

Did African Methodists Save Their Denomination or Perpetuate Its Bigotry?

Earlier this week, the United Methodists “rejected an effort by more progressive members of the global church to lift the denomination’s ban on same-sex marriage and LGBT clergy.”

Had the vote been left to American United Methodists, the new measure would have passed. But since it was a global vote, the conservative voices of United Methodists in Russia and, more importantly, throughout Africa, rejected this measure.

Should we commend these conservative voices for holding to plain biblical truth as historically affirmed by the Methodists? Or should we condemn them for perpetuating an un-Christian bigotry based on a misreading of Scripture?

In a paper titled, “How Do United Methodists Know a Sin When We See It?,” Catherine L. Kelsey wrote:

The cultures from which American Methodists formed their common sense were and are quite varied, north to south, east to west, rural to urban.

For example, using their civic common sense, Methodists in Denver, in 1864, celebrated the slaughter of Cheyenne and Arapahoe women and children at Sand Creek. But Methodists on the East coast, using their civic common sense, deplored the same event as a massacre. The theological texts that Methodist preachers had studied did not define transgression against God’s law sufficiently to provide one interpretation that made sense to Methodists in both cultures.”

How do we evaluate today’s divide in the Methodist church? Is the divide simply one of culture, without clear scriptural

support either way? Or can one side claim scriptural authority and historic affirmation?

Before the vote, which affirmed the Traditional Plan and rejected the One Church Plan, Rev. Tom Berlin, a “progressive” Methodist, warned that “you will be putting a virus into the American church, and it will make it very sick, and it will be sick quickly.”

He said, “Whether you like it or not, [gays and lesbians] feel that their church is exhibiting itself as being against gay people along with others.”

In contrast, after the vote, delegate Nancy DeNardo said, “The One Church Plan does not agree with the words of our Savior, and in so doing, deceives young persons into believing that same-gender marriage is OK with God when clearly it is not. There is danger to that not only to those being deceived but the deceivers as well.”

Who is right? Who is representing the heart of the Lord? Who is standing with Jesus and who is standing against him?

Nowhere was the contrast in opposing views clearer than in the contrast between Africa and America.

As reported in *The Washington Post*, “Jerry Kulah, head of the UMC Africa Initiative said he was sorry the church had spent so much time and money debating questions about homosexuality:

“The progressive groups are loud, but they don’t have the numbers,” he said. If the church had voted to affirm LGBT inclusion, he said, it would have become a “laughingstock” in Africa.

“I’m happy to go back to old ladies and old men in villages who received the Bible from missionaries and let them know that the Bible hasn’t changed,” he said.

“But Will Willimon, a retired Methodist bishop and a

prominent theologian at Duke Divinity School, said that preaching to the 'old' is a failure of the church.

"We're sending a signal we are here to minister to the spiritual needs of the elderly," he said, adding that he has trouble explaining this debate to his adult children.

He added, "The Traditional Plan is a misnomer. We really have nothing in our tradition to justify this sort of punitive, exclusionary mentality."

Again I ask, who is right? Does Kullah stand for historic, biblical truth and does Willimon stand against it, or is the opposite true?

Without a doubt, Kullah and those who voted against the One Church Plan voted for historic, biblical truth.

First, despite claims to the contrary, the Bible is quite clear on the subject of homosexual practice, regardless of the nature of the same-sex relationship. In all cases, homosexual relations are forbidden by God. In no cases are they justified or approved or blessed by Him. (For forthright and respectful dialogues on this subject, see [here](#) and [here](#).)

Second, contrary to Willimon's statement that "We really have nothing in our tradition to justify this sort of punitive, exclusionary mentality," the Methodist church has always held to a strong moral code, one that expressly forbade adultery, fornication and homosexual practice.

It is completely absurd to argue that now, without a shred of scriptural evidence to support the position, practicing homosexuals could be ordained and same-sex "marriages" recognized. Based on what biblical criteria? Based on what statements from John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, or the Methodist *Book of Discipline*?

Writing for *Christianity Today* in 1996, Don Thorsen noted

that, "Wesley, the founder of Methodism, affirmed the primacy of scriptural authority. But he also acknowledged the genuine, albeit secondary, religious authority of tradition, reason, and experience. By doing so, Wesley simply made explicit what is implicit in all theological reflection, even when it ostensibly is based on Scripture alone."

He asked, "Given this so-called quadrilateral of religious authority, how should Methodists—or any Christian interested in considering a breadth of relevant data—view homosexuality? Although Wesley did not specifically deal with the issue of homosexuality, his theological legacy provides a comprehensive and integrative way of evaluating it."

The article was titled "Revelation and the Gay Experience: What Would John Wesley Have Said About This Debate?", and it is quite relevant for the Methodist debate today.

After evaluating these four pillars of Methodism—Scripture, tradition, reason and experience—Thorsen gave his verdict on the major vote that had just taken place in the Methodist church, with outcomes similar to the vote this week. He wrote, "I applaud the decision of the United Methodist Church to reaffirm its stance that the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching. This affirmation not only conforms to Scripture, which remains the primary source of religious authority, [but] it also conforms to church tradition, logical reasoning and experience as understood from a Wesleyan perspective."

But, he added, "I also applaud the ongoing concern of United Methodists for the holistic well-being of homosexuals and for their civil rights. A Wesleyan approach not only lends itself to a comprehensive and integrative approach to homosexuality; it understands and treats people realistically and compassionately, because, as Mildred Wynkoop says, Wesley's theology is 'a theology of love.'"

Yes, if we are to be scriptural, we must be loving. Genuinely loving. Sacrificially loving. Loving as Christ loved. Absolutely. Without that, we are no better than religious hypocrites.

That's why Thorsen closed his article with these wise words: "Above all, Scripture tells us we are to love our neighbors and have compassion on those who struggle with temptations. Jesus called people to repentance, but He also astounded others by the compassion He demonstrated toward those caught in temptation and sin. Can it be said of us that we surprise others by the sympathy and compassion we extend toward homosexuals?"

This is the heart of the Lord, and ideally, this counsel would be followed by the whole Methodist church today.

But since the denomination is so divided, it will likely go the way of a major split, with the "progressives" breaking away and forming a new denomination. (The opposite would have likely happened had the vote gone in the other direction.)

If that split does take place, this is what you can expect: Those churches which affirm Scripture, with love, will grow and thrive. Those churches which seek to rewrite Scripture in the name of love will decline and die.

Watch and see.