**HAPPENINGS IN THE CHURCH**

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***UNITED METHODISTS BEHIND THE CULTURE?***

Jeremy Smith of First UM Church, Portland, Oregon, is scandalized that the United Methodist Church still believes in faithfulness in marriage and celibacy in singleness, and that marriage is between a man and a woman: “Why is this still in the books? In the Methodist church we have been behind the culture.”

What “culture” does Jeremy Smith have reference to? After the Revolutionary War the United States was in serious moral decline. The new land faced deism in the East and lawlessness in the West. Francis Asbury, however, saw only a bright future for Methodism and for the country. “O American, America, God will surely make it the glory of the world for religion.” The instructions to the newly formed church were visionary: save souls and reform the nation.

And so they did. The earliest Methodists railed against slavery, alcohol, gambling, and dancing girls (prostitution). They disdained fashion and ruffles and gold jewelry in order to live a simple life style. They even disdained extravagance in church buildings. The reason for this, following Wesley, was to identify with the poor. Of all the American groups the Methodists were probably the strongest supporters of the family. Every single *Discipline* from 1784 on in all the predecessor bodies of the UM church emphasized family and family worship. It was not until the 1980s, when progressives were buying into a new sexual agenda that the family was de-emphasized.

In large part because of United Methodists and its predecessor bodies, American culture has through most of its history reflected Christian values (though admittedly imperfectly). America has led the world in charitable giving, in the importance of education, in opposition against bribery and corruption, and in concern for the poor and dispossessed. It has stood for freedom and equality and opportunity. It has been known for reaching out to other countries. America has stood for that which brings hope to the rest of the world.

This Christian-influenced culture is obviously is not the “culture” that Jeremy Smith and progressives generally are enamored with. In a world of fast-changing values, new “cultures” are challenging traditional culture. Jeremy Smith’s remarks were made in support of a culture strongly influenced by a sexual revolution that has reached tsunami proportions. It is a culture reflected in Hollywood movies, in *People* magazine, in the entertainment world, in (usually biased) gender studies on campuses, and especially among what appears to be a growing scientism (an exaggerated trust in science to explain reality) and atheism. In this culture anything goes, at least anything that does not offend progressive sensitivities.

Several months ago I was in the nation of Turkey for a week. Every night on the Turkish television American movies were shown. The movies spewed out a steady diet of violence, killing, promiscuous sex, rape, and cursing, with vampires, werewolves, zombies, aliens, psychopaths, and evil spirits thrown in. The wealthy in these films were usually corrupt and crime was rampant. I remember no portrayals of stable American homes. Inasmuch as Christian faith was portrayed it was never in a positive light. It is no wonder persons in Muslims lands believe Americans are morally decedent.

Religious progressives obviously would not support everything that secular progressive culture wants to impose on us, but they seem to support that portion of the culture that is critical of Biblical and traditional sexual morality. What was once affirmed as positive--the Biblical orders of creation, and marriage as a mystery related to the relationship between Christ and His Church--is linked with hatefulness and discrimination.

The arguments for this are incredulous and usually take one of two forms:

1) God has revealed new truth to religious progressives that all manner of sexual expression is now acceptable and this new truth takes precedence over Scripture; and/or,

2) To be relevant in the modern world Christianity needs to adhere to the standards of inclusivity and freedom as reflected by our secular, enlightened culture.

Both of these arguments serve to invalidate historic Christian faith and are unacceptable to Christians.

What then is our response?

1. Our primary task as believers is to uphold Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. It is most unfortunate that at the present time obsession with sexual morality has distracted us from proclaiming the saving message of Jesus Christ, crucified for our sins and raised for our justification.

2. In Christian morality means is more important than ends. “Winning” is not as important in the present debate as conducting ourselves with respect and dignity for all persons. Unfortunately, the present atmosphere in society (and in the church) on matters of sexual morality is being poisoned by ugly accusations, bullying, disruption, ecclesiastical disobedience, demonstrations, intimidation, name-calling and plain old ugliness. Let it not be said that evangelicals are guilty of such methods.

3. We must never compromise on Scripture. It is difficult to exaggerate how seriously the Bible treats sins of sexual immorality. Teachings on sexual morality are not, like teachings such as food laws or holy days, addressed to customs of the times that are superseded by the New Covenant. Teachings on sexuality are linked to the Orders of Creation and with Covenant understandings (the mystery of marriage and the relationship of Christ and the Church) and they are repeated in both the Old and New Testaments. There are at least eight vice lists in the New Testament (Mark 7:21-22; Romans 1:24-31; I Cor. 6:9-10; Gal. 5:19-21; Col. 3:5-9; I Tim. 1:9-10; Rev. 21:8) and sexual immorality is included in every one of these.

4. We need to remember that for United Methodists to compromise with error on the matter of faithfulness in marriage and celibacy in singleness, would be to seriously blemish our connection with the Church universal. Progressives generally like to see themselves as “ecumenical” and in relationship with Christians all over the world. According to present statistics the denominations that have declared themselves supportive of gay marriage (Episcopalian, Presbyterian USA, Evangelical Lutheran, United Church of Christ, and Disciples) together represent less than 10 million members out of a national church membership of about 180 million members. That represents a paltry 6% of the nation’s denominational membership. Outside the United States there are probably fewer than 1% of the world’s Christians that would discard Scripture teachings on marriage and the family.

Within the past several weeks 34,000 African American churches which are part of the National Black Church Initiative have separated themselves from the Presbyterian Church USA after the Presbyterians officials changed its definition of marriage. The Black Church Initiative explained: “PCUSA’s manipulation represents a universal sin against the entire church and its members… In forsaking 2,000 years of Christian scripture and tradition PCUSA has forfeited the right to be a Christian entity in the body of Christ.” The Coalition calls on the Presbyterians to repent and be restored to fellowship.

Do we wish United Methodists to go the way of the Presbyterian Church USA? Do we wish to separate ourselves from Scripture and tradition and from other Christians not only in America but the world over in order to align ourselves with secular culture? We hope not.