

On Separation, Schism, and Seasons



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By the time the 2019 General Conference rolled around, I had begun to hope that some form of Chris Ritter's plan to divide the UMC into theologically defined jurisdictions would gain traction. The two main options before the delegates were the One Church Plan and the Traditional Plan. I opposed the One Church Plan for theological—specifically, ecclesiological—reasons and did not think it had the votes to pass. As for the Traditional Plan, even if it passed, it was far from clear that it would do what so many traditionalists hoped it would: restore discipline to the UMC, prevent ecclesiastical disobedience, and preserve denominational unity. As the vote came up for the traditional plan, I sat beside a friend, a more progressive Christian who works at another theological school. The vote tally appeared on the screen indicating that the Traditional Plan had passed. He looked at me with tears in his eyes. I told him I was sorry, and I meant it. He hugged me and told me he loved me. I told him the same.

After the General Conference, I resolved that I would never support any plan except a separation plan. The human cost of this internecine conflict was too great. Most people I knew who attended the conference, regardless of theological position, were

devastated. This was a battle of sincere convictions entirely at odds with one another. There was no easy path before us. Whatever we chose would be painful, but separation would be less painful than a fruitless and prolonged war of attrition. Whichever side “won,” it would be a Pyrrhic and hollow victory.

The Inevitability of Division

We humans are prone to believe that we make decisions rationally, based on the best available information. As Jonathan Haidt argues in *The Righteous Mind*, however, this is not normally the case. Most of our decisions are based on intuition and emotion. Had I been thinking with clear rationality, I might have understood that the division of the UMC was inevitable. Nevertheless, I believed for a long time that we could patch the holes and hold it together. When the WCA was formed, there was considerable discussion about whether we should “lead” or “leave.” In other words, should we continue to work for reform within the UMC, or should we exit the denomination and help other like-minded United Methodists to do so? I was firmly in the “lead” camp for quite a while. Since the 2019 General Conference, however, I have never wavered in my conviction that to divide the denomination is the only realistic option.

Nevertheless, regardless of my personal convictions or anyone else’s, the breakdown of governance in the UMC made division inevitable. I’ve written about our problems of governance before, as has Scott Kisker here and here, so I won’t belabor the point. The gist of it, however, is that the jurisdictional system has allowed bishops to function independently of the General Conference if they so choose. Put differently, jurisdictional conferences serve as a buffer between the General Conference and the episcopacy. In the absence of any effective means of implementation, the decisions of the General Conference have become irrelevant. Traditionalists could win every vote, but it wouldn’t matter. Faced with such futility, many have decided to leave.

Bishop Willimon has recently written a scathing criticism of UMC traditionalists and the Global Methodist Church, derisive and dismissive in its tone. Here is just one excerpt:

Caucusing is easy; church is hard. Unable to convert you to my point of view, I’ll hunker down in my gated community of buddies who think as I do and call that ecclesia. We thereby say to the world that Jesus Christ can’t make and sustain community out of people whom I don’t like and are not my type. Rather than ask, “What’s Christ up to in our neighborhood?” we say, “I refuse to be part of a church that doesn’t reflect my values before I came to church.”

This is from the bishop who once prayed that God would smite the hard-hearted UMC traditionalists. The article does not account for the complexity of issues that are at play in the UMC division. It does not take traditionalist concerns seriously, but rather offers a series of zingers and straw-man characterizations. Tellingly, it never acknowledges the role that many bishops have played in creating the intractable mess in which we now find ourselves. We do at least agree on one thing: “The General Conference is no longer a viable means of governing the church.”

Willimon is nevertheless right that traditionalists have at times been “pompous, painful, [and] pretentious.” We need to own our share of the responsibility for this division. At times I have cringed at what I have heard from people on our “side.” At times I have probably said or written things that were cringe-worthy. Sometimes they have reflected anger and resentment that were perhaps understandable, but nevertheless unhelpful. The Bible teaches us, “Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence. Keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame” (1 Pet 3:15-17). We have not always made our answer with gentleness and reverence. We are not blameless, and there are ways in which we need to repent of actions that have escalated the conflict.

Schismatics?

Now we traditionalists are told we are schismatic. Yet it makes no sense for Protestants to think this way. If denominations represent ongoing schisms, and schism is a sin, then the only way to remedy this sin is to join the Roman Catholic Church or the Orthodox Church. Of course, these two traditions have also been separate communions at least since the eleventh century. No, we Protestants should not locate unity within an ecclesiastical body, much less in a denomination (the UMC), the roots of which are in a group that separated from the Church of England, which itself separated from the Roman Catholic Church. Rather, we identify unity within beliefs and practices that have characterized what Thomas Oden called the “consensual tradition” of Christian faith. Vincent of Lerins spoke of the faith that was confessed “always, everywhere, and by all.” He knew there had always been disagreement. What he meant to lift up was the consensual tradition that persisted across time and throughout the globe despite such disagreement. There were periods, for example, when the Arians were a popular and powerful group, including among their ranks the Roman Emperor. Yet Arianism did not prevail, nor should it have. The consensual tradition persevered, and it is this tradition that should define unity for Protestants.

In the face of accusations of schism, I must demur. The Bible teaches us to contend for the faith (Jude 3), to guard the good treasure that has been entrusted to us (2 Tim 1:14). When we insist upon those standards of doctrine that Christians have confessed across two millennia; when we insist on the supremacy of Jesus Christ alone, and that there is no other name under heaven by which we may be saved; when we affirm the church's time-honored teachings about human life, our bodies, sex, and marriage; and even when it becomes clear that we must leave a denomination that does not insist upon these same things, but treats them as matters of mere opinion; we are not dividing the church. We are aligning ourselves with the great cloud of witnesses who have stood upon these truths across the centuries. We are proclaiming that the unity of the church is not found within an institution, but within the confession and practice of that faith once and for all entrusted to the saints. We are not diminishing the unity of the church, but preserving it.

What Does the Future Hold?

Without the ballast of U.S. conservatives, will the UMC swing wildly to the left? Will the worst excesses of the progressive movement become the norm? The answer is almost assuredly no. The post-separation UMC will probably look a lot like the Presbyterian Church (USA) or the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America—fairly conventional in most cases, retaining much of the language and practice of the broader tradition, though with a univocally progressive social ethic. It will affirm both gay marriage and transgenderism. Bishop Bickerton's statement lamenting the *Dobbs v. Jackson* decision provides some sense of what the denomination's stance on abortion will look like. There will likely be more marked opposition to the State of Israel and calls for boycotts related to Israel. In some annual conferences there will be the mandatory ritual of starting one's pronouns before speaking. U.S. delegates may succeed in forming a largely self-governing U.S. Central Conference in order to mitigate the influence of majority-world conservatism.

There are those who suggest that the UMC will soon modify its doctrinal standards to get rid of doctrines such as the virginal conception of Christ or his bodily resurrection. This is also unlikely. For one thing, because of the first Restrictive Rule it is almost impossible to change the doctrinal standards. For another, there is no need to do so. The problem with the UMC has never been its doctrine, but the fact that our doctrinal standards have not really functioned as standards. Rather, they have functioned more like historical documents. They represent the commitments of our Methodist and EUB founders, but particularly with the first iteration of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral in 1972, they were relegated to optional status. The change to "Our Theological Task" in 1988 was a valiant effort to walk back the doctrinal pluralism encoded in our system since 1972, but it was too late. The ethos of the denomination was firmly in place, particularly within the upper echelons of the denominational

structures. Bishop Joseph Sprague's 2002 *Affirmations of a Dissenter* might have ruffled a few conservative feathers, but there would never be any official accountability for his denunciation of traditional Christian doctrine. Such would have been inconsistent with the established ethos of doctrinal pluralism.

Many United Methodists have insisted that to hold our doctrines loosely in this way represents a compassionate and broad-minded approach to the relationship between the people of the church and her teachings. I disagree. The central claims we make about God, the salvation we have in Jesus Christ, and the nature and goals of human life are too important to make them optional for those who hold church membership, and particularly for the ordained. Beliefs matter precisely because they guide us into salvation, and false beliefs guide us away from it. Truth really does matter, and truth is most profoundly disclosed to us through God's self-revelation, preeminently through Christ, and canonically through Scripture.

In the face of claims that the post-separation UMC will be a capacious big tent with just as much room for traditionalists as for progressives and centrists, I must admit my skepticism. Most of the people who make this claim are probably sincere. I just don't believe they're thinking the matter through from top to bottom. We have been told for decades that traditional Christian teachings on sex, marriage, and gender represent a grave injustice, that these are even matters of life and death. What compromise can there be in the face of issues of such gravity? Will the church continue to tolerate actions it views as grossly unjust? The ELCA appears to be walking back conscience exemptions (see [here](#) and [here](#)) related to the performance of gay marriages. In the Episcopal Church, Bishop William Love was recently compelled to resign after facing disciplinary actions for refusing to allow same-sex marriages in his diocese. It is not unreasonable to suggest that the post-separation UMC will follow suit in time.

On Leaving

In July of this year I moved my ordination from the United Methodist Church to the Global Methodist Church. I didn't want to admit that this was difficult for me, but it was. I was baptized in Matthew's Memorial United Methodist Church (now University UMC) in Fort Worth, Texas, in 1971. Since then, I have never been a part of any other denomination. Some of my earliest memories are in the halls and classrooms of this church. I sang in the children's choir and received my third-grade Bible there. I went through confirmation at another UM church, Genesis UMC, where I was also involved in United Methodist Youth Fellowship. At the age of twenty-two I enrolled in the Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University. During my internship I worked at the UM campus ministry at North Texas State University and Texas Women's University. I was later accepted into the

PhD program at SMU and completed a doctorate in religious studies. I served on the staff of First UMC in Dallas for a time, moved to Ohio to teach at United Theological Seminary, and was ordained an elder in the West Ohio Conference of the UMC. I have served on the District Committee on Ordained Ministry, the Board of Ordained Ministry, and West Ohio task forces on church unity and ministry with people with disabilities. I served on the University Senate for ten years. The UMC played a large part in making me the Christian I am today, and in turn I poured myself into it. I don't regret doing so even for a moment. In recent years I have experienced considerable frustration with the UMC, but when I look back over my life, I also feel gratitude for its influence on my faith and character. Moving my ordination to the GMC has not been easy, but nevertheless I feel it is what God has called me to do in this season.

My prayer for the United Methodist Church is that it will thrive in faithfulness. I pray that God will guide the UMC, give its leaders wisdom, and lead it to fulfill its mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. After the dust settles and we've had time to lick our wounds, perhaps the UMC and the GMC can even begin to work together again. I know that sounds naive, but I've lived long enough to know that God will often act in the most surprising of ways. I wish no ill will upon this denomination that has played such an important role in my life.

The character of the Global Methodist Church is still being formed. There are pitfalls ahead, including ones we have not foreseen. Even if you do not agree with us, I would ask for your prayers that we will be faithful to God's purposes, proclaim the gospel faithfully, repent where we need to repent, and represent the body of Christ well. We are imperfect people, finite in our vision, dependent on the grace of God for any good we might do in the world.

I am not leaving Methodism. Methodism is in my bones. I am moving into a new iteration of the Methodist movement. I look to the past with both gratitude and lament. I look to the future with anticipation and hope. May the God who called the Methodist movement into being guide all of us imperfect sinners as we negotiate these difficult times. May God give us vision to move forward in love and righteousness as we do so.

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