

WE CONFESS

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Judicial Council Defers Important Membership Decision to April 2009

By Rev. Walter B. Fenton

The Church's Judicial Council has deferred responding to a request for a declaratory decision regarding the meaning, application and effect of ¶4 of the *2004 Book of Discipline* as it relates to ¶¶214 and 225. The request for a decision on the matter was made by the Alaska United Methodist Conference at the behest of its conference lay leader Mr. Lonnie Brooks.

The request for a decision was an invitation to the Council to reverse the now much discussed and debated Decision 1032 issued in October 2005. Decision 1032 overruled Bishop Charlene P. Kammerer's decision to place Rev. Edward Johnson on an involuntary leave of absence for failing to receive into church membership a self-avowed practicing homosexual at South Hills United Methodist Church in South Hills, Virginia.

Decision 1032 stated, "[t]he *2004 Discipline* invests discretion in the pastor-in-charge to make the determination of a person's readiness to affirm the vows of membership (¶ 217). Paragraphs 214 and 225 are permissive and do not mandate receipt into membership of all persons regardless of their willingness to affirm membership vows."

In remanding the request for a declaratory decision to the Alaska United Methodist Conference the Judicial Council stated that it cannot rule on the matter until the proper documentation is submitted. It formally deferred the matter to its April 2009 docket.

This case is being closely watched for at least a couple of reasons.

First, it seemed apparent to many at General Confer-

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ence 2008 that there was a concerted effort on the part of The Council of Bishops and some liberal caucus groups to defeat the re-election bids of former Judicial Council members Keith Boyette, Mary Daffin, and James Holsinger. Boyette, Daffin, and Holsinger voted in the majority on Decision 1032. When Decision 1032 was handed down The Council of Bishops quickly issued a statement that was widely interpreted as disagreeing with the decision. Neither Boyette, Daffin nor Holsinger appeared on The Council of Bishop's list of nominees for the Judicial Council.

Second, several petitions were submitted at General Conference 2008 attempting to amend ¶¶4, 214 and 225. Some were submitted with the intent of more closely circumscribing a pastor's ability to determine a person's readiness to affirm the membership vows. While others attempted to make more explicit that all people—regardless of their expressed unwillingness to abide by certain Church teachings—"shall be eligible to . . . be admitted as baptized members". An amended version of ¶4 was narrowly approved and forwarded to all annual conferences for ratification at their 2009 gatherings.

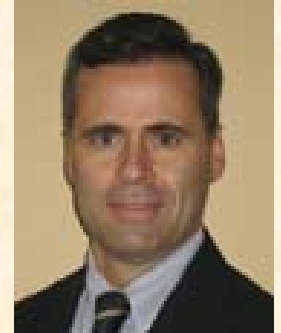
Were the Judicial Council to reverse Decision 1032 on the basis of the current or revised version of ¶4 it could put pastors in rather awkward circumstances. Pastors could feel compelled to receive into membership persons whom they know have no intention of fulfilling at least portions of the membership vows. Indeed, pastors might find themselves in the unenviable position of receiving a person into membership one Sunday only to find themselves initiating charges against them the following week.

Decision 1032 was clearly not an anti-homosexual ruling, but many have obviously interpreted it as such. Decision 1032 has, albeit unintentionally, invited the Church to think seriously about what it means to be a member of a local congregation and the wider connection. And furthermore, it has forced the Church to revisit its rather muddled and potentially contradictory guidelines on membership.

It is apparent that some simply regard receiving individuals into membership as an act of inclusion. Others, however, believe membership involves a willful commitment to a body of beliefs and to living a holy life according to the teachings and standards of our Church. It will be important for all members to pay close attention to the Judicial Council's ruling next

April, and to closely consider the implications of ratifying the amended version of ¶4.•

Walter B. Fenton is a clergy member of the Greater New Jersey Annual Conference. He has attended several Epworth Institutes sponsored by The Confessing Movement.



Rev. Walter B. Fenton

The Death of Protestant America

By: Dr. Maxie Dunnam

One of the most significant signs on the religious landscape in America is the decline of mainline denominations. There is not a single mainline church in America that is growing; many of them declining so rapidly that there is enough evidence to conclude that some will be “dead” within 25 years. Even Southern Baptists are witnessing far fewer baptisms than at any time during the past four decades. United Methodism has declined from more than eleven million at the time of merger with the Evangelical United Brethren in 1968 to less than eight million today.

This is a critical issue for any of these denominations, but it is a crucial issue for the life of our nation. There are concerns that are more important than maintaining institutional strength.

Joseph Bottom has written a very provoking article entitled *The Death of Protestant America* (First Things, Aug/Sept, 2008) in which he makes a case that may be more serious and impacting than the decline of the mainline. I urge the reading of this article. Bottom states the issue clearly:

“All the talk, from the eighteen century on, of the United States as a religious nation was really just a make-nice way of saying it was a Christian nation,

and even to call it a Christian nation was usually just a soft and ecumenical attempt to gloss over the obvious fact that the United States was, at its root, a PROTESTANT nation. Catholics and Jews were tolerated, off and on, but “the destiny of America”, as Alexis de Tocqueville observed in 1835, was “embodied in the first Puritan who landed on those shores...”

If, in fact, Protestant America is dead...and that means the “mainline” is no longer influencing, certainly far from shaping, public life...how do we live our faith responsibly as citizens?

Is there a way for a new force to be born that will be less “institutional” and/or “denominational” in expression, yet powerful in shaping public and political life for the common good?

Bottom contends that when future historians tell the story of our age, they will begin with the public effect Protestant Christianity (the mainline) had on our nation. My question is: What is going to replace that role of the mainline as the constant reminder of the Kingdom that is sovereign over all secular/political/institutional structures?

Even America's unique founding principle of religious liberty was essentially a Protestant idea. No question about it...ours has been a "Christian nation".

The pervasive presence and influence of Protestant Christianity in America is seen in the fact that by the time the War Between the States, one out of every three church members in America was a Methodist and the theology of Methodism was exerting a significant influence on those who were not formally Methodists. The fact is Protestant America became a liberal church America. The liberal church in America is dying, thus Protestant America is dying; Bottom would say is dead.

"America was Methodist, once upon a time – or Baptist, or Presbyterian, or Congregationalist, or Episcopalian. Protestant, in other words. What can we call it today? Those churches simply don't mean much any more. That's a fact of some theological significance. It's a fact of genuine sorrow."

Bottom makes the big point that the death of Protestant America has weakened both Christianity and public life in our country. The Protestant church has provided both criticism and support which a nation needs to be

effective. He is rightfully concerned whether the "hole in public life" can be filled by either Catholicism or the evangelical churches. Both are minorities, with the evangelical churches having too little organization and the Catholics have too much.

Bottom's article has raised all sorts of questions and stimulated a lot of reflection about the nature of renewal, the value of unity, the relationship of the "evangelical wing" of a mainline church like United Methodism to the larger evangelical body, how much time and energy should we spend on seeking to renew a declining denomination, and a bottom line question: how should The Confessing Movement invest our time and energy?

It is clear to me that the death of Protestant America and the decline of the mainline is due, in part at least, to the diminishing of identity. We became more

Unitarian than Trinitarian, and more secular than Kingdom-minded in our theology. It is also clear to me that the Christian faith must impact the "public square", and in our particular situation, our nation and its government. •

"It is clear to me that the death of Protestant America and the decline of the mainline is due, in part at least, to the diminishing of identity."



Please remember to contact the office when you have a change of mailing or email address so we can stay in touch!

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Marriage: Something Divine or a Contract of Convenience?

By Dr. Joy Moore



Dr. Joy Moore

While contemporary culture shapes marriage as a contractual convenience of happiness, benefits, and accomplishment, the biblical sketch suggests a pledge of holiness, blessings, and vocation. The creation of humanity, male and female, with the

task to reflect God's holiness, resulted in the gift of marriage. This re-union of the human one - at once separated as man and women and united because it is not good for the human to be alone - calls for two distinct individuals to intentionally merge their lives into one image of God through holy covenant. Marriage, not as a social contract, but a holy union, seeks to affirm God's creation of humanity to bear his glory on earth.

In the civil context, the redefining of sexual practices, contractual relations, and tolerance of differing opinions should be deemed appropriate. But the conversations of the church are different. Among the called-out community who provide the world a glimpse of the intentions of the Creator, the plea for equality is to accept the vocation to bear witness to God's holiness, faithfulness, and good intention for the world as demonstrated in Jesus. Such a witness is born of maintaining a distinction from a culture seeking self-gratification, narcissistic approval, and disproportionate consumption. I cannot say that same-sex unions undermine this witness, but most scholars on both sides of the issue acknowledge there is no biblical warrant suggesting this option.

In the same manner, a comprehensive reading of the biblical witness never delineates humanity by modern notions of race. The call among persons of color to be judged by the content of their character did not redefine human morality. Instead, it called for African Americans to be treated as fully human: bound by the same laws, not separate unequal ones; Marriage, across modern racial lines, still acknowledged the union of a man and a woman. Participation in the education system, still called for learning reading, writing, and arith-

metic. Participation in the institutions of government sought to remove the glass ceiling.

In the church, the so-called glass ceiling of ordination and marriage has more to do with its theological claims about God than social claims of access and hospitality. As a woman of color, I admit I resent the suggestion that my ordination has more to do with chance of birth than my conviction to a Wesleyan expression of a biblical witness to the Triune God proclaimed by Jesus Christ. And my singleness...well I just haven't found that someone who calls me to holiness.

This doesn't mean those who side against gay marriage can go along merrily in righteous indignation. Instead it challenges us to demonstrate in our marriages that which causes others to recognize something divine. It challenges us to never practice discrimination, while holding to a high standard of morality among our leaders - from choir members to janitor, from pew to pulpit. It challenges us to accept the biblical witness to God when proclaimed by a woman or person of color.

To those who may have stopped reading and started skimming because you believe that Gay Rights are not achieved by employment, education, and participation in civic and social contexts, there is a challenge as well. Civil rights do not reframe the biblical witness to issues of hospitality and blessed unions. Among the people of God, the call for equality resides in a shared witness from Christian Scripture of the salvation of the world given by God through the Holy Spirit, in the life, death, resurrection, and promised return of Jesus.

"This doesn't mean those who side against gay marriage can go along merrily in righteous indignation."

40 years later, the dream of equality called for a glimpse of God's glory beyond the walls of the church. Today, maybe our in-house conversations need to cease sounding like civic debates. Until Christians practice a hospitality of hope evidenced in preparing others to accept their vocation as representatives of the reconciling love of God, all we have is social contract. And that may just be a moral wrong. •

Dr. Joy Moore is Associate Dean of the Center for Lifelong Learning at the Divinity School at Duke University and an ordained elder in The United Methodist Church. She specializes in Christian formation, homiletics, and practical theology, focusing on Christian formation in postmodern culture.

DO YOU HAVE A QUESTION?



In each issue of *We Confess*, we will try to answer several of your questions concerning the Christian faith, The United Methodist Church, or The Confessing Movement. Just e-mail your question to: Editor, *We Confess*, at bgbouknight@aol.com. You can also send your question by regular mail to Dr. Bill Bouknight, 10 Oakman Lane, Columbia, SC 29209.

Question 1: What is The Confessing Movement?

The Confessing Movement is an unofficial movement within The United Methodist Church supported by approximately 7,158 clergy and 1,539 local United Methodist churches in the United States with supporters of over 698,000.

Question 2: What is the purpose of The Confessing Movement?

The purpose is to call The United Methodist Church to confess the person, work, and reign of Jesus Christ. We affirm Jesus Christ as Son, Savior, and Lord, and we call The United Methodist Church to rediscover its classical, orthodox, Wesleyan faith tradition.

Question 3: Why did we choose the name "Confessing Movement"?

We chose the name because our primary purpose is to be faithful to Christian tradition in "confessing" Jesus Christ as Son, Savior, and Lord.



Read a Good Book Lately?

This is a new feature in our *We Confess* newsletter. If you have read an excellent book lately that relates to our faith or denomination, send us a brief (one or two paragraph) review. Just e-mail it to Dr. Bill Bouknight at bgbouknight@aol.com.

The book we review today is entitled ***THE REASON FOR GOD, Belief in an Age of Skepticism***, by the Rev. Timothy Keller, published by Dutton Press, February 2008.

Timothy Keller is pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan. Concerning him, Billy Graham writes, "Tim Keller's ministry in New York City is leading a generation of seekers and skeptics toward belief in God. I thank God for him."

Keller's book may be the best response to familiar objections to Christianity since C.S. Lewis. Always true to the Bible and Christian tradition, Keller gives clear answers to objections like these: Surely, there cannot be just one true religion; How could a good God allow suffering; Isn't Christianity a straitjacket? How can a loving God send people to hell? Has not science disproved Christianity? Surely, you cannot take the Bible literally. The second part of his book is an affirmation of central beliefs. He deals with the problem of sin, the true story of the cross, and the reality of resurrection. Keller speaks to the thoughtful, secular seeker with almost undeniable logic. However, Keller's church in Manhattan is traditional in worship and free of gimmicks, it attracts over 6,000 urban worshippers each Sunday. Tim Keller provides ample proof that there is nothing outdated about the Bible or the Gospel.

Reviewed by Dr. Bill Bouknight

A NEW WAY TO GIVE!

Many of you have asked if there is a way to make a contribution online. Thanks to VANCO Services, The Confessing Movement is now able to accept contributions online by credit card or electronic transfer of funds from your checking or savings account. You can give a one time gift or schedule regular contributions to be debited from your account. Donations can be marked in honor or in memory of a loved one. It is fast, safe, and easy! VANCO Services is also the provider for the General Council on Finance and Administration of The United Methodist Church. Please visit our website at www.confessingumc.org for further information.

Also, remember that we now accept stock contributions. You can call The Confessing Movement office at 317-356-9729 to find out how! You can also continue to mail contributions to The Confessing Movement at 7995 East 21st Street, Indianapolis, Indiana, 46239.

Dear Friends of The Confessing Movement:

Greetings in the name of Jesus Christ—God’s Son, our Savior, and the Lord of all. I’m writing to you near the end of 2008 to highlight HOW CRITICAL the year 2009 will be for our beloved United Methodist Church.

Eight months ago THE GENERAL CONFERENCE’S ACTIONS were a combination of good and bad news. Thankfully, we defeated attempts to redefine marriage and to open the pastoral ranks to practicing homosexuals. On the bad news side of the ledger we elected a Judicial Council (the equivalent of the Supreme Court for the Church) that is much more liberal than the previous one, based on past statements and actions of its newly elected members.

The other part of the bad news was the approval of CERTAIN CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENTS which, if passed by a two-thirds aggregate vote of all the Annual Conferences, will have two tragic results. First, a local pastor’s discretionary authority to determine a person’s readiness for church membership will be removed. Secondly, an added level of bureaucracy will separate United Methodists in the United States from United Methodists in other parts of the world. In other words, we will segregate ourselves from foreign United Methodists. It is generally believed that many liberals favor this “re-segregation” because United Methodists in Africa and other places are more conservative theologically and usually vote against the approval of homosexuality.

Your Confessing Movement is working to defeat these dangerous constitutional amendments when they come before the various Annual Conferences next summer. We are providing articles, talking points, and needed research in order to equip our friends to defeat these destructive amendments.

We have powerful, well-funded opponents. The San Francisco-based EVELYN AND WALTER HAAS, JR. FUND has committed \$1.2 million to LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgendered) advocacy groups within mainline denominations. Their main goal is to redefine marriage as a civil right for lesbians and homosexuals.

WE NEED YOUR PRAYERS AND FINANCIAL CONTRIBUTIONS! Thanks to your previous help, The United Methodist Church is in a process of gradual reformation. We are gradually returning to Scriptural authority and our Wesleyan heritage. However, the gains are fragile and could be reversed. We must work, pray, and give without ceasing.

I’m asking you to join my wife, Gloria and me in making a generous donation to keep The United Methodist Church orthodox and faithful to the Gospel. AND PLEASE DO IT BEFORE YEAR’S END! If you are in a position of leadership in your local congregation, ask your Sunday School class and/or church to make a donation, as well.

Thanks for your help in renewing and reforming our beloved denomination. Thank you for what you have done in the past and will do in the future. By the grace of God, METHODISM MAY BECOME A MOVEMENT AGAIN!

Grace and Peace,



Dr. Bill Bouknight
Associate Director

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Purpose Statement

**Confessing Jesus Christ as Son, Savior, and Lord.
The Confessing Movement exists to enable The United
Methodist Church to retrieve its classical doctrinal
identity, and to live it out as disciples of Jesus Christ.**

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