

The Unity of the Church in Relation to Christian Teaching and Human Sexuality

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Introduction

Christian teaching as it relates to creeds and confessing documents, provides the primary framework for the unity of The United Methodist Church. However, the issue of homosexuality is not included in the statements that constitute our doctrinal standards. Thus, one could contend that The UMC can stay united in spite of different positions on the issue of human sexuality and still maintain the same standard of Christian teaching. The church's decision-making process relates, not only to judicial and legislative decision making based on our written church order, but also to the development and life of the church in regard to practical divinity and experimental Christianity. It seems that decisions based on practical divinity function within the church, but not necessarily in its judicial and legislative decision-making process. The unity of United Methodist churches and hence our Christian identity as Methodists is linked to doctrine, praxis, and order, which are all included in the Wesleyan understanding of Christian teaching.

Teaching as the Foundation of Unity

In the Great Commission in Matthew, Jesus commands the apostles to make disciples by teaching.¹ Matthew states that the teaching of Christ is an instrument for adding new disciples to the body of Christ, the living church. In Peter's "confession" as recorded in Matthew, we find the first confession of faith: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (16:16 CEB), and this declaration is Christian teaching in its most concentrated form. In response to Peter's confession, Jesus speaks of building his church.² Thus the teaching of Christ and the building of the church are succinctly connected.

In the development of the creeds, first in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, then the Latin Apostles' Creed, and subsequently the Athanasian Creed, we find these statements were adopted by the church in regard to Christian teaching on the church's unity and its boundaries. These ecumenical creeds state both the content of the Christian teaching and the required doctrinal minimums to be part of the church.³

Later, during periods of reformation, different branches of the church split into separate church families. The instrument giving the foundation and defining the boundaries of a specific church has always been, first, to state its consonance with the teaching of the Nicene and Apostolic Creeds, and second, to state its central doctrines in a concordat or confessing document. The *Confessio Augustana* and the Heidelberg Catechism are Protestant examples of this. In the Lutheran tradition, we find the strong link between Christian teaching and the document of confession in the Catechism of Luther. Whereas the commentary on the Apostolic Creed is focused in the Small Catechism of Luther, the Large Catechism of Luther explains the *Confessio Augustana*.⁴

The Methodist tradition on Christian teaching has its roots in the Anglican tradition. As clergy persons, John and Charles Wesley remained faithful to the Anglican Church and its

theological tradition. However, in Wesley's reformation of it, we find his ideas about Christian teaching contained in the "Articles of Religions," the *Sunday Service*, and in his sermons and hymnals. This collection of doctrinal texts has been adopted by the array of Methodist churches, which are based on the Wesleyan tradition via the Anglican Church, back as far as the Early Church. In these doctrinal texts we, as United Methodists, find our standards for Christian teaching and what distinguishes us from other faith communities.⁵ However, as United Methodists, we are in line with not only our Wesleyan tradition but also Wesleyan thinking about the role and status of the doctrinal documents within the church and our relation to other churches.

In some churches, theological positions are strictly linked to the interpretation of the formally adapted documents of confession. In those churches, forensic interpretation and various rationales about the doctrinal documents are the basis for apologetic work and new positions. Many Lutherans use this model. This method itself indicates the center of theological thinking.⁶ In other churches, the theological positions are linked to other theological sources. In the Orthodox churches, for example, tradition, liturgy, and liturgical texts play a central role in the identity and positioning of the church. The life and practices of the church, in worship, prayer, and preaching are all cornerstones of doctrinal formation.

Like other Protestant churches, the Wesleyan tradition has a set of doctrinal documents, namely the "Articles of Religion," which state the standards of Christian teaching. We Wesleyans use this standard as the foundation of being a church, as well as defining and distinguishing our church from other faith communities. But the theological method of Wesleyan tradition has also been influenced by Anglican and Orthodox traditions, in that theological understandings are rooted in the life of the church, as reflected primarily in worship and liturgy. The Anglican tradition, going back to Thomas Cranmer's homilies, gives a set of standard sermons that espouse central Christian teaching. Homilies in the Anglican tradition functioned to point out the dogmatic positions on central themes. Likewise, Wesley published his Standard Sermons as an instrument to help his followers understand Methodist thinking on central Christian subjects. Wesley's sermons are not to be used legalistically but rather as standards and principles in dogmatic positioning.⁷

The Anglican tradition of Wesley's time was influenced by the Reformed Puritan tradition and a Reformed Arminian tradition. Puritans, in keeping the church's identity and unity, believed: "Strictness in doctrine, first of all the doctrine on the new birth, and freedom in order, first of all freedom in liturgical practice and preaching." Arminians went in an opposite direction: "Strictness in order, first of all the liturgy and preaching, and freedom in doctrine as long as the position is included in the position of the classic ecumenical creeds." Puritan and Arminian thought had two different approaches regarding the theological foundation of church unity.⁸ In the Wesleyan tradition, we find hints of the Puritan influence regarding strictness in faith formulations and faith experiences important for church unity. Here, we have the focus on the community of faith, which includes the personal development of faith as a process of sanctification, social responsibility, and the belief that God will provide answers through our dialogue with the world and other people. But the Wesleyan tradition also includes Arminian influence. This means that we are held together as a church and find our confessional identity in our actions and in worship. The General Rules is the main document sustaining this position. In the General Rules, the focus is on responsible doing and being, in covenant with God and people of the community. This is one of the most remarkable and strongest characteristics of Wesleyan ecclesiology.

When Wesley established his first societies, some of which later became congregations in the American context, he did not ask people to profess a specific doctrinal document or sign a statement of faith. He was not looking for profession of a specific Christian rationale or teaching; rather Wesley asked new members to be willing to *do*, to live out a specific Christian praxis: to do no harm, to do good, and to attend to the ordinances of God. And in so doing they would be responsible members of the Christian community. If they were willing to practice their faith, then they were qualified to be part of the faith community.⁹

Here Wesley is in line with the Armenians, in that a person's thinking and theology take form as they are put into practice. The demonstration of one's profession of faith in one's behavior takes priority over mere rational assent. Wesley trusted in the spiritual formation and sanctification of people as they meaningfully participated in church life. In "doing no harm, by avoiding evil of every kind"; in "doing good"; and in "attending upon all the ordinances of God," which includes public worship, the ministry of the Word, the Lord's Supper, family and private prayer, searching the scriptures, fasting or abstinence,¹⁰ people were and are formed as Methodists. It is interesting to observe, according to the protocol of many congregations, that few, if any, members were excluded because of having the "wrong" theology, but some were excluded because they neglected the Means of Grace or did not sufficiently practice their faith, for example, by not taking the Eucharist.

In the Wesleyan tradition, the foundation of standard theological positions has a double focus on doctrinal creeds and statements and on Christian practices. The unity of United Methodist churches and our identity as Methodists are linked to doctrine, praxis, and order, and all three are included in a Wesleyan understanding of Christian teaching.¹¹

“. . . and consider this practice incompatible with Christian teaching”

In 1972, The UMC General Conference decided to amend the *Book of Discipline* ¶161.G, concerning the issue of homosexuality. They added that The UMC “consider[s] this practice incompatible with Christian teaching.” How are we to understand this?

We understand Christian teaching as synonymous with Christian doctrine. Our United Methodist theological position according to our standard of confession is defined in paragraph 3 of the Constitution as the doctrinal standards of The United Methodist Church, namely, the “Articles of Religion” and the “Confession of Faith.” The Constitution states, in the restrictive rules (see ¶¶17, 18), that the General Conference shall neither change the doctrinal standards in the “Articles of Religion” and “Confession of Faith” nor add any new standards or rules of doctrine.

In the *Book of Discipline* (¶102), we find the history of doctrinal standards and our theological task. “Doctrinal statements in form of creeds, confessions of belief, and articles of faith were officially adopted by churches as standards of Christian teaching.”¹² Our distinctive heritage as The United Methodist Church is inspired by the Christian teaching contained in the Standard Sermons of John Wesley and the liturgical formative texts, the General Rules, and the hymnals and *Sunday Service*. These are also resources for the doctrinal positions of The United Methodist Church. In ¶102, “Christian teaching” is defined, and we find that six times “Christian teaching” is used as a synonym for Christian doctrine, our theological standard of confession.

Paragraph 203 of the *Book of Discipline* ends with a clarification of the “standards or rules of doctrine” and a protection of the same in the restrictive rules:

. . . that our doctrinal standards shall not be revoked, altered, or changed. The process of creating new “standards or rules of doctrine” thus continues to be restricted, requiring either that they be declared “not contrary to” the present standards or that they go through the difficult process of constitutional amendment.¹³

For the ongoing interpretation of our theological position, the *Book of Discipline* presents the Methodist theological method, which uses scripture, tradition, experience, and reason as instruments and sources for theology (§105),¹⁴ and this method for new theology is never in the *Book of Discipline* understood to be in contrast to the “Article of Religion” or the “Confession of Faith” or to add any new position. The restrictive rules (§§17, 18, 21) are safeguards meant to prevent any new theological statement from conflicting with our standard of Christian teaching.¹⁵

In the history of Methodism, we find periods of conflict and separation. The conflict in the Methodist Episcopal Church over the issue of slavery was, until now, the most detrimental conflict, since it led to a nearly one-hundred-year separation before the church was reunited. This conflict within the church reflected divisions found in society, which erupted into one of the bloodiest military conflicts in the world at that time. From Wesley to Whitefield to Asbury to James O’Kelly, the theological position in opposition to slavery was firmly held. But the theology used to frame the issue of slavery did not involve Christian teaching as understood according to our doctrinal standards. Even when the church was clear in its antislavery position, slave owners could continue to be members of the church. “We do not hold in the deepest abhorrence, the practice of slavery; and shall not cease to seek its destruction by all wise and prudent means,” the General Conference in 1786 stated, but the reason that slavery was “incompatible with Christian teaching” was never used, and slave owners could keep their membership of the church.¹⁶ To be clear: the church had a clear theological position, and the church was in process of implementing that position, but the issue was not dealt with as a question of being compatible with Christian teaching.

In the Lutheran tradition, we find an example where a social issue was connected to Christian teaching. Apartheid was lifted up by the Lutheran World Federation and became a matter of *status confessionis*. In this formulation, we see that the Lutheran World Federation was not able to add a new doctrine to the historic main “*Confessio Augustana*,” but they did expand their standard of Christian teaching. However, by deciding that apartheid was *status confessionis*, they stated that it was on the same level and of the same importance without actually being so. The Lutheran version of Christian teaching was not changed—it is the same—but a belief in apartheid has been elevated as germane to their standard formulation of faith.¹⁷

United Methodist churches have not used the same model of articulating new theological positions, maybe because that tradition focuses on both the formal confession and praxis. But what did The United Methodist Church mean by adding to the *Book of Discipline* that the practice of homosexuality is “incompatible with Christian teaching”?

The amended sentence expresses a condemnation of homosexual practice. The church can judge such action and give a theological rationale for any decision it makes about the practice of homosexuality. But to link this condemnation to our standards for Christian teaching is illegal, according to our *Book of Discipline*. It is unconstitutional, not in harmony with our Wesleyan history of theological positioning, and not in harmony with methods to change our theological position!

If the added phrase, “and consider this practice incompatible with Christian teaching,” should be in disharmony with or a violation of our standards of Christian teaching, then our standards of Christian teaching, as listed in the Constitution (§3) and protected in the

Constitution (§§17, 18, 21), and all the listed documents, most of which are contained in paragraphs 102–105, should have had texts on human sexuality, texts that define sexual identity and sexual orientation as part of God’s order of creation, or other doctrinal texts dealing with sexuality. However, our standards of Christian teaching, as classified in our doctrinal documents, do not have any text saying that homosexual practice is incompatible with anything. Thus, according to the *Book of Discipline*’s understanding of Christian teaching, the statement, “and consider this practice incompatible with Christian teaching,” is illegal, unconstitutional, and theologically wrong.

Could the 1972 General Conference have had another understanding of what Christian teaching is? If “Christian teaching” has another meaning, different from what is defined in paragraph 102—that “doctrinal statements in form of creeds, confessions of belief, and articles of faith, which were officially adopted by churches as standards of Christian teaching”—then the content of Christian teaching diverges from our Articles of Religion and Confession of Faith. In this case, Christian teaching is not in accordance with Wesley’s Standard Sermons and General Rules, and the content is not defined or qualified. Most important, if “Christian teaching” has another meaning from the formal doctrinal standard documents of the church, it cannot be the instrument for stating the foundation of the church or setting the boundaries of the church. The wording “Christian teaching,” used with no definition or with an open definition, where anyone can add his or her own content, has no authority regarding the issue of human sexuality or the issue of the unity of the church. It is very difficult to understand “Christian teaching” in any other way, given what is said in paragraph 102, defined in paragraph 3, and restricted in paragraphs 17, 18, and 21 of the *Book of Discipline*. The *Book of Discipline* itself defines the meaning of “Christian teaching,” and the meaning of this wording in one paragraph cannot be different from the meaning of the same wording in another paragraph.

By adding the phrase, “and consider this practice incompatible with Christian teaching,” could the 1972 General Conference have meant to add a new doctrinal standard to the corpus of doctrinal standards of The United Methodist Church? Christian teaching, after all, has been seemingly expanded by the church’s theological position on human sexuality. It is a possibility. But here the restrictive rules in paragraphs 17 and 18 put a full stop to such interpretation. No new standards or rules and no revocation or change in our present standards of Christian teaching is allowed. It is in the power of the General Conference to change our formal standards of Christian teaching in our doctrinal document, but it is a complicated and long process, involving at least two steps to change the Constitution, and these actions have not been taken and have not been initiated. It is difficult to understand the action of the 1972 General Conference as actions to add a new theological standard to the present standards of faith and order.

The phrase, “and consider this practice incompatible with Christian teaching,” added to paragraph 161.G is illegitimate, and only the Judicial Council can rule on its constitutionality and thereby delete it from the *Book of Discipline*. But the Judicial Council is able to act only if an authorized body applies for a ruling. The bodies that are authorized to apply for a ruling on this issue include: The General Conference, the Council of Bishops, and a number of bodies for which the issue is “matters relating to or affecting.”¹⁸ Until now, no formal application has been given to the Judicial Council on this matter.¹⁹

If the phrase, “and consider this practice incompatible with Christian teaching,” that was added to paragraph 161.G could be deleted, then the condemnation of homosexuality would still be maintained in the Social Principles. The first part of the sentence remains; it says that “The United Methodist Church does not condone the practice of homosexuality.” But a deletion of the

second part of the sentence would give a more correct background for our current discussion, and a deletion would separate the issue of homosexuality from the issue of church unity.

Of course, The United Methodist Church is able to stay united in spite of having different positions on homosexuality around the world. The church could continue in a process of theological formation on the issue of human sexuality and varying familial constellations for years to come, with the acknowledgment that the process of reflecting on new theological formulations would not be made at the same speed in all parts of the world. Of course, The United Methodist Church is built on, and has its boundaries defined within, Christian teaching as contained in the Articles of Religion, the Confession of Faith, Wesley's Sermons, and the General Rules. But to be consistent in line with our own Constitution, we have to get rid of the illegal phrase, "and consider this practice incompatible with Christian teaching."

Are the Social Principles, Principles or Not?

Only the practice of homosexuality is singled out by the *Book of Discipline* as "incompatible with Christian teaching." No other topics have been classified in this way, even though another subject is classified with wording very close. It is the subject of war, where it is stated that "war is incompatible with the teachings and example of Christ."²⁰

In the paragraphs about war, peace, and military service, we find the strict condemnation of all kinds of war and the church's clear judgment that war is incompatible with the teaching of Christ. But the text also deals with United Methodists who are in military service: "we honor the witness of pacifists," and "we respect those who support the use of force" (§164.I). How is it possible to have a text with strong condemnation of war, incompatible with the teaching of Christ, and concurrently give honor to pacifists *and* professional soldiers? And how is it possible to have some UM pacifists as ordained pastors and others in military uniform? It is theologically possible, because the text serves as a guideline for ethical formation in different cultures, contexts, historical setting. The Social Principles are *principles*, and "not to be considered church law."²¹

The General Conference managed to develop a well-balanced paragraph on the ethical issue of war and how the church and its members should engage in war or not. This paragraph on war has not influenced the understanding of other parts of the *Book of Discipline*, and especially not influenced the law texts, in particular the Constitution and the interpretation of the doctrinal texts that articulate the unity and boundaries of the church, even though the Social Principles have functioned as principles and guidelines on this topic.

Why can we not say the same on the issue of homosexuality? Why has the condemnation of homosexual practice and the wording about incompatibility with Christian teaching functioned differently than the similar text and ethical statement on the subject of war?

On the issue of homosexuality, the text of the Social Principle has been read as law and used as an interpretive framework for other texts in the *Book of Discipline*, most critically, the Constitution, the paragraphs dealing with our doctrinal standards, and the texts dealing with candidacy for ordained ministry. A statement intended to provide guidelines for the ethical formation in different cultures, contexts, and historical settings, and which otherwise has no judicial intent, is "not to be considered church law."²² But even so, it has now influenced the understanding and interpretation of fundamental judicial texts within our church order. How strange!

This constitutes another reason why the added phrase to paragraph 161.G of the *Book of Discipline*, on the issue of homosexuality—“and consider this practice incompatible with Christian teaching”—is unconstitutional, illegal according to the *Book of Discipline*, and should be deleted. The Social Principles, which are principles and guidelines in addressing ethical issues, have been used to bring a specific, theologically fixed interpretation into our standards of faith and confession on the subject of homosexuality but not on the issue of war. That is wrong. The Social Principles should function only as principles and guidelines and not overrule the Constitution of the *Book of Discipline*.

From Judicial and Forensic Decision-Making Theology to Practical Divinity?

The method of creating new church theology influences the content of that theology. The model we use for new theological positions influences how this theology is formulated and expressed.

In the Wesleyan tradition, “practical divinity” is the technical term for theology that originates from the life of individuals and the life of the church. Wesley was the one who introduced the term.²³ He also introduced a more rarely used term, when he classified Methodism as “experimental Christianity”.²⁴ When he accepted lay preachers on his staff of traveling preachers and gave them an authority that was not accepted in the Anglican Church, he named them the “Extra Ordinary Means of God, and what is Extra to the ordinary authorized preachers.”²⁵

Citing Hooker’s *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, Wesley believed in the ordinary order of the church, but he also accepted the “Principle of an Extra Ordinary order” validated by the testimony of the Holy Spirit.²⁶ Wesley fully accepted and supported not only lay preachers in general but also female lay preachers. His acceptance was based on the Extra Ordinary call that he witnessed in their daily practice.²⁷ The thinking behind Wesley’s model of theological formation is that theology stems from the life of the church. In the life of the church, we believe that God is acting, people are acting, and God and people are interacting. Not only do individuals experience the process of sanctification and growing in responsibility and wisdom; the church, congregations, and faith communities are also in a constant process of sanctification. They also have the potential to grow in responsibility and wisdom.

This growth happens at different rates, so the development of theology and its praxis is not necessarily homogeneous in a worldwide church. Both individuals and the church as a faith community are in constant interaction with God, according to Wesley. And out of this life, with its challenges, victories, mission, and setbacks, grows wisdom and understanding of God as reflected in its theology and ecclesiology. This is “practical divinity,” and it is experimental and it is extraordinary, because it includes new possibilities for belief and Christian practices that the church and individuals have never before imagined.²⁸ When Wesley and the church adopted new positions or statements, they always based it on the daily life of the church, because they were convinced that God is among us and that we interact with God. This is practical divinity as a theological method.²⁹

The practical divinity and experimental Christianity decision-making method has a long history that predates John Wesley. It was first used at the council in Jerusalem. According to Acts 15, the young church was facing a situation that seriously threatened its unity. The issue at hand was circumcision and how, or if, Gentile converts to The Way needed to adhere to that Old Testament law. The conflict was contentious, and scriptural exegesis at the time tended

predominantly to support only one position with only a few exceptions, at least until the four Gospels and the epistles to the Romans and Galatians were part of Scripture. The final decision was reached, not because of arguments from the scripture, but because of the daily life of the church as witnessed by the apostles. Peter spoke up and said that the Holy Spirit didn't distinguish between Jews and Gentiles, so why should they (Acts 15:8-9). They saw fruitful ministry and people bringing other people to Christ irrespective of circumcision.

Decision making under the paradigm of practical divinity and experimental Christianity was that "the Holy Spirit has led us to the decision that no burden should be placed on you."³⁰ In addition to this first decision, some few "essentials" were kept, for example not eating blood (Act 15:29). John Wesley wrote in his *Notes upon the New Testament* that the decision making continued after the conference, so that those churches, following the interpretation of the bishop in Rome, were allowed to eat blood, but that another practice was followed in the rest of the church; and so it is today. Wesley's point was that even after the decision of the council in Jerusalem, the decision-making process continued, namely that we follow what is taking place in the church and see how people are blessed by the fruit of the Holy Spirit. The decision of the council in Jerusalem was not final. The Church of Rome used a decision-making process, in which the condemnation of the blood eating practice was cancelled, a decision all Protestant churches have followed with no further discussion, in spite of the clear condemnation in the scripture and in spite of the fact that a major part of the ancient church kept the condemnation of the "essentials," the blood eaters.³¹ This is a good example of practical divinity and experimental Christianity in practice.

However, when it comes to human sexuality, The United Methodist Church deals with this issue in a judicial and forensic way, as though theology is a legal text. How has it come to a point where we think that we can narrow the issue of homosexuality to voting one sentence up or down at a General Conference? The whole set-up for decision making is critical, seen from a Wesleyan perspective of practical divinity. The procedure of General Conference is that someone formulates a motion to amend a paragraph in the *Book of Discipline*. After the motion is offered, the ensuing discussion begins: to amend the amendment, to speak for the motion or speak against the motion and vote on it using Robert's Rules of Order. The entire process is problematic, given the limitations on time to honestly consider possibilities. The character of the text itself is viewed as law, and this has a great impact on the results.

In addition to this, it is important to remember that the decision-making process of the General Conference is not used in the Central Conferences, so it is unfamiliar to many General Conference delegates, and does not give those delegates the understanding that, in fact, they are in a process of creating new theology or solving a problem in the life of the church. It does not help the situation that many General Conference members have a limited knowledge of the *Book of Discipline*. Thus, it is unclear when new petitions to amend the *Book of Discipline* are adopted, what, in fact, the amendment is actually changing or creating. Finally, the nexus of biblical reflection in relation to more advanced exegetical knowledge and theological decision making is weakly represented in the open work of the General Conference.

We are a Protestant church with a strong biblical tradition, but it seems as if the biblical arguments play a minor role in the decision-making process. By neglecting the role of sound biblical reflection in the process, we become unable to challenge the entrenched dualism and false assumptions surrounding any issue. As it is often perceived, the "no-voters," having the Bible "on their side," oppose changes in the position of the Social Principles, while the "yes-

voters” look for arguments everywhere except the Bible, in an effort to support the acceptance of homosexual people in the ministry of the church.

Did Paul talk about Christian non-heterosexuals, when, in Romans 1:27, he condemned those αρσενες αφεντες την φυσικην χρησην (the males leaving the natural use);³² and in 1 Corinthians 6:9, those μαλακοι ουτε αρσενοκοιται (the boy-prostituted and boy-abusers); and 1 Timothy 1:10, αρσενοκοιταις (boy-abusers)?³³ The pagan practice of the Roman and Greek “fertility religions,” including the sexual practices of pagan Hellenistic vices, was a subject of Jewish outrage. The reason for this anger was that the people of God in the Old Testament were threatened by the Canaanitic fertility cults from their first day entering the Promised Land.³⁴ Leviticus 18 and 20 lists a whole array of pagan vices, such as idolatry, including the practice of כָּבַד (lay with; in the Septuagint (LXX): κοιμαω [sleep with]).³⁵ The situation in the book of Judges 19–21, where we find rape, sexual abuse, and killing in the tribe of Benjamin, demonstrates the impact of syncretism after the Hebrews settled in the Promised Land. This syncretism mirrors the text of the pre-history city of Sodom, where people would וַיִּנְדְּבוּ (we-have-sex-with-them; LXX: συγγενωμεθα [we-beget-them]);³⁶ and the prophets Amos, Isaiah, Zephaniah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel using the metaphor of Sodom and Gomorra to identify the syncretism of God’s people during the time before the exile to Babylon.³⁷ They also included the pagan cult of King Manasseh³⁸ and temple prostitution in Jerusalem,³⁹ as well as the catastrophe where Jerusalem followed Sodom and Gomorra in being destroyed. Of course, Paul saw the pagan vices in Rome and other places as a sign of God’s παρεδωκεν (given up).⁴⁰ Paul saw this as people gave themselves over to non-Christian, decadent, and destructive cultures. These texts are about idolatry, syncretism, and violation against fellow human beings. None of these texts can be used for condemning homosexual practice.

In support of the acceptance of non-heterosexual orientation, we can look at Cornelius in Acts 10 and 11;⁴¹ in Matthew, where Jesus talks about the ευνουχοι (eunuchs);⁴² and the text where Paul offers advice about different structures of family life in 1 Corinthians 7. What about the understanding of the Genesis 1:28, blessing of human life to be פְּרֹוּ וְרָבָו (be fruitful and expand your potentiality; LXX: Αυξανεσθε και πληθυνεσθε [grow and expand potentiality])?⁴³ Does it include development of language, cultural identity, sexual orientation, psychological resources, and other important things not fixed in the physical world but endowed to each person who is created in the image of God? If so, then each person is obligated to receive and develop these qualities as coming from fellowship with God and from the social fellowship of human beings. What about the understanding of Genesis 1:27, God’s creation of all people as זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה (male and-female; LXX: αρσεν και θηλυ [male and female])? Does it include the understanding that God created men and women, but also that God created all people with a male and female quality in the same way as the one God includes both male and female qualities? And does the birth of male and female persons exclude the formations of sexual orientation, developed and adapted in the relations to God and to fellow human beings?

Some post-Reformation theologians developed the idea that God’s created order contains a divinely sanctioned order for human life. This idea about created order has been used in the context of apartheid to justify the notions of racial superiority and segregation. In the same way, the argument about God’s order in nature has been used to place women under the dominance of men. If we will use the rationale regarding God’s created order on the issue of human family structure, we have to include polygamy, which was not condemned in the family structure of Abraham, Jacob, David, and Solomon; and likewise, the single-family-with-no-children ideal

that Paul lifted up for Christian people. We do not condemn or rule out these culturally determined family structures, because they are in conflict with God's created order. When Paul writes about nature and practices in conflict with nature, he uses the same word, φύσις (nature),⁴⁴ as when he talks about hairstyle—women's long hair and men's short hair.⁴⁵ It shows that Paul did not separate what is nature and what is culture and common praxis. Paul did not separate what in the human life comes from DNA and what comes from the psychosocial culture. It is φύσις (nature), all included. The newest science suggests that human sexual orientation is determined not only by DNA but also developed in the psychosocial interaction with other people, male and female. In the same way, personal identity, language, and mentality are developed in our psychosocial contexts. This means that we cannot appeal strictly to God's order of creation for sexual orientation and family life. God has παραδίδωμι, given over to humans, to create, to develop sexual orientation in the same way as other psychosocial functions in human life is taken over, παραδίδωμι, by the individuals from the role models of fellow human beings in the context.

A historical and contextual reading of many important biblical texts can give us the foundation for a high level of common understanding.⁴⁶ Diversity in interpretation will always remain within the church, and biblical studies should be integrated in the decision making about the church's stance on homosexuality.

The decision making of the General Conference is very different from the way Wesley led his conferences. Wesley often started with an open issue and invited the participants to speak up. Then he introduced scripture with the latest exegetical expertise, tradition of the church, experiences of people present, and reason as it pertained to the highest scientific and philosophic inquiry. He also took the time to hear everybody, as long as they added new insights to the discussion. Some conferences took a few days, but we also find conferences of twenty-one days, because the discussion had not yet finished. The discussion process was not violated by lack of time. And not until thorough discussion had taken place did Wesley conclude and formulate what the conference had decided. The conclusion was not presented in the beginning as a fixed motion that you could vote up or down. If the conclusion was preliminary, it was not fixed beforehand in a specific forensic text. Even when dealing with difficult and taxing themes, the level of consensus in decisions was very high, because the conclusion was formulated in a way that included the positions presented at the conference.⁴⁷ The understanding of holy conferencing was that the way of building up theology and wisdom took place in the interaction among people who actively participated in the discussion, allowing God to be present through them.⁴⁸

The British Methodist Annual Conference still works in a similar way and has not ended up in the same schismatic situation as seen in The United Methodist Church. Maybe one of the reasons we have ended up where we are is because we have poorly mixed faith and order, "Christian teaching and practice,"⁴⁹ and not separated them from the formation of the church.

The *Book of Discipline* is first of all an instrument for the order of the church. Here we find the mission plan for the church on local, regional, national, and international levels. Here we also find the guidelines for many functions in the church. The majority of all work at the General Conference is concentrated on formation of the *Book of Discipline*. That is all very good when we deal with order and structure, but not when dealing with faith and theology. The way of making theology influences the content of the theology itself, and the General Conference has unfortunately ended up in a judicial and forensic model of making theology; that is to say the way we legislate our theology, which is certainly not in harmony with our Wesleyan tradition.

The concepts of practical divinity and experimental Christianity offer another process of decision making in The United Methodist Church. The preaching at the 2016 General Conference was strong and formative regarding the UM position on human sexuality. Some of the skillful liturgical leaders and musicians, who functioned admirably during the proceedings of General Conference, were openly non-heterosexual in their orientation. They served the church during the conference, and the church accepted their presence and received their ministry. Given the principle of practical divinity, the United Methodist General Conference has already accepted the ministry of non-heterosexual peoples in the church. And the decision, based on the concept of practical divinity, stands in contrast to the difficulties and schismatic discussions, as well as the unsuccessful decision making concerning paragraph 161.G of the *Book of Discipline*.

It is obvious that General Conference is speaking with two tongues. The practical-divinity tongue says yes to ministry of all people, including homosexual people, while the *Book of Discipline* says no. But it is one and the same General Conference! When the bishops exercise their supervision of the church, the General Conference has, with its double-tongued decision, created a conflict between the conference and bishops, the church and its manual of order. To which of these two decisions should the bishops be most loyal? It is an impossible situation. Is the practical-divinity decision superior to the forensic text of the *Book of Discipline*, or is it the opposite? How do we interpret the situation when the General Conference, by all possible means, shows in action that homosexual people (whether lay or clergy)—by praying, singing, and leading—are fully accepted and that they successfully contribute to building up the church and being in mission to people; and at the same time is not capable of reconciling the *Book of Discipline* with the life of the church? Could we imagine that Wesley would have taken the sermons preached at the 2016 General Conference and lifted them up as the “Standard Sermons” on the issue of homosexuality for the next quadrennium?

Experimental Christianity exemplifies theological formation in different levels of the church. The church is not homogeneous. In some local congregations, despite, and in some places because of, their homosexual practice, people are elected to lead ministries because of their spiritual gifts. In a few annual conferences, we find homosexual, ordained ministers who serve using the same criteria of call and confirmation of that call, showing that they “maintain the highest standards of holy living in the world,”⁵⁰ exactly as other ministers in the same conference. In one conference, the church has called an openly practicing homosexual person to be a bishop, using the same criteria as for the election of any bishop. In other parts of the church, no calling or ordaining homosexual people to ministry has taken place. The situation is not homogeneous. But the power of conferences, the power of holy conferencing, and the power of experimental Christianity have shown that The United Methodist Church has made decisions about accepting homosexual persons in all positions of ministry.

Experimental Christianity is also about theological formation, and it yields different results from theology created through a judicial and forensic decision-making process. Theology in the experimental-Christianity tradition takes account of what the church does and then lets the life of the church, its practices, stand as a source for theology. Geoffrey Wainwright’s classic systematic theology *Doxology*⁵¹ is a modern and good example of this kind of theology. We could write United Methodist and ecumenical theology on the issue of homosexuality, describing what is taking place in the living body of Christ, the church of today, in, for example, its preaching, liturgy, mission, election, ordination, and consecration.

Conference Takes Priority over Church Order

In some conferences, openly “self-avowed practicing homosexual persons”⁵² have been ordained and serve as leaders in spite of the *Book of Discipline*. In the ancient church, we find several examples where the church, either a conference or the hierarchy of the church, elected and ordained people who did not fulfill the generally accepted criteria: lacking baptism, education, ordination, celibacy, or a specific gender. These elections, ordinations, and consecrations were, in reality, Extra Ordinary in relation to Ordinary praxis. However, the understanding was that conference actions always took priority over formal church order. An openly acknowledged lack of qualifications did not suspend the power of a conference election, ordination, or consecration. The powerful actions of the conference in terms of election, ordination, and consecration still shape the identity, authority, and influence the performance and perceived holiness of these persons. And its action changes the relationship to and attitude toward these persons. According to the *Book of Discipline*, the membership of ordained persons moves from congregational membership to annual conference membership, and when a person is elected and subsequently consecrated as bishop, membership moves from the annual conference to the Council of Bishops; therefore, church structure puts the person into another status.

The approval and ratification of such conference actions always find legality in how people accept and receive the ministry of the persons as they serve in their position, not in judicial argumentation about the person’s qualifications before election. The *Book of Discipline* gives no way to rescind or annul the authority given in ordination and consecration without having a charge of misconduct or a chargeable offense of the person in the appointed position. Without any wrongdoing or ineffectiveness in ministry, or any complaint or trial process, there is no way to annul or take back an election, ordination, or consecration, even if the person’s behavior is common knowledge. Ordained pastors who leave the church, and even the Christian faith, but after a while return to the church and to ministry, will never be re-ordained, and a bishop elected and consecrated will not be consecrated a second time if he or she is re-elected for a second term. Ordination and consecration matter.

If tradition is an authority in the decision making of The United Methodist Church, we have to learn from the history of the ancient church that conference and hierarchy take precedence over formal and judicial church order. Our understanding of the authority of tradition helps us to point out situations where conference power overrules the judicial and formal church order, and where the legality of such decisions and transfer of authority in ministry finds ratification and approval in the acceptance of the people who are depending on the ministry of the person appointed. In many annual conferences, we find ordained persons, who in one way or another did not fulfill a criterion for ordination, but they were ordained and appointed, and the ratification of these decisions find their legality in how these persons function in their ministry.

The UMC *Book of Discipline* illustrates the higher precedence of the conferences in terms of election, consecration, and sending/appointing, in the fact that the power of election of bishops is constitutionally given to the jurisdictional and central conferences, not to general or annual conferences (see ¶¶27.2, 31.2, 46), but the criteria and conditions for the election are not constitutional and do not have the same legal priority. In the same way, The *Book of Discipline* gives the power of election, ordination, and sending/appointing elders and deacons only to the annual conferences, not to general, jurisdictional, or central conferences, and the criteria and conditions for the election and ordination are not constitutional, but put into administration and judgment of the same conference that has the right to elect, ordain and send/appoint.⁵³

The act of ordination and consecration is an act of the conference, and serving bishops act as part of the liturgical order of ordination and consecration on behalf of the annual and

jurisdictional and central conferences. Without conference evaluation, election, and active participation in worship and liturgy, the bishop cannot exercise the power of ordination and consecration. The whole action of transferring ministerial authority to new persons is an action of the conference, not limited to transferal of ministry and leadership from one bishop to a new ordinand. The Wesleyan understanding of *ecclesiology* includes the ministry of bishops where the conference is sovereign.

The ordination of elders and deacons is the only clerical ordination we have, according to our Protestant theology.⁵⁴ Consecration of bishops is not an ordination. Concerning qualification for ordination, we cannot say that a bishop's consecration requires additional or extra qualification not required for elders.⁵⁵ Bishops and elders are one and the same order. The difference between them is that bishops have administrative responsibility and supervisory duties that elders do not have. Wesley took "episcopal" authority without having been consecrated bishop, and when he used it, his argument was that he had this authority because of his ordination as a priest in the Anglican Church.⁵⁶ But it was the acceptance and ratification by the Methodist connection that made the exercise of authority legal.

When the Methodist Episcopal Church in America published the Minutes of the Conference 1790 as a "Book of Discipline," before the first *Discipline* in 1798, Francis Asbury and Thomas Cook were mentioned as "persons exercising the Episcopal Office," both having been consecrated. But John Wesley was also mentioned as "exercising the Episcopal Office" as bishop, an authority he assumed without having been consecrated bishop, but ratified and validated by the acceptance of his exercise of supervisory ministry in the church.⁵⁷ The 1798 *Discipline* states that "If by death, expulsion, or otherwise, there be no bishops remaining in the church . . . the general conference shall elect a bishop, and the elders, or any three of them shall . . . ordain . . . according to our office of ordination."⁵⁸

My point is that the criteria for becoming a bishop in The United Methodist Church is how the person has functioned as an elder, not some new criteria or repeated criteria. The consecration of bishop gives the elder, who has become an elected bishop, the legal authority to exercise the authority already given in receiving elder's orders. A candidate for episcopal election and consecration will always be evaluated on how the person functioned as an elder. No other criteria can be imposed, not even if the person lacks fulfilling some of the criteria for elder's ordination (e.g., formal education or even sexual orientation). This lack shall not be a hindrance for election and consecration to the office of bishop as long as the clergy order of elder and bishop is one and the same. The *Discipline* has a six-year limitation for this person's function as a minister "within the six years immediately preceding," except when the case is not about sexual abuse and crime.⁵⁹ The *Book of Discipline* doesn't repeat the questions of criteria from the elder ordination when the same person is a candidate for bishopric consecration. The clergy status and the ordination status do not change when an elder becomes a bishop. The administrative, the supervisory duties, as well as the duty of interpreting church order and theology changes, but that is a question of church order, not of ministerial status or the theology of ministry. Actions of conferences in transferring authority in election, ordination, and consecration take priority over formal church order.

If it is stated that a homosexual elder did not fulfill the criteria he or she should have had as a candidate for ordained ministry or even violated the criteria as outlined in the *Discipline*,⁶⁰ this cannot cancel or take back the powerful action of conference in electing, ordaining, and appointing. If one part of the church has the understanding that a homosexual bishop did not fulfill what is needed to be a qualified candidate for bishop's election, this understanding cannot

take back or nullify what another part or area of the church in conference has done in election, consecration, and sending/appointing to an episcopal area. Maybe the election could be ruled invalid, but what kind of information or decision can make an ordination or a consecration invalid? Here we could add to our theological reflections that our understanding of *conference* includes the conviction about God's action in conference, and it would be totally absurd to think that a judicial decision on a matter of church order should have authority to take back or cancel what God has done in calling, electing, consecrating, and sending/appointing a bishop to an episcopal area. Parallel to this we could ask, what legality could cancel what God has done in an act of baptism? As long as the bishop functions fruitfully in his or her ministry and is in good standing under the general supervision of fellow bishops, first in the Jurisdiction or Central Conference and second in the Council of Bishops, then the church cannot take back or cancel what has been done by the powerful conference action of electing, consecrating, and sending/appointing to an episcopal area. Actions of conferences take priority over formal church order.

The Unity of the Church in Relation to Christian Teaching and Human Sexuality—Jørgen Thaarup

¹ Matt. 28:20: διδασκοντες αυτους τηρειν παντα οσα ενετειλαμην.

² Matt. 16:18: επι ταυτη τη πετρα οικοδομησω μου την εκκλησιαν.

³ World Council of Churches gave in the Faith and Order Paper No 153, *Confessing the One Faith*, a modern theological interpretation of the foundation and the boundaries of the church, and the issue of human sexuality is not mentioned as a theme related to the foundation or boundaries of the church.

⁴ *Konkordiebogen, Den evangelisk-lutherske Kirkes Bekjendelsesskrifter*, Christiania 1882.

⁵ Frank Baker, *John Wesley and the Church of England* (Epworth Press, 1970), 106–119.

⁶ Einar Molland, *Kristne Kirker og trossamfund*. (Copenhagen, Denmark: Gad Publishers, 1976), 17–46, 199–248.

⁷ See *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church* (2016), ¶ 103, p. 59. Also see “distinctive Methodist teaching” in Albert C. Outler, Introduction, *Sermons, The Works of John Wesley*, vol 1 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), 55–79.

⁸ Baker, *John Wesley and the Church of England*, 237–38, 243–45.

⁹ Wesley gives the rationale for the General Rules that he follows not the thinking, but the praxis of the Primitive Christianity as described by William Cave; and the recommendations of Paul in 2 Cor. 13:5-10 (John Wesley, *The Methodist Societies: History, Nature, and Design*, ed. Rubert E. Davies, vol. 9, *Works* [1989], 67.

¹⁰ See Acts 2:42; also see *Discipline* (2016), ¶104, pp. 78–80.

¹¹ Thomas E. Frank, *Polity, Practice, and the Mission of The UMC* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 91–92.

¹² *Discipline* (2016), ¶102, p. 48.

¹³ *Ibid.*, ¶103, p. 65.

¹⁴ Some will recognize this as the “Quadrilateral,” however this word is not in the *Book of Discipline*.

¹⁵ Langford, *Doctrine and Theology*, 216–20; Douglas Meeks, ed., *What Should Methodists Teach?* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1990).

¹⁶ *Minutes of the Methodist Conferences 1773–1794 under the superintendence of John Wesley*, Facsimile Ed., 83.

¹⁷ Lutheran World Federation Assembly 197 7, designated Apartheid in South Africa as *status confessionis*, see: <http://lwf-assembly2003.org/lwf-assembly/htdocs/history.html>. Also see Meeks, *What Should Methodists Teach?*, 67.

¹⁸ *Discipline* (2016), ¶2610.2, p. 783.

¹⁹ It was on the agenda of the Denmark Annual Conference, May 2017, to apply to the Judicial Council for a declaratory decision on the constitutionality of “and consider this practice incompatible with Christian teaching” (*Discipline* [2016], ¶161.G).

²⁰ *Discipline* (2016), ¶161.G, pp. 143–44. Also see Ed Phillip's chapter in this book.

²¹ Preface to the Social Principles, *Discipline* (2016), 105.

²² *Ibid.*.

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- ²³ John Wesley in *Christian Library*, vol. 1, i, iv–v; vol. 2, 209. John Wesley, *A Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists*, vol. 7, *Works*, 74.
- ²⁴ Wesley, from *Christian Library*, 210. Wesley, *Sermons 115–151*, vol. 4, *Works*, 406.
- ²⁵ Wesley, *The Letters of John Wesley, A.M.*, 8 vols., ed. John Telford (London: The Epworth Press, 1931), 3:150.
- ²⁶ Frank Baker, *John Wesley and the Church of England* (London: Epworth Press 1970), 64.
- ²⁷ Wesley, *Letters* 5:257.
- ²⁸ Wesley, *The Methodist Societies, The Minutes of Conference*, vol. 10, *Works*, 76.
- ²⁹ Robert Cushman, *John Wesley's Experimental Divinity* (Nashville: Kingwood Books, 1989).
- ³⁰ Acts 15:28: εδοξεν γαρ τω πνευματι τω αγιω και ημιν μηδεν πλεον επιτιθεσθαι υμιν.
- ³¹ John Wesley, Acts 15:28-29, *Explanatory Notes upon The New Testament* (London: 1754/1950), 455–56.
- ³² C.K. Barrett, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), 39.
- ³³ C.K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Harper & Row, 1968), 140.
- ³⁴ Deut. 12:1-6, 16; 23:1, 18-19.
- ³⁵ Lev. 18:22; 20:13. Otzen Benedikt, *Israeliterne i Palæstina* (Gad, 1977), 60–67.
- ³⁶ Gen. 19:5.
- ³⁷ Amos 4:11; Isa. 1:9-10; 3:9; Zeph. 2:9; Jer. 23:14; 50:40; Ezek. 16:46-49, 53-56.
- ³⁸ 2 Kgs. 21:1-17.
- ³⁹ 2 Kgs. 23:7.
- ⁴⁰ Rom. 1:24, 26. Same word used in 1 Cor. 11:23, “In the night when Jesus was παρεδιδετο.”
- ⁴¹ Evald Lövestam, *Apostlagärningarna* (Verbum, 1988), 172–88.
- ⁴² Matt. 19:12.
- ⁴³ Gen. 1:28.
- ⁴⁴ Rom. 1:27: οι αρσενες αφεντες την φυσικην.
- ⁴⁵ 1 Cor. 11:14 ουδε η φυσικη αυτη διδασκει υμας οτι ανηρ μεν εαν κομα ατιμια αυτω εστιν.
- ⁴⁶ In addition to the Bible texts mentioned in this article: The Bible texts are on the creation of human beings in the image of God, e.g. Gen. 1:27-28. repeated in Gen. 9:6b-7, in the interpretation of Irenaeus and Gregor of Nyssa saying, that here we see the “little man” in his relation to God and human fellows to become a grown up human being, which has taken place in Paradise (Gen. 2:4a–3:24), and with reference to Gen. 11:1-9, the Bible texts where we find God's παραδιδομι, ε.γ. (Rom. 2:14; Acts 17:24-28).
- ⁴⁷ Wesley, *Works*, 10:856–57.
- ⁴⁸ Jørgen Thaarup, *Med venner i lys vi tale* (Tro-fast, 2016), 157–59.
- ⁴⁹ Langford, *Doctrine and Theology*, 159.
- ⁵⁰ *Discipline* (2016), ¶304.3, p. 226.
- ⁵¹ Geoffrey Wainwright, *Doxology* (Oxford Press, New York, 1980).
- ⁵² *Discipline* (2016), ¶304.3, 226.
- ⁵³ *Ibid.*, ¶¶33, 635, 2702.
- ⁵⁴ WCC document *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry*, Part III Ministry.
- ⁵⁵ “Bishops are elected from the elders . . .” (*Discipline* [2016], ¶ 403.1, 323).
- ⁵⁶ *Minutes of the Methodist Conferences 1773 to 1794 under the superintendence of John Wesley Bishops Asbury and Coke*, Facsimile Ed, Lovely Lane Museum, Conference January 1785, p. 76. Wesley's letter §2: Wesley's letter to Asbury and the preachers in the US in 1784 shows that he was inspired by his studies of Lord Peter King's book on *Christian Antiquity*.
- ⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, Conference 1790, p. 136. Quest. 7: Who are the persons that exercise the Episcopal Office in the Methodist Church in Europe and America? Answ. John Wesley, Thomas Coke and Francis Asbury, by regular order and succession.
- ⁵⁸ *The Methodist Discipline of 1798*, Facsimile Ed (Academy Books, 1979), 38.
- ⁵⁹ *Discipline* (2016), ¶2702.4, 789.
- ⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, ¶304, 225–26.