

PLURALISM REVISITED (Part 1)

By Dr. Riley B. Case

As the United Methodist Church faces a probable division it might be helpful to discuss several issues that have contributed to the making of a fractured church in order to give guidance to our future.

The Methodist-EUB merger of 1968-72 has proven to be a disaster. There are several reasons for this, one of which, of special interest to evangelicals, is the fall-out from the 1972 adoption of Part II of the Discipline, *Doctrine and Doctrinal Statements*. It is an indicator of Methodism's doctrinal malaise in which the Task Force, who prepared the statement, generated very little interest in the period before the 1972 General Conference. The Task Force was dominated by Albert Outler of Perkins. Some persons would have jettisoned the Articles of Religion of the Methodist Church and the Confession of Faith of the EUB Church to create a new statement of faith. Outler and the Task Force at least had the foresight to reject this idea (it would have necessitated constitutional amendments). What the Task Force did instead was to retain the historic Methodist and EUB documents but so label them ("landmark documents") to suggest this was what the church once believed but was not necessarily what the church was believing at the present time.

The statement itself introduced three unfortunate concepts. 1) The Conciliar Principle; 2) The Quadrilateral; and 3) Doctrinal pluralism. The "Conciliar Principle" stood in contrast to "The Confessional Principle" (the new statement asserted that while confessions are valid summaries of Christian truth they are not to be invested with final authority). The Quadrilateral (identifying doctrinal "guidelines" and "sources" as Scripture, tradition, reason and experience) was a term invented by Albert Outler who claimed it had been an essential part of Wesleyanism ever since Aldersgate (but which no one else had ever heard of). The Quadrilateral would lead to all kinds of controversy in the church (but that is not the focus of this article). To label these as "sources" implies that they have been in the past or could be in the future valid initiators of new "truth" (such as the claim that through reason and experience new "truth" now supersedes the church's historic witness on matters such as human sexuality).

"Pluralism" was the claim, according to the statement, that there is a "marrow" or core of Christian truth that can be identified and must be preserved but that within that "core" many different theological perspectives could operate. The question was (and is): what is this "marrow" or "core?" Is it the Articles of Religion and the Confession of Faith? When questioned on this Outler himself demurred, refusing to identify what he meant by the "core." To interpret his response on one occasion: a "core" smacks of "fundamental" truths or fundamentalism and that would lead to controversy. Of course Wesley himself did not hesitate to speak of "essentials" of the faith and even identified what these were but the task force did not pick up on Wesley at this point. Whatever the "core," it was not to be construed "juridically." In fact, according to the report, nothing was to be construed juridically. What are the implications of this? Evidently, "standards" are not really standards. They might better be described as suggestions or guidelines. There would be no accountability in matters of church doctrine.

It was hoped by the Task Force that the doctrinal statement would be taken seriously by the newly merged church. It took up, after all, 43 pages in the 1972 *Discipline*. However, the group that did have reason to take it seriously - evangelicals - had not been represented on the Task Force nor involved in any serious discussions of the statement before the

conference. The report itself was introduced and accepted without debate by a vote of 923 to 17 in less than half an hour. It was not the church's finest hour.

When the fledgling Good News group finally analyzed the statement the conclusion was that the church's stance was now, in matters of doctrine, anything goes and there will be no accountability. It would never be possible to have heresy trials in the United Methodist Church simply because heresy would never be able to be defined.

However (and this is the point of this article), evangelicals grabbed on to one glimmer of hope in the statement. The hope was in the concept of "pluralism." This is because, at least for the Methodists, there was a prevailing liberal institutional understanding of what was acceptable and not acceptable in the church that operated pretty much as "standards." The book, *Why I am a Methodist* by Roy L. Smith (1955), is revealing. At the time Roy L. Smith was known as Mr. Methodist. He had written dozens of books, had pastored the largest church in Methodism (Los Angeles First) and had been editor of *The Christian Advocate*. Roy L. Smith pointed with pride to the fact that Methodism had experienced no serious doctrinal controversies for the past 50 years. This was because of the *standardizing* policies of the church. There was one official literature used in the Sunday schools of Methodism; there was a *standardized* system of choosing and training ministers, helped in large part by the church's University Senate which made sure that only the properly accredited schools would train Methodist ministers. The church *Disciplines* before 1972 stipulated that only "official" denominational hymnbooks, curriculum materials and even audio-visuals were to be used in Methodist churches. Methodist connectionalism, according to Smith, "requires" such (1964 *Discipline*, p.119).

So, by 1972 the church was operating not only in the area of curriculum materials but in a number of church programs with a "one size fits all" philosophy. The one size proscribed was to serve all Methodist churches, conservative, liberal, big city, rural, evangelical, black or white. The one size, say in Sunday school curriculum material, might have been commendable had the materials reflected historic Methodist beliefs and practices. But they did not. As early as the 1920s education leaders had denied Original Sin and the Atonement (Wesley had been too influenced by Augustine) and warned against reading Old Testament Bible stories lest children take them literally. In September 1964 Martin Chambers wrote an article in *The Church School* entitled "Non-Approved Church School Lesson Material Can Be Subversive" arguing that "commercial" (meaning evangelical) publishers advanced doctrine in direct opposition to "present Methodist traditions." Chambers then explained "present traditions" which was a litany of theological modernism. The "heresies" of the independent publishers had been discarded years ago by the best of dedicated scholars.

So evangelicals were drawn to the concept of pluralism. Albert Outler, to his credit, understood this quite well and related to evangelicals on several occasions that pluralism was to their advantage. And in the section "Theological Frontiers and New Directions" the Task Force (Outler) included a statement saying the church would in the future take seriously "other widely variant theological emphases of our time" and mentioned neo-fundamentalism and Pentecostalism.

Good News took the lead on challenging the church to incorporate pluralism in its life. Very quickly after 1972 Good News asked for and was offered several occasions for discussions with the Curriculum Resources Committee. A little later, in the mid-1970s, it asked for discussions with the official seminaries. All of the seminaries but one (Perkins) welcomed Good News teams. The discussions were gracious but not necessarily fruitful. The seminaries would not agree to anything except to promise to include major evangelical

authors in their libraries in several instances. They believed they were already pluralistic even if there were but very few scholars that were recognized as evangelicals by the evangelical world. The Curriculum Resources Committee did form a task force on Pluralism and sought to include evangelical writers from time to time.

What Roy L. Smith and other liberal leaders of institutional Methodism either did not know or refused to recognize is that it was not institutional liberalism but evangelicalism that represented the wave of the future in American Protestantism. With an emphasis on identity politics, liberation ideologies, quota systems (which did not include evangelicals), politically correct language and actions, and general capitulation to the secular culture, the new United Methodist Church along with other mainline denominations began their period of implosion and decline.

At the same time within the Protestant world generally evangelical expressions began to thrive. The Jesus People movement, the charismatic movement, the launching of para-church ministries, the development of mega-churches, and the tremendous growth of overseas churches (almost entirely evangelical) began to shift the theological landscape.

By 1984, just twelve years after 1972, the United Methodist General Conference agreed to a revision of the doctrinal statement. A new Task Force, chaired by Bishop Earl Hunt, did welcome evangelical input and repaired much of the damage of the 1972 statement. The word “pluralism” was omitted entirely, as were references to the “conciliar principle.” The historical statement admitted the church’s dilution of the force of the Articles of Religion as constitutional doctrinal standards and spoke of a new interest in Wesley and “classical” traditions of Christian thought. It erased all mention of standards not meant to be understood “juridically.” It deleted the label “landmark documents” and redefined the “quadrilateral.” The statement was adopted by the 1988 General Conference.

In 1995 after several national events involving evangelicals concerned about the continual theological drift of the institutional church, 900 persons gathered in April in Atlanta to adopt a strong statement affirming Jesus Christ as Son, Savior, and Lord. That would represent the beginning of the Confessing Movement (the sponsor of these Happenings articles). It is the Confessing Movement, along with other evangelical renewal groups, that will carry the banner for doctrinal integrity in what we believe will be a new expression of Methodism coming out of the 2021 General Conference. Stay tuned.

(The next Happenings around the Church article will deal with Part 2 of” Pluralism Revisited.”)