

The Christ-Centered Community

October 30, 2022 Sermon by Stephen Portner

John 17:20-23

²⁰ "My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, ²¹ that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²² I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one— ²³ I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

Acts 15:36-40

³⁶ Some time later Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us go back and visit the believers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing." ³⁷ Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them, ³⁸ but Paul did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work. ³⁹ They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus, ⁴⁰ but Paul chose Silas and left, commended by the believers to the grace of the Lord.

This Sunday's sermon will be an unusual one because I will be reading it to you, which is not my usual practice. However, what I want to share with you today is so important to the life of our church, that I want to be sure I share the exact same words at both worship services. So please be gracious as I share with you a difficult subject that I have taken extra measures to try to word as impartially as possible.

As recorded in the gospel of John chapter 17, Jesus, the Son of God, offered up a prayer on behalf of His followers. Although Jesus did not use the word "church," he did pray that all of us may be one, just as God the Son is in God the Father, and God the Father is in the Son. Jesus prayed that we be brought into complete unity, because then the world would know that God the Father sent God the Son, and that God the Father so loved the world just as God the Father loved God the Son. It was a powerful prayer, which demonstrated just how much Jesus desired all those who believed in him to have unity with one another.

It was a unity however, that was conditional. Jesus was not praying that we have a unity at all costs, such as unity at the cost of personal or spiritual integrity. Jesus was praying for the unity of his followers because "they are not of this world," just as Jesus was not of this world. Jesus prayed that his followers be sanctified (that is, made holy) by the truth; for God's word is truth (John 17:16-17). In other words, according to Jesus' prayer, if one denies that God's word is truth, then one is not in unity with the people of God.

There are those who do claim that God's word is truth yet are still divided over issues. Protestants have divided from Roman Catholics. Protestants have split over various issues and

thus why we have different churches with different beliefs – Baptist, Episcopal, Presbyterian, Wesleyan, Non-Denominational, to name a few. Even in Scripture we read of division between Paul and Barnabas. They could not agree on the issue of whether or not to take John called Mark along with them on their mission trip because he had deserted them once before. Because Paul and Barnabas could not agree, they went their separate ways. As a result they spread the gospel to even more people than they would have if they had stayed together. So, even in their division, God was able to make something good come out of it. Thus, when it comes to the issue of whether believers should stay together despite their differences or should separate to be more effective witnesses is a tough one with no easy answer.

This leads me to the main reason why this is such a tough topic for our church today. The United Methodist Church has come to a critical point where some churches are choosing to stay with the denomination, whereas others are choosing that it is better to go a separate way. Those who choose to go a separate way, begin a process of separation called disaffiliation. The Bethany UM Church Council has brought in representatives of our Conference to discuss what is involved in disaffiliation. At the time of that informational meeting it was discerned that it would have cost our church hundreds of thousands, perhaps close to a million dollars, to disaffiliate. And so, the Church Council discerned it was simply too expensive a venture to even bring to the attention of the rest of the church. A week and a half ago I received the news that the process had changed. Instead of the church needing to pay hundreds of thousands of dollars, it would be required to pay more like tens of thousands, perhaps no more than a hundred thousand, to disaffiliate. But the window of opportunity for the church to decide whether or not it wanted to disaffiliate would have to fully completed by March 31, 2023. And since the process takes about three months to complete, that left only between now and the end of this year for the church to vote on it, if they wished. As your pastor, I believe it was only fair to give this church the opportunity to make that decision for yourself, even though we have a limited time to do so. The date for this Special Church Conference to decide on whether or not this church wants to disaffiliate (that is, “separate”) from the United Methodist Church is November 30, 2022, at 6:30 here in the church sanctuary. I’ll repeat that date again toward the end of this message.

First, some background. Our denomination’s doctrine and polity is compiled in a book called “The Book of Discipline.” Under normal circumstances our denomination has a General Conference every four years. The General Conference is a gathering of representatives of the United Methodist Church from all around the world. The General Conference is the only governing body that can make changes to the Book of Discipline.

The presenting issue is about the practice of homosexuality in the life of the church. There are a number of references to homosexuality in the Book of Discipline¹ but the one that has caused the most controversy is this one from Par. 304.3 of the 2016 Book of Discipline:

[quote] While persons set apart by the Church for ordained ministry are subject to all the frailties of the human condition and the pressures of society, they are required to maintain the highest standards of holy living in the world. The practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching. Therefore self-avowed practicing homosexuals¹ are not to be certified as candidates, ordained as ministers, or appointed to serve in The United Methodist Church.

¹ <https://www.umc.org/en/content/homosexuality-full-book-of-discipline-statements>

1. "Self-avowed practicing homosexual" is understood to mean that a person openly acknowledges to a bishop, district superintendent, district committee of ordained ministry, board of ordained ministry, or clergy session that the person is a practicing homosexual.[unquote]

This issue has been hotly debated at General Conferences at least as early as 1972 when that legislation was first adopted.² In 2019 there was a Special Called General Conference just to deal with the division in the denomination over this issue. The Commission on the Way Forward was formed to offer possible plans that could be adopted at that General Conference. Of all the alternatives offered at the 2019 General Conference, the Traditional Plan narrowly passed by a vote of 438 in favor and 384 against.³ The Traditional Plan affirmed the historic statement about the practice of homosexuality being incompatible with Christian teaching and proposed new ways of holding United Methodists accountable to that policy statement.

Far from settling the issue, the passing of the Traditional Plan caused even more anger and division with the United Methodist Church. A group was formed called UMCNext which includes the following points in their commitment statements: "We reject the Traditional Plan approved at General Conference 2019 as inconsistent with the gospel of Jesus Christ and will resist its implementation." And: "We will work to eliminate discriminatory language and the restrictions and penalties in the Discipline regarding LGBTQ persons. We affirm the sacred worth of LGBTQ persons, celebrate their gifts, and commit to being in ministry together."⁴

On the other end of the theological spectrum, the Wesleyan Covenant Association was formed, which agreed with the decision of the 2019 General Conference that the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching.⁵ There was a new progressive denomination formed called the Liberation Methodist Connexion, which has since disbanded.⁶ A new conservative denomination was formed in May 2022 called the Global Methodist Church.⁷ At any rate, the divisions in the Church seem to be getting deeper, more bitter, and more angry. Not a good witness for anyone who is wondering what a life in Christ may look like.

The General Conference was to meet again in 2020 to take a further look at the divide and to introduce a number of proposals to resolve this division. One such proposal was the Protocol of Reconciliation and Grace Through Separation, which essentially was going to propose a Paul and Barnabas-type solution, where progressives and traditionalists could go their separate ways with grace.⁸ That proposal was never brought to General Conference, because General Conference kept being put off due to COVID in 2020, 2021, and 2022. The next General Conference is scheduled for 2024. Although this proposal originally had the support of traditionalists, progressives, and centrists, the centrists and progressives have since withdrawn

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<https://www.wncumc.org/files/websites/www/PDF+of+Healthy+Conversations+Toward+the+Way+Forward+PowerPoint.pdf>

³ <https://www.umnews.org/en/news/gc2019-daily-feb-26>

⁴ <https://umcnext.com/>

⁵ <https://wesleyancovenant.org/>

⁶ <https://religionnews.com/2020/11/30/progressive-united-methodists-announce-new-denomination-liberation-methodist-connexion/>

⁷ <https://globalmethodist.org/>

⁸ <https://www.umnews.org/en/news/protocol-of-reconciliation-and-grace-through-separation-faq>

their support.⁹ It is partially due to that withdrawal of support that conservative churches believe that they will not be allowed a gracious separation from the denomination after General Conference 2024.

The 2019 General Conference allowed a process for churches to be able to separate from the denomination called disaffiliation¹⁰ specifically for churches that could not agree with the denomination's stand on the issue of homosexuality. The disaffiliation process has been used by conservative and progressive churches to effectively separate from the denomination. The only reason a church is allowed to disaffiliate from the United Methodist Church is that it either believes the Book of Discipline has gone too far or has not gone far enough on its current stance of the practice of homosexuality. Again, when a church disaffiliates they have to be clear that they believe that the Book of Discipline either (1) has gone too far in its discipline of LGBTQ+ individuals who desire to marry and be ordained in the United Methodist Church, or (2) has not gone far enough in its discipline of those same individuals.

So, let me repeat. On November 30 of this year, at 6:30 here in the church sanctuary, church members will have the opportunity to vote on whether this church wants to disaffiliate – that is, to separate – from The United Methodist Church as a denomination or not. I know this was a lot to throw at you all at once on a Sunday morning, but time is of the essence. I will post this sermon on our church website later this afternoon, so that you can have it as a reference, as well as provide some printed copies after the worship service. I know there will be a lot of questions which you are welcome to write down on the Connection Cards in your bulletin. We will attempt to answer them as best as possible at future informational meetings, which will be determined by the Church Council. I obviously had to leave out a lot of details for now just so that we could convey only the necessary information in the limited time we have during worship.

Augustine is given credit for the quote “In essentials, unity; in doubtful matters, liberty; in all things, charity.” If in fact it came from Augustine, it was his way of dealing with the difficult matter of disagreement in the church. ...John Wesley liked this aphorism and modified it slightly in his preaching to the early Methodists.

...Wesley allowed differences of opinion, but he, like Paul, appealed to the Methodists not to let their differences prevent them from loving each other.¹¹

As Wesleyans by tradition, we need to determine what for us is essential and what is non-essential. We will disagree on what that means. But, as Wesley points out, we need to act in charity, in grace, to all people. In all that we do, our love of God and our love of neighbor should prevail, as our Lord commanded. Amen.

⁹ <https://www.umc.org/en/content/reconciliation-protocol-loses-support-gaf>

¹⁰ Para. 2553 of the 2019 Book of Discipline.

¹¹ Smith, James Bryan. *The Good and Beautiful Community* (The Good and Beautiful Series) (pp. 94-95). InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition.