

Book Notes

William B. Lawrence

**Methodism in Recovery: Renewing Mission, Reclaiming History,
Restoring Health**

2008. Nashville: Abingdon Press

United Methodists have been belaboring their ongoing decline in church membership and cultural influence in the United States virtually from the founding of the denomination in 1968. Two factors, however, may help to put this fact into proper perspective. First, if a wide angle lens is employed, Methodism looks remarkably healthy. That is, when the World Methodist Council meets, as Lawrence points out, it embraces participants from over 132 countries and represents more than seventy-five million people, a number that is even larger than the world-wide Anglican communion. Second, since a smaller percentage of Americans participate in worship now than at any time since the 1930s, the decline of United Methodism is not unique but is actually a part of a larger American cultural trend.

Making a distinction between rescue (“in the aftermath of an extreme event, the first response is rescue”) and recovery (“in the aftermath of a tragic event, [the] second phase is recovery”), Lawrence maintains that the recovery of the United Methodist Church will entail nothing less than a renewal of unity as well as the three criteria that constitute the church, namely, faithfully preaching the Word of God, duly administering the sacraments, and adhering to proper order and discipline. This broad prescription is particularized into sixteen themes among which include the following: 1) “Learning again how to define what ‘church’ is,” 2) “Changing the practices of discussion from the legislative to the theological” and 3) “Restoring the role of oversight to the episcopacy.”

Recognizing that the recovery of United Methodism will not likely occur until it not only rediscovers its message of redemption but also finds a mission worthy of its life and call, Lawrence rightly points out that four factors continue to pose problems for recovery so understood, namely, “the congregationalization of the church, the identification of American Methodism with the North American middle class, the acceptance of secular political categories as a way to understand the church, and the tendency to transmute the art of ministry into the management of ministry.”

Appreciating the universal nature of the gospel, Lawrence offers prescriptions that break out of the class-warfare models (often informed by Marxist analysis) that have been offered repeatedly by United Methodist leaders in the past. Along these lines he notes that “Jesus ministered to the rich as well,” a statement rarely intoned during Methodist morning worship. Beyond this, Lawrence argues that it will undoubtedly be helpful to Methodists to change the operative paradigm from the political to the theological. Indeed, a politicized gospel can easily become sectarian, limited, and in the end divisive. The gospel of Jesus Christ, however, is genuinely inclusive, that is, indicative of the universal love of God in which as the Apostle Paul states, “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” (Gal. 3:28 TNIV)

Lawrence concludes his analysis by noting that the way forward must entail the transformation of both the world and individuals, but that transformation always requires telling the truth—about God and about ourselves. As such this small volume is a helpful addition to the burgeoning problem/solution genre focused on the decline of North American United Methodism.

Charles Yrigoyen, John G. McElhenney, and Kenneth A. Rowe
United Methodism at Forty: Looking Back Looking Forward

2008. Nashville: Abingdon Press

Everyone knows that the United Methodist Church is in decline. Few, however, realize just how gray the denomination has become. In fact, according to this recent book by Yrigoyen and others, elders under thirty-five today represent less than five percent of the ordained clergy. And according to Larry Hollon the median age of a person in a United Methodist the pew is fifty-seven!

Aware of this unenviable predicament, Yrigoyen, McElhenney and Rowe set out to assess the future of American's second largest Protestant denomination by looking back at its forty year history. Established in 1968 through a union with the Evangelical United Brethren, the United Methodist Church in many ways is emblematic of the turbulent yet promising decade in which it arose. Indeed, after listing five culture currents from the sixties (Liberation, Inclusion, Autonomy, Participation, and Globalization), the authors set up a typology that makes this particular decade the gold standard. Thus, persons and groups are defined principally as either pro or anti-sixties. Anti-sixties folk, for example, are portrayed as those who view things in terms of “right and wrong.” Republicans, led by Newt Gingrich, so it is claimed, “ushered in an anti-sixties agenda for America.” Such a typology,

however, is tedious, inadequate and may even be prejudicial, since it routes readers down the well grooved paths of the social mores and political judgments that the authors so vigorously prefer. The sixties decade, however, was far more complicated than such a glib analysis can ever allow. It was marked by both good and bad, promise and tragedy. On the one hand, the Civil Rights Act was passed in 1964 which gave Afro-Americans the freedoms they richly deserved. On the other hand, the sexual revolution of this decade led to the cataclysmic rise of unwed motherhood which is one of the leading engines of poverty in this country even today.

Beyond preferred typologies the authors repeatedly employ prejudicial language that does not allow readers to come to their own seasoned (and more accurate) judgments. Thus, for example, the evangelical association for renewal in the United Methodist church known as “Good News” is painted as a “window closing” movement. Moreover, those who disagree with the social, political and theological judgments of these authors are swept aside as “Bible thumping” critics. Again, those protesting theologies that revel in divisive identity politics are described as “many-colored” while traditionalist theology is referred to quite simply as “black and white.” And as if this were not enough, layers of guilt by association are added to this mix as it is claimed that traditionalists “borrowed from the five fundamentals of Fundamentalism.” Hinting that traditionalist folk in the United Methodist church are “fundamentalist” (and many of them, by the way, are not) may actually be the moral equivalent of an ethnic slur. But what is a fundamentalist anyway? The gifted philosopher Alvin Plantinga in his book *Warranted Christian Belief* suggests that the definition of the term may actually tell us more about the user than to those it supposedly refers. As such, “A fundamentalist. . . is a stupid sumbitch whose theological opinions are considerably to the right of mine.” This seems to inform the usage in *Methodism at Forty* as well.

The chapters on Doctrine, Worship, Ministry and Mission lack depth and proper focus. Accordingly, the vital notion of the transformation of being that occurs through faith in Jesus Christ and that cleanses believers in holy love floats by these authors like a blur. Indeed, their attention is elsewhere, not on grace, holiness and beauty, but on the hot button social issues of the day as they mimic the political rhetoric of the left. To illustrate, they engage in special pleading and paint United Methodists as essentially being pro choice on abortion. Beyond this, special treatment is given to the controversial topic of homosexuality, and the reader quickly gets the sense that this is one of the leading themes of this book. In fact, there are more page references to homosexuality listed in the index than to any other topic and one more than even for John Wesley, himself!

In the end, this volume relates the story of the last forty years of United Methodism utterly from the perspective of the left, a perspective which at

times is confused with the center. But the United Methodist church is actually far more diverse than these authors have ever imagined. To be sure, another, far more accurate and accountable story needs to be told.

Scott J. Jones

Staying at the Table: The Gift of Unity for United Methodists

2008. Nashville: Abingdon Press

“These are difficult times for the United Methodist church,” so states the first paragraph of yet another book on the malaise of contemporary Methodism. Lifting up the theme of unity as the way forward (although equally as much and perhaps even more is written about diversity), Bishop Scott Jones wants to chart a course that avoids the extremes of both the right and the left to end up with what he calls (idiosyncratically) “the extreme center.”

Repeating the bromides that the United Methodist church should not split, Jones suggests that unity can arise from a common mission. The problem, of course, not identified by Jones, is that the United Methodist church cannot agree on its basic mission because beyond the vague assertion of “making disciples of Jesus Christ,” the church is actually rife with interest groups with all sorts of agendas, some of which, ironically enough, undermine holiness and purity, and therefore serious Christian discipleship as well. And though the Bishop bewails the loss of mission among many UM congregations that have become “internally focused” and therefore, “more of a club than a church,” he continues in that same exclusivist manner by failing to include many evangelicals in his analysis. To be sure, not one Asbury Seminary professor was invited to participate in the respondents section with its sixteen contributors, though according to the best estimates available, evangelicals constitute a full third of United Methodism. What’s more when groups are identified to be included in the ministry of the church (“We need Yankees [a disparaging term for Northerners] as well as Texans; we need seminary educated persons as well as part-time local pastors. We need women and men, African-Americans, Asians, Native Americans, Hispanic/Latinos/Latinas and Anglo folk,” there is not a single, specific mention of evangelicals at all, other than a vague reference later on to “conservatives,” whatever that means. Oddly enough, Jones vision includes identifying those who have body piercings and tattoos but, once again, not evangelicals. While the former should indeed be included in the circles of ministry, marked by holy love, so should the latter. This is not the extreme center, as Jones claims, but the leftist center.

Failing to find the unity of the church among its many peoples, Jones then turns his attention to doctrine which may yet hold the power to unite. After affirming the importance of Scripture, constitutionally protected standards of doctrine (such as Wesley's Sermons and Notes), the Book of Discipline, liturgy and hymnody, Jones then lifts up a number of essential doctrines of the church that embrace all of the following: "Trinity, including Christology, creation, sin, repentance, justification, new birth, assurance, sanctification, grace, mission." This is clearly a movement in the right direction though things quickly unravel as Jones identifies six divisive issues (Race and Gender, Scripture, Christology, Homosexuality, Global Nature, The Gift of Unity and Holy Communion). Indeed, not only does Jones label the view that we should judge persons not on the color of their skin but on their qualifications as extreme (he prefers an affirmative action that focuses on race—and gender) but he also maintains that the United Methodist church needs to be more accepting of lesbian, gay, bi-sexual and transgender folk. Demonstrating that his analysis is far more political than theological, the Bishop makes the additional claim that he does not "regard our teaching on homosexuality as an essential doctrine," not realizing, of course, that the doctrine of creation (listed as essential earlier) impugns, indeed militates against many homosexual practices when natural law as grounded in a created order is considered. Such a truth, of course, does not deny that homosexuals are people of sacred worth as the Book of Discipline clearly states, but that a sacred canopy can not be laid atop all homosexual behaviors without qualification.

Perceptive readers will likely come to the conclusion that a meta-narrative of identity politics, even political correctness, actually informs so much of the analysis of Bishop Jones. Though the language is often theological the argument is actually sociological and political, focused neither on the transcendent love of God nor on the moral law (as an expression of the *imago Dei*) but on groups, on the cacophony of voices currently in United Methodism clamoring for attention, rights, justice and what not. This is hardly a prescription for unity. These are indeed difficult times for the United Methodist Church.

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