

# Same-Sex Marriage, Just War, and the Social Principles

## *Grappling with the Incompatible<sup>1</sup>*

L. Edward Phillips

*Item one: “The United Methodist Church does not condone the practice of homosexuality and considers this practice incompatible with Christian teaching. We affirm that God’s grace is available to all.” (2016 Book of Discipline, ¶ 161.G)*

*Item two: “We believe war is incompatible with the teachings and example of Christ.” (2016 Book of Discipline, ¶ 165.C); “We believe war and bloodshed are contrary to the gospel and spirit of Christ.” (Confession of Faith of the United Brethren Church, Article 16, “Civil Government”)*

*Item three: Ceremonies that celebrate homosexual union shall not be conducted by our ministers and shall not be conducted in our churches. (2016 Book of Discipline, ¶ 341)*

*Item four: Blessing, For Those in Military Service: “Guard brave men and women in military service. . . . Though for a season they must be people of war, let them live for peace, as eager for agreement as for victory . . . and never let hard duty separate them from loyalty to your Son.” (The United Methodist Book of Worship, 542)*

The United Methodist Church is struggling with strong differences of opinion over homosexuality, with sincere and dedicated Christians on all sides of the issue. Some United Methodists are advocating schism as the unavoidable way to end the tension. Before we accept schism as inevitable, I suggest we consider, by way of comparison, another very important issue where the church is similarly divided over its understanding of Christian teaching and the practice of United Methodists: the church’s position on war and service in the military. This essay proposes that such disagreements can productively allow us to discern God’s blessing; but they also can help us avoid a selective hypocrisy about what we allow as faithful witness to Jesus.

It is only fair to acknowledge my commitments at the outset. I am a pacifist. I embrace pacifism, not because I think it is a good idea or even that it will necessarily make war less likely, but because as a disciple of Jesus I have been commanded to love my enemies and to do good toward them. I see it as a fundamental issue of Christian discipleship and commitment to the sovereignty of God, and I see it as an aspiration of Christian perfection toward which I have promised to aim my life.

The Social Principles in *The Book of Discipline*, as they have evolved over the years, support me in my position, though I acknowledge that the level of support has wavered over the years. Item 2 above contains the United Methodist doctrinal position on war, coming from the Evangelical United Brethren Church Confession of faith: “We believe war and bloodshed are contrary to the gospel and spirit of Christ.” This doctrinal statement is protected by the Restrictive rules of The UMC; paragraph 103 states these standards “shall not be revoked, altered, or changed.” As a reflection of this doctrinal standard, the Social Principles state: “We believe war is incompatible with the teachings and example of Christ” (*Discipline*, ¶165.C). These statements support those who would reject Christian participation in war in all cases. However, the *Discipline* clarifies the position of The United Methodist Church according to just war principles: “We also acknowledge that many Christians believe that, when peaceful alternatives have failed, the force of arms may regretfully be preferable to unchecked aggression, tyranny, and genocide” (¶164.I). Thus, in some cases, the Social Principles allow for the necessity of war. Nevertheless, in this same paragraph, the 2016 *Discipline* continues to support the pacifist position: “We honor the witness of pacifists who will not allow us to become complacent about war and violence.” It would seem that I have the church’s full support for my position, even as it recognizes that many, perhaps most, United Methodists will support conscientious participation in war after careful discernment to determine that such participation will not violate the witness of Christ, and “only in extreme situations and only when the need is clear beyond reasonable doubt” (¶164.I).

Regarding service in the military, the last paragraph succinctly states the point: “We also support and extend the Church’s ministry to all persons. This includes persons who *conscientiously choose* to serve in the armed forces or to accept alternative service” (¶164.I, emphasis added). In all honesty, I cannot see how it is possible for a Christian *conscientiously* to choose to go against the teachings of Christ. That is to say, I do not see how a person could reject war and bloodshed as contrary to the teaching and example of Christ, and then *conscientiously* choose to engage in war and bloodshed. Yet thousands of United Methodists do, in fact, join the military and support their governments in armed conflict. The current *Discipline* shows that a just-war approach to the problem of international conflict has won the day among United Methodists. This is not the place for me to perform a detailed analysis of how United Methodists as a body have shifted the official position on war and violence over the last century. Briefly, the evidence would show that the United Methodist position on the issue has wavered, depending on the social acceptance of particular wars, who happens to be president of the United States, and other cultural factors. Even a cursory presentation of the evidence shows that many United Methodists believe that they may enter the military as faithful Christians without compromising their commitments to Christ or the church. No matter how hard I try, I cannot see how they come to this conclusion, even though I know from personal experience that some of these United Methodists are sincere Christians who are attempting to live faithful lives.

In support of Christians in the military, *The United Methodist Book of Worship* contains a blessing “For Those in Military Service.”<sup>2</sup> This blessing acknowledges that “for a season,” those Christians in the military will be “people of war.” I am troubled by the inclusion of this blessing in our *Book of Worship*, since it asks God to bless a practice that our Social Principles, at the time the *Book of Worship* was approved, still acknowledged was “incompatible with the teachings and example of Christ.” I note with irony that there is no comparable blessing in our *Book of Worship* for women and men who choose to *oppose* military service. Even though I am an ordained United Methodist pastor, it would be difficult to offer this blessing for someone in

the military, without violating my conscience, even though it is in our *Book of Worship*. Nevertheless, I would not break fellowship with a United Methodist who is in the military, nor would I break fellowship with another pastor who used this blessing without irony.

To summarize the points:

1. The Confession of Faith and Social Principles rejects war and bloodshed as incompatible with the gospel.
2. Paradoxically, the Social Principles have allowed that some Christians may decide that they could go to war as a last resort against “unchecked aggression, tyranny, and genocide.”
3. The *Book of Worship* contains a blessing for persons who make such a decision.

The similarities and differences between the ways the *Discipline* addresses war and homosexuality are striking. The Social Principles state that the practice of homosexuality, like the practice of war, is incompatible with “Christian teaching.”<sup>3</sup> We should notice here the phrase “Christian teaching,” rather than “teachings and example of Christ,” as in the reference to war. This is due to the fact that we have no record that Jesus himself ever commented on the matter of homosexuality.

Even so, despite the negative evaluation of the “practice of homosexuality,” both the Constitution and the Social Principles also acknowledge that all persons are of “sacred worth” who need the fellowship of the church.<sup>4</sup> The paragraph in the Social Principles goes on to state:

We will seek to live together in Christian community, welcoming, forgiving, and loving one another, as Christ has loved and accepted us. We implore families or churches not to reject or condemn lesbian and gay members and friends. We commit ourselves to be in ministry for and with all persons. (§161.G)

In the spirit of this second statement, I, along with many other United Methodists, affirm that many gay and lesbian couples *conscientiously* live out their sexuality with integrity as Christians, that is to say, as part of their faithful commitment to Christ. This is why some of us have asked that homosexual marriages be blessed within the church and to receive the support of the Christian community. Yet the Social Principles state: “Ceremonies that celebrate homosexual union shall not be conducted by our ministers and shall not be conducted in our churches” (§341.6).

As an aside, I note this same paragraph also prohibits the practice of re-baptism, though I do not know of a single pastor who has been charged on violating this rule, despite evidence of violations among even some prominent United Methodist elders.<sup>5</sup> I have often wondered why matters of sexual ethics carry so much more social significance than matters of sacramental teaching and practice. If we simply looked at where our energies focus our attention, it might seem that marriage is, in practice, more “sacramentally powerful” for United Methodists than baptism or Holy Communion.

To return to the issue at hand, the teaching of the church on war coupled with the blessing of men and women in the military seems to me to be ironic, if not hypocritical. Why should the church be willing to bless the one supposed “incompatibility” and not the other?

Of course, I do not want to fall into the trap of trying to justify my position based on the precedent of a *bad* decision. If it is problematic (as I believe it is) for the church to offer its blessing to military service, then someone who accepts the Social Principles’ statements on homosexuality will undoubtedly offer the same argument right back as a reason why the church

ought not to conduct services of same-sex marriage. Cultural accommodation is rarely a valid argument for faithful witness.

With regard to war, however, I have to admit that many United Methodists, perhaps the majority, *do not* believe that war is fundamentally incompatible with the teachings of Jesus if it is a *just* war. Most United Methodists probably believe that it is the duty of Christians to go to war, and even to be willing to kill others, if the cause is just, as our current *Discipline* allows. Moreover, historical precedent shows that most United Methodists are willing to give their political and military leaders the benefit of the doubt regarding what constitutes a just war, even though our Social Principles allow for the use of force “only in extreme situation and only when the need is clear beyond reasonable doubt” (§164.I).

In like manner, many of us who support the blessing of same-sex marriage do not believe that homosexuality is fundamentally incompatible with Christian teaching so long as it is held to the same standards of fidelity that (ostensibly) apply to heterosexual relationships. That said, I must also admit that, sometimes, those of us who support same-sex relationships have not been particularly scrupulous about these standards of fidelity.

For the sake of argument, let us compare the reasoning that would lead one to accept participation in a just war with the reasoning that would lead one to accept homosexual unions. Briefly, let me suggest how this reasoning might work. The New Testament norm for heterosexual relationships is the faithful sexual union of husband and wife, and the New Testament standard for the treatment of enemies is to love and do good to them, forsaking the sword of retribution. Sexual sinning would include fornication (sex between unmarried persons) or adultery, and also sexual intercourse that is forced, even between husband and wife, or withheld within marriage without due reason. Similarly, war, as it is generally practiced (that is, wars that do not meet the criteria of just war: e.g., wars of aggression, or wars that cannot protect non-combatants) would also be forbidden to Christians, and even in the most justifiable circumstances such a war would still be the lesser of evils. A same-sex marriage, finally, would be comparable (in this line of reasoning) to the just-war position. It would be justifiable, given the circumstances, if it can meet certain criteria. For a just war, the criteria would include discrimination in the use of violence to protect the innocent, justness of the cause, the probability of success, and so forth. In the case of same-sex marriage, the criteria would include the standards of fidelity, mutuality, and monogamy that apply to marriage.

I am sure that some who support same-sex marriage will be quite uncomfortable with my comparison with just-war thinking. Engaging in a sexual relationship is by no means the moral equivalent of killing another human being. But the foremost objection would be that gays and lesbians seek the support of the church for their committed unions, not as a consolation prize, but as an acknowledgment of their love and commitment. It simply will not work to say, “We really are sinning here, but given the circumstances, we believe that God will allow us to live together as a married couple as a lesser of evils.” Rather, gay and lesbian Christians, and others of us who support them, want the church to recognize their commitments as unions that are *intrinsically open to God’s blessing and the support of the church*.

I suspect that many of those who support Christians in the military and who want their military service blessed would have a similar concern for their position; they seek the blessing of the church as a celebration of their commitment to honor, duty, and personal sacrifice, not merely as the lesser of evils. We really can never be satisfied with “blessing” what we actually believe is “incompatible” with the gospel.

This is one of the reasons why I think that the position of those who support military service for Christians is untenable. I am specifically speaking about taking up arms, not those who may enter as medics or chaplains. Nevertheless, I am willing to remain in The United Methodist Church with those who support the military, because, all things considered, I would much rather my Christian brothers and sisters attempt to take a conscientious approach to their military service than to give themselves to such service uncritically. As a Christian pacifist, I believe it is my responsibility to keep reminding them that the criteria of just war are stringent and must be taken seriously. Indeed, the *Discipline* encourages me to perform this witness. Likewise, I would hope that those who oppose homosexual practice would see that, all things considered, *at the very least*, it is much better for our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters to be in faithful, monogamous homosexual unions with the support of their church, than to struggle against the dangerous and idolatrous cultural tide of sexual promiscuity without such support. That is to say, it might be helpful for those who *oppose* same-sex marriage to embrace a line of thinking similar to the just-war position as a way to acknowledge such unions within the church, even though they are not satisfied that these unions should be blessed by the church. I must also expect that they would keep raising questions about Christian commitment to fidelity and monogamy, not only for our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters, but for all of us.

But here is the central, and most difficult, point in my argument: those who support same-sex unions should be concerned with the same questions about fidelity and monogamy. For while we can sincerely bless only what we believe is compatible with the gospel of Jesus Christ, we must never forget that the gospel is not primarily about either ecclesial rules or personal affirmation; it's about conversion. We ask God to bless our commitments to one another so we may be transformed<sup>6</sup> into a sign of God's utterly faithful, non-coercive, gratuitous, holy and creative kingdom, which exposes the idolatry and domination in all human systems and institutions after the Fall—including marriage. The church has no business giving its approval to same-sex marriages in order for them to be a duplication of heterosexual marriage as culturally practiced, *per se*. Rather, the church should ask God to bless such unions in order for them to be an image of Christ's holy union with the church. As such, the blessing of marriage, same-sex or otherwise, becomes a prophetic act of the gospel of Jesus Christ before the world.

In short, supporters of same-sex marriage and supporters of Christian participation in (just) war would both have to think carefully, and be open to discernment, about how Christian disciples engage with accepted cultural practices while at the same time living as faithful to witnesses to the gospel. Cultural engagement for the sake of witness is not the same thing as cultural accommodation. But all of us, no matter how convinced we may be, must adopt a conscious attitude of humility in being open to the witness of our brothers and sisters.

Let me summarize my argument. 1. As Christians we can bless only what we believe to be compatible with the gospel. 2. The United Methodist Church as a whole displays disagreement, even confusion, in regard to both homosexuality *and* war (and also on other matters not discussed here). 3. We seek God's blessing in order to transform our human actions into sign of the kingdom of God. 4. We do not have to embrace fully the position of those with whom we disagree on these points in order to live together in fellowship and mission as we seek to resolve the church's disagreements on these important social, ethical, anthropological, and theological issues.

I must confess that as I have shared these ideas with my gay and lesbian friends, some of them have been less than impressed. Why should they remain in a church with persons (some of whom will be the preachers and teachers) who do not fully embrace them as God made them? I

refrain from offering the advice, “Be patient,” because I am painfully aware such advice has been offered to legitimate ongoing sexism and racism. How can we “be patient” when we believe the church is being unfaithful to the gospel? I am also aware of how “impatient” women and persons of color working within the church have gradually begun to change the way the church understands itself as an inclusive community. Theologically, I believe this is how the Holy Spirit works within us and among us to form us all into the living body of Christ. And, theologically, I believe that this is what Jesus’ commandment to love demands.

Historical precedent is filled with failures of Christian imagination on how to live together with all those who have been baptized into the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit when we have profound disagreements on theology and practice. Today, United Methodists are being tempted to follow this same, tired, historic precedent. Here is my modest proposal for a way beyond our impasse. Let us commit to live together in a church in which we call one another to account for all the ways we struggle to live out our dedication to the gospel in our harsh and complex world, so that we may come to see where we have strayed in our dedication to Jesus Christ. As a sign of this commitment, just as the church has made room in its *Book of Worship* for the blessing of soldiers, let us similarly make room for those who, out of their understanding of gospel, conscientiously choose to honor same-sex marriage. For if we can hold our differences about participation in war in tension, how much easier should it be to hold homosexuality in tension within the church as we seek God’s will. In the meantime, I will allow you to give your blessings when you, after prayerful discernment, are convinced in your heart that you are doing the right thing, if you will allow me to do the same.

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter is a revision of the essay “Homosexuality and the Social Principles: Blessing the Incompatible?” in Tex Sample and Amy E. DeLong, *The Loyal Opposition: Struggling with the Church on Homosexuality* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 88–95. Copyright ©2000 by Abingdon Press. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

<sup>2</sup> The source for this blessing is the *Presbyterian Worshipbook* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970).

<sup>3</sup> All references to the Social Principles and to the United Methodist Constitution are taken from *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2016).

<sup>4</sup> *Discipline*, The Constitution: ¶ 4. Article IV. Inclusiveness of the Church; Social Principles: ¶ 161.G) Human Sexuality.

<sup>5</sup> For example, see this statement on rebaptism published by a United Methodist church: [http://gccwired.com/attachments/baptism\\_book.pdf](http://gccwired.com/attachments/baptism_book.pdf) 14–5 (accessed 4/26/2017).

<sup>6</sup> I realize this word has been co-opted by the so-called “Transforming Congregations” movement to signify the supposed “healing” of persons of homosexual orientation. I can say only that our Christian vocabulary is always open to misuse.