

Human Sexuality and the Unity of the Church

Toward a Faithful United Methodist Witness

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When, in 1928, the first five editions of the vital research tool, *The Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature*, had appeared, not one of these editions, though they indexed over a million articles, contained a single entry on the topic of homosexuality.¹ Indeed, it was not until 1932, that is, in the sixth edition of this work, which covered the years 1929–1932, that an entry on this topic finally emerged.² In fact, according to Mark Smith, professor of political science at the University of Washington, “from the beginning of the twentieth century up to 1968, no Christian denomination in America passed a resolution or released a report that directly addressed homosexuality.”³ Today in United Methodist circles, this topic dominates church life. To be sure, conversations about same-sex attraction have been both heated and belabored. Not surprisingly, then, the denomination in so short a period of time now runs the risk of being rent asunder with the loss of a common witness. Such a loss will no doubt have consequence for effective ministry to a hurting world as recognized in the prayer of Jesus Christ, himself, which calls for nothing less than the unity of the faithful precisely for the sake of mission: “that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (John 17:21 NIV).

Fortunately, there are considerable biblical, theological, ethical, and ecclesiastical resources in the Wesleyan tradition, especially in the writings of John Wesley, that can help United Methodists today to think through this emerging issue with a clarity that can empower them to find the difficult and costly path forward in God's salvific grace. Often these very significant resources of the Methodist tradition do not receive their full and appropriate weight in contemporary discussions of human sexuality, simply because political resources have, by and large, displaced them. William Lawrence has noted the tendency in United Methodism to take up, “secular political categories as a way to understand the church.”⁴ And Scott Kisker, for his part, has observed: “At worst we find practices that are little more than thinly veiled attempts to manipulate others through politics or marketing techniques.”⁵ Indeed, the weighty matter of human sexuality is too important to be decided by a show of hands or by the pull and tugs of political forces.

Accordingly, the argument of this essay employs the rich resources of the Methodist tradition and is presented in four parts as follows:

- Part I: Biblical, Theological, and Ethical Foundations of Human Sexuality
- Part II: Understanding Same-Sex Attraction or Homosexuality
- Part III: Ecclesiastical Foundations: The Formal Judgment of The United Methodist Church
- Part IV: The Question of Unity Posed

Though Wesleyan materials will be the basic framework for this examination, other resources beyond this tradition, though consonant with it in key areas, will be appealed to as well. In this

way, United Methodist reflection will be sustained and invigorated by an ecumenical context that will display a broader unity among fellow Christians well beyond The United Methodist Church.

Part I: Biblical, Theological, and Ethical Foundations of Human Sexuality

This first part of the argument will lay out a number of maxims or foundational truths that have guided the Wesleyan tradition from its inception, especially in terms of how it has grappled with the issue of human sexuality and creaturely status.

God as Creator and Governor

One of the ongoing themes in John Wesley's practical theology, beyond his orienting concern of holiness and grace, is his affirmation that human beings must ever be understood *in relation to* a God of holy love. In fact, when he considered the difference between *homo sapiens* and all other species, he observed that humanity finds its very purpose as well as identity in the worship and glorification of the Most High. In his sermon, "The General Deliverance," for example, he wrote as follows:

What then makes the barrier between men and brutes? The line which they cannot pass? It was not reason . . . But it is this: man is capable of God; the inferior creatures are not. We have no ground to believe that they are in any degree capable of knowing, loving, or obeying God. This is the specific difference between man and brute—the great gulf which they cannot pass over.⁶

Simply put, such an observation means that human beings can never be properly understood by themselves, apart from God. Accordingly, John Wesley's anthropology, his basic understanding of human beings, puts him at odds with some of the leading thinkers of the eighteenth century, men such as Hume, Diderot and D'Holbach, who were in earnest to consider humanity as self-understood and thereby self-referential, that is, in a word, as autonomous.

This picture, however, is remarkably different in terms of the Divine Being. For though humanity cannot be properly conceived apart from God, the Most High can be considered, in terms of being and essence, without any reference to humanity whatsoever. Such an observation, though it may appear as trenchant to some, is just another way of stating that human existence is ever dependent and contingent whereas the Divine Being is not. Moreover, a further distinction must be made between the *essential* attributes of God, in terms of such things as aseity and eternity, and the *relational* attributes of the Almighty, such as being a Creator and Governor with respect to what has been made. Carefully distinguishing these roles of Creator and Governor, Wesley observes:

As a Creator, he has acted, in all things, according to his own sovereign will. Justice has not, cannot have, any place here; for nothing is due to what has no being. Here, therefore, he may, in the most absolute sense, do what he will with his own. Accordingly, he created the heavens and the earth, and all things that are therein, in every conceivable respect, "according to his own good pleasure."⁷

Put another way, though God is utterly free to create or not—looking only to a sovereign, free, divine will, once creation has occurred—the Most High takes on a self-limitation in terms of the created order itself. Simply put, the created order restricts, in some sense, the divine freedom. That is, it is an order, once it is created, with which even God must reckon. Bishop

William Cannon noted this curious aspect of Wesley's doctrine of God in his own writings: "Once God performed the creative act and called things into existence," Cannon reasoned, "he obligated himself to respect the creation which he had made."⁸ Theologians have expressed this basic theological truth more technically by distinguishing between *potentia absoluta* (absolute freedom) and *potentia ordinata* (freedom delimited by creation itself).

Wesleyan Maxim 1: A created order issues in restrictions and limitations for both God and humanity.

Creation and a Moral Order

As the Eternal One brought forth the creation out of freedom and holy love, the Almighty not only brought into being inanimate things, the very stuff of the universe, but also all sorts of living creatures, only one of which bore the divine image. Beyond this, God not only created in a particular way, and therefore by design, in order to achieve very good purposes; but the Lord also established a created moral order, one embedded throughout the cosmos, though seen only through the eyes of reason or heard through the tender voice of conscience. This multivalent conception of creation, which is never exhausted in a simple consideration of material existence, is acknowledged by Wesley in his clear affirmation that as God brought the very angels into existence they were immediately given "a complete model of all truth, so far as was intelligible to a finite being, and of all good, so far as angelic minds were capable of embracing it."⁹ In a similar fashion, when God created man and woman, they were immediately given that "same law as to his first-born children."¹⁰ Wesley elaborates:

In like manner, when God in his appointed time had created a new order of intelligent beings, when he had raised man from the dust of the earth, breathed into him the breath of life, and caused him to become a living soul, endued with power to choose good or evil, he gave to this free, intelligent creature the same law as to his first-born children—not wrote indeed upon tables of stone, or any corruptible substance, but engraven on his heart by the finger of God, wrote in the inmost spirit both of men and of angels.¹¹

This moral law, as humanity came forth from the hands of God, was coeval with its nature,¹² indicating a resplendent harmony between the Creator, on the one hand, and the creature on the other. "But it was not long before man rebelled against God," Wesley points out, "and by breaking this glorious law well-nigh effaced it out of his heart;"¹³ With this near removal of the moral law from the hearts of men and women as a consequence of sin, the debilitating effects of the fall were so great, disrupting the good and gracious order in which humanity had been created, that if God did not sovereignly act in an initial move toward restoration, then humanity quite simply could not be redeemed. Wesley explains: "And yet *God did not despise the work of his own hands*; but being reconciled to man through the Son of his love, he in some measure re-inscribed the law on the heart of his dark, sinful creature."¹⁴

Viewed in another way, this re-inscription of the moral law, in the wake of sin, is not only an apt expression of prevenient grace, but it is also done universally. In other words, all people, not simply theists, are provided with the illumination of the moral law that renders all human beings responsible with respect to God's ongoing offers of grace, a grace by means of which (in a way distinct from libertarian freedom) they can do otherwise. Such a boon, which was given to all the posterity of our first parents,¹⁵ as Wesley notes, was richly christologically based, coming at the hands of "the true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world" (John 1:9 NIV), to cite one of Wesley's favorite passages on prevenient grace. Moreover, this same law that was

re-inscribed conveniently was also given “to a peculiar people,”¹⁶ Wesley writes, in other words, to the Hebrews, and it was chiseled in stone, so that they, along with the rest of humanity, would have “a more perfect knowledge of this law.”¹⁷ Its greatest expression, however, through which its height, depth, and extent were revealed, occurred at the Sermon on the Mount.

Wesleyan Maxim 2: God gave human beings the moral law as a window on their own nature and as a complete model of all truth.

The Moral Law as the Nexus between Creator and Creature

As Wesley considered the nature of the moral law, which as a consequence of prevenient grace now reverberates, at least in some sense, in the hearts and minds of all creatures, he lifted up a number of its characteristics that show in a very able way the moral law’s relation to the Divine Being. Observe, then, the elements or traits of the moral law in the following list:

- “Now this law is **an incorruptible picture of the high and holy One** that inhabiteth eternity.”
- “It is **the face of God** unveiled.”
- It is “**God manifested** to his creatures as they are able to bear it.”
- “It is **the heart of God** disclosed to man.”
- “It is the streaming forth or **outbeaming of his glory**, the **express image** of his person.”
- “The law of God is **all virtues in one.**”
- “What is the law but **divine virtue and wisdom** assuming a visible form?”
- “What is it but the **original ideas of truth and good**, which were lodged in the uncreated mind from eternity?”
- “The law of God . . . is **a copy of the eternal mind, a transcript of the divine nature.**”
- “It is the **fairest offspring** of the everlasting Father, the **brightest efflux** of his essential wisdom, **the visible beauty** of the Most High.”¹⁸

All of the attributes above reveal the very close connection in Wesley’s theology between the moral law, on the one hand, and *who* God is in *essence*, on the other. Put another way, the moral law is none other than the Divine Being expressed in the *form* of law, as sinful human beings are able to bear it. That is, God clothes the unsurpassed radiance of the divine glory and holiness in the *form* of law so that sinful human beings are able to look into its beauty without being immediately overwhelmed. In fact, the relation between the Almighty and the moral law is so exact that Wesley scoffs at the celebrated Euthyphro dilemma (Is something good because God wills it, or does God will it because it is good?), which hailed from the time of Socrates, in his pungent observation: “It seems, then, that the whole difficulty arises from considering God’s will as distinct from God. Otherwise it vanishes away. For none can doubt but God is the cause of the law of God. But the will of God is *God himself*.”¹⁹ Moreover, Wesley not only made a connection between the moral law and the Most High, but he also illuminated and underscored a relation between that same law and the created order established from the beginning, an order that includes, of course, the creation of humanity in righteousness and holiness. Wesley explains: “If we survey the law of God in another point of view, it is supreme, unchangeable reason; it is unalterable rectitude; it is *the everlasting fitness of all things* that are or ever were created.”²⁰

Though creation is now marred by sin, self-will, and inordinate desire; nevertheless, humanity is able to look into the moral law to discern “the everlasting fitness of all things,”

established by God in creation, an examination that reveals the ongoing divine will for human beings precisely as *creatures*, that is, as ones whose lives are guided and illuminated in some sense by a created order. Accordingly, this moral law, which is “holy, just and good,”²¹ is not a human creation, subject to the whims, tastes and attitudes of various cultures; but is of a divine origin and therefore eternal. Not surprisingly, Wesley insists it must “remain in force, upon all mankind, and in all ages; as not depending either on time or place, or any other circumstances liable to change, but on the nature of God and the nature of man, and their unchangeable relation to each other.”²²

Wesleyan Maxim 3: The moral law is a reflection of not only *who* God is but also what humanity ought to be.

Aquinas and Wesley on Eternal and Natural Law

One of the frustrations that Wesley scholars invariably encounter in their chosen discipline is the dearth of good and detailed studies on the similarities between a Thomistic theology of law and a Wesleyan one.²³ This state of affairs is unfortunate, since Wesley’s theology of law heartily coheres in many respects with that of Aquinas, especially in terms of the former’s estimation of both moral and natural law. Though there is indeed broad agreement in this area, nevertheless the terminology employed by these two theologians is somewhat different, requiring a judgment that will render key terms as near equivalents of the other. Thus, for example, though both Aquinas and Wesley utilize the language of “natural law,” they differ in terms of the most general expression of law, the one that is nearest to, and even identified, with the Divine Being: for Aquinas this is termed *eternal* law; however, for Wesley this is called the *moral* law. Once this identification is made, however, the basic schema, the structure of law for each theologian, from general principles to particular expressions, is essentially the same, as is evident in the following chart:



A few observations are in order in light of the chart above. First of all, for both Aquinas and Wesley there is no contradiction between the basic principles of natural law, on the one hand, and divine law, on the other, since both find their more general source in the eternal law for Aquinas and in the moral law for Wesley. In other words, the revelation of divine law, as found in the Bible, for example, is in harmony with the natural law that is an expression of the “everlasting fitness of all things,”²⁴ to use Wesley’s language, established by God in a created *order*. This means then that Gentiles, though they were not formally given the moral law as the Hebrews had received it at Mt. Sinai; nevertheless, they were not without knowledge of this law through the operations of prevenient grace, through a reflection on nature itself, and through a consideration of the contents of conscience, as noted earlier. Such a truth was clearly recognized

by the apostle Paul in Romans: “Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts sometimes accusing them and at other times even defending them” (Rom 2:14-15 NIV).

Second, Wesley undoubtedly follows the Thomistic articulation of the two general principles of natural law. Earlier in his *Summa Theologica*, for instance, Aquinas had written in the following manner: “Since, however, good has the nature of an end, and evil, the nature of a contrary, hence it is that all those things to which man has a natural inclination, are naturally apprehended by reason as being good, and consequently as objects of pursuit, and their contraries as evil, and objects of avoidance.”²⁵ So impressed was Wesley with this line of reasoning (whether he actually read this in Aquinas or in some other source is debatable²⁶) that he made these same two precepts of natural law, that is, to avoid evil and to do good, the very first two counsels of none other than his *Nature, Design, and General Rules of the United Societies*, published in 1743. To illustrate, in his work, Wesley observes:

It is therefore expected of all who continue therein [in the United Societies] that they should continue to evidence their desire of salvation, *First*, By doing no harm, avoiding evil in every kind. . . . Secondly, By doing good . . . ²⁷

Wesleyan Maxim 4: Natural law, as a reflection of the eternal moral law, is an integral part of historic Methodism and is even embedded in the first two precepts of *The General Rules of the United Societies*.

Natural Law: Then and Now

Since, according to Wesley, the moral law is the genus, the larger entity, which embraces both the natural law, discerned by reason, and the divine law revealed in Scripture (the Ten Commandments, for example), he was able to stress natural law at times precisely in order to make a broader, more encompassing, ethical appeal that included not only the church but those beyond its walls as well. Thus, for example, when Wesley addressed the vicious practice of American slavery, he specifically based his argument not on the divine law contained in the Bible but on the natural law that should be acknowledged by all people, whether Christian or not. “Setting the Bible out of the question,²⁸” as he put it, Wesley developed his argument in his treatise *Thoughts Upon Slavery* by appealing to the broad ethical principles that would be acknowledged by all people of good reason and by demonstrating what trouble would ensue when human, positive law was not in harmony with such principles. Wesley reasons as follows:

The grand plea is, “They are authorized by law.” But can law, human law, change the nature of things? Can it turn darkness into light, or evil into good? By no means. Notwithstanding ten thousand laws, right is right, and wrong is wrong still. There must still remain an essential difference between justice and injustice, cruelty and mercy. So that I still ask, Who can reconcile this treatment of the Negroes, first and last, with either mercy or justice?²⁹

Just as John Wesley, in his own day, recognized that some moral issues require natural law reasoning in order to leverage the argument for a civil context that was becoming increasingly diversified, so too do ethicists today make a similar sort of appeal. To illustrate, the contemporary Roman Catholic scholar, J. Budziszewski, in his engaging book *What We Can't*

Not Know: A Guide, considers the significance of natural law for some of the leading issues of the day in terms of what he calls “four witnesses,” all of which testify to the reality of this dimension of human existence, reflective of a created order. In other words, real moral knowledge can be culled from all of the following: 1) *deep conscience*, which is not only a faculty of judgment but one that contains within it the very norms that are directed toward the good; 2) *design as such or in general*, which expresses an order capable of being discerned in the things that have been made; 3) *design in particular*, which pertains to the sophisticated, complex, multidimensional reality of a human being; and 4) *natural consequences* of various courses of human action.³⁰

Though many today, who are caught up in the throes of identity politics as their chief orienting concern, are loathe to acknowledge the reality of natural law, much preferring stereotypical political configurations for their conceptions of justice (with racial, gender, and economic hierarchies in play); nevertheless they too invariably keep backing into the *reality* of natural law, its logic as well as its four witnesses. To be sure, such a curious turn of events is precisely why Budziszewski entitled his book *What We Can't Not Know*. Such truthfulness and moral realism, refreshing in so many ways, aptly describe Wesley's own ethical reasoning as well.

Wesleyan Maxim 5: The four witnesses of natural law, a law that was affirmed and even championed by Wesley in his treatise *Thoughts Upon Slavery*, illuminate human action in terms of both good and evil.

Human Sexuality as Expressive of a Created Order and a Covenant

Upon being brought into being in a magnificent created order, humanity, according to Wesley, had “the whole visible creation before [it], both to contemplate, and to take comfort of.”³¹ Such a reflection enabled Adam and Eve to begin to understand “God's being and perfections,”³² as Wesley put it, in the things that have been made. Moreover, when the newly created human beings considered their own nature, they recognized that they were creatures “different from all that had been hitherto made.”³³ In a way similar to the thought of Aquinas, Wesley maintained that the progenitors of the human race belonged not merely to one but to two worlds since they were composed of both flesh and spirit, whereby “heaven and earth must be put together”³⁴ in them.

With such an understanding of their twofold nature in place, the parents of humanity, so to speak, in a consideration of their very being, could never be content with a simple recognition of their bodily existence. That is, created as composite beings and yet in nothing less than the image and likeness of God, a window on the Divine Being, Adam and Eve were enabled through the Spirit of God, by which they lived, to transcend their spatial and temporal conditions to participate in the very life of the Most High, with whom they had holy and loving fellowship; and by means of such, were able to get a foretaste of eternity. Wesley considered both the lowly origins as well as the high estate of humanity in his *Notes Upon the Old Testament* in a passage worth quoting in full:

Man consisting of body and soul, a body made out of the earth, and a rational immortal soul, we have in these verses the provision that was made for the happiness of both. That part of man, which is allied to the world of sense, was made happy, for he was put in the

paradise of God; that part which is allied to the world of spirits was well provided for, for he was taken into covenant with God.³⁵

The spiritual nature of humanity highlights the image of God in which humanity was created in its *natural sense*, that is, as distinguished from both the political and moral dimensions of the *imago Dei*. Wesley explored this natural image in his sermon, “The New Birth,” in which he considered humanity “[as] a spiritual being endowed with understanding, freedom of will, and various affections;”³⁶ So then, as a spiritual being, oriented toward God as the goal or perfection of her own being, Eve participated in the same covenant relations as did Adam, her husband, and Wesley specifically refers to her as “the wife of his covenant.”³⁷ This means then that the sexual differentiation of man and woman is not only a part of the good created order that God established at the beginning, in terms of the very bodies of Adam and Eve, along with their complementarity—in other words such differentiation is biologically grounded and will in time issue in children—but it is also caught up in the spiritual realm in which both participate as heirs of a covenant, a holy relation, established by the Creator. What’s more, Wesley views the marriage of Adam and Eve, with its sexual differentiation, as established by God as an ordinance that was “instituted in innocency.”³⁸ The strength of this establishment (in which the spiritual nature of human beings as well as their sexual nature played a role) is gathered into nothing less than a holy covenant with the Most High, and is revealed in Wesley’s pungent observation with respect to marriage that “The virtue of a divine ordinance, and the bonds of it, are even stronger than those of nature.”³⁹

Wesleyan Maxim 6: The sexual differentiation of men and women is expressive of a good, created order. It is biologically grounded, capable of producing children, and is governed by both moral and natural law.

Wesleyan Maxim 7: Created as spiritual beings both Adam and Eve were taken into covenant with God.

Marriage as Biblically and Theologically Grounded

Contemporary Wesleyan scholars from various disciplines acknowledge, as did John Wesley before them, that marriage between a man and a woman has not only been ordained and blessed by God but that it is a part of a created order that reflects the very will of the Creator and is therefore protected by the moral law found in Scripture. Bill T. Arnold, widely recognized United Methodist biblical scholar, broaches this topic by considering the response of Jesus to the question of whether it is permissible to divorce one’s wife. The response of Christ to this query (recorded in Matt. 19:4-6), as Arnold points out, affirms “three particulars about God’s actions in creation,”⁴⁰ which can be expressed in the following list:

- “First God ‘made’ them male and female (v. 4).
- “Second, God ‘said’ the creative design for marriage is for the male and female to leave their parents and be joined as one flesh (v. 5)
- “Third, God ‘joined’ them together in one flesh . . . which should not be undone by anyone (v. 6).”⁴¹

After laying out Jesus’s on-the-spot exegesis of Genesis 1:27 and 2:24, Arnold quickly summarizes this teaching in his pithy observation that “Jesus thus affirms that heterosexual

gender is divinely created, heterosexual marriage is a divine institution, and heterosexual fidelity is the divine intent.”⁴²

In a similar fashion, Wesley studies scholar Howard Snyder, in his carefully-argued book *Homosexuality and the Church*, explores the creation of humanity as male and female; and he develops some of the larger theological implications that suggest a parallel between the *relations* that exist between male and female, on the one hand, and the *relations* between the persons of the Christian understanding of the Godhead, on the other. Snyder explains:

Human creation as male and female is in some sense a reflection of the unity and diversity of the Holy Trinity. When the Tri-Personal God creates, gendered human-kind is the result. The profound unity-in-diversity of the Trinity is in a derivative sense reflected in the unity-in-diversity of the human family— mother, father, offspring.⁴³

Such a parallel not only indicates that the male/female relationship expresses the creative will of the Almighty but also that this relationship enjoys a fund of security, assurance, and even confidence, since it is not simply an indication of a good and gracious order but also a reflection, at least in some sense, of the divine life itself.

Wesleyan Maxim 8: It is no one less than Jesus Christ who affirmed that “heterosexual gender is divinely created, heterosexual marriage is a divine institution, and heterosexual fidelity is the divine intent.”⁴⁴

Wesleyan Maxim 9: Human beings created as male and female are “in some sense a reflection of the unity and diversity of the Holy Trinity.”⁴⁵

With these considerable biblical, theological, and ethical resources in place that are a part of the rich Methodist heritage, we are now, *and only now*, in a position to assess carefully the variant forms of human sexuality, so celebrated in North American culture, that have posed significant questions to The United Methodist Church of late. Indeed, apart from these materials, Methodists will not be able to exercise sound judgment in accordance with their tradition. Again, apart from these sources, the church would likely run the risk of having its own narrative overrun by fleeting political and cultural concerns.

Part II: Understanding Same-Sex Attraction or Homosexuality

A Definition of Same Same-Sex Attraction or Homosexuality

United Methodist Bishop Timothy Whitaker of the Florida Conference has raised the issue of the difficulty of language with respect to the salient topic of homosexuality. The problem is that the very terminology of the discussion in The United Methodist Church today may be front-loaded, so to speak, with views already embedded in the language that need to be called into question in a vigorous debate and not simply presumed. The bishop explains:

One of the problems in the discussion is that the language being used is laden with assumptions on which there is no agreement. I prefer the term “same-sex attraction” to describe the phenomenon usually called “homosexuality.” This term describes the fact there are persons who are attracted to other persons of the same sex. It does not imply

what the possible causes of the phenomenon might be. It does not imply that this attraction is constitutional, as “orientation” does, nor does it deny it. It does not denigrate a person’s dignity, nor advocate for an understanding of that person’s identity in terms of his or her sexuality as the terms “gay” and “lesbian” do. I think the term “homosexuality” lacks the neutrality of “same-sex attraction,” but I use it because of its common acceptance.⁴⁶

Following the lead of Bishop Whitaker, Bill Arnold in his book *Seeing Black and White in a World of Gray* also takes up the specific phrase “same-sex attraction” though, given the number of views represented in the discussion today, it is difficult to maintain this language throughout, as the bishop himself, earlier realized.⁴⁷ We, therefore, will employ both of these discourses or rhetorics as a matter of expediency but also to demonstrate that the matter remains open and therefore warrants additional theological and moral reflection.

Beyond this, the linguistic difficulties surrounding the word *homosexual* are compounded by yet another consideration. The distinction between “preference” and “practice” that plays out, for example, in John Stott’s work *Same-Sex Partnerships: A Christian Perspective*,⁴⁸ on the one hand, and “orientation” and “practice” in Snyder’s work *Homosexuality*,⁴⁹ on the other (both fellow conservatives or traditionalists, by the way), are both by and large rejected by Whitaker, Arnold, and Collins. Though such a typology is helpful in focusing on sexual practices in order to assess their moral worth, it may render the other half of the typology, that is, “preference” or “orientation” as spiritually and morally neutral. However, that move may decide a matter that is best left open at this point, given the ambiguity surrounding the terminology of *preference* and *orientation*. For one thing, it appears that various groups, even within the church, employ this language in remarkably different ways. Consider, for a moment, the morass of definitional problems that emerge in terms of the word *orientation*, in light of the following questions:

- Is one born with this?
- Is it acquired through habit and custom from a very early age?
- Is it generated and formed by self-will?
- Is it present even before one assents to it?
- If so, when is the first moment of assent?
- Is it an inclination that arises from the carnal nature?
- Is it the carnal nature, itself?
- Is it of no moral concern?
- Is it sinful, a missing of the mark?
- Does it represent the will of the Creator for the creature?
- Will it be in glory, in heaven, before the throne of God?
- Are the desires that flow from it virtues or vices?
- Is it a composite of disordered desires that are falsely associated with the identity of the self?
- Does it in some sense determine behavior even though the self freely and immediately assents to it in what looks like a variation of philosophical compatibilism?

We are certainly not in a position to give a definitive answer, the last word, to many of these questions, and that predicament once again is precisely the point. The neat packaging of the term *homosexuality* in terms of “preference/practice” or “orientation/practice” is a recent development, and, once again, may route the discussion down particular pathways. In fact, the word *homosexual* was not coined until as late as the nineteenth century by a German

psychologist, Karoly Maria Benkert.⁵⁰ Moreover, that standard bearer of definitions and etymologies, that is, *The Oxford English Dictionary*, considers as its first entry for the word a late nineteenth-century citation found in H. Havelock Ellis's *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, which not only makes reference to Burton's "climatic theory of homosexuality"⁵¹ but also notes in reference to this same author that "homosexuality is a barbarously hybrid word, and I claim no responsibility for it."⁵²

John Wesley on Same-Sex Attraction or Homosexuality

The terms *homosexual* and *homosexuality* and even "same-sex attraction" were, of course, never employed by John Wesley in his very large corpus of writings. And in terms of those controversial passages from the Bible that are often lifted up as emblematic of this particular domain of human sexuality—ten in particular repeatedly come to mind⁵³—Wesley, remarkably enough, offered no commentary on the theme of human sexuality in terms of three of them, drawn in this first instance from the pages of the Old Testament. Despite Wesley's neglect, many traditionalists consider these same three passages as crucial to their case: Genesis 19:1-5; Leviticus 18:22; 20:13.

The picture, however, is considerably different in terms of the New Testament material. Here Wesley did indeed address the sexual dimensions of several passages. We will consider three of the most important. First, in terms of Romans 1:26-28, which describes women exchanging natural sexual relations for unnatural ones and men committing shameful acts with other men, Wesley made a judgment drawing from his recognition of the illuminating power of the moral law in general and of the precepts of natural law in particular by referring to such behaviors as the fruit of "unnatural lust,"⁵⁴ which is also implied by the text itself. In other words, it was a desire not rightly ordered to the God-given goal of humanity, which is holiness.

Second, with respect to 1 Corinthians 6:9-11, "Don't be deceived. Those who are sexually immoral, those who worship false gods, adulterers, both participants in same-sex intercourse . . . won't inherit God's kingdom" (CEB), Wesley missed the possible connection between *μαλακοὶ* (*malakoi*, "soft ones") and *ἀρσενικοῖται* (*arsenokoitai*, "male bed partners"), picked up in the Common English Bible's translation of "both participants in same-sex intercourse" just cited, a phrase that suggests a relation between "submissive and dominant male sexual partners."⁵⁵ Indeed, the text that Wesley was reading translated *μαλακοὶ* (*malakoi*, "soft ones") as "effeminate," and he therefore referred to them in his *Notes* on this passage simply as those "Who live in an easy, indolent way; taking up no cross, enduring no hardship."⁵⁶ However, in terms of *ἀρσενικοῖται* (*arsenokoitai*) the Bible that Wesley used translated this particular word as "sodomites" (the term that he employs in his *Notes* on this passage as well), though later the editors of the Authorized Version changed this translation of *ἀρσενικοῖται* (*arsenokoitai*) to "abusers of themselves with mankind," which is how the King James Version renders it today.⁵⁷

Third, in regard to Jude 1:7a ("In a similar way, Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding towns gave themselves up to sexual immorality and perversion" [NIV]), Wesley once again drew from the wells of moral and natural law and referred to this sexuality in terms of "unnatural lusts," that is, as neither rightly ordered to human nature, in the form of the glorious *imago Dei*, nor partaking of the will of the Creator in the fitness of relations established in creation.⁵⁸ In fact, when a detailed analysis is made of the over thirty passages in Wesley's writings in which he utilized the word *sex* (often in the form of the phrase "age and sex" in his letters, for example⁵⁹), it is abundantly clear that he gave recognition, and therefore legitimacy by implication, only to the sexual distinction and to the heterosexuality activity of males and females in sacred covenant.

To illustrate, the scope of Wesley’s treatment can be seen, in a similar fashion, in his observations on Mark 10:6: “Therefore Adam did not at first contain both sexes in himself: but God made Adam, when first created, male only; and Eve female only. And this man and woman he joined together, in a state of innocence, as husband and wife.”⁶⁰

Where Does Same-Sex Attraction or Homosexuality Fit In?

It is clear from an examination of the writings as well as the practices of John Wesley, especially as he guided the moral and religious life of the Methodist societies, that he rejected as a missing of the mark all human sexual activity that was not a part of a covenanted marriage between a man and a woman. In Wesley’s estimation, such sexual activity had no positive moral status. It was neither given by God at creation nor taken up into covenant and declared holy. Wesley’s judgment, then, is evident not only in his commentary on key New Testament passages; but it is also manifested in his vigorous appeal to the moral law of Scripture as well as to the natural law of a created order. His employment of the latter, that is natural law, was evident not only in the first two precepts of *The General Rules of the United Societies* but also in a more formal way in his arguments against slavery. The following chart, then, represents not only a summary of Parts I and II but also the seasoned judgment of Wesley, as well as some contemporary Methodists, as they bring to bear, in a very intentional way, the significant resources of this great Wesleyan tradition on the issue of human sexuality:

Wesleyan Maxims	Sexual Relations Between Man and Woman (Husband and Wife)	Sexual Relations Between Man and Man; Woman and Woman
Rooted in a Created Order	✓	---
In Harmony with the Eternal and Moral Law	✓	---
In Accordance with Natural Law	✓	---
Affirmed by the Four Witnesses of Natural Law	✓	---
Is Biologically Grounded and Productive of Children	✓	---
The Spiritual Dimensions of the Marital Relation are Taken Up into Covenant	✓	---
Is a Reflection of Trinitarian Relations	✓	---
Celebrated in Scripture	✓	---
Affirmed by Jesus Christ	✓	---

Part III: Ecclesiastical Foundations: The Formal Judgment of The United Methodist Church

To the significant assets of The United Methodist Church already enumerated must be added ecclesiastical ones in terms of the formal, public judgments of the church, expressed in general conferences as well as in the *Book of Discipline*, on the issue of human sexuality.

The Official Teaching of United Methodism Today

Same-sex attraction, along with its sexual activities, did not become an issue for United Methodists until the 1968 union of the denomination, when the Evangelical United Brethren and the Methodist Church came together.⁶¹ The question of human sexuality became prominent, in other words, during the decade of the 1960s, a period that witnessed the rise of both the sexual revolution and the New Left. Russell E. Richey, Kenneth E. Rowe, and Jean Miller Schmidt in their work *The Methodist Experience in America: A History* chronicle the official teaching of *The UM Church* on this topic over a thirty year period. This material, drawn from their text, is presented and organized in the following bulleted format:

- [1968] “Before the 1968 union, Methodists and mainline Protestants had given homosexuality little sustained attention.”⁶²
- [1972] “So the declaration that the practice of homosexuality is ‘incompatible with Christian teaching’ entered United Methodist history in 1972.”⁶³
- [1984] “The delegates approved ‘fidelity in marriage and celibacy in singleness’ as a standard for all ordained clergy.”⁶⁴
- [1987] “The denomination’s bishops issued a ‘statement of concern’ during their November 1987 meeting. It called upon all United Methodists to join with us in being faithful to the standards, ‘fidelity in marriage and celibacy in singleness. . . .’”⁶⁵
- [1988] “The study committee created by the 1988 General Conference worked over the next quadrennium, gathering testimony from experts in biblical studies, theology, ethics, and the sciences.”⁶⁶
- [1992] “The 1992 General Conference ‘received’ the report, rejected the recommendations of the study committee on homosexuality, but directed that the report be made available for study in congregations throughout the denomination. The report, therefore, did not represent the official position of the UMC.”⁶⁷
- [1996] “The 1996 General Conference not only reaffirmed the UMC’s exclusionary rules but also included a new prohibition in the Social Principles regarding gays.”⁶⁸
- [1998] “In August, the Judicial Council determined the disciplinary prohibition against gay unions to be enforceable, notwithstanding the law’s curious placement in the Social Principles, a matter that the decision examines.”⁶⁹

To these judgments must be added those from the most recent General Conference of The UM Church, which met in Portland, Oregon in 2016. This duly assembled conference, which is the only body that can speak in an official way for the church with respect to doctrine, made the following declarations, which reiterated the judgments of earlier conferences that are a part of *The Discipline* today:

- [¶ 161] “Primary for us is the gospel understanding that all persons are important—because they are human beings created by God and loved through and by Jesus Christ and not because they have merited significance.”⁷⁰
- [¶ 161.B] “We believe the family to be the basic human community through which persons are nurtured and sustained in mutual love, responsibility, respect, and fidelity.”⁷¹
- [¶ 161.C] “We affirm the sanctity of the marriage covenant that is expressed in love, mutual support, personal commitment, and shared fidelity between a man and a woman. We believe that God’s blessing rests upon such marriage, whether or not there are children of the union.”⁷²

- [¶ 161.G] “We affirm that sexuality is God’s good gift to all persons. We call everyone to responsible stewardship of this sacred gift. Although all persons are sexual beings whether or not they are married, sexual relations are affirmed only with the covenant of monogamous, heterosexual marriage.”⁷³
- [¶ 161.G] “The United Methodist Church does not condone the practice of homosexuality and considers this practice incompatible with Christian teaching.”⁷⁴
- [¶ 161.G] “We implore families and churches not to reject or condemn lesbian and gay members and friends. We commit ourselves to be in ministry for and with all persons.”⁷⁵
- [¶ 304.3] “The practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching. Therefore self-avowed practicing homosexuals are not to be certified as candidates, ordained as ministers, or appointed to serve in The United Methodist Church.”⁷⁶

Given the considerable biblical, theological, ethical and now ecclesiastical resources of the Methodist heritage currently in place, the question of differing forms of human sexuality—posed originally and chiefly by a broader North American culture—as well as the question of church unity in the midst of controversy can now be addressed.

Part IV: The Question of Unity Posed

In terms of same-sex attraction and its sexual practices, The United Methodist Church today is obviously divided. On the one hand, groups such as Good News, The Confessing Movement, The Institute on Religion and Democracy, and United Methodist Action all favor a biblical and traditionalist approach. In other words, they agree with both Scripture as well as the Methodist tradition that all sexual activity that occurs outside the marriage bond of a man and a woman is sinful, illicit, and therefore has no positive moral standing. Put another way, such sexual activity has neither been established by God nor is it protected and affirmed by moral and natural law or by a holy covenant. The ongoing strength of this view is reflected in the wisdom of the general conferences over the last generation and in the most recent edition of *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church*. On the other hand, groups such as Reconciling Ministries Network, Love Prevails, and the Methodist Federation for Social Action have maintained that the sexual practices of homosexuality can and should be embraced by the church. In other words, such practices should be a bar to neither marriage nor ordination.⁷⁷

Some in The United Methodist Church today, such as Bishop Scott Jones, have argued that the division just noted, as contentious as it is at times, does not touch upon a basic teaching of the faith. In his book *Staying at the Table*, for example, he explains: “On the issue of homosexuality, I am a compatibilist. I welcome diverse opinions and conversation because I think the Church needs the conversation. This is only possible because I do not regard our teaching on homosexuality as an essential doctrine.”⁷⁸ However, the sexual practices of same-sex attraction, though not its supposed orientation or proclivity to certain sexual behaviors, do indeed undermine not one but actually two essential doctrines. Bear in mind that the early church, at the Council of Constantinople in 381, for instance, affirmed four basic marks of the church: namely, the Body of Christ is *one, holy, catholic, and apostolic*.

So then, first of all, the sexual practices of homosexuality, disordered as they are, strike at nothing less than the very holiness of the church. That is, the doctrine of sanctification, which lies at the heart of Methodism, is emptied of its meaning and vacated. And yet Bishop Jones has argued, interestingly enough, that sanctification is, after all, an essential doctrine!⁷⁹ With these discordant judgments in place, the bishop, in our judgment, should have connected the

theological dots, so to speak, in order to arrive at a determination consistent with other areas of his theology and, more important, with the Methodist tradition as well.

Second, the consequence of emptying out the doctrine of sanctification has the snowball effect of undermining the very nature of the church itself. Indeed, it's difficult to get more basic or essential than that. Consider this: what is being asked of United Methodists today by the Reconciling Ministries Network and others, for example, is to bring people into the church in a way that has occurred only once before (with the notable exception of the sin of slaveholding) in the history of American Methodism. In other words, people would be brought into communion who are not only unwilling to repent of their sins, their unholiness in the sight of a God of holy love, but who also actually demand that such sinful practices be affirmed by the church. What's more, those who are calling for this revisionist⁸⁰ understanding of both human sexuality and the nature of the church have yet to develop, in a forthright way, the arguments necessary to demonstrate clearly and convincingly just how this newfangled approach would cohere with Scripture, two thousand years of Christian history, the moral and natural law, a created order, as well as with the genius of the Methodist tradition itself, a tradition that has ever placed a premium on holiness.

The other time that the church, specifically in this instance United Methodism, was compromised in its witness, took place in the wake, once again, of the sexual revolution of the 1960s. This time, however, it concerned not homosexuality but heterosexuality. To illustrate: at the turn of the twentieth century, the Methodist Episcopal Church; the Methodist Protestant Church; as well as the Methodism Episcopal Church, South, all interpreted Matthew 19:9 ("I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery" NIV) in a way that understood divorce to be a regrettable, and therefore, it was hoped, a rare occurrence (the divorce rate was 7 or 8 percent in 1908⁸¹), with little or no provision made for a remarriage other than adultery. However, by the time these bodies came together, first in 1939, and then with the Evangelical United Brethren in 1968, a new course on this matter was already in the making.

Following broader cultural and political trends—California enacted a no-fault divorce law in 1969 and all states some version of this by 1985⁸²—The United Methodist Church by 1976 was clearly compromised and co-opted in its sexual ethic, in what looked like serial monogamy, having removed virtually all impediments for contracting another marriage after divorce in its *Discipline* that year. Indeed, the church now affirmed "the right of divorced persons to remarry,"⁸³ picking up the language from the title of a popular book of the period.⁸⁴ By 1996, the *Discipline* began to employ the simple and general statement, "Divorce does not preclude a new marriage,"⁸⁵ and this same language is found in the current *Discipline* (2016) as well.⁸⁶ What an earlier age had called sin, and Roman Catholics, by the way, still do today (that is, divorce and remarriage in the wake of, for example, simply irreconcilable differences), the current United Methodist Church calls "a regrettable alternative."⁸⁷ What is this but to tolerate the ongoing practice of sin and thereby to lay the groundwork for and to participate in a divorce culture that is harming children and in which rates not only hover around 40 percent but also hardly differ between those inside the church and those beyond its walls.⁸⁸ In this particular area, instead of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world, The United Methodist Church has opted for being transformed by the world in ways that it has not yet fully comprehended, theologically or otherwise.

Where, then, is the moral force and authority of the heterosexual United Methodist community, those who are compromised, when it looks in the direction of the homosexuals in its

midst? For one thing, it must get its own house in order and take up the discipline of repentance if there is to be any credible call to holiness in the broader church. Otherwise co-opted, culturally accommodated heterosexuals will not only contradict themselves repeatedly in the proclamation of the Christian faith, but they will also be charged with hypocrisy precisely when they issue a call to holiness in terms of the homosexuality community, a call that they themselves are apparently unwilling to hear.

Conclusion

In light of the forgoing argument, the way forward to a unity that will be grounded in the holiness and the love of Christ would entail nothing less than embracing the humble path of repentance for both the heterosexual and homosexual communities. In particular, the heterosexual community must repent of its cultural accommodation with respect to trends in North American culture, especially in the area of divorce and remarriage. For its part, the same-sex attraction community must repent of all those sexual practices that depart from living a celibate, holy, and Christ-like life. With this effort brought to bear in the warp and woof of life, and united in the humble, gracious spirit of repentance, both heterosexuals and homosexuals alike will finally be in a place where they can appreciate each other's gifts as they together glorify a God of holy love in thought, word, and deed. By this unifying path of mutual repentance, under the Lordship of Christ, they will together be empowered to spread the genius of the Methodist tradition, so very precious, from age to age.

Human Sexuality and the Unity of the Church: Toward a Faithful United Methodist Witness—Kenneth J. Collins

¹ Mark A Smith, *Secular Faith: How Culture Has Trumped Religion in American Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), Kindle loc. 1934–36.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., Kindle loc. 2216–17.

⁴ William B. Lawrence, *Methodism in Recovery: Renewing Mission, Reclaiming History, Restoring Health* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008), 49.

⁵ Scott Kisker, *Mainline or Methodist: Discovering Our Evangelistic Mission* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2008), 73.

⁶ “The General Deliverance,” *The Sermons*, vols. 1–4, *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985), 2:441.

⁷ Thomas Jackson, ed., *The Works of John Wesley*, 14 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1978), 10:361.

⁸ William R. Cannon, *The Theology of John Wesley, with Special Reference to the Doctrine of Justification* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1984), 172.

⁹ John Wesley, “The Original, Nature, Properties and Use of the Law,” *The Sermons of John Wesley: A Collection for the Christian Journey*, eds. Kenneth J. Collins and Jason Vickers (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2013), 106.

¹⁰ Ibid., 106–107.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., 107.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., emphasis added.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., 108. All of these quotations are taken from the same page in Wesley's writings, and so we list them all in this single footnote. Boldface is added.

¹⁹ Ibid., 110.

²⁰ Ibid., 108, emphasis added.

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- ²¹ Ibid.
- ²² “Upon Our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount, Discourse the Fifth,” Collins and Vickers, *The Sermons*, 528.
- ²³ Though there have been a couple of good comparative studies of John Wesley and Thomas Aquinas, none focus on the important issue of moral and natural law with but a recent exception. See Edgardo Antonio Colon-Emeric, *Wesley, Aquinas, and Christian Perfection: An Ecumenical Dialogue* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2009), Kenneth Loyer, *God’s Love through the Spirit: The Holy Spirit in Thomas Aquinas & John Wesley* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University Press, 2014), and more recently the work of A.C. Weissenbacher, “John Wesley and the Natural Law of Jean Porter and Pamela Hall,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 49 (Fall 2014): 187–204.
- ²⁴ Collins and Vickers, *The Sermons*, 108.
- ²⁵ Peter Kreeft, *A Summa of the Summa* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2011), 516.
- ²⁶ In his *Address to the Clergy*, Wesley recommends knowledge of the writings of Aquinas for those who take on this high calling. He questions, for instance, a supposed candidate in the following way: “Do I understand metaphysics; if not the depths of the Schoolmen, the subtleties of Scotus or Aquinas, yet the first rudiments, the general principles, of that useful science?” See *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Thomas Jackson, 14 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1978), 10:492.
- ²⁷ Rupert E. Davies, *The Methodist Societies: History, Nature, and Design*, in *The Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 9:70–72.
- ²⁸ Jackson, *Works of Wesley*, 11:70.
- ²⁹ Ibid.
- ³⁰ J. Budziszewski, *What We Can’t Not Know* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2011), 111.
- ³¹ John Wesley, *Notes Upon the Old Testament*, 3 vols., ed. William M. Arnett (Salem, OH: Schmul Publishing Co., 1975), 1:16 (Gen. 1:26-28). I have made the material gender neutral by adding the brackets.
- ³² Ibid., 1:18 (Gen. 1:31).
- ³³ Ibid., 1:16 (Gen. 1:26-28).
- ³⁴ Ibid.
- ³⁵ Ibid., 1:21 (Gen. 2:8-15).
- ³⁶ “The New Birth,” Collins and Vickers, *The Sermons*, 157.
- ³⁷ Wesley, *OT Notes*, 1:24 (Gen. 1:23).
- ³⁸ Ibid., (Gen. 1:24).
- ³⁹ Ibid.
- ⁴⁰ Bill T Arnold, *Seeing Black and White in a Gray World* (Franklin, TN: Seedbed Publishing, 2014), 101.
- ⁴¹ Ibid.
- ⁴² Ibid.
- ⁴³ Howard A. Snyder, *Homosexuality and the Church: Guidance for Community Conversation* (Wilmore, KY: Seedbed Publishing, 2014), Kindle loc. 230–32.
- ⁴⁴ Arnold, *Seeing Black and White*, 101.
- ⁴⁵ Snyder, *Homosexuality*, Kindle loc. 23–232).
- ⁴⁶ <http://www.flumc.org/newsdetail/928412>.
- ⁴⁷ Arnold, *Seeing Black and White*, 27–28.
- ⁴⁸ John Stott, *Same-Sex Partnerships? A Christian Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Revell, 1998), 15.
- ⁴⁹ Arnold, *Seeing Black and White*, 27–28.
- ⁵⁰ <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/homosexuality>, accessed December 30, 2016.
- ⁵¹ The Editors, *The Compact Edition of the Oxford Dictionary: Complete Text; Supplement and Bibliography*, 2 vols. (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1971), 2:3,990.
- ⁵² Ibid.
- ⁵³ They are as follows: Gen. 19:1-5, Lev. 18:22; 20:13; Mark 10:5-9; Rom. 1:26-28; 1 Cor. 6:9-11, 17-20; 7:1-2; 1 Tim 1:8-11; Jude 1:5-7.
- ⁵⁴ John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament* (Salem, OH: Schmul Publishers), 473 (Rom. 1:26-28).
- ⁵⁵ See 1 Cor. 6:9-11, Common English Bible, note h.
- ⁵⁶ Wesley, *Notes*, 23 (1 Cor. 6:9).
- ⁵⁷ *The Holy Bible: King James Version*, Electronic Edition of the 1900 Authorized Version. (Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 2009), 1 Cor. 6:9.
- ⁵⁸ “The Original, Nature, Properties and Use of the Law,” Collins and Vickers, *The Sermons*, 108.
- ⁵⁹ “To Sarah Mallet on March 11, 1788,” *The Letters of John Wesley, A.M.*, 8 vols., ed. John Telford (London: The Epworth Press, 1931), 8:44.
- ⁶⁰ Wesley, *Notes* (Mark 10:6).

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- ⁶¹ Russell E. Richey, Kenneth E Rowe, and Jean Miller Schmidt, *The Methodist Experience in America: A History*, Kindle ed., vol. 1 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010), Kindle loc. 10637–39).
- ⁶² Ibid.
- ⁶³ Ibid., Kindle loc. 10726–27.
- ⁶⁴ Ibid., Kindle loc. 12036–40.
- ⁶⁵ Ibid., Kindle loc. 12076–78.
- ⁶⁶ Ibid., Kindle loc. 12115–24.
- ⁶⁷ Ibid., Kindle loc. 12129–31.
- ⁶⁸ Ibid., Kindle loc. 12141–42.
- ⁶⁹ Ibid., Kindle loc. 12171–72.
- ⁷⁰ *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church 2016* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2016), ¶161, Kindle loc. 2648–49.
- ⁷¹ Ibid., ¶161.B, Kindle loc. 2660–61.
- ⁷² Ibid., ¶161.C, Kindle loc. 2664–66.
- ⁷³ Ibid., ¶161.G, Kindle loc. 2691–93.
- ⁷⁴ Ibid., Kindle loc. 2700.
- ⁷⁵ Ibid., Kindle loc. 2702–3.
- ⁷⁶ Ibid., ¶304.3, Kindle loc. 4798–4800.
- ⁷⁷ See Steve Harper, *For the Sake of the Bride: Restoring the Church to Her Intended Beauty* (Amazon Digital Services, 2014), 5, 40, 97. Harper’s reasoning on homosexuality is flawed in many ways. We will simply note three major faults. First, he bases much of his argument on *human experience*, in particular the one that he had during Lent of 2014. However, no matter how deeply felt or poignant, the personal *experience* of an individual, in this case Steve Harper, is by no means sufficient grounds for the kinds of radical changes that he is calling for in the church. Put another way, this form of argumentation convinces no one but himself or those who already share his view on other grounds. Second, sounding very much like Rob Bell in places, Harper stresses the following dictum in his essay: “But the point is, no matter what interpretation you give to it, ‘love wins.’ The Father’s love is the supreme and prevailing love.” However, it would have been far better if Harper had explored the phrase “holy love,” a very Wesleyan thing to do, by the way, and not simply love, since the latter can so easily become a weasel word for such things as self-interest and even self-indulgence (God is so loving because the Most High affirms me in precisely what I want to do!). All of this, of course, is indicative not of holiness but of cheap grace. Third, Harper commits the logical fallacy of “begging the question.” In other words, he *presumes* to be good (homosexual marriage, for instance) and therefore not to be at stake precisely what is being called into question by so many others. Thus, Harper embeds his own various assumptions into a newfangled approach in which he has reconfigured the institution of marriage. To illustrate, at Harper’s revisionist hands, marriage is now to be defined as “a union of persons who do not want to fornicate (whether the union is a heterosexual or a homosexual one). However, beyond the matter of fornication, homosexual practices must themselves be called into question and not simply tucked away under the canopy of a reworked definition of “marriage.”
- ⁷⁸ Scott J. Jones, *Staying at the Table: The Gift of Unity for United Methodists* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008), 61.
- ⁷⁹ Ibid., 32.
- ⁸⁰ We employ the word *revisionist* rather than *progressive* because the latter term is a political one that offers a different framework (identity politics) for the assessment of the moral worth of homosexual behaviors. The former term rightly places heterosexuality at the center (in terms of creation, moral law, natural law and a covenant affirmed by God) and it therefore sees homosexuality, in terms of the claim of the right to marriage, for example, as a revision of this prior good. The former term, in other words, offers the framework of the church and its grand story as the locus of interpretation, not politics. Indeed, to call revisionists “progressives” is not only to subtly shift the framework in which this problem will be addressed, but it is also to move the discussion away from the rich resources of the Christian heritage.
- ⁸¹ Smith, *Secular Faith*, Kindle loc. 1472–73.
- ⁸² Ibid., Kindle loc. 1574–79.
- ⁸³ *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church 1976* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1976), ¶ 71.C.
- ⁸⁴ Dwight Hervey Small, *The Right to Remarry* (Grand Rapids, MI: F.H. Revell, 1975).
- ⁸⁵ *The Book of Discipline* (1996), ¶ 65.D.
- ⁸⁶ *The Book of Discipline* (2016), ¶ 161.G, Kindle loc. 2679.
- ⁸⁷ Ibid., ¶ 161.D, Kindle loc. 2670.

⁸⁸ We recognize that this is a difficult and sensitive topic that needs more reflection as well as some carefully drawn nuances, more than can be offered in this current essay.