**HAPPENINGS IN THE CHURCH**

*By Dr. Riley B. Case*

***CAN “UNITY” BECOME IDOLATROUS? (PART 2)***

I recently attended a district meeting called for the purpose of introducing persons who would like to be considered in the election of delegates for the general conference. The persons being presented are qualified in many ways. They hold leadership positions in the church. But none, whether clergy or lay, directly addressed the crisis that threatens to divide the denomination, that is, the matter of marriage as a union between one man and one woman, whether practicing homosexuals should be ordained, and the nature of the Biblical authority that serves as the basis for our decision-making. I asked several persons why the silence on these matters. Their answers were that these issues are divisive.

They are indeed divisive. And they are becoming increasingly divisive despite the fact that there have been conversations, dialogues, arguments, hearings, and discussions on what the church should be doing. Suggestions, plans and proposals coming out of the conversations do not appear to be viable solutions. It is time to face reality: we as a denomination abhor all thoughts of division, separation, and conflict. We desire unity. But it may well be that “unity,” under the present circumstances, is not happening and perhaps is not possible.

This Happenings article is suggesting it is time to think outside the box. The suggestion is that there may well be values more important than “unity,” at least the kind of unity as being defined by present institutionalists. United Methodists have not had a consistent doctrine of the Church. John Wesley, good Anglican that he was, held to a catholic doctrine of the church. He was never willing to admit that the Methodists should ever be something other than Anglicans. This changed drastically when the Methodist Episcopal Church was founded in America in 1784. Even as the newly independent Americans had separated themselves from England politically, at the same time they separated themselves from Anglicanism and from state involvement in religion. Methodists accepted the Articles of Religion and the General Rules and the episcopal form of church government but they never accepted Wesley’s doctrine of the Church. Wesley’s turn-around collar and thoughts of baptismal regeneration and even the Sunday Service were promptly ignored.

In a word, they moved toward a sectarian understanding of the church. Church membership was based on confession of faith, not baptism; the infilling of the Holy Spirit was more authoritative than Tradition and bishops’ proclamations; ministers were preachers, not priests. Most of all, Methodists demanded separation from worldliness and sin.

It was on the western frontier that this was expressed most consistently. Since there was no prevailing church culture on the frontier, Methodists and Baptists, and just about everybody else, established their own church culture. The individualism and egalitarianism of the frontier meant that purity of doctrine and practice was more important than big-tent inclusiveness. Being called by God rather than education and ordination was what qualified for ministry.

The result was chaos. As the historian R. Carlyle Buley put it:

*Although revivalism and the question of the freedom of the will precipitated sectarian difference (in the west) there were really dozens of matters of dogma and church organization and government which caused fission. Denominations split along one line on one issue, along another line on another. So numerous and complex were the schisms and crossings over and so illogical were many of them that groups and sects not infrequently found themselves back in the fold when they had started. So confusing did the history of the Protestant sects become that no historian church or lay, has been able to make a clear and organized presentation of its* course. (*The Old Northwest Pioneer Period*, 1815-1840. Vol. 2, p. 418)

By 1850 in Indiana Baptists had divided into Separate Baptists and United Baptists, and than formed a group known as United Separate Baptists. They further divided into Regular Baptists and Primitive Baptists and Missionary Baptists and anti-Missionary Baptists and Free Will Baptists and Particular Baptists and Hardshell Baptists. Quakers (already with a sectarian doctrine of the church) divided into Hicksites and Querneyites and, within a few years, into the Indiana Yearly Meeting, the Friends General Conference, the Western Five Years Meeting, the Friends World Committee, the Western Conservative Meeting, and the Central Yearly Meeting.

The Brethren would divide into Old German Baptists, Old Order German Baptists, Old Brethren, Dunkard Brethren, and eventually Brethren Church Ashland, Grace Brethren, Brethren in Christ and Apostolic Christian. Groups clustering around phrases like Christian Union would divide like the sand of the sea.

Methodists were in the thick of this. When Indiana College (later Indiana University) was established in 1828 as the first state-funded institution of higher education the Methodists accused the school of sectarianism. The board and faculty were dominated by Presbyterians. The Methodists wondered why, if the Methodists had 24,000 members in Indiana and the Presbyterians 5,000, did the Presbyterians have three colleges and the Methodists none. A public institution needed to be “diverse,” to use a modern term. Methodists petitioned the school for a Methodist professor. In a quote well-circulated, a trustee of the board, Samuel Bigger (later the governor of the state) laid the petition on the table and remarked there were no Methodists in the state that would be qualified to teach.

The president of the school, a Presbyterian clergyman, Andrew Wylie, was at the forefront of the sectarian wars. He had to fend off not only Methodists and members of the general public, but his own Presbyterian Church. At the time four different Presbyterian groups were in existence in Bloomington: Presbyterians, Associated Presbyterians (Secederes), Associated Reformed (Union) Presbyterians, and Reformed Presbyterians. In 1840 Wylie wrote a book *Sectarianism Is Heresy.*  Wylie and the school claimed to be non-sectarian. Wylie even opened the college chapel to “non-sectarian revival meetings” (an oxymoron if there ever was one). By 1842 a frustrated Andrew Wylie joined the Episcopal Church. Non-sectarianism university-style soon became secularism.

Methodists meanwhile had started their own school, Indiana Asbury (now DePauw University). Answering the question as to whether the school would be sectarian, the 28-year old president Matthew Simpson (later Bishop Simpson), in his inaugural address remarked that of course it would be sectarian, in the best sense of the word. It would have to be if it were Christian and Methodist. “The only man who is not sectarian either believers all things or believes nothing.”

Unfortunately, the present progressive movement trends toward Simpson’s description. It wants to believe all things (all religions are valid) and all persons are to be affirmed regardless of their beliefs or practices. At the same time it is ambiguous about core Christian truth.

To modern ecumenists the chaos of sectarianism reflects the Church at its worst. Sophisticated religious leaders despise religious wars. All groups, supposedly, lose in religious wars. The cause of Christ suffers.

But consider: in 1780 there was a church in America for every 1,143 inhabitants. The heaviest concentration of those churches was in New England. In 1870, according to census figures, there was a church in America for every 600 persons. The highest concentration of churches was in the West. In the states of Ohio, Indiana, Kentucky, Tennessee and Mississippi there was a church for every 432 inhabitants. These were the revival states and the sectarian states. They are called the Bible Belt today.

There is a case to be made for unity, but unity should never usurp the values of commitment to core doctrinal truth and personal moral integrity. Unity cannot be built on irreconcilable beliefs and the practices that flow from them. That is a recipe for chaos. In the present crisis, which has resulted from irreconcilable beliefs and the resultant contradictory practices, the question should be asked, what course of action will cause least harm to the cause of Christ. Some sort of amicable separation, or at least a plan whereby churches can be freed from a denominational identification that they feel undermines their perceived mission, must be considered.