

The Birth Pangs of United Methodism as a Unique, Global, Orthodox Denomination

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Introduction

After the Council of Jerusalem as reported in Acts 15, Luke tells us that the dispute between Paul and Barnabas was so contentious that they parted from one another. This little episode stands as a symbol of the turmoil at the end of the United Methodist General Conference in Portland. There is one crucial difference. The Council of Jerusalem did a deal on how to resolve the dispute on how to handle the conflict between Jews and Gentiles in the early church. The General Conference failed to end the conflict between traditionalists and revisionists on the contested issues in and around human sexuality. The delegates asked the bishops to appoint a commission to tackle the problems and left the door wide open on a specially called session of General Conference in 2018 or 2019. The contentious delegates, like Paul and Barnabas, parted from one another, waiting for another day to take up the dispute and hopefully resolve it once and for all.

Despite the decision to postpone action, the General Conference of 2016 was a watershed conference. The crucial change it made manifest was this: The United Methodist Church is no longer a contemporary North American, mainline, liberal Protestant denomination like the Episcopalians, Lutherans, Presbyterians, the United Church of Christ, and the like. It is a unique, global, orthodox Methodist denomination. This is conceptually and historically what is at stake. It will take years for this to sink into our ecclesial consciousness; and it will take at least another General Conference for the initial operational implications to be worked out on the ground. However, this is the truth of the matter. A whole new and surprising identity has emerged. The new reality will be resisted with relentless energy. Its agents and advocates will have difficulty believing their good fortune; its opponents will not go quietly into the night. However, this is where history is now moving.

It is important to forestall an immediate objection that will allow the articulation of a crucial premise that underlies this turn of events. Turn to any local church, say, in the suburbs of Dallas and, it will be said, folk will stare at you in incomprehension on the arrival of this news. They care little about the identity of The United Methodist Church. Moreover, decisions at the General Conference level are mere official statements that bear no correspondence with facts on the ground. Generalize from this observation and the observer will argue that nothing has really changed. The church essentially remains the same as before. The critical mistake here is to think merely in terms of sociological observations about identity. The crucial observation to make is this: one and only one body both represents and speaks for The United Methodist Church, namely, the General Conference. So anecdotal remarks about a local church, or

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seminary faculties, or national data, or even the Council of Bishops are beside the point. It is the General Conference and only the General Conference that speaks for the church as a whole. In this respect The United Methodist Church is ineradicably conciliar in nature. Moreover, the delegates to the General Conference are elected in terms of demographic allocation. They are literally the representatives, lay and clergy, of the church as whole. Thus even empirically the General Conference reflects the truth about reality on the ground. Parochial soundings of what may be happening at that level are significant in getting an initial impression; they are useless in settling the bigger questions about representation and identity. That said, let me turn to recent developments that provide relevant background music for what follows.

Progressive Developments

Consider what happened two years ago in some of the Annual Conferences. In the past, the elections for General Conference which take place in Annual Conferences have been held a year in advance; in some conferences the elections were moved up to two years in advance. Some perceptive leaders noted that storms were brewing and they needed more time to prepare, a judgment confirmed by the chaos that emerged at the General Conference of 2012. Last time much of the weeping and gnashing of teeth arose initially because the Judicial Council (the equivalent of the Supreme Court) rejected at the very last minute a Plan of Action that the bishops had sought to implement. They had spent years bringing it to perfection and bet the store on its execution. However, there was also the fallout from the aggressive effort to change the church's position on sexuality and the ensuing consequences for ordination. The events in and around this effort left many delegates stunned and deeply disoriented. On this score the reality has been this: there is no chance of change given the significant and increasing majority in favor of the standing teaching and practices of the church. The United Methodist Church is in truth a global church where delegates from outside the USA, like their Anglican cousins, are resolutely conservative. Teamed with conservatives from the USA, the vote against change has been secure. Thus it stood.

The year before these early elections had proved to be a dramatic one. On the revisionist side, several things happened. One leading bishop, a veteran of the Civil Rights era, performed a same-sex marriage in the heart of the South, in a bastion of United Methodism. The case was taken up by the Council of Bishops and was resolved in minimalist fashion by means of a carefully worded confession of contrition that permitted his explicit rejection of church discipline to stand without any significant reprimand. After promising to cease and desist he repeated the action in the run-up to the 2016 General Conference. Another bishop cleverly used a regulation on just resolutions to stop the trial of an offending elder in its tracks, and then announced that there would be no more trials. He had effectively found a way to nullify church law even more effectively than jury nullification or trivializing the price paid for breaking canon law. This practice has been the preferred option for those bishops and lawyers who want to avoid exercising their authority to convene church trials related to the performance of same-sex marriages.

In addition, various interest groups protested at connectional meetings, to the point where the agenda of the Connectional Table (an important forum of decision making) was changed and this led to a resolution that adopted the move to change canon law to fit the long-standing progressive agenda. There are solid reports that one of the bishops present claimed to have had a special revelation from the Holy Spirit to move in this direction. In time the Connectional Table

brought a resolution to General Conference that would effectively drop opposition to same-sex marriages and its related prohibitions for good. The platform for one more major push for change had been erected by one of the most important committees of the church.

Various elders, some of them very ill, defied church law by conducting same-sex marriages or unions and thus challenging the church to put them on trial. One died shortly afterwards and was celebrated as one of the great prophets and activists of the last generation. Most dramatic of all, a retired clergy member of what is now the Rio Texas Conference burnt himself to death in his home town of Grand Saline in East Texas in protest against a litany of social evils, including the refusal of The United Methodist Church to endorse the gay agenda. The national press and his allies have been oddly silent about the incident. He had originally planned to execute his plan on the campus of Southern Methodist University but out of his love and respect for the university changed his mind at the last minute. This was an entirely personal act rather than a corporate one and reflects a tragic dimension that is readily acknowledged by those who disagreed with him. Furthermore, just before General Conference this year several highly publicized gay-marriage ceremonies were either carried out or attended by scores of United Methodist clergy. They were clearly throwing down a gauntlet and daring the church to prosecute them.

The overall story is simple: those committed to change, after losing the debate and the vote yet one more time, doubled-down and went straight back to work. Given the stresses and strains, for many it is a godsend that General Conferences are only held once every four years. However, the institutional and canonical decisions of the church cannot be left on the sidelines of history.

The Hamiltonian Project

Perhaps the most significant development has come not from the progressive side of the church but from elsewhere. At the last General Conference two delegates from different mega-churches made the strange proposal that United Methodists should record the obvious platitude that not all United Methodists were agreed on the burning issue of the day; so they should record their agreement to disagree. On the surface, of course, this seems daft. The task of General Conference is not to record sociological platitudes but to make normative decisions. So either this really was daft; or it was a covert way to change the teaching and practice of the church on the sly. The effort failed; and many thought that was the end of it. It was in fact a trial run, a testing of the waters. It had sufficient legs for its leading proponent, Adam Hamilton, to read the situation positively as a signal to go right back to work, as United Methodist politicians are wont to do. He is now a crucial player in the debate about where United Methodism is headed.

Hamilton has been a rock-star within United Methodism, and deservedly so. He started a church in a funeral home aptly named the Church of the Resurrection. It now has over eighteen thousand members and is still going strong. He is a brilliant communicator and leader, a figure whose writings and DVD's are used all across the church. Increasingly, he is also becoming the face of United Methodism on the national stage. Everyone who knows him can attest to his extraordinary gifts, his passion for evangelism, his ability to lead, his unbounded creativity in meeting folk where they are, and his innovations in mission. On the personal level he is a man of singular piety and resolute friendship. Over the years there were signs of his evolving in the debate about same-sex marriage. That evolution is now complete. In a new book on scripture he did what he does best: he developed a popular case for his change of mind embedded in a wider

account of his vision of scripture. The arguments were not new; what is significant is the source; a prominent evangelical had changed course in public.

Others, of course, have done this. What makes Hamilton stand out is the political edge to his theological and pastoral change of mind. First, he argued the case from scripture, thus challenging his erstwhile evangelical and conservative colleagues at precisely the point where they want to make the case. He went for the crown jewels of the conservative apologetic. Second, he combined this move with an overt political campaign to make possible a local option where Annual Conferences and local churches could opt out of the default teaching and practice of the church as a whole. This is an exceptionally clever move on many fronts. It only requires a majority vote in the General Conference rather than a complex set of constitutional amendments that would be extremely difficult to pass. It is offered up as a third way beyond those labelled extremists on the left and the right, a line of argument that appeals instinctively to the moderation and good will of United Methodists as a whole. Most importantly, it deliberately targets the middle or center of the church that is being read as alienated and fed up with all the acrimony that most folk detest. Thus far Hamilton has struck a chord given the number of centrists who have rallied to his cause. They wobble when they try to work out the details but there is no doubting the attraction of his vision.

Looking back, it is easy to see what might have been coming. However, few, if any, predicted such a dramatic development. What makes this development even more interesting is that Hamilton, and his colleague-in-arms, Mike Slaughter, come out of the evangelical wing of United Methodism. They have been joined of late by Steve Harper who led the Florida campus of Asbury Theological Seminary and who in a poignant confession of faith also joined in the call for the adoption of the local option proposed by Hamilton. It would appear that he too has moved towards the progressive agenda on gay marriage. More interestingly, he has couched his change of mind ambiguously in terms of a personal revelation from the Holy Spirit vouchsafed to him in his Lenten devotions. What has emerged is a network of folk who are generally conservative on classical doctrine but revisionist on the gay agenda. This is nothing new in the wider evangelical community; it is new within United Methodism. What makes it significant is that it involved an aggressive political campaign launched two years ahead of the General Conference. Many conventional progressives signed on to the proposal with enthusiasm so the prospect of a whole new alignment was now on the table. Other progressives saw this as a betrayal of their principles but did not protest too loudly given the way it advances their cause.

The Evangelical and Traditionalist Appeal to the Bishops

Traditionalists and conservative evangelicals have certainly been alert to the ongoing efforts of progressives represented by their standard tactics; they were not asleep at the wheel.² Even prior to the move by Hamilton to seize the microphone, they were quietly beginning to network and think through what to do. They have had no illusions about the difficulties they

² There is no easy way to define the network of groups I identify here and hereafter as traditionalists, conservatives, evangelicals, orthodox, and the like. There is no monolithic conservative stream. It is an understandable but common mistake to lump being a conservative in theology with being a conservative in North American politics. To do this is to work with an entirely North American vision of United Methodism, the more general mistake I am at pains to eliminate in this essay. Thus it would be obviously mistaken to think that those who are conservative theologically in, say, most of Africa are conservative in the North American political scene. The same would apply to United Methodists in Russia. More generally, there will always be significant players who simply do not fit any taxonomy one may choose to use.

face. Some preferred to go back to work and shore up the loop holes in canon law. Some wanted to look seriously at separation and withdrawal. Some desired a more militant approach to the challenges involved; others have been resolutely committed to a moderate and irenic campaign. Yet others retreated into new forms of renewal and ministry. There has been general agreement that the house is on fire; the lightning had struck and the thunderstorms were here to stay. For the present no single leader like Hamilton has emerged; indeed there has been no desire for this, as most conservatives prefer to work together. However, they have taken notice of developments elsewhere. They have seen that things can change very quickly and that it is vital to act together rather than splinter into inept fragments. Their first move was to call upon the Council of Bishops to do two things: take responsibility for upholding the teaching and practice of the church; and fix the serious mistakes on governance that they have either tolerated or enacted. There was an air of sober realism in this strategy; the next step was dependent on what the bishops would do at their October meeting in 2014. Conservatives were not ready to move to any explicit talk on separation; in fact they have been and are divided on this score. The bishops' action was not in the least surprising: they did absolutely nothing.

It is worth pausing for a moment and asking why this should be so. After all, there are a significant number of bishops who would own that they are conservative; some of these have been funded in their education and supported in their elections by conservative interest groups. It would surely be a matter of simple courtesy to send a letter of acknowledgment together with appropriate sentiments of sympathy and understanding. Moreover, bishops are well aware that many of their biggest churches and therefore the funding for the Annual Conferences and for the general church are heavily dependent on these churches. Hence the silence and inaction is surprising on its face.

The Situation among the Bishops

Conservatives generally explain the situation stoically by noting that the bishops are themselves hopelessly divided and hence pretty much dysfunctional when it comes to the exercise of their ministry. There is no doubt truth in this explanation. However, it does not begin to tell the whole story for it ignores the possibility of a remarkable competence at work. My own speculative sense as garnered from appropriate testimony is that the council of bishops is in reality governed by a network of progressive bishops who are very effective at controlling who gets promoted and what gets done within the council of bishops.³ The bishops concerned are mostly drawn from the North East and the North Central Jurisdictions and can readily depend on the support from the Western Jurisdiction. They are very nice in person but equally are very shrewd politicians who mentor those who share their agenda after episcopal elections, who quietly marginalize those who dissent, who steer the business and work of the council in their direction, and who readily detect external opposition from the beginning in order to make any opposition ineffective. They also have created an atmosphere of intimidation that effectively silences potential conservative opponents. Add to this the fact that they liaise with progressive caucuses both within and without General Conference and we can readily see that far from being

³ The story is, of course, far more complicated than noted here. Thus for years the Council of Bishops has seen itself as a closely knit family, insisting on consensus with respect to their decisions and on confidentiality with respect to their deliberations. However, this has been under severe strain since the famous decision on the part of a group of bishops at the General Conference in Denver in 1996 to break ranks and dissent from the general teaching of the church on sexuality. This decision sent shock waves through the Council.

dysfunctional, the council of bishops is governed by a network of effective politicians who know in their bones exactly what to do in order to further their agenda and to undercut opposition. If we want to speak of dysfunction, then this is a penultimate cause of the silence of the bishops; the dysfunction is itself caused by very effective action taken by bishops who are always able to rely on plausible denial whenever folk seek to identify the underlying difficulties in the Council of Bishops. Failing denial, they can always appeal to some vague conspiracy theory or ad hominem attack to carry the day.

In these circumstances the silence of conservative bishops is readily understandable even if in its own way it is deafening. In part they are team players who want to go along and not cause unnecessary trouble; there is enough division without explicitly causing more. In part there is an asymmetry between the disposition of traditionalists and revisionists; the latter see no problem in forging ahead and fixing what they see as the moral failures of the church in their inclusivist agenda; the former value unity and collegiality first and foremost. Moreover, standing out of line and speaking up for the doctrine and discipline of the church in an overt way on the controversial issues involved would readily get them in trouble with their district superintendents, their staff, and more generally in their home conferences. This could kill what they want to achieve on their watch. Seen as a whole, they are between a rock and a hard place. They may stand with the present teaching of the church but if they make a fuss about it they will be seen as dividers and their effectiveness in ministry may go up in smoke. All these factors would explain their abject failure in harvesting the fruits of the various conservative renewal groups over the last fifty years. Equally, it would explain why they have failed to form any kind of identifiable group within the Council of Bishops and why they have utterly failed to reach out in any serious way to conservative interest groups. It is highly unlikely that this will change absent a dramatic and public crisis in which the future unity of the church becomes an unavoidable issue.

The Third Way Option and its Potential Fallout

The generally perceived trigger event is the changing of the church's prohibitive language on homosexual practice. Within the conservative ranks of clergy and laity, this is the point of no return, the moment when the frog realizes that the water is beginning to boil and signal their end. Sometimes, mention is made of the election of an openly partnered or married bishop, drawing on the analogy of Bishop Robinson in the Episcopal Church. However, the latter analogy misreads the status of bishops in The United Methodist Church and ignores the possibility that this could be done against the canon law of the church rather in conformity with it. So a change in the language is rightly seen as a watershed development because it would signal the fact that the church has changed its doctrine and practice in sexual ethics. However, it is easy to be naïve at this point and underestimate the ingenuity of the progressive leadership. Thus most of the proposals for change involve a form of wording that would declare church teaching to stand either as historically significant or even normative, but allow a conscience clause to opt out on the part of conferences and local congregations.⁴ This muddies the waters considerably. The crucial issue can be put in terms of a subtle distinction. The United Methodist Church could legitimize, say, same sex-marriages without fully endorsing them; it could permit same-sex marriage without mandating it. Aside from causing confusion in certain quarters, this postpones any final decision and gives cover for conservatives to pause before they would think of

⁴ This has been the position recently adopted by The Church of Scotland.

departing the church. At the end of the day, however, it is precisely the official legitimization of same sex marriages and related practices that that represents the line in the sand for them. They cannot in conscience agree to this proposition however it may be presented to them.

To be sure, this is not how many would interpret the adoption of this kind of proposal. They would be aided in this by the national media. The latter will read any moderation of the current position as a victory for the progressive side and a confirmation of the view that The United Methodist Church is a mainline, liberal denomination with a network of evangelical dissenters causing trouble. Thus I would not exaggerate the way in which the perceived trigger event of changing the language would cause confusion and inaction. However, United Methodist leaders and delegates to General Conference are exceptionally adept at forging moderate resolutions that harbor radical consequences. Equally, they are brilliant at crafting rationales that are soft and alluring. Thus any change has been presented by its proponents as a wonderful compromise that should leave every reasonable person satisfied. Equally, they have astonishing ability to develop the rhetoric to move things along in public. Thus moderate changes have been presented as an irenic third way beyond the terrible extremes that stalk the church and nations; it has even been presented as a unique gift that all churches should emulate as they seek to negotiate the most pressing moral and theological issue of this generation.

Even if the critical turning point were reached in a way that all could see what is happening, conservatives would have found themselves confronted with the challenge of what to do in response. As things stand, the desire has been for all to stand together. The immediate attitude was to prepare effective legislation for the General Conference of 2016 that would strengthen the conservative position and halt the nullification of church law. The more optimistic hoped, if not believed, that the *Book of Discipline* would not be changed; others were less sure that things would stand as they were. Neither option was especially heartening. Either things would stand as they were or be strengthened and the progressives would simply redouble the efforts to nullify in practice the relevant teaching and regulation; or The United Methodist Church would at a minimum legitimize same sex-unions, gay ordinations, and the like. The former decision would tend to leave things as they were but with the likelihood that conservatives would seek ways to escrow apportionments in special accounts and thus send a message of continued disapproval; some clergy and churches would reach the point where they would simply leave with or without their property. Some laity would remain as members but refuse to support the budgets of their local churches. Others would simply leave. Disintegration and fragmentation would lurk at the door.

The latter decision (changing the language of the *Book of Discipline*) would precipitate a much larger effort to find an exit strategy with as many assets and property as possible. Folk with the relevant expertise have been pondering how best to develop an exit strategy both publicly and privately. The most public option was to develop different jurisdictions, say, with a special jurisdiction for progressives; or alternatively, with two or more separate jurisdictions to accommodate different commitments in doctrine and polity. These are precarious options, not least because even with the best intentions any kind of separate jurisdiction will be seen as the work of the devil as witnessed in the existence of a special jurisdiction for African-Americans. There is no way of avoiding the odium of segregation; this, together with the constitutional changes involved, was enough to make this option highly unlikely. A more privately canvassed strategy was to make use of a current section in the *Book of Discipline* that permits exit under certain restricted circumstances. The danger in the latter case is that congregations who exit will simply become local congregations disconnected from other United Methodist congregations, an

option tried and funding wanting in the past. So the more likely scenario was that a way would have to be found to land in a new Methodist ecclesial body yet to be defined and organized. Plans are already in place to make this a preliminary reality. Put pastorally, there will be a place where those who currently uphold the teaching and practice of the church can find a home. It would be a relatively easy operation to make this explicit and generally effective.

Observers may wonder why this matters. This takes us to the deeper ecclesial and cultural issues that are in the neighborhood. The crucial fact is that Methodism makes no coherent sense once it dissolves into a congregational polity. So what is at stake is the identity of Methodism theologically. Two facts confirm this observation. All sides have continued to stay together as best they can; and most leaders have been emphatic at preserving connectional unity. This is the salient feature that still stands among the many divisions that can be cited. United Methodists are inescapably connectional in orientation and polity. One need not dig deeper into the ethos and practices of the tradition to prove this; it is a secure platitude. Even traditionalists fed up with the problems of connectonalism and ready to abandon it know that this is a crucial marker of their identity. Whatever happens, most traditionalists and progressives will seek to maintain it.⁵

Progressive and Conservative Understandings of Methodism

Beyond this there is significant disagreement on the nature of Methodism. Progressives generally see their denomination through the lens of the early developments in the early nineteen seventies when Albert Outler led the church into a vision of pluralism, inclusivism, and internal tolerance in the General Conference of 1972.⁶ In keeping with their self-understanding as rational and progressive, progressives deploy the adoption of scripture, tradition, reason, and experience, as a means of cultivating person-relative spiritual development and church-relative conversations. Without openly saying so, they effectively treat the church as an academic-therapeutic seminar where there is tolerance for differing opinions. For the most part, they have wanted to make room for differences in teaching and practice. However, pluralism is incoherent; it cannot accommodate those who reject the ecclesiology it embodies. Moreover, in the end churches have to make up their minds on contested issues; inclusivism is fine until irreconcilable differences appear; and tolerance by its nature cannot show tolerance to perceived discrimination and bigotry when it impinges on the freedom to enact radical change. In reality contemporary progressives see their proposed changes not as one more option but as essential to their understanding of gospel and scripture; they see it as minimally legitimate and maximally mandatory. Pluralism has been shelved for the moment, overtaken by its own incoherent internal logic.

All sides were agreed until recently that progressives within United Methodism were going to stay until they got their way. Ideological, theological, and prudential considerations combine to make any idea of separation on a large scale practically impossible. They have already set themselves apart as the true church in the councils of the denomination by donning

⁵ It is, of course, true that for many connectionalism seems to be a dead letter when large local churches now choose their own senior pastors, when appointments of clergy are made in terms of local church theology, and when many are happy to turn to a more congregational network of practices. However, these developments should not be exaggerated.

⁶ Outler changed his mind about his achievements later in life as is visible in his papers from the 1980's but these are buried in Bridwell Library at Southern Methodist University and are not generally known. I lay out the evidence for this claim in my "United Methodism, Ecumenism, and Ecclesiology," unpublished.

their own dress code as a badge of a new identity. Many of them display all the hallmarks of the sects of old in zeal and bigotry but do not have the courage to leave the church from which they are radically alienated. They appear all too ready to tear down without possessing the wisdom to rebuild. They covet the riches, resources, identity, and institutions which were developed by those whom they would now gladly excoriate were they living among us. There has been too much to lose all around for them to think of leaving, even though there is much anxiety about how long it will take to implement their proposals; they have been remarkably resilient in staying the course and rallying their supporters. They possess endless moral zeal married to a Pharisaical conception of their own righteousness. They represent the typical second-generation reformers who take a hard-won virtue – the extension of genuine civil rights, for example – and turn it into a vice that they pursue regardless of the merits of the case and regardless of the consequences for the body they seek to serve and claim to love. Their intellectual mediocrity shows up in their naïve conviction that gays and lesbians will rest content with gay marriage as the way ahead; even a superficial reading of the burgeoning field of queer theology and ethics would disabuse them of this illusion. Those who are aware of what lies up ahead remain strategically silent on what the future holds. Antinomianism lurks at the door.

This complex context provides the framework for understanding the persistent use of protests. One leading figure promised the ready use of ‘piss and vinegar’ to ensure that her progressive agenda would win the day. The constant threat of vigorous protest is, of course, borrowed from the secular political arena. Bishops who preside at General Conference have to explain what is going on to delegates from outside the United States. The general effect of protests is to engender shame, fear, anxiety, anger, resentment, and guilt within the body politic. The negative consequences are manifold. The threat and reality of protests create circumstances in which it is very difficult to make rational decisions; the outcome is the development of intellectual vices like credulity, emotionalism, naiveté, ridicule, impulsive reflection, gullibility, oversimplifications, sophistry, and the like. The crucial issue is that protests signal the end of serious conversation and rational deliberation among delegates. This is recognized by the fact that presiding bishops regularly disallow applause during the regular debates on the floor, a long-standing admonition in Methodist history and tradition. Furthermore, the use of aggressive protests dovetails nicely with the constant use of slogans, the ad hominem attacks on opponents, the use of multicolored stoles to separate the righteous from the unrighteous, and the use of pious hymnody as a form of spiritual blackmail. Traditionalists simply have had to buckle down, and grin and bear it; there is nothing else they can do and they recognize that the alternative of calling in the police would simply make matters worse.⁷ They could also see that the protests, while entirely legal in terms of state law, called into question afresh the efforts to embody the pluralism initially envisaged by Albert Outler.

Conservatives were never really happy with pluralism, even though some of them naively accepted it initially as creating official space for their convictions and practices. Over time they recognized that the relevant legislation adopted in 1972 was provisional; even though the content of the Constitution was eviscerated by contemporary reinterpretation, it left the Constitution of 1968 which offered an alternative vision of the church unchanged. They could always hope for a course correction down the road. Any course correction had, of course, been set aside to deal with the ongoing crisis around sexual morality; so they had to live with the ethos and self-

⁷ Imagine what would happen in General Conference if conservatives and traditionalists hired a jazz band from New Orleans and had it lead a march, complete with a coffin signifying the funeral of The United Methodist Church, on to the floor of General Conference. It is not likely that they would make it into the building.

understanding of the original pluralist creed as best they can. At a personal level they reject pluralism in favor of a vision of the church that remains faithful to divine revelation enshrined in scripture and tradition. At bottom they find it well-nigh impossible to live in a church that rejects the truth of revelation. In this they stand with ancients like Athanasius and Maximus who insist that theological principle and truth are primary in the life of the church. They have had no illusions of the difficulties of separating and founding a new denomination; their sense of loyalty to local congregations and even conferences can run extremely deep; their fears about how bad things could be for them are depressingly real.

What is now emerging is the unraveling of United Methodism's founding creed as developed in the immediate aftermath of its creation in 1968 and the crucial actions taken at the General Conference in 1972. The experiment adopted in 1972 is now running its course towards its fateful denouement. Of course, hosts of ordinary United Methodists have little or no interest in this kind of discussion. They tend to be theologically indifferent; or they operate informally with brittle summaries of Methodist teaching and tradition across the years. The deep challenge to traditionalists and conservatives has been to think through not just what they want to preserve despite the current difficulties but what they want to embody in any new ecclesial expression of Methodism. Up until now they have been content to hold the line and see where things would fall out after the General Conference of 2016. Some worried that the current ecclesial scene is in fact exceptionally negative. They worry about the spiritual effects of the wider culture of their church for the rational sheep for which Christ died. No doubt this is one reason why they shield their local congregations from developments elsewhere in the church.

The Surprising Success of Traditionalists and Conservatives

Conservatives went to the General Conference of 2016 as confused and uncertain as everyone else. The first couple of days were cliff-hangers. The group responsible for organizing General Conference proposed a special rule, Rule 44, that would permit the Conference to depart from *Robert Rules of Order* and allow certain items (sexuality was the intended item) to be taken up in table fellowships with reports being brought back to a small group who would then forge the legislation to be brought to the floor.⁸ Those in favor saw this as a new way to tackle a contentious issue; those against saw it as a wily attempt to forestall a conservative effort to strengthen the standing teaching and practice of the church. In the end Rule 44 was roundly defeated. This set the table for an extraordinary round of success for the conservatives in terms of elected bodies (especially the Judicial Council, where they ran the table) and in the subcommittees, which are effectively the gate-keepers for matters reaching the floor for corporate action in the second week. In the latter case the conservative basically defeated every effort to present some kind of third way as favored by self-proclaimed moderates. By the end of the week a sea-change had taken place inside the organs of the church: traditionalists and conservatives were on their way to reorienting the internal commitments of The United Methodist Church.

⁸ Robert's Rules of Order were originally developed to enable church assemblies from the smallest to the largest to make decisions that reflected the mind of the body as a whole and that prevented clever or powerful minorities from imposing their will on the church. It is no accident that they are widely used. It is easy to complain about their implementation, not least when the bishops who preside are unsure of how to apply them and when delegates clog the flow of debate with endless points of order and points of clarification. The problems that the Rules address, however, are real; the alternatives that are sometimes canvassed are far from bearing the promises that are proffered on their behalf.

For revisionists the news could not have been worse. It was not difficult to detect the sorrow and even despair in the discourse and their demeanor. The hopes that they had entertained were dashed and only insiders know what contingency plans were being considered. The orthodox train was barreling down the tracks and all they could really hope for was that someone could get their hands on the emergency brake and stop it reaching the station. This is exactly what happened. How exactly this got off the ground is far from clear. What initially happened was the Bishop Ough, the President of the Council of Bishops, in a moving speech brought a short statement to the Conference basically stating that the church was in crisis but without offering any way forward. This was picked up by the Conference who then asked the bishops to meet and tackle the challenge. Consequently, they brought a recommendation that through a series of confusing votes was eventually adopted by the Conference. My clear impression is that that the Council of Bishops looked at the real possibility of schism in the eye and were deeply disturbed. Not unnaturally they played for time by asking for the appointment of a Commission to explore the relevant issues and to allow for the option of a specially called session of the General Conference in 2018 or 2019. The vote in favor won by a small margin of twenty three and there were persuasive rumors that some thought they were merely receiving the relevant report rather than adopting it for action. This could have led to a call for reconsideration but this was rejected, not least on the grounds that it would spell the end of other votes on crucial issues that delegates wanted to take up.

The Intervention of the Bishops

The content of the Bishops' recommendation has essentially three foci. First, it asks for a review of all the material related to sexuality with a view to potential revision. Second, it calls for a commitment to the unity of the church. Third, it seeks for a moratorium on trials even as it insists that the regulations of the *Book of Discipline* be enforced.

My own reading of the document is that it is clearly loaded in favor of the progressive agenda so that in effect it is an effort to put the option of a third way back on the table. Thus it halts the traditionalist train in the short term. It has given some solace to the revisionists even as it has disappointed the traditionalists who were prepared to continue the journey to an assured victory in General Conference. The latter are happy that the teaching and practice of the church has not changed and have essentially decided to go back to work again. They will be fairly represented in the Commission to be appointed by the bishops even as they remain skeptical of yet another round of dialogue and debate. They are also implementing plans to ensure that their constituencies stays the course and will not be left to flounder in confusion. Because of their careful preparations over the last four years it is fair to say that the leadership has already mapped most if not all of the relevant options and made contingency plans.

The critical problem in the mandate for the Commission is that it is pragmatically incoherent. On the one hand, it calls for a revision of every single statement of the Book of Discipline on sexuality. On the other hand, it calls for the maintenance of unity. The former represents the agenda of the progressives. It is astonishing how bold and unvarnished it is in content. Where one would have expected a more moderate mandate that would revisit the debate, and allow all sides to make their case afresh, it unapologetically tilts entirely in one direction. The latter call for unity strikes a chord with the heartbeat of United Methodism both in terms of its classical commitment to uphold unity as a crucial feature of the church and in terms of its longstanding commitment to organic unity in its work in the ecumenical movement.

However, the first goal is hopelessly incompatible with the second. If the official teaching and practice of the church is changed as envisaged there is absolutely no way that unity can be preserved. Anyone with a minimum of social intelligence can see this. Such a change will make it impossible for many on the conservative side of the debate to remain within the church. The violation of conscience is so severe that they will have to secure a home elsewhere.

Perhaps this is why conservatives are so readily identified as extremists committed to schism and division. This shifts the blame in a way that conceals the truth of the matter. Pressing for revision will have the inevitable consequence of dividing the church. This is how the causal nexus works; secure revision and the unity of the church evaporates. It is astonishing how few participants are blind to this obvious maxim. At the end of the day, to be sure, it does not matter where one lays the blame for disunity. Each side can make a case for blaming the other, even though the balance of blame must surely lie on those who are determined to undo the teaching and practice of the church by what they euphemistically call ‘biblical disobedience’. The reality is that there is no way that the first two mandates of the Commission can be secured; executing the first mandate will ensure the division of the church; executing the second mandate will ensure the rejection of the first. No amount of appeal to biblical principles about unity can undo the causal factors contingently in play.⁹ This is the crucial feature that dooms any third way of holding change and unity together.

No Future for a Third Way

The revisionists will certainly be keen to look for some kind of North American exceptionalism either in terms of a new Central Conference that would have its own version of the *Book of Discipline* or that would offer the creation of distinct jurisdictions inside The United Methodist Church that would allow for differing views on gay marriage and ordination. Given the rejection of these options in terms of a third way, it is highly unlikely that these would pass at any future General Conference, special or otherwise. The votes are simply not there even though there will be aggressive efforts to go down this road.

Even so, some traditionalists and conservatives might take a second look at the option of differing jurisdictions within the one church. Here is why. First, it would release them in the short term from having to deal with the cultural and ecclesial obsession with sexuality even as they develop appropriate ministries to tackle the challenges this obsession highlights morally and pastorally. More generally it would provide space to tackle the deleterious effects of the current culture on the spiritual life of members and speed up efforts to deal with smaller local churches which are in bad shape. Second, it would mean they could plant new congregations across the nation without having to worry about conference boundaries. Third, it would put wind behind their significant network of theologians to tackle the questions that currently call out for attention, not least how best to improve on the doctrinal treasures of the denomination. Within this, serious efforts could be marshaled to develop the apologetic resources to deal, say, with the challenges of Islam and the New Atheism. Fourth, it would enable them to stand shoulder to shoulder with other Christian groups who want to preserve the church’s teaching on marriage

⁹ Even so the appeal to unity despite its initial attraction is much too vague and underdeveloped to carry much weight in the debate. Naturally, most will pay lip service to it, but even unity has been co-opted as a political weapon in the debate as seen in effort to identify opponents of the progressive agenda as schismatic. Moreover, given that the whole drive to organic unity is now not just brain dead but buried in a new round of divisions within the Western church, the plea for unity carries next to no conviction.

within a hostile culture. Thus it would sharpen and embolden a much more robust witness in the public domain than is currently possible because of its increasingly shrill and totalitarian ethos. Finally, it would make possible a concerted, if not corporate, effort to engage in evangelism across the nation and elsewhere. If need be, they could reestablish a department of evangelism to tackle the tough challenges that have to be faced in this arena. There is a desperate need, for example, for catechists and presbyters in parts of Africa; many new converts are deprived of the sacraments because the business of the General Conference cannot get its work done due to the dysfunction that is on display. The problem as already indicated is that jurisdictionalism is not a likely option given its associations with racism and the constitutional changes that would be required. So what I have just outlined is a mere thought-experiment. I do not think that it will be adopted in the end.

What I have effectively argued just now is that any robust version of the third way and of continuing unity is not a likely possibility. We will see various permutations but none of these will succeed. What was faced head on publicly and for the first time in this General Conference was the real possibility of schism. This is the terrifying reality that is now before the church and it cannot be postponed indefinitely.

A Possible Exit for Progressives

A second possibility is that the revisionists will now want to exit the denomination, given their resounding defeat. One of them is reported to have tweeted that what was in store for them was a stay of execution. This will not, of course, be the general public stance in that marshalling supporters calls for a more optimistic analysis of what has happened. On this scenario, that of exit, those who cannot live with the doctrine and discipline of the church would be offered a generous package of separation. Traditionalists and conservatives would then take up in earnest the wider reform and renewal of the denomination. For those conservatives who have wanted schism for some time, this will be a tough pill to swallow for the toxic effects of living in an alienated environment will take time to be healed. We would be looking at a cross-generational work of change that would be daunting in the extreme. The major argument in its favor is that it would require the minimal of constitutional change to execute this option.

Contrary to initial impressions over time progressives might well warm up to the option of exiting. Progressives will not die on the vine should United Methodism fall apart. The United States is an inescapably religious nation, despite what the paranoiac New Atheists may say. Progressives are simply seeking to minister to a culture that wants enough accommodation to the gospel and to spirituality that will not interfere too radically with its own favored interests and ideologies. Its leaders are at times brilliant in mastering the marketing techniques to keep themselves in business. Its theologians can sometimes appear to be adept chaplains to its intellectual elites, even though they readily make this accusation against their opponents. There is no reason why the progressive tradition should not continue to exist and in some local cases thrive in the foreseeable future. Given future autonomy such prospects are likely to increase rather than decrease. Conservative predictions of doom and gloom are misleading half-truths. There is a future for progressives even though it is likely to be one of solid survival rather than immediate decline.

To objective observers it will surely appear obvious that exiting would also be the honorable thing to do. After trying for over forty years to persuade the church to change its ways, and failing again and again to secure this goal, there naturally comes a time when a

principled response requires that one face up to such failure. Of course, progressives will argue that this is an unreasonable reading of the situation. Their vocation, they will say, is to stand firm in the prophetic tradition and keep going to things change. This is the case in secular politics; and it also applies, it will be said, in ecclesiastical politics. However, this principle has its limitations. One can only carry it so far before it becomes exaggerated and inappropriate. In the current situation it assumes that progressive truly are prophets, a claim that has to be tested like any other prophetic claim. It is by no means secure. Furthermore, the aggressive effort to bring about change by non-rational or even anti-rational means shows no respect for the covenantal commitments of the community as a whole. It represents a destructive strategy that should make its advocates reconsider. There surely comes a point when failure to persuade the body as a whole has to be taken with radical seriousness. Integrity requires that one step out and form the appropriate new institutions that represent the changes that are sought. History has its own way of indicating whether such developments represent the truth or become one more dead-end that is erroneous.

It must also be said that the prospect of leaving will be extremely difficult for the leaders of the progressive constituency. They have been predicting success now for every General Conference since at least the nineteen-nineties. Whatever their private reservations, they have held out hope that the teaching and practice of the church would eventually change. Many younger progressive clergy were depending on such hopes being fulfilled. The progressive leadership now have to deal with the failure to predict what will happen, a failure that may well unsettle their own confidence as leaders, as well as undermining the enthusiasm of their followers. Hence they will need time to abandon the false hopes that have been crucial to their success to date and to work their way through to a new consensus. Given these realities the appointment of a commission gives them indispensable breathing space. One wag described the creation of a special commission as ‘dog-paddling in the middle of the Rubicon’. More accurately, it gives progressives a last chance to tackle the difficulties that are now publically acknowledged. Much will depend on how far progressives are willing to come to terms with the new reality that has emerged and that some of them in their heart of hearts feared because of the changing fortunes for their cause in the church as a whole.

One can be forgiven for thinking that at the end of the day progressives are not likely to take up this option. They have simply too much to lose in terms of finances, identity, resources, national politics, and long-held aspirations. It is already clear that they will intensify their efforts to flaunt the regulations of the *Book of Discipline*, for example, in ordaining those currently prohibited. We are in for a tumultuous period of disobedience and even canonical turmoil. This will only increase the pressure to work for a plan of separation.

Fresh Hope for an Orthodox Version of United Methodism

A big tent United Methodism of traditionalists, evangelicals, friendly fundamentalists, charismatics, evangelical Catholics, and middle-of-the-roaders should lay hold of the brighter future that waits then on the other side of the developments that are now inevitable. This is especially true of the large number of clergy in the middle of the pack who have been set aside as bishops wistfully promote younger clergy in hopes that this will slow down if not halt numerical decline.

We simply have to wait and see what will happen over the next couple of years. One thing is clear: even as the bishops are likely to want to postpone a decision indefinitely, their

credibility is at stake if they do not live up to the expectation they have created. To use a hackneyed platitude: they cannot kick the can down the road one more time. They will have to face the real possibility of division; the various plans that have been quietly worked on behind the scenes will now have to be explored. No doubt they will try to keep the option off the table as long as possible. They will want more study and testimony meetings. Yet it is perfectly clear that no new evidence is going to show up or that some new moral or theological axiom is going to alter the outcome of the debate. The dialogue has gone on long enough. Deployed yet one more time it cannot but appear as one more effort not just to play for time but to wear down the opposition. Conservatives and traditionalists will simply have to be patient and explore what emerges. They will have their own challenges in reaching consensus even as they confer together on the best way forward. They are in no mood to abandon their principles; and they will not be distracted either by internal disagreements or by pressure to compromise. They are right to be quietly vigilant and persistent. They, more than any other group, are best placed to face the likelihood of division.

Whatever happens, no one should underestimate the positive prospects that lie ahead for the traditional wings of United Methodism. The focus on the situation in North America is deeply misleading at this point. Most of United Methodism outside the United States does not merely represent a significant voting block; it constitutes a vibrant form of living faith and witness that will find a way to flourish with or without its partners in the West.¹⁰ So too do the many thriving United Methodist congregations and networks inside The United Methodist Church. These units could readily form the nucleus of a whole new version of Methodism that I have identified already as a global, orthodox United Methodist denomination. In time this could be expanded to take in through stages the many Methodist churches, say, in Asia and South America that would be keen to join in a larger unit of Methodism. It could also provide a home for smaller Methodist bodies across the world like Cuba or Ireland. This prospect would be a live one whether we face the exit of progressives or whether we have some kind of complex division in the near future.

United Methodists are by nature a friendly, reasonable, and gracious people. In their own inimitable way they have taught and lived the gospel and the great faith of the scriptures in effective and inspiring ways. They have their own unique canon of saints, prophets, sages, evangelists, and teachers. Given their commitment to holiness in all its forms they can be acutely aware of their sins, their wrong-turns in history, and their stupid mistakes in polity and ministry. Times of crisis all too readily bring the latter to the surface. Yet times of crisis also bring to the surface deeper insight, wiser boldness, and more resolute creativity. The critical wisdom now surfacing is the theological challenge that faces the whole of Christian tradition. Given the current convulsions in Rome there is no safe place to which to run and hide. Going off into the wilderness may bring temporary relief but it does not amount to a strategy for survival,

¹⁰ The existence of the large number of African delegates present a serious dilemma for those opposed to their agenda. On the one hand, there has been much talk about the need for inclusion, especially for those who are poor and in need of financial help. Thus the natural tendency should be to give them a privileged place in the life of the church. On the other hand, progressive delegates find their views on sexuality highly offensive. And they resent that they readily depend financially on the riches of their North American colleagues. One visitor to the General Conference captured the dilemma nicely when he spoke to me about being in favor of increasing the budget for theological education in Africa in the hopes that this would open the door for the introduction of Process theology and Liberation Theology. He had no idea how patronizing his comment was. At times one can detect the straightforward judgment that folk from Africa are simply not up to speed intellectually to see the merits of the progressive case.

much less dynamic flourishing. At stake are the prospects of heresy and apostasy. Put differently we are facing the challenge of a fourth schism in the history of the church.

Standing Firm in the Fourth Schism of Church History

Think of the issue this way. In the fourth century, the church faced a massive challenge in and around the Arian controversy when what was at issue was its Christology and doctrine of God. In the sixteenth century, the church faced a critical attack on the liberating doctrine of justification by faith through grace. In the nineteenth century, while the problem was often conceptualized in terms of the authority of scripture, the real matter was the power and authority of the special divine revelation that funded and undergirded its deepest convictions and practices. What was at stake in all of these crises was either heresy in which this or that group kept what it could of the faith but set its own person-relative judgment above the faith of the church. More drastically, what was at stake was the total repudiation of authentic and canonical Christian teaching. Today the issue is no less dramatic. What is at issue is the dominical teaching of the church on sexual morality and marriage. The issue is theological and moral; theological because it involves its doctrine of creation; and moral because it is a matter of the canonical and ethical practice.¹¹ The moral radical progressives within United Methodism have for more than a generation sat lightly to the classical doctrines of Christianity and thus invite the charge of apostasy; the more moderate progressives represented now by revisionist evangelicals reject the dominical teaching of the church on marriage and thus invite the charge of heresy. Both wings of the progressive tradition will in some instances wear these badges as tokens of honor.¹² Either way, what is at issue is a fourth schism in the life of the church in its complex march through history.

Traditionalists are right therefore not to panic; equally they are right to eschew merely pragmatic schemes of accommodation and negotiation. To be sure, if confronted with division they should insist on the equitable division of assets and property. They should explore any and every proposal that would genuinely preserve the treasures that God has given to the Methodist tradition in its varied forms over the last two centuries. They should not hand over the store to those who with the best intentions in the world are party to apostasy and heresy. They should stay the course as long as is needed to ensure the spiritual welfare of the sheep for whom Christ died and was raised from the dead. They should pray and fast; they should gather as needed in national conferences to seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit as the apostles did of old and as their

¹¹ Astute observers will note that I omit here the debate about slavery that divided the church in North America in the nineteenth century. I do so for two reasons. First, I do so because I am interested here in the divisions that are more ecumenical in orientation, that is, they have involved pretty much the whole church worldwide. The debate about sexuality is not a parochial issue but a global issue related to the life of the church across the world. Second, I do so because the proper lesson to draw from the debate about slavery is precisely the failure to take seriously the implications of the doctrines of creation and redemption that are central to orthodox forms of Christianity. Those who want to include the division over slavery may indeed place this division in the neighborhood of my taxonomy but there are significant differences that need to be observed. Ironically, if the church adopts the progressive agenda on sexuality, it will make a similar mistake to the one that was made in the debate about slavery. It will undermine the deeper grammar and warrants of the Christian tradition.

¹² For this reason they will reject my way of stating what is at stake. In this respect, they reflect the impact of modern conceptions of Christianity that have effectively eliminated the concepts of apostasy and heresy. More accurately, they will find my depiction offensive. However, this carries little weight here because it simply begs the crucial questions at issue and helps to make manifest the deeper division I am at pains to identify in the current debate.

ancestors did in early Methodism. As Irenaeus once noted, where the Spirit is, there is the church and the fullness of grace and truth; and within the church, the power of the keys are no dead letter. So they should humbly own their God-given authority to act. They should patiently wait until the time is ripe for action. And they should calmly face down the intimidation and hostility they currently encounter. In all this they should seek to be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. The deeper wisdom in the neighborhood is that the issue is not one of clever pragmatism but of truth and witness. Conservatives and traditionalists stand in fear and trembling for the truth of the gospel and for the faith of the church universal and triumphant in heaven. This is the foundation that gives resolute backbone to their deliberations and actions.¹³

Two other considerations round off our analysis.¹⁴ First, in time the relevant leadership will emerge that will take United Methodists into a better future. Some are already quietly surfacing despite the risks they run in standing up for the canonical teaching of the church. More importantly, in time it is nothing short of certain that a network of bishops will emerge to provide the executive wisdom and theological leadership that is needed. Earlier I delineated the difficulties that currently beset them. At that stage I deliberately omitted a salient observation. Conservative bishops may be tongue-tied and prudent for now but this is merely a temporary reality. Once the dam breaks and, say, division emerges, they will come out of the shadows and exercise the vocation that they embraced when they were elected. It would be easy to name a handful who will rise to the occasion and own the leadership they are more than capable of exercising. The details at this point are obscure; the big picture is clear. Traditionalist United Methodist bishops are not stupid; nor are they faithless; they are prudent and patient. For the moment they are lying low; when the crowbar of history breaks through and the prospects of preserving the riches of The United Methodist Church erupt, they will rise to the occasion.

¹³ I am well aware that one of the besetting temptations of the conservative side of the church is to give in to its gloomy conservative instincts. Moreover, for too long some evangelicals have shown little or no interest in the institutional life of the church. In this they are the grandchildren of Adolf Harnack who tended to see the development of forms of ministry, for example, as a fall into institutionalism. They have also at times been infected by the pessimism of the premillennial, dispensationalist eschatology that is rampant in some circles in North America. Furthermore, there is always the temptation to retreat into a personal world of piety and renewal. This world has its own attractions and virtues, not least in time of intense ecclesial and cultural conflict. However, it also has its vices, not least its tendency to turn against the institutional life of the church. I am cautiously optimistic that these challenges can be met over time once we get hold of a vision of a better future for our Methodist heritage.

¹⁴ Beyond what I have noted in this paper, it would take a whole new paper to explore why traditionalists and conservatives were so successful. Many observers simply make the issue one of demographics: the rise in the number of delegates from outside the USA, especially Africa, tipped the balance of power. However, this is but a first step. How come those outside the USA were so significant in the change of direction? We need an answer to that question to make progress. The issue cannot simply be a matter of counting votes; one wants to know why folk vote as they do. Generally speaking, I would select the following factors. First, conservatives have been extremely well organized across the years. One element in this has been the sensitive cooperation with delegates from outside the USA. Second, the leadership, while often pessimistic about success, did not make predictions that undermined their credibility. Third, conservatives kept front and center the appeal to the overall teaching of scripture, the content of divine revelation mediated so clearly in the teaching of Christ on marriage, and the consensus of tradition, in their efforts to argue for the canonical tradition of the denomination on sexuality. All of these warrants have deep roots in Methodism despite the efforts to override them with appeals to reason and experience. Fourth, they were aided in their efforts by the overconfidence of the ‘moderate’ and progressive leadership, and within this, very especially, by the over-reach in terms of the use of protests and the breaking of church law. Many were simply fed up with the tactics of the opposition; it stiffened the resolve not to give in to intimidation. Fifth, one cannot overlook the striking emergence of anti-establishment sentiments in the general political and cultural debates currently in play in the USA.

Second, John Wesley once noted that what God had achieved in the development of Methodism was no mere human endeavor but the work of God. As such it would be preserved by God so long as history remained. The place for the continued preservation of the treasures given to Methodism by God belongs in a new configuration of Methodism that is at present but a gleam in the eye of its beholders. Some wistfully but rightfully envisage a new global, orthodox Methodist denomination that would begin from within United Methodism and then over the next decades expand by adding other Wesleyan and Methodist ecclesial bodies across the world. They are convinced that if the initial developments were favorable a host of strong Methodist bodies would be delighted to join together to provide and implement a healthy vision of primitive Christianity. Smaller Methodist denominations that are currently struggling could also find a bigger home in which to grow and flourish. All this would take time, determined persistence, and wise leadership; but these are available in spades. The goal would be to preserve a robust orthodox and missionary version of United Methodism. It is an open question how exactly this might be done; at the moment this is just below the radar screen; it is certain to emerge if things were to fall apart either at the next General Conference or beyond. The relationships, mechanisms, and personnel are in place to determine joint action as and where it would be needed. For the moment we are in a period of unsettled incubation; the birth pangs are already visible. In the long-term the prospects and outcomes lie in the providence of God; only fools and the fainthearted believe that such providence will fail. It would be bold but not impossible to believe that providence might include another Great Awakening in its portfolio.