiguous standard of doctrine, is the one that says, "In the name of the Holy Scripture we do understand those canonical books of the Old and New Testament of whose authority was never any doubt in the church." There are many of the books included within the canon identified in this article whose authority we now know was disputed within the church from the very beginning. The example of

Second Peter comes quickly to mind, but there are plenty of others. Revelation and James are two such, and Luther himself called James "a book of straw."

It is rare for any serious work of theology to be a runaway best seller, but recently *Misquoting Jesus* by Bart D. Ehrman achieved that status. Huge numbers of Christians and non-Christians alike now know that there is a lot of loose sand in the firm foundation of Scripture for doctrine in the Church. Nothing in Ehrman's book is new, and for seminarians, in fact, it is all old hat. But we have not done a good job in bringing this kind of understanding about our canon to the laity, and I think such an understanding can make all the difference in how we treat the primary source of teaching authority in the Church.

Bishop Jones identifies six issues on which "our diversity might be compatible with our commitment to unity." They are race and gender, Scripture, Christology, homosexuality, global nature, and gift of unity and holy communion. I will not comment on all of those, but I do want to make what I think is an important observation on his statement that "In many ways, The United Methodist Church is a global Church." I think we might be a bit too full of ourselves when we make that claim and compare ourselves to the Catholic Church. The UMC has no members in South America, the Caribbean, Australia, China, India, Japan, Korea, or the Middle East. We have a pitifully small number in Central America. Even on our home continent of North America, we have no members in Mexico or Canada, restricting ourselves to presence only in the United States. We cannot make ourselves be global simply by saying we are. I think it is time for us to find another way to live into the call for being in global ministry than to try to stretch the UMC into having membership throughout the world. Perhaps it is time for us to look seriously at the World Methodist Council as the right vehicle for Methodists to be in ministry to the global community, which, in my judgment, will require that we work to restructure that body to be more open in its processes of leadership selection and financial accountability.

Finally, if I had composed the list of issues on which our unity is blessed by our diversity, I would have included the issue of pacifism and just war

doctrine. Increasingly much of our professional leadership, and in particular the General Board of Church and Society, is pressing the Church to become a pacifist body aligned with the historic peace churches like the Friends and the Mennonites. Currently our Social Principles call us to the extreme center, condemning war as "incompatible with the teachings and example of Christ" (§165C) and at the same time saying, "As Christians we are aware that neither the way of military action, nor the way of inaction is always righteous before God" (§164I), and that war may "be employed only as a last resort in the prevention of such evils as genocide, brutal suppression of human rights, and unprovoked international aggression" (§165C).

This issue of war and pacifism is one that I think has more potential to divide our Church than any other of the hot-button issues that are before us. I hope that at the upcoming General Conference we reject any effort to make the UMC a pacifist body.