

Engaging the “Public/Private” Split

United Methodism and Lessons from the Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy

Christopher Evans

When I was in graduate school, a work that contributed to my scholarship was an anthology edited by Russell Richey, Kenneth Rowe, and Jean Miller Schmidt, *Perspectives on American Methodism*.¹ I was especially drawn to a chapter by Jean Miller Schmidt, “Reexamining the Public/Private Split: Reforming the Continent and Spreading Scriptural Holiness.”² Schmidt’s purpose was to engage questions surrounding the historiography of American Protestantism that discussed the division of churches along the lines of two theological camps. One group, called “public” Protestants, supported various models of social activism. Another group, called “private” Protestants, championed traditional evangelical understandings centered upon personal conversion.³ Originally written at the time of Methodism’s bicentennial in 1984,⁴ Schmidt appealed for a nuanced view of so-called “public/private” Protestantism. Citing a range of important scholarship coming out of the 1970s and 1980s, Schmidt critiqued the difficulties with public/private terminology within United Methodism, especially pointing to the rich tradition of social activism that grounded evangelical movements during the nineteenth century. She concluded her essay with a plea for United Methodists to develop a historical grounding that looked beyond what she saw as a false dichotomy between personal and social faith. “We need to encourage people who do not believe that their efforts make a difference by helping to acquaint them with heroes and heroines of their own tradition . . . who combined personal faith and social vision and action in their time. Methodist historians in particular might bring their awareness of history to the task of helping the church spell out the values inherent in the Methodist way of life.”⁵

Schmidt’s essay serves as an important reminder that labels like *liberal*, *conservative*, *fundamentalist*, and *modernist* often fail to grasp how various persons in The United Methodist Church have integrated dimensions of personal and social holiness in their ministries. Historians including Schmidt, Timothy Smith, Donald Dayton, and Rosemary Keller, have examined how nineteenth- and twentieth-century Methodists connected their beliefs in personal salvation to a range of social reform efforts, including abolition, temperance reform, economic justice, and women’s rights.⁶

Creating a model of theological unity based upon a Wesleyan axis of personal and social holiness is an excellent starting point for holding difficult theological conversations. However, United Methodist history is marked by painful theological divisions that, up until a few decades ago many, Methodist scholars glossed over. As a church, we need to acknowledge that, historically, the marks of personal and social holiness have often come to identify two distinctive theological movements in Methodist history.

One can understand how these theological divisions impact United Methodism today by reviewing the historical event commonly called the fundamentalist-modernist controversy.⁷ These battles over a range of doctrinal issues split apart many Protestant churches in the 1920s

and 1930s. Through the 1970s, most historians tended to minimize the impact of the fundamentalist-modernist conflict within American Methodism. They argued that Methodism, with its Arminian-based theology and its receptivity to theological liberalism, largely came through the fundamentalist-modernist battles unscathed. Frederick Norwood epitomized this historical trend. While conceding that certain churches in the United Methodist family were caught up in the currents of the fundamentalist-modernist battles, they were mostly “regional and local” squabbles.⁸

American Methodism may not have experienced the schisms that characterized several denominations impacted by fundamentalist debates in the early twentieth century. However, I don’t believe that the United Methodist tradition escaped these theological conflicts. In examining the theological ruptures that occurred almost a hundred years ago in American Protestantism, we gain insight into broader theological fissures that lie at the heart of many of the divisions that affect our church today. In many ways, contemporary United Methodist debates over contentious social issues, like human sexuality, are not just differences of opinion. They reflect larger theological rifts that have existed in American Methodism for a long time.

This paper engages two primary questions. First, how are the theological differences that characterized the fundamentalist-modernist controversy of the 1920s instructive for The United Methodist Church today? While the conflict between so-called modernist liberals and fundamentalist evangelicals has often been caricatured in American popular culture, two primary figures emerge out of these early twentieth-century theological battles: J. Gresham Machen and Harry Emerson Fosdick. The debates between Machen and Fosdick raise a number of questions for us in terms of how we understand a range of important questions pertaining to the roles of scripture, doctrine, and who in the church is entitled to be called an “evangelical.” Quite simply, the issues that Machen and Fosdick fought over are still being contested in The United Methodists Church.

Today, we can debate the usefulness of terms like *fundamentalist* and *modernist*. However, I believe that one can see the theological contours of two parties in contemporary United Methodism that roughly parallel these earlier movements. The first group I call Orthodox Methodists. This group represents persons who insist on the centrality of scripture and an embrace of doctrinal confessions ranging from the early church period, the sixteenth-century Reformation era, through the time of John and Charles Wesley. A persistent theme within this camp is United Methodism needs to link understandings of Christian orthodoxy to a vibrant vision of evangelicalism and mission.⁹ One leader of this particular trajectory within United Methodism stated that the ends of Christianity were to “pledge unequivocal and confident allegiance to the Lord Jesus Christ. . . . This faith centers on Jesus Christ, fully God and fully man; and on His life, death, resurrection, ascension, and promised return as attested in Holy Scripture.”¹⁰

The second group I call Progressive Methodists. Although not dismissive of scriptural and doctrinal claims, this group often focuses upon questions related to one’s historical, cultural, or social context as the primary shaper of theology.¹¹ While mostly, but not exclusively, associated with iterations of theological liberalism, Progressive Methodists have a long and at times contentious history in our church for their support of reform measures associated with the social gospel movement. Connected to late nineteenth-century developments of industrialization and urbanization, the social gospel strove for a vision of faith rooted in the transformation of social structures. While the movement crested after World War I, its legacy cast a long arc on the broader history of twentieth-century American religion, with Methodists playing a major role in

the movement's dissemination.¹² Both camps lay claim to using Wesleyan sources of authority, such as the centrality of scripture. However, their conclusions about where these sources lead The United Methodist Church today are often quite different.¹³

My second question is: how might the Wesleyan heritage provide the resources for us to engage these deep theological divides within our history? For all the ways that earlier historians of American Methodism glossed over various theological divisions, they were probably right in their insistence that Methodism represented the quintessential American religious body.¹⁴ However, the truth of that statement is evident in ways that historians like Frederick Norwood never envisioned.

At times, both Progressive and Orthodox Methodists have leaned toward a dualism in their theological certainty. I argue that perhaps the way to bridge the gap between these two theological movements is to explore how renewed attention to Wesleyan themes of orthopathy, an understanding of "right experience," might provide a means for United Methodists to engage one another in theological conversation. Instead of centering our conversations solely on doctrine, often favored by Orthodox, or on context, often favored by Progressives, an engagement with questions of orthopathy might allow us ways to bridge some of the theological divides that we experience in The United Methodist Church today.

The Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy and Contemporary United Methodism

Historians have debated precise definitions of the term *fundamentalism*. Some scholars have emphasized the importance of premillennial dispensationalism, associated with figures such as John Nelson Darby, Dwight Moody, and Cyrus Scofield. These historians stress how biblical interpretation was tied to late nineteenth-century movements of "Bible prophecy," believing in the imminent return of Christ.¹⁵ Other historians, notably George Marsden, have seen the contours of Protestant fundamentalism chiefly connected to the doctrine of biblical inerrancy. Marsden argues that this doctrine united a disparate cross section of evangelicals in a common cause to resist liberalism's encroachment upon traditional Protestant teachings. As Marsden noted famously, "a fundamentalist is an evangelical who is angry about something."¹⁶

Likewise, definitions of *modernism* are not always precise. Usually, the term defines persons and churches influenced by theological liberalism. These persons reinterpret Christianity in light of nineteenth-century continental philosophy and emerging movements in the natural sciences.¹⁷ Despite the difficulties with the terms *fundamentalist* and *modernist*, they do help us understand the positions taken by the two major protagonists of this controversy in the 1920s: J. Gresham Machen and Harry Emerson Fosdick. A Baptist minister, Fosdick was probably American Protestantism's most prominent liberal preacher in the first half of the twentieth century.¹⁸ His 1922 sermon, "Shall the Fundamentalist Win?" encapsulated the larger liberal-modernist critique of fundamentalism. Fosdick criticized the efforts of many Presbyterians and Baptists who insisted on rigorous adherence to scriptural inerrancy and classic Reformed Protestant creeds. His sermon emphasized a theme that Progressive Methodists often use today toward their Orthodox colleagues; mainly, they accuse the Orthodox of theological intolerance. "Nobody's intolerance can contribute anything to the situation which we have described," Fosdick asserted. "The present world situation smells to heaven! And now, in the presence of colossal problems, which must be solved in Christ's name and for Christ's sake, the Fundamentalists propose to

drive out from Christian churches all the consecrated souls who do not agree with their theory of inspiration. What immeasurable folly!”¹⁹

Machen was unmoved by Fosdick’s arguments. A professor of New Testament at Princeton Theological Seminary, Machen disliked the term *fundamentalist* and vehemently rejected many popular beliefs associated with the movement, such as dispensationalism.²⁰ However, he castigated Fosdick and other liberals, not simply because their arguments were misguided, but because from his perspective, liberals were asking the wrong theological questions. For Machen, the core issue at stake for the church was not tolerance vs. intolerance. It was whether or not Christianity was going to maintain fidelity to indispensable biblical and doctrinal teachings. Machen likely had Fosdick in mind when he noted in his 1923 book *Christianity and Liberalism*, “The liberal preacher says to the conservative party in the Church: ‘Let us unite in the same congregation, since of course doctrinal differences are trifles.’ But it is the very essence of ‘conservatism’ in the Church to regard doctrinal differences as no trifles but as the matters of supreme moment.”²¹ Responding to the claim that the fundamentalists were narrow minded, Machen asserted that liberal accusations of theological intolerance was a moot point when one was faced with the necessity of preserving core Christian doctrines.

It is not necessarily “narrow” to reject the vicarious sacrifice of our Lord as the sole means of salvation. It may be very wrong (and we believe that it is), but it is not necessarily narrow. But to suppose that a man can hold to the vicarious sacrifice of Christ and at the same time belittle that doctrine . . . that is very narrow and very absurd.²²

A critical issue at stake for Fosdick and Machen was contesting the broader definition of the term, *evangelical*. Modern interpretations of this word come out of the transatlantic revivals of the eighteenth century, epitomized by the Great Awakenings in North America and the rise of Methodism in the British Isles.²³ According to historian David Bebbington, an evangelical emphasizes the fourfold authority of scripture, personal conversion, belief in Christ’s substitutionary atonement, and the importance of missionary activism.²⁴ The use of the term *evangelical* in nineteenth-century American Protestantism, including various branches of Methodism, tends to refer to the broad body of churches that we would call today mainline Protestantism. Late nineteenth-century historians of American Christianity, including Methodist Daniel Dorchester, often used the term *evangelical* to designate what they considered to be theologically orthodox churches—set apart from apostate churches such as Roman Catholic, Unitarian, and Mormon.²⁵

However, a recovery of themes related to personal conversion and biblical centrism became increasingly normative for a disparate range of churches that formed in the late nineteenth century—including many associated with the Holiness movement in American Methodism.²⁶ What often tied these groups together was the belief that Protestant churches were losing their zeal for evangelism and mission, embracing cultural respectability at the expense of vital piety and a biblically centered worldview.²⁷

For Machen, to be an evangelical meant not only embracing the truth of the Bible. It also reflected one’s unequivocal consent to various historic creeds.

An evangelical church is composed of a number of persons who have come to agreement in a certain message about Christ and who desire to unite in the propagation of that message, as it is set forth in their creed on the basis of the Bible.²⁸

Fosdick conceded that churches would come to different conclusions over the meaning of the term *evangelical*. However, he was worried about the growing number of Protestants who saw

biblical inerrancy and premillennialism as the primary litmus tests for being an evangelical.²⁹ Fosdick argued that knowledge of the modern world must go hand in hand with a view toward Christian unity. “The new knowledge and the old faith cannot be left antagonistic or even disparate. . . . We must be able to think our modern life clear through in Christian terms, and to do that we also must be able to think our Christian faith clear through in modern terms.”³⁰

Fosdick and Machen encapsulate core theological perspectives that frequently divide Orthodox and Progressive perspectives in United Methodism. Progressive Methodists concur with Fosdick by arguing that a core value of Methodism should be theological pluralism that seeks to interpret doctrinal truth through a wide range of beliefs and practices. Orthodox Methodists concur with Machen’s beliefs that Christianity needs to center upon unambiguous standards of scriptural and doctrinal fidelity.

Twentieth-century American Methodism has often used variations of Fosdick’s and Machen’s arguments in debating topics such as evangelicalism, mission, and, most especially, social issues. The formation of the Methodist Federation for Social Service in 1907, inaugurated decades of tension over the extent Methodists should endorse models of economic redistribution, such as socialism. The agitation of social gospel Methodists, chiefly Harry F. Ward, led in 1936, to a conservative reaction that created numerous “laymen’s caucuses” designed to curtail the radicalism of the Methodist left.³¹ In the post–World War II era, discussions surrounding economic justice often spilled over into church debates over civil rights, the Vietnam War, and the relationship of American church leaders to emerging models of liberation theology.³²

Historically, debates over the social principles of The United Methodist Church reflect this theological polarization. The activism of Harry Ward became synonymous with how a mainstream social-gospel liberal became an inflexible radical. Ward’s embrace of Marxist ideology in the 1930s and 1940s blinded him to the spiritual discernment that characterized other representatives of the social-gospel movement.³³ At the same time, Orthodox Methodists need to acknowledge the less savory aspects of their history. The affiliation of many Methodist conservatives in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s with a variety of xenophobic, racist, and anti-Semitic interests in the name of Christ and free-market capitalism embodied a longstanding tendency of some American Methodists to equate evangelical fidelity with an uncritical nationalism.³⁴

The terms *fundamentalist* and *modernist* may not be applicable to where The United Methodist Church is today (and one can argue that the terms are not necessarily helpful to understand the broader history of American Protestantism in the early twentieth century).³⁵ However, I do think it is important for us to examine how our own theological perspectives say something about where we stand on issues such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender equality. The question remains, however, can the theological resources of our tradition lead us forward in ways that focus us on The United Methodist Church’s mission “to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world”?

What to Do?

Last spring, I took several Boston University students to Portland, Oregon to observe the General Conference. My students and I witnessed the amazing diversity of our connection. In conversations with delegates and other visitors over coffee during breaks, we were surrounded by the sounds of diverse languages, accents, and styles of dress that gave us a sense of our church’s potential to manifest a powerful vision of hope to a hurting world. However, we also

experienced the deep divisions in our church, not just regarding questions of human sexuality, but over how we understand the broader mission of our connection.

As a United Methodist theological educator, I have taken pride in the ministries of my former students who are making a major impact in the church today as pastors, teachers, counselors, denominational leaders, and activists. It has been my joy to teach students about the contributions of various Wesleyan and Methodist historical movements. Yet I am aware that many aspects of our history often tell us more about what divides us, as opposed to what unites us. Without minimizing the passion of our personal beliefs, my hope is that we can move beyond the sense that our future depends on vanquishing from the church persons who disagree with our theological perspectives. In the late 1990s, Don Saliers and Henry Knight noted that debates in The United Methodist Church had created a “battle-line and warfare mentality,” where “theological differences are but a pretext for warfare of various kinds.”³⁶ Sadly, this theological vitriol is probably worse today.

Ultimately, questions of how The United Methodist Church will find a “way forward” rests in the authority of the General Conference. However, I believe that we must look at issues like human sexuality (and other contentious social issues) from the standpoint of how they engage the church not just on a conference level but among our broader membership.

Prominent Methodist historians from William Warren Sweet to Frederick Norwood emphasized that American Methodists were quintessentially American.³⁷ Yet their vision of the “quintessential” Methodist often resembled one shaped by a progressive Methodism that in some way never materialized—at least on a grassroots level.³⁸ Demographically, The United Methodist Church is probably the one mainline Protestant denomination in the U. S. to encompass the entire geographic range of the country.³⁹ However, throughout its history it has been a predominantly white, rural denomination.⁴⁰ Within many parts of the United States today, one sees evidence of Methodist DNA by noting that many of our congregations are what we would call “Main Street” churches that, once-upon-a-time, sat at the center of American religious and civic life. When we examine the results of the 2016 presidential election, we need to acknowledge that the outcome probably tells us a lot about our current membership—not just in terms of political commitments but also about the theological questions that are important to our members. This calls United Methodists to do a lot of soul searching in terms of whether or not the questions that we debate at General Conference really represent the issues that keep many of our members awake at night.

Data on American religious habits, such as the Pew Religious Landscape survey, reveals a portrait about our membership that would likely leave both Orthodox and Progressive Methodists not entirely happy. I’ve heard some Orthodox Methodists argue that affirmation for LGBT rights does not reflect the sentiments of people in the pews. However, data suggests that support for LGBT rights has risen dramatically over the last two decades. Further, this support increases exponentially when looking at the millennial generation of persons under the age of thirty—who statistically are leaving our churches in droves.⁴¹ Likewise, Progressive fixation on models of a social-gospel oriented faith often fails to take account of the historical and demographic realities of many of our churches. As United Methodist scholars, we frequently speak to our students in terms of what the church “ought” to be like. However, we sometimes gloss over what our church actually looks like.⁴²

I constantly remind students that every United Methodist congregation in our connection comes with its own unique history. Unlike nondenominational megachurches that often target specific demographics, most United Methodist congregations in the United States are made up of

persons with a mix of theological convictions. Further, our connection is shaped by a range of factors influenced by race, ethnicity, social class, and geographic location.⁴³

As United Methodists, it is one thing to say that we follow the doctrinal standards in the *Discipline*. It is another, however, when we come face to face with the specific implementation of our beliefs among our membership. For example, when we talk about upholding the authority of scripture, what does that mean in terms of an “acceptable” range of beliefs? Does it include embracing a doctrine of inerrancy, or more contemporary models of biblical scholarship? When we recite the Nicene or Apostles’ Creed that speaks of Christ’s second coming, should we exclude from membership those who see this as a metaphorical second coming, or those who hold to a dispensationalist view of the rapture? When we engage our members on questions of Christology, how do we handle those in our churches whose understanding of Jesus’ nature might lean more toward Arianism, as opposed to the orthodox doctrines of the Councils of Nicaea and Chalcedon?

My point is not to trivialize these important questions of doctrine. It is to draw attention to the fact that theology in America has historically been shaped by forces of popular culture that weave in and out of formal denominational structures.⁴⁴ Often, these theologies represent the starting point for pastoral leaders who engage people on a congregational level. I believe that Orthodox Methodists are accurate in calling the church’s attention to questions of reclaiming doctrinal traditions. But I also believe that “right teaching” is not a simple matter of trying to get our membership to conform to one precise interpretation of doctrine, especially given the demographic realities of our denomination.⁴⁵ Today, United Methodist pastors must effectively engage parishioners whose beliefs are often shaped by historical factors deeply engrained within the religious history of the United States.

Finally, it is important to point out that regardless of where we are theologically, many United Methodists today share with J. Gresham Machen and Harry Emerson Fosdick a vision of the church that is predominantly white. Recently, Robert Jones has called attention to what he sees as the end of White Christian America.⁴⁶ Although I feel that Jones’s argument is flawed by some of his assumptions, I do think he raises a critical point. Mainly, he signals the twilight of any model of Christianity that is centered upon a vision of white cultural and political dominance. Historically, United Methodism has played a major role in shaping the contours of American culture. While the shape of our church’s witness in the twenty-first century will look very different from the shape it took a hundred years ago, we face an array of contemporary crises that challenge us to reflect critically on how we understand our church’s mission—including how we might move beyond our current malaise over human sexuality.

Orthopathy as a Starting Point for Theological Conversation

Engaging Wesleyan understandings of *orthopathy*, or “right experience,” might prove especially valuable in healing “the public/private” split that has long plagued our tradition. Theodore Runyon observes that conversations surrounding Wesleyan theology often focus upon the categories of orthodoxy (right doctrine) and orthopraxis (right practice), without examining a Wesleyan view of orthopathy. According to Runyon, a rigorous understanding of orthopathy might enable United Methodists to flesh out their views of doctrine and practice. “Orthopathy thus testifies to the richness as well as the rightness of a faith which includes experience that is both divine and human. Strictly speaking, genuine experience of God is not *my* experience, it is the experience of the Other into whose life I am taken by grace. It is a *shared* reality.”⁴⁷ Runyon

focuses on the ways that Wesley understood orthopathy as essential to connecting individuals to the shared wisdom of a faith community. Wesley avoided a theological subjectivism by calling attention to the ways that “the experience is valid only insofar as it comes from a relation with a source that transcends the subject, and it is valid only insofar as it is consistent with a community of experience that transcends the individual.”⁴⁸

How might an engagement with questions of orthopathy heal some of the historical and theological divisions that exist among Orthodox and Progressive Methodists today? First, a Wesleyan orthopathy can become a counterweight to the religious individualism that is endemic to the history of American Christianity. My wife, who is a United Methodist elder, recounted to me an encounter with one of her parishioners many years ago, which I think illustrates a challenge that many in pastoral ministry face. This individual had a deep faith, and, like many United Methodists of the past, she could speak confidently of the sufficiency of God’s grace to carry her through many of her personal struggles. Yet as a means of summarizing her faith, she asserted, “As the Bible says, ‘to thine own self be true.’” One response to this woman is to say that she represents the problem of biblical illiteracy in many American churches. However, I think what is revealing is how this faithful person chose to define her beliefs with an assertion of rugged individualism (even as she confused William Shakespeare with holy writ).

In many ways, this woman’s confession goes to the heart of what is a blessing and curse about American Protestantism. It speaks to a deeply held religious sentiment of one’s personal relationship with God—the idea that we as individuals don’t need any sort of priestly mediation outside of our own experiences. Our churches are full of faithful people who have had “heart strangely warmed” encounters that lead to personal transformation. Yet our challenge is how to equip individuals to move from the question, “what is God doing for me?” to engage the question, “what is God doing through us?”

Years ago, I had the privilege of co-teaching a course on United Methodist History and Doctrine at Garrett-Evangelical Seminary with Bishop Edsel Ammons. Bishop Ammons repeatedly brought to the class’s attention a statement in the section on United Methodist doctrinal heritage in the *Book of Discipline*: “We proclaim no *personal gospel* that fails to express itself in relevant social concerns; we proclaim no *social gospel* that does not include the personal transformation of sinners.”⁴⁹ Part of what Ammons wanted the class to understand was that the balance of personal and social holiness was essential for a holistic evangelism. Sometimes Progressive Methodists are guilty of eliminating from their vocabulary any mention of evangelism in their understanding of faith. Sometimes Orthodox Methodists speak of evangelism in a fashion that creates parameters that only a select few can meet. Both perspectives are inadequate. Quoting from John Wesley, Runyon summarizes:

For Christianity “cannot subsist at all without society, without living and conversing with other men’ . . . To turn this religion into a solitary one is to destroy it.” . . . “True Christianity cannot exist without *both the inward experience and outward practice of justice, mercy, and truth*. Orthopathy combines in one indissoluble whole the inward and the outward, the individual and the social.”⁵⁰

Finally, I believe that engaging questions of right experience as a starting point for our theological conversations might provide us a means as a church to engage questions of human sexuality. Regardless of how we feel about this issue, we have to acknowledge that growing acceptance of LGBT persons, including marriage equality, is a reality in America. This support is especially pronounced among young people, regardless of their religious affiliation. The flip side of this support among younger Americans is they carry a negative perception about the

ability of faith communities to facilitate constructive conversations on these contentious issues.⁵¹ Sociologist Robert Wuthnow points out that the perceived lack of civility surrounding questions such as marriage equality has created a chasm that has alienated many millennials from religious institutions. “Religious leaders and policy makers need not abandon their principles to work for the common good, but working for the common good must be emphasized more forcefully if the culture wars are to be transcended.”⁵²

Part of the rhetoric made by different theological camps in United Methodism is that the church cannot be held captive to dominant cultural norms and values. While I largely affirm this view, I worry that this argument sometimes gets used without a clear sense of the enemy in the culture that we are allegedly fighting. I recognize that many members in our connection believe changing our current polity on LGBT inclusion will somehow destroy our church—in terms of both doctrine and membership. There are many reasons why American churches—both mainline and evangelical—are losing members today. However, I believe that focusing solely on human sexuality singles out a segment of the church for scapegoating, as opposed to centering attention upon the historical forces of the past half-century that have radically altered the face of Christianity in the United States.

Is It Well with Our Souls?

One of my favorite hymns is Horatio Spafford’s “It Is Well with My Soul.”⁵³ Whenever I’ve sung that hymn I’ve had similar feelings of being connected with the people who surround me. Spafford’s lyrics speak of God’s comfort amid deep personal tragedy. While the refrain, “it is well with my soul” speaks to the assurance that comes to the believer, there is something uniquely communal about singing the hymn. It’s as if all the labels that we assign to one another—liberal, conservative, orthodox, progressive—melt away into the shared experience of knowing that we belong to God.

Yet like many United Methodists of the past who have struggled over issues of division, we know that in some ways it is not well with our souls. We recognize that our divisions cannot be healed by the simple admonition to “just get along.” Like other churches with strong roots in the broader history of American Christianity the heritage of United Methodism often leaves an ambiguous legacy—demonstrating at times a prophetic voice and at other times manifesting the prejudices and biases of the larger culture.

My hope for plotting a way forward is that we as a church are able to do something that Harry Emerson Fosdick and J. Gresham Machen never had the opportunity to do: speak to each other face to face. Like Fosdick and Machen, and indeed like many people in the United States today who are divided by questions of religion, politics, race, and social class, our inclination is to speak only to those who agree with our own perspectives. Perhaps our conversations should not begin with the question of church unity. Perhaps our discernment needs to begin with our collective engagement of a question that has faced leaders of the church since the first century: to what extent are we individually and collectively willing to embrace change? When we talk about being a church that transcends the values of our culture, perhaps, for us as United Methodists, it begins with the simple act of engaging persons in the church who disagree with our opinions. These conversations on their own won’t solve our problems. But perhaps they can forge circumstances that allow us to come together to sing “It Is Well with My Soul” not as a lament for a broken church, but as diverse individuals who believe that we share a common hope rooted in God’s love to make all things new.

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- ¹ Russell E. Richey, Kenneth E. Rowe, and Jean Miller Schmidt, eds., *Perspectives on American Methodism: Interpretive Essays* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1993).
- ² Jean Miller Schmidt, “Reexamining the Public/Private Split: Reforming the Continent and Spreading Scriptural Holiness,” *Perspectives on American Methodism*, 228–47.
- ³ As Schmidt notes, the concept of the public-private split was developed by her PhD advisor at the University of Chicago, Martin E. Marty. See Marty, *Righteous Empire* (New York: Dial Press, 1970). See also Schmidt, *Souls of the Social Order: The Two-Party System in American Protestantism* (Brooklyn, NY: Carlson, 1991).
- ⁴ Schmidt’s chapter originally appeared in Richey and Rowe, eds., *Rethinking Methodist History* (Nashville: Kingswood, 1985).
- ⁵ Schmidt, “Public/Private Split,” *Perspectives on American Methodism*, 246.
- ⁶ See Timothy Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform* (New York: Abingdon, 1957); Donald Dayton, *Discovering an Evangelical Heritage* (New York: Harper, 1976); Rosemary Skinner Keller, ed., *Spirituality and Social Responsibility: Vocational Vision of Women in United Methodism* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993); Alice Knotts, *Fellowship of Love: Methodist Women Changing American Racial Attitudes* (Nashville: Kingswood, 1996); Jean Miller Schmidt, *Grace Sufficient: a History of Women in United Methodism* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999); and Mark R. Teasdale, *Methodist Evangelism, American Salvation: The Home Missions of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2014).
- ⁷ For an historical overview of the fundamentalist-modernist controversy, see George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).
- ⁸ Frederick Norwood, *The Story of American Methodism* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1974), 386.
- ⁹ For one view of the Orthodox perspective, see Thomas C. Oden, *The Rebirth of Orthodoxy: Signs of New Life in Christianity* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 2003).
- ¹⁰ Riley B. Case, *Evangelical and Methodist: A Popular History* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004), 258–59.
- ¹¹ For a sample of the progressive outlook, see John B. Cobb Jr., *Grace & Responsibility: A Wesleyan Theology for Today* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995).
- ¹² See Christopher H. Evans, *The Social Gospel in American Religion: A History* (New York: New York University Press, 2017).
- ¹³ Some United Methodist scholars have attempted to forge dialogue related to these broader theological differences. See, for example, Donald E. Messer and William J. Abraham, eds., *Unity, Liberty and Charity: Building Bridges Under Icy Waters* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996); and Henry H. Knight III and Don E. Saliers, *The Conversation Matters: Why United Methodists Should Talk with One Another* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999).
- ¹⁴ See Russell E. Richey, “History as a Bearer of Denominational Identity: Methodism as a Case Study,” in *Perspectives on American Methodism*, 480–497; and Christopher Evans, “From Militant Methodism to Secular Christianity: The Social Gospel in American Methodist Historical Narratives,” *Methodist History* 38 (April 2000): 147–59.
- ¹⁵ See Ernest Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970); and Matthew Avery Sutton, *American Apocalypse: a History of Modern Evangelicalism* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2014).
- ¹⁶ George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 235.
- ¹⁷ See, for example, William R. Hutchison, *The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976).
- ¹⁸ On Fosdick, see Robert Moats Miller, *Harry Emerson Fosdick: Preacher, Pastor, Prophet* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).
- ¹⁹ Harry Emerson Fosdick, “Shall the Fundamentalists Win?” <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5070/>. For a summary of Fosdick’s argument in this sermon, see Christopher Evans, *Liberalism without Illusions: Renewing an American Christian Tradition* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2010), 100–102.
- ²⁰ On Machen’s theology, see George M. Marsden, “Understanding J. Gresham Machen,” in *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1991), 182–201.
- ²¹ J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (New York: Macmillan, 1923), 161.
- ²² *Ibid.*, 161–62.

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- ²³ See Mark Noll, *The Rise of Evangelicalism* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2003).
- ²⁴ See David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989).
- ²⁵ Two important late nineteenth-century textbooks that accentuate this institutionalized understanding of evangelicalism are Daniel Dorchester, *Christianity in the United States from the First Settlement Down to the Present Time* (New York: Phillips & Hunt, 1888), and Leonard Woolsey Bacon, *A History of American Christianity* (New York: Christian Literature, 1897).
- ²⁶ On works that explore different themes in the development of the holiness movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, see Charles Edwin Jones, *Perfectionist Persuasion: the Holiness Movement and American Methodism* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1974); Norris Magnuson, *Salvation in the Slums: Evangelical Social Work* (Metuchen: Scarecrow, 1977); and Priscilla Pope-Levison, *Building the Old Time Religion: Women Evangelists in the Progressive Era* (New York: New York University Press, 2014).
- ²⁷ See Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America: Winners and Losers in our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992).
- ²⁸ Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*, 168.
- ²⁹ Although not commonly associated with Methodism, apocalyptic interpretations of the “end times” have historically cut across a cross-section of American Protestant churches, representing a persistent feature of the American religious landscape. See Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1992).
- ³⁰ Fosdick, “Shall the Fundamentalists Win?”
- ³¹ See Walter G. Muelder, *Methodism and Society in the Twentieth Century* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1961).
- ³² See George D. McClain, “Pioneering Social Gospel Radicalism: An Overview of the History of the Methodist Federation for Social Action,” in *Perspectives on American Methodism*, 371–85. United Methodist engagement with the ecumenical movement, especially during the Civil Rights and Vietnam War eras, is well documented in Jill K. Gill, *Embattled Ecumenism: The National Council of Churches, the Vietnam War, and the Trials of the Protestant Left* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois Press, 2011).
- ³³ David Nelson Duke, *In the Trenches with Jesus and Marx: Harry F. Ward and the Struggle for Social Justice* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2003).
- ³⁴ See, for example, Rembert Gilman Smith, *Moscow Over Methodism* (Houston: University Press, 1950).
- ³⁵ See Christopher H. Evans, *Histories of American Christianity: An Introduction* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2013).
- ³⁶ Knight and Saliers, *The Conversation Matters*, 31.
- ³⁷ William Warren Sweet’s highly influential *Methodism in American History* (originally published in 1933) serves as a template for many subsequent studies that depicted American Methodism as part of the larger advancement of a liberalizing faith. See Nathan O. Hatch, “The Puzzle of American Methodism,” *Church History* 63 (June 1994):175–89.
- ³⁸ The idea of an American religious landscape dominated by liberal Protestant suppositions has been challenged by numerous historians since the 1980s. See, for example, R. Laurence Moore, *Religious Outsiders and the Making of Americans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).
- ³⁹ On United Methodist demographics in the United States, see Edwin Gaustad and Philip Barlow, *New Historical Atlas of Religion in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).
- ⁴⁰ See, for example, Richard M. Cameron, *Methodism and Society in Historical Perspective* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1961).
- ⁴¹ See Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010); and Pew Religious Landscape, <http://www.pewforum.org/about-the-religious-landscape-study/>.
- ⁴² See Mark Chaves, *Congregations in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004).
- ⁴³ An excellent resource for exploring the relationship between regionalism and religion in the U.S. is the nine-volume series edited by Andrew Walsh and Mark Silk, *Religion and Region*, published in cooperation with the Leonard E. Greenberg Center for the Study of Religion in Public Life at Trinity College, Hartford, CT (Walnut Creek: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001–2005).
- ⁴⁴ See Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990); and Peter Williams, *Popular Religion in America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989).
- ⁴⁵ Even within churches and denominations that strongly identify with traditional themes of evangelicalism, the idea that these evangelicals have historically agreed on matters of church unity is a fiction. During the heyday of the fundamentalist-modernist controversy, evangelicals contested various matters of scriptural inerrancy, the key

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- tenets of doctrine, and the nature of the church. See Molly Worthen, *Apostles of Reason: The Crisis of Authority in American Evangelicalism* (New York: Oxford, 2014).
- ⁴⁶ Robert P. Jones, *The End of White Christian America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016). See especially chapter 1.
- ⁴⁷ Theodore Runyon, *The New Creation: John Wesley's Theology Today* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 162, italics in original.
- ⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 161.
- ⁴⁹ *Book of Discipline* (2016), ¶ 102, p. 55, italics in original.
- ⁵⁰ Runyon, *A New Creation*, 164, italics in original.
- ⁵¹ See Putnam and Campbell, *American Grace*.
- ⁵² Robert Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 232.
- ⁵³ *The United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), 377.