

## **Do I Stay Christian? Our Denomination in Crisis**

### **Matthew 22:34-40**

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As Jesus grew more widely known for his teaching and his healing, the traditional religious leaders, the Sadducees and the Pharisees, began to feel threatened by his popularity among the peasants. They decided to try to trip him up or catch him in some false teaching or practice so they would have a reason to discredit him. One day, as Jesus was teaching, the Pharisees, who were the biblical literalists of their day, asked Jesus which is the greatest commandment in the Law. He gave the correct answer, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ And then he added a most telling comment, “All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

There are 613 individual commandments in the Hebrew Bible. They range from food laws, such as you shall not eat shrimp because they are an abomination, to the moral laws found in the ten commandments. In this scripture passage, Jesus tells us that each and every one of them hangs on, or is subordinate to, the commands to love God with all our heart, soul, and mind, and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

What a perfect starting point for our topic today. We’ve just finished a sermon series on Bryan McLaren’s new book, *Do I Stay Christian?* So, it seems like a good time to look at a question that many individuals and churches are asking right now - do we stay United Methodist? This comes up because the United Methodist Church is finally, slowly, and painfully splitting apart. Though we’ve tried, we simply can’t, or won’t, resolve our differences over same sex marriage, the ordination of LGBTQ clergy, and the sentence in our Book of Discipline that states we believe the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching. The battle has been contentious, the tactics sometimes underhanded, and the harm to LGBTQ folks and to our Christian witness in the world immense.

Of course, there is a long history I could retell, going back fifty years, but I’ll just remind you of the most recent events. In 2016, at our denomination’s General Conference, the policy-making body of the church, it became clear that we were at an impasse. The bishops called for a special General Conference to be held in 2019 with only this topic under discussion. During that Conference, a plan for the future which strengthened the rules against LGBTQ+ inclusion was passed at the last minute. At that point, many centrist and progressive United Methodists began exploring disaffiliation from the denomination. In fact, we began to have those conversations here. Of course, disaffiliation would be messy and expensive - many of the issues involved in this whole conflict come down to money.

Finally, a group of representatives from the different constituencies, primarily bishops and clergy, came together and developed a plan for separation that everyone agreed to, calling it a Protocol for Reconciliation and Grace Through Separation. For a little while, we thought we would be able to have an amicable divorce that would be codified at the General Conference in

2020. And then covid happened. The General Conference was delayed to 2021 and then to 2022. In the winter of 2022, the issue was tabled until the General Conference of 2024.

No sooner was that decision made, the Wesley Covenant Association and other traditional caucuses in the church, announced they would be launching a new Methodist denomination in May - the Global Methodist Church. In the Global Methodist Church, marriage is defined as between a man and a woman, clergy must be either in a marriage between a man and a woman or celibate and single and may not perform same sex marriages. If they are suspected of breaking these rules, they can be brought up on charges and removed from the denomination.

Since the launching of the Global Methodist Church, they have been actively recruiting individual Methodists, churches, and conferences to join them. You may well have friends who belong to churches that are exploring whether they will stay United Methodist or join the Global Methodists. Many churches are split. So, as they make a decision, those who don't agree find themselves without a church. We are at the beginning of what will be a massive reshuffling of Methodists as they seek a church that aligns with their beliefs.

While it saddens me, I think this split in our denomination was inevitable and I am grateful that I don't have to choose between my denomination and my beliefs. Unless things shift again dramatically, I will be able to stay United Methodist. What disturbs me, though, is that as the traditionalists leave the United Methodist church and seek to take others with them, they are misrepresenting what the United Methodist Church is and what it will look like in the future.

Rev. Rob Renfroe, a United Methodist pastor in Texas and leader in the Global Methodist Church, has recently released six videos to convince United Methodists to become Global Methodists. In these videos, Renfroe makes a number of statements about the United Methodist Church now and the United Methodist Church of the future that are simply untrue. His statements have been so extreme that a group of United Methodist bishops in Africa, an area which has frequently aligned themselves with Renfroe and the Traditionalists, released a letter last month saying, *"We will not allow or entertain any activities of the Wesleyan Covenant Association who are wrongly influencing God's people in our areas. We will not tolerate anyone giving false information about The United Methodist Church in our areas."*

Renfroe says, among other things, that "in many, many ways the United Methodist Church has left John Wesley" and "in many, many ways, they have left the Bible". "In a few years, the UMC will have very little in common with the church that you joined." He claims that the UMC will not stand under the authority of scripture or believe in the basic doctrines of the Christian faith and that United Methodist seminaries cannot be trusted to teach basic truths about Christ. He says that if the United Methodist Church accepts same sex marriage and the ordination of LGBTQ individuals, polygamy won't be far behind. He paints a picture of the United Methodist Church as denying Jesus as savior, redeemer, and the divine Son of God.

Rev. Adam Hamilton, the founder and senior pastor of the largest church in the denomination, Church of the Resurrection in Leawood, Kansas, has released a series of videos that directly respond to Renfroe's videos, and I highly recommend them. You can find both Renfroe's videos and Hamilton's easily on YouTube.

I'm not going to try to address the fear tactics in Renfroe's videos or refute his accusations. Rather, I'm going to return to Jesus's words. The greatest commandment is to love God with all your heart, your soul, and your mind, and to love your neighbor as yourself. All other laws are subject to these two. If love of God and love of neighbor are the guiding principles of our faith, then whatever we do in separating, in interpreting the rest of scripture, in creating policy - everything must begin there, and I believe in the United Methodist Church - past, present, and future - we strive to do that.

Some of you know I was born a Methodist to parents who met at the Wesley Foundation at the University of Illinois. I was baptized and confirmed in the First United Methodist Church of Albion where my family lived for the nearly forty years my father taught Albion College, a Methodist school. I grew up going to Sunday School, singing in the Children's Choir, and participating in youth group. My family spent a year in India as Methodist missionaries when I was twelve years old. Like a lot of young adults, I wandered away from the church for a while. When I decided to try church again, I visited a number of denominations - Lutheran, UCC, Unitarian Universalist, Presbyterian - but I came back to Methodism. This time, though, it was an intentional choice. I returned to Methodism because I agreed with what Methodists believe and what they do.

I love the United Methodist Church because as followers of John Wesley we recognize the authority of scripture and make space for questions. We encourage thinking about scripture through the lens of the teachings of the church using our intellect and our experience. Our theology is grace-based meaning we believe in God's love and acceptance, forgiveness and redemption as we journey through life. Salvation isn't a onetime event, but an ongoing process as we grow, make mistakes, return to God, and continue toward perfection in love. That is what makes our faith transformational.

John Wesley never meant to start a denomination. He was an Anglican priest all his life. What he sought was to create a movement through which faith would transform people's lives. A movement that called for personal holiness developed through scripture reading, worship, and the sacraments. A movement that called for social holiness expressed in giving back to God by bettering our church and community and world. He valued education, so Methodists have founded hundreds of schools and colleges. He promoted good health, so we have founded hospitals and clinics. He believed our faith grows through acts of mercy, so we started organizations like the United Methodist Committee on Relief, or UMCOR, which not only is frequently the first agency to respond when there is a natural or manmade disaster but also the longest to stay on the ground and help.

This is the United Methodist Church I believe in. This is the United Methodist Church I chose to serve. Yes, we've definitely got foibles and have made many mistakes. Yet, our future is bright because we continue to try to be faithful to two things - to love God and to love our neighbor.

Thanks be to God. Amen.