



Doctrine and Theology Matter

Maxie D. Dunnam

I don't know if it could happen, but I'm praying it will happen—that out of the General Conference will come a spirit, a movement, a commitment, dare I suggest a program that will lead United Methodist people to come to the deep realization that doctrine and theology matter.

What we think about Jesus is the crucial issue of the Christian faith. It is the issue of who Jesus is as revealed in Scripture—his birth, incarnation, teaching, activity and relationships, his passion, death and resurrection—that is crucial, because doctrine and theology matter. What we think about Jesus will determine the kind of church we are. What we think Jesus can do for persons and for society will shape the lives, the ministry, and the mission of our congregations. What we think about God's grace expressed in Jesus, operating in the life of individuals and culture, will shape the defining characteristics of our life together as Christian community. Doctrine and theology matter.

We so superficially quote John Wesley's word, "If your heart is as my heart, give me your hand." We present ourselves as an inclusive people, using the dictum as our motto: Methodists "think and let think," and citing Wesley as the authority for that. But we fail to put Wesley's word in context. He was making a case for the orthodox Christian faith, and he prefaced his remark about thinking and letting think with the words, "As to those things that do not strike at the heart of the Christian faith." He was very clear about those things that were at the heart of the Christian faith, because he knew that doctrine and theology matter.

Back in 1972, the General Conference took official action which in effect institutionalized what has been designated "theological pluralism." Pluralism became the operative center around which we ordered our life as a denomination. This became the driving energy, the organizing principle of theological/doctrinal reflection. **The crux of the matter is that theological pluralism became an ideology with more influence upon us than our theology.** There's nothing wrong with pluralism if we keep our center clear, but that's the problem. We haven't kept the center clear. When we don't have a center, we can't define the circumference. What I'm refuting is pluralism without a center.

That we are on the wrong path was recognized as far back as the General Conference in 1984. Speaking for the Council of Bishops in the episcopal address, Bishop Tuell said, "The time has come to say the last rites over the notion that the defining characteristic of United Methodist theology is pluralism. The word (pluralism) may have some descriptive value, but it has no defining value. It carries philosophic overtones which contradict our understanding of the Christian faith." That was in 1984 but we failed to heed the bishops' call. A flabby pluralism is more alive than ever. Some would make it our primary defining value—not only in terms of the-

ology and doctrine, but in terms of the culture of the church. We act as though diversity were redemptive within itself. This pluralism ideology has resulted in a pervasive relativism, whose operational rubric is that

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truth claims and moral commitments must take second place to inclusiveness and dialogue.

If the conviction that doctrine and theology matter would pervade our thinking at General Conference, we might come from that conference with a program that would immerse the whole connection in a study of our doctrinal standards—our Articles of Religion, our Confession of Faith, Wesley's *Standard Sermons* and *Notes on the New Testament*. As United Methodists, we would all get on the same page in understanding and claiming our identity as we have defined ourselves in the *Discipline* of our church. Is this not the unity we seek?

In the ordination process, pastors are asked if they find these identifying documents consistent with holy Scripture and they are called upon to "preach and maintain" them. When we baptize persons, we ask them to confess the Apostles' Creed, which is the sign that connects us with believers throughout time and around the world.

The most urgent issue before The United Methodist Church is to become a missionary church in a missionary context. In order to do this, we will need to equip ourselves to teach the doctrine and discipline of the church to ourselves—as well as to the millions who do not know anything about Christianity. So I pray that the General Conference will establish a way for the whole church to spend four years in

study that will create an ethos for clarifying who we are in relation to scriptural authority, doctrine, mission, and ministry.

The second thing I hope the General Conference will do flows out of this core issue: find a way to study and respond to an ever-shrinking pool of effective, transformational clergy leaders. A bishop recently said to me: "Nearly all the issues that compromise our denomination's mission could be corrected over time with an exceptional pool of dedicated, evangelical, transformational pastors." He added, "We have too many seminaries with too little clarity of mission and too little connection with the needs of annual conferences." He was verbalizing what I hear bishops and district superintendents across the church saying.

To respond to this issue, the General Conference will have to decide to revolutionize clergy leadership recruitment, training and credentialing processes, as well as accountability of our seminaries which are training our ministers. This would be a monumental task, but I do believe it would prove to be the greatest leverage for renewal we could undertake.

The third thing I hope the General Conference will do is to confront the "structural and financial issues" from the perspective of fulfilling our mission in the 21st century. I do believe that, as a denomination, we are straining to become an evangelical movement that takes seriously our mission of "making disciples." At the same time, we refuse to take the bold steps necessary to dismantle those organizations and leadership structures that inhibit the emergence of a new connectionalism that would serve our missional commitment.

I do not see that any of the proposals being discussed for presentation at General Conference will do this. They are certainly not based on what's happening at the local level and they still maintain an ethos governed by general agencies. Also all the proposals are governed by a preoccupation with quota representation. We must design our structures for action and response to needs. Effectiveness, rather than mere "representation," should guide us. It certainly is going to require smaller rather than larger groups making decisions, which, in turn, will require trust and also a commitment to effectiveness in mission rather than a quota system of representation.

I also believe it will require empowering the bishops to exercise their ministry of leading the church in fulfilling its mission. **Years ago, when we united with the Evangelical United Brethren, Albert Outler warned us that we were creating a constitutional crisis by establishing the Council on Ministries.** We gave the Council on Ministries and other groups the responsibility that our *Discipline* defines as the work of our bishops. Our bishops are charged and must be empowered to function once again as their vocation is defined in *The Book of Discipline*. The coordination among other groups would not be an issue to be negotiated at a connectional table, and mission would have the priority of our financial resources. Our Council of Bishops should be the connectional table.

While I know the practice of homosexuality will probably be a presenting issue at this conference, I pray that we would lay that issue aside. The General Conference has spoken resoundingly on that issue over and over again. We are in harmony with the Church through the ages and the overwhelming "sense of the faithful" around the world. It is clear that United Methodism has no intention of breaking with the apostolic and consensual teaching that the Church has maintained for two millennia.

My prayer for General Conference is that it will:

One, initiate a four-year program that will immerse the entire church in a study of our doctrinal standards;

Two, authorize a study of and respond to the ever-shrinking pool of effective, transformational pastors; and

Three, confront the structural and financial issues from the perspective of our mission in the 21st century, concentrating on effectiveness rather than quota representation, and giving mission financial priority. □

Maxie D. Dunnam is President of Asbury Theological Seminary in Wilmore, Kentucky. He is the author of many books, including *This Is Christianity* (Abingdon Press), and co-author of *Staying the Course* (Abingdon Press, 2003).



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