

Let Me Say That Again

By Dr. Maxie Dunnam

Most ministers have a preaching style with practices that are common in their delivery of the sermon. Somewhere along the way in my preaching, I developed a practice of emphasis and repetition using the recurring phrase, "Let me say that again." I say that when I want to lodge solidly in the mind and heart of the listener something I have already said and want to emphasize. "Let me say that again."

As I am responding to the raging division and separation in the UMC, I thought my common practice in preaching would be a good communication tool. I believe separation is essential, even redemptive, and can be a faithful response to the crisis we are in. I believe separation is essential, even redemptive, and can be a faithful response to where we are. Let me say that again. I believe separation is essential, even redemptive, and can be a faithful response to where we are. So here we go.

There are five areas of concern on which I base my conviction that separation is essential.

1. The Bible is God's Word. It does not contain the word of God; it IS the WORD of God.

The United Methodist Church came into being by the union of The Methodist Church and The Evangelical United Brethren Church in 1968. I have been a pastor in the UMC as long as there has been a UMC. From the beginning, with what was labeled the "Wesleyan Quadrilateral," the nature and authority of Scripture was questioned. Rather than being central, the Bible, along with tradition, reason, and experience, was to be our guide. This was followed with the 1972 General Conference (GC) adopting a statement of doctrinal pluralism.

The 1988 General Conference sought to alter the emphasis on pluralism by adopting a theological report that cited "the primacy of Scripture" as the guiding principle for doing theology. Even so, the nature and authority of Scripture has been a source of debate and division in the Church throughout our history.

So, let me say that again. The Bible is God's Word. It does not contain the word God; it IS the WORD of God.

2. The Church is the Body of Christ, and because members "belong to Christ," they "belong to each other" in unity.

Today's default argument about separation is unity. The banner Scripture quoted comes from Jesus' prayer in John 17:

"My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, 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. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one." (John 17:20-22)

Unfortunately, many who plead for unity on the basis of this prayer don't pay attention to the preceding part of Jesus' prayer when he pleaded and petitioned the Father:

"My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world. For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified." (John 17:15-19)

Our unity is rooted in our belonging to Christ, being sanctified by the truth, that is, set aside and not being of the world. Some of those who are so quick to use this Scripture, forget that unity in the body has been threatened throughout our history. It was threatened when:

- Bishop Joseph Sprague wrote a book questioning traditional Christian teaching
- 15 dissident bishops actively supported homosexual clergy at GC 1996
- one of our bishops performed a same sex wedding in 2013
- [• one of our bishops is openly LGBTQ]

How can we continue together when those who have been consecrated to defend the faith break covenant and blatantly violate the doctrine and discipline the official body of the Church has established?

So, let me say that again. The Church is the Body of Christ, and because members “belong to Christ,” they “belong to each other” in unity.

3. I am a Methodist by choice because of our primary emphasis on full salvation and the particular Wesleyan accent on the nature of grace: prevenient, justifying, assuring, and sanctifying (perfecting) grace.

The claim being made is that the UMC is a big tent, meaning we can stay together if we will simply accept the fact that Christians can believe and express their beliefs differently. That may be true in a limited way, but not in the core of the Christian faith: that we are sinners, separated from God, and we are only saved by Christ in his death on the Cross. John Wesley’s gift to us concerning the dynamics of grace in our “full salvation,” must not be diminished for the sake of superficial union. The Wesleyan understanding of salvation is that all need to be saved, all can be saved, all can know they are saved, and all can be saved to the uttermost. All grace!

Prevenient grace. Grace going before us, the Lord seeking us before we seek Him.

Justifying grace. Based on imagery of being on trial before God, when we appear before God, we are anything but innocent; we are utterly guilty. Justification means that God treats us, reckons us, and accounts us as if we were innocent.

Assurance and Sanctifying grace. We can know we are saved, and we can be saved “to the uttermost.” This is one of the unique accents of the Wesleyan understanding of salvation: sanctification, that is holiness--“perfection in love.”

How can we who claim this distinctive Wesleyan accent of salvation be at home with or practice the Great Commission with those in the UMC who supported the General Board of Global Ministries, a primary ministry arm of the UMC, when they focused primarily on “liberation theology” rather than evangelism in the 1980s? That was not only an indication of lack of concern for the Great Commission, but it was also a diminishing of our distinctive Wesleyan/Methodist identity.

So, let me say that again. I am a Methodist by choice because of our primary emphasis on full salvation and the particular Wesleyan accent on the nature of grace: prevenient, justifying, assuring, and sanctifying (perfecting) grace.

4. Marriage was designed by God in God's act of Creation, one man and one woman in a life-long covenant. Scripture teaches that the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching.

Human sexuality has been a divisive issue in the church almost from the beginning. As early as 1972, when the General Conference was considering the subject of ordination, the issue of homosexuality was debated. The vote of the General Conference was clear; we declared in our Social Principles that the practice of homosexuality is "incompatible with Christian teaching." Since that time every General Conference has debated the issue and it has been the "presenting issue" that portended schism and ultimate separation.

Even now, despite the constant debate, the official position of the UMC is that "the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching." The bottom line of that statement has been that practicing gay persons could not be ordained and marriage is a lifelong covenant between one man and one woman.

A special session of the General Conference was held in 2019 to find A Way Forward because the church was threatened by implosion at the 2016 GC. The nature and authority of Scripture was prominent as, again, the issues of marriage and ordination were the presenting ones. After fiery and painful emotional debate, the position that had been sustained through the years was again confirmed. The leadership of the Western Jurisdiction publicly announced that they would not abide by the decision. That should not have surprised us since in July 2016, that Jurisdiction elected a woman as bishop who was living in a marriage relationship with another woman. The Judicial Council (Supreme Court of the Church) declared that unconstitutional, yet she still serves as an active bishop. How can an institution survive a constitutional crisis like that?

So, let me say that again. Marriage was designed by God in God's act of Creation, one man and one woman in a life-long covenant. Scripture teaches that the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching.

5. Seminaries are servants of the Church, not graduate “schools of theology and religion.”

From the beginning with a small fellowship of students at Oxford University, Methodism has been allied with learning and teaching. As the Methodist revival spread across this new nation, the church established colleges. Today there are over 185 “Christian Colleges” in our nation. Sensing the need that Methodist preachers needed education, seminaries were established as a part of the colleges. At least four of the major universities in the US are “Methodist:” Boston, SMU, Duke, and Emory. All have seminaries that educate the ministers of the UMC. All of them were established to be “Servants of the Church,” but have become primarily graduate schools of theology and religion.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer described the present situation well. He came to the US to teach at Union Seminary in 1930-31. His reflection on that time was a dramatic snapshot of the role seminaries have served in bringing us to where we are today theologically. Of this premier seminary that is approved for persons to study and prepare for ordination, Bonhoeffer said, “There is no theology here.” Talking specifically about the students, he said, “They talked a blue streak, but were unfamiliar with the most basic questions. They became intoxicated with liberal and humanistic phrases, laughed at the fundamentalists, and yet basically are not even up to their level.”

We must not judge seminaries on isolated incidents such as recent worship services at one of our major UM seminaries where God was called queer, or the Dean of a seminary approved for training UM pastors declared that atonement is not essential. Yet, the fact that Asbury, an independent seminary, has more students preparing for ministry in the UMC than any two of our official 13 UM seminaries speaks loudly about whether we see our seminaries as servants of the church.

So, let me say that again. Seminaries are servants of the Church, not graduate “schools of theology and religion.”

With all I have said about the issues that have caused or contributed to our present crisis in the UMC, and the many other reasons that could be added and documented, hopefully I have made my case. So, let me say it again. I believe separation is essential, even redemptive, and can be a faithful response to where we are.