

Dear Lake Vista Church Family:

The August, 2021 “Word from Woody” article will be replaced, with permission, with a guest piece from the Vice President of Good News and a personal friend, Rev. Tom Lambrecht. As a United Methodist (UM) clergy from the Wisconsin Conference, Tom has been heavily involved with UM renewal and the Wesleyan Covenant Association (WCA). He wrote this article earlier this year and I thought it would be helpful for our understanding of what the theological situation is within The UMC, especially as Tom will be speaking on Tuesday, August 10th at Covenant UMC in Lafayette to the Louisiana WCA. The context of this article is that in 2020 Tom wrote a piece explaining the differences between progressives, centrists, and traditionalists/conservatives in The UMC and why separation in the denomination is necessary. The Rev. Adam Hamilton, a pastor of one of the largest UM congregations in the U.S. and a prolific author, responded to Tom in a way that negated many of the distinctions Tom made. The piece below is Tom’s response to Rev. Hamilton.

Love in Christ,

Woody

Approaching Separation: A Rejoinder to Adam Hamilton
by Tom Lambrecht | Feb 19, 2021

I recently expounded the primary [reasons](#) I see for separation taking place in The United Methodist Church. That article drew the [response](#) of the Rev. Adam Hamilton, who felt that my characterization of centrist and progressive understandings was not an accurate description. I respect Adam and the vibrant ministry he has led at Church of the Resurrection. I have used some of his Bible study materials and found them helpful. His views on Scripture have appeared to evolve over time, however, and some statements in his 2014 book *Making Sense of the Bible* seem to reflect an approach to Scripture at odds with that of most traditional Methodists. In this article, I would like to delve a bit deeper into our differences.

The Primacy of Scripture

I focus on the traditionalist/evangelical understanding of Scripture as the primary authority for what we are to believe and teach as Methodist Christians. In his response to my article, Hamilton writes, “nearly every United Methodist I know believes ... that Scripture is primary in determining what we believe, and tradition, reason, and experience are secondary.” He elaborates, “I do not know anyone who sees tradition, experience, and reason as equal to Scripture.”

An interesting [survey](#) of United Methodist members in 2018 done by United Methodist Communications asked the question, “What is the most authoritative source of your personal theology?” Scripture was identified as the number one source by 6 percent of self-identified progressives/liberals, 25 percent of moderates/centrists, and 41 percent of conservatives/traditionalists. In fact, Scripture was identified as the number three source of theology, after reason and tradition, by moderates/centrists. And for progressives, Scripture was the least important source of theology.

Granted, the subjects of the study were laity, not clergy. But it appears that there is a distinct difference in approaching Scripture between progressives, centrists, and traditionalists in general. I have to believe that at least some of this difference is due to their pastors, who reflected that difference of approach in their teaching and preaching.

A glaring example of that approach is the clergy delegate at a General Conference years ago who stood up on the floor of conference and said, “We don’t go back to the Bible for the last word on anything.” There may be more people in the church than Hamilton realizes who hold a different view of Scripture, for whom Scripture is not primary in guiding our beliefs and actions.

Hamilton’s statement of his beliefs about the Bible’s inspiration demonstrates the difference between a centrist understanding of Scripture and that of a traditionalist. “Divine influence on the writers [of Scripture] was not qualitatively different from the way God inspires or influences [people] by the Spirit today,” Hamilton writes. “The difference between biblical texts and some contemporary writings also influenced by the Spirit is that the biblical authors lived closer to the events of which they wrote. ... This view allows us to value the Bible, to hear God speaking through it, yet ... to recognize that some things taught in scripture may not represent God’s character nor his will for us today, and perhaps never accurately captured God’s will” (*Making Sense of the Bible*, p. 143).

By contrast, most traditionalists believe the Bible is “God-breathed,” which is why we can receive it as “the true rule and guide for faith and practice” (*Confession of Faith*, Article IV). If *all* Scripture is not God-breathed, but only some parts of it, how can we view it as our true rule and guide? This morphs over very easily into making ourselves and our own ideas the true rule and guide, since it is we who decide which parts of Scripture to regard as authoritative. If something in Scripture does not make sense to us or does not fit our cultural perspective, we can too easily discard it as one of those “not inspired” parts, rather than allowing Scripture to correct our understanding or cultural myopia.

Scripture and Culture

In my article, it was my contention that many centrists and progressives believe, “when modern knowledge contradicts our understanding of Scripture, we must change our understanding of Scripture. ... Human knowledge and understandings are more important than any long-standing perception of what Scripture teaches.” This is seen among those who have changed their understanding of Scripture’s teaching on marriage and sexuality due to recent cultural shifts.

In reply, Adam names a number of illustrations where he claims new knowledge and a changing cultural perspective have altered the church’s interpretation of Scripture.

Hamilton puts forward the narrative that many preachers in the 1800’s promoted slavery as consistent with, if not commanded by, Scripture. It was only as American society came to reject slavery that such an interpretation became untenable. Tragically, however, the legacy of slavery is still with us in Jim Crow attitudes and racist practices among some in our society even today. So, I do not think we can regard the “progress” of society as the source for a changed view of slavery.

Historically, the progression was just the opposite. The early Methodists in England and America were adamantly against slavery. The early *Book of Discipline* forbade Methodists from owning slaves. However, as the church began to grow after the Revolutionary War, southern Methodists complained that the church’s stance on slavery was hurting their ability to evangelize among the slave-holding population. Because of this cultural influence, the church’s stance on slavery was weakened, and it was eventually not enforced in southern states. It was when the northern annual conferences wanted to enforce the slavery prohibition against a particular slave-owning bishop

that the southern Methodists rebelled and forced a schism in the church in 1844. They removed the prohibition against owning slaves from their *Discipline* and rationalized that slavery (and, in some cases after the Civil War, racism) was God's will.

Accommodation to a slave-owning and racist culture caused the church's interpretation to change in a negative way. That is what we see happening today with the changing definition of marriage and affirmation of same-sex relationships.

The same could be said about women in leadership in the church. There are prominent examples of female leaders in the Bible, as well as in early Methodism. Not least among those examples was John and Charles Wesley's own mother Susannah, who was in many ways a co-pastor with her husband. There were women leaders in early American Methodism, as well. Yet after its explosive growth on the frontier, the church failed to adjust its practice in line with its understanding of Scripture, and instead allowed the desire for social respectability to limit the leadership of women in the church. It was actually a return to its former understanding of the priesthood of all believers that enabled first the Evangelicals and United Brethren, and finally the Methodists to recover the equal role of women in leadership.

Here again, our society is not a stellar example of women's equality, what with the gender pay gap and the paucity of female business and political leaders. It is just as fair to say that churches like the UM Church are leading society in this regard, rather than being influenced by society in our understanding of Scripture.

Truth and Identity

Adam questions my claim that "most centrists and progressives reject the idea of absolute truth." However, that is not what I claimed. The actual quote is, "Most centrists and progressives value self-determination as the deciding factor in one's view of oneself." I say this is connected to the idea that "truth is defined by each person for themselves."

I am heartened to hear Hamilton's assessment that "Most United Methodists ... would agree that God is absolute Truth, that Jesus Christ is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. That the Holy Spirit leads us into all truth. And that Scripture bears witness to God's truth." I would say that Scripture does more than bear witness to God's truth – it reveals and teaches God's truth. Aside from that quibble, I can affirm Adam's quote.

However, I have not found that to be universally true in my interaction with United Methodist clergy. Some of my colleagues do not believe the doctrines we are "required" to believe in our doctrinal standards, particularly the *Articles of Religion* and the *Confession of Faith*. Some believe that everyone will go to heaven. Some believe Jesus did not need to die on the cross for our salvation. Some believe Jesus did not physically rise from the dead. There is not the universal agreement on the outworking of Adam's quote above that he might think there is. There are no better illustrations of people operating by their own "truth" than the One Church Plan, the Connectional Conference Plan, and the Christmas Covenant. Each of these plans envisions part of the church living by one truth, that the practice of homosexuality is contrary to God's will. Another part of the same church would be living by another truth, that God affirms the practice of homosexuality. It is the ultimate example of self-defining truth attempting to coexist in one church body. The result is confusion and the loss of identity as to what it means to be a United Methodist Christian.

A Social Justice Agenda

Of course, Hamilton is right that we should "be unapologetic in pursuit of [social] justice." The question is a matter of priorities.

The survey I cited earlier asked the question, “Which should be the primary focus of The United Methodist Church?” 68 percent of self-identified progressives/liberals said, “Advocating for social justice to transform this world.” Meanwhile, 68 percent of moderates/centrists and 88 percent of evangelicals/traditionalists said “saving souls for Jesus Christ.” Here, the demarcation is between progressives on the one hand and centrists and traditionalists on the other.

Most traditionalists perceive the denomination’s agenda as driven by the progressive “social justice” priority. Most of the general boards and agencies and most of the Council of Bishop statements have to do with issues of social justice. Aside from some good communication materials produced by UM Communications, most of the programs and resources produced by the general church have to do with social justice, with very little related to evangelism or discipleship.

More troubling to many conservative United Methodists is that often the positions promoted by the general church are in line with partisan policies advocated by one political party in the U.S. Politically conservative positions are not considered, and thus politically conservative United Methodists feel marginalized and even chastised by their church.

I agree with Adam that, “we are to live the gospel, doing justice, practicing kindness, being the hands and feet of Christ in addressing the brokenness in our world.” But we cannot live the gospel if we never hear the gospel, if we are never called to respond to the gospel call of Christ, or if we are never ushered into the lifelong discipleship of Jesus. I know these things are present in Hamilton’s ministry at Church of the Resurrection, but they are often missing from many congregations across our church and from the leadership of the general church.

Breakdown of the Church’s Governance

In my original post, I state, “When significant portions of the church refuse to abide by that church’s governance processes, the church’s unity is no longer viable. Ordained clergy vow to abide by the church’s tenets, even when we disagree, but many now are renouncing that vow by their actions and words.” Adam acknowledges this point, but has no answer for it.

Many traditionalists are outraged that the consistent and continual will of the General Conference quadrennium after quadrennium can be summarily ignored and set aside by some bishops, clergy, and annual conference boards of ordained ministry who disagree with the outcome.

My colleague, the Rev. Forbes Matonga of Zimbabwe, put it well when he [said](#), “Africans expected to see their American counterparts who are generally perceived as champions of constitutionalism and democracy to show them by example how democratic institutions and systems work. This was a massive let down. We began to be taught new lessons, that minority voices override majority vote. That when you don’t have it your way then you make the institution ungovernable. That you only follow the law when it is in sync with your cultural beliefs.”

For traditionalists, this last straw breaks the camel’s back. We could and did abide differences of opinion and belief for 40 years in the UM Church. But when widespread schism through disobedience to the order and discipline of the church began, it became apparent that we could not all go on together as part of one church body.

I appreciate the opportunity to exchange views with Adam Hamilton. It clarifies our understanding of each other. As we approach the possibility of separation within The United Methodist Church, clarity of communication and understanding will be important. It is our contention that after 50 years of conflict over the issues above, it is time to go our separate ways. Each person and each congregation will have an opportunity to decide what their beliefs and

direction will be. As we prayerfully make these decisions, our goal is that we separate amicably, blessing one another, and allow each group to pursue its ministry in the way it feels led by God to do so. There is no benefit to continuing a conflict that only detracts from our church's focus on mission and ministry.