

What a church officially confesses, teaches, and guards is its doctrine, and here Jaroslav Pelikan's definition is apt: doctrine is "what the church of Jesus Christ believes, teaches, and confesses on the basis of the Word of God." The church is a training camp for disciples. Our curriculum is our body of teaching as grounded in Scripture, enacted in worship, and lived out in love of God and neighbor. Our mission is to spread the fame of Jesus that all may have an opportunity to enter a healed relationship with the Triune God.

While many still invoke the myth that we are not a confessional church, United Methodists have a body of five texts from which we develop a wide range of faithful teaching. We are a confessing church with genuine content. Scripture is primary, and our doctrinal base is textually fixed.

Our Constitution protects five texts. The Articles of Religion (AR) and the Confession of Faith (CF) express the faith of the early church and later Protestant Reformation and provide resources for preaching and Bible study. *The Standard Sermons of John Wesley* and his *Explanatory Notes on the New Testament* provide insight into Wesleyan soteriology, including our doctrines of grace. The General Rules provide a concrete picture of the Christian life.

These texts are our Constitutional Standards and all but inviolate. Those who wish to change our sexual ethic know it's not the place to start because of its traditional nature, its defense of Scripture as the norm for "faith and practice" (CF, Article 4), and the support found in Wesley's *Notes* on Romans 1:26-27, 1 Corinthians 6:9-11, Ephesians 5:1-11, and 1 Timothy 1:8-11, as well as Sermon 38, "A Caution Against Bigotry." They must choose other battlefields, especially at the next tier of official—but not constitutionally protected—teaching.

The second level is a cluster of Contemporary Statements in our *Book of Discipline 2016 (BOD)*. They are subject to change at each General Conference, but it is clear that sections of the *Discipline* (Part III: 1. "Our Doctrinal Heritage," 2. "Our Doctrinal History," 3. "Our Theological Task," Part IV: "The Ministry of All Christians, Part V: "Social Principles," Part VI.7.2.2702, "Chargeable Offenses," and *The Book of Resolutions 2016*), as well as several other scattered paragraphs, have authority as current teaching. (On the three levels of United Methodist teaching, see Scott Jones, *United Methodist Doctrine: The Extreme Center* [Nashville, TN: Abington, 2002], 33-68). It is at this level that most of our teaching on sexuality is found and upon which the debate centers.

A third level is our *Hymnal* and *Book of Worship*. The adage is that "belief shapes worship, and worship shapes belief." Worship is where our convictions as a church get into our hearts and hands. Because the debate over marriage includes our liturgies, this also is a disputed arena.

Now that we understand our sources, the question remains, "Does the United Methodist Church have a faithful, defensible sex ethic?" This requires us to revisit the three tiers of teaching.

*The Articles of Religion* and *Confession of Faith* contribute basic assumptions. The Triune God is the maker of the good creation, including male and female image bearers (AR, Article 1; CF, Article 1). But all are corrupted by the distorting powers of sin and rebellion with a bent towards evil as a deep inclination (AR, Article 7; CF, Article 7). This includes our sexual capacities. The common appeal to creation—"This is how God made me"—must be nuanced by an accounting of the devastating effects of sin on all our capacities (see Timothy C. Tennent, *For the Body:*

*Recovering a Theology of Gender, Sexuality, and the Human Body* [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2021], 31-32). No simple appeal to creation is adequate, but only a “created good, but now fallen” tension that holds Genesis 1-2 and 3 together. The tragedies, brokenness, and vices of the fallen world may not be attributed to the goodness of creation fresh from the hand of God but to our deception, treason, distortions, and their effect on all relationships.

The Incarnation of God the Son in Jesus, including his words and works and climaxing in death and resurrection, is God’s action to reclaim the whole person and eventually all creation (AR, Article 2, 3; CF, Article 2, 12). Jesus attended weddings, defended marriage against casual dissolution, called himself a bridegroom, and spoke of the vices of fornication, adultery, and all forms of flagrant immorality (*licentiousness*) as evil impulses that, when acted out, render us morally polluted (Mk. 7:14-23). Jesus was a voluntary celibate but did not make it a condition of discipleship. Compulsory celibacy is not required of our clergy, who may marry at their discretion “to serve best to godliness” (AR, Article 21).

Our doctrine of sanctification in the direction of mature love holds out the promise of substantial freedom from the powers of sin and evil, including sexual vices and their reduction of persons to objects and commodities (CF, Article 11). That our *General Rules* with its lists of prohibitions does not include sexual vices likely indicates, in light of Wesley’s other teachings, that they were assumed as out of bounds and so not listed.

It is at the level of Contemporary Statements that our most detailed teaching is found, most particularly in the “Social Principles” (161C. “Marriage,” G. “Human Sexuality,” I. “Sexual Abuse,” J. “Sexual Harrassment,” P. “Sexual Assault,” Q. “Pornography”). Summarizing this deposit is difficult, but the most basic affirmation is that sex and gender are God’s good gifts to all, whether or not persons are married. Sexual relations are affirmed only within monogamous, heterosexual marriage, thus polygamy, polyamory, adultery, cohabitation, hook-ups, homosexual practice, and all other variances are “incompatible with Christian teaching” (*BOD*:113), as is pornography and sexual harassment, including commercial exploitation.

God resists all practices that damage those crafted in the divine image. Jesus Christ must be Lord over all our appetites and bring them under his graced supervision. The casualties of the sexual revolution are all around us in rampant STDs, millions of convenience abortions, the degrading of male/female relations, ever-more bizarre practices, and the increasing mockery of marriage as the best venue for full, loving sexual expression and the rearing of children.

A clarification is necessary here. Ours is not a general sex ethic for the culture, nor are we trying to enforce standards on those who do not share our faith, be they secular or searching, deist or polytheist, the open hedonist or the growing numbers of the church alumni association who’ve moved on to something more in tune with the times, even if still found in our pews on occasion or making pastoral appointments.

Ours is a true, loving, and wise teaching for disciples of Jesus Christ. It is contrary to fallen human nature and its unruly impulses, so we must expect struggle and call for compassion. It only makes sense from the inside, once you surrender the self to the risen Jesus and learn his holy, happy ways in our Book and among his people. Ours is a healing minority report, a genuine alternative.

In the sections of the *Discipline* on Ordained Ministry the epigram “fidelity in marriage and celibacy in singleness” is used three times (*BOD*: 226, 231, 269), and the list of chargeable offenses is expanded to “immorality including, but not limited to, not being celibate in singleness or not faithful in heterosexual marriage” (*BOD*: 788-789). It is instructive to compare the current list of chargeable offenses for clergy and laity with the shorter lists prior to 1972. Of the twelve for clergy, five are now sexual offenses, and for laity, four of eleven. As the culture experiments with sexual license and the church notes the casualties of misconduct, harassment, and pornography inside our fold, the lists must be frequently updated.

The five chapters in *The Book of Resolutions 2016* dealing with sexual ethics (“Response Team Ministry for Sexual Misconduct,” “Sexual Misconduct with the Ministerial Relationship,” “Eradication of Sexual Harassment in the UMC and Society,” “Sexual Ethics as Integral Part of Formation for Ministerial Leadership,” “Pornography and Sexual Violence”) may be read as extended footnotes on relevant materials in the “Social Principles” and “Chargeable Offenses.” Their aim is faithful implementation, not the creation of new or different teaching.

The third level in our doctrinal system is our worship practices, particularly “A Service of Christian Marriage,” which begins with a greeting that is brief and elegant and summarizes what Scripture teaches. It refers to the Creation account in its phrase, “who created us male and female for each other.” It later refers to Jesus’ example of sacrificial love as the model “for the love of husband and wife.” The binary of “husband and wife” occurs three other times in the service. In addition, three of the six hymns under the heading of “Marriage” make explicit reference to “man and woman” (No. 642) or to “husband, wife” (No. 643, 647). Our wedding service reflects our teaching. It does not say other arrangements do not legally exist, only that this is the only valid one available to followers of Jesus in our denomination.

A close review of our doctrinal materials indicates clearly that the answer is, “Yes. The UMC does have a faithful sex ethic that is a coherent expression of our doctrines and defensible as binding on all professing members.” Our failure is not that we do not have the teaching; it’s that we largely have failed to offer it as part of a life-giving call to discipleship in the modern world. We have lost our theological and moral nerve. We have been internally secularized, and it’s showing.

The reason our church will soon divide is over an ethical issue concerning our teaching on human sexuality. The current position is “traditional,” if that means continuity with the apostolic tradition across time. In another sense it is “radical” because of the way it stands over against the erotic obsessions of our culture. What could be more out of step than our crisp, official summary of “celibacy in singleness and fidelity in heterosexual marriage,” meaning that all the creative ways of not keeping this norm are “incompatible” with being a follower of Jesus?

We have a comprehensive sexual ethic and not just an isolated teaching on homosexual practice and same-sex unions. Our conflict is with progressive leaders who refuse to abide by our teaching and intend to scrub a new *Book of Discipline* clean of its understandings and prohibitions. With that erasure, a layer of the apostolic tradition will have been banished from our churches.

Our teaching is undermined from within, and the challenge is unapologetic: “The church is bigoted, mean, and we have a better way based on new revelations in science and experience.”

All erotic impulses are now equally blessable, with consent and the age of consent the only limit. British Methodists recently approved same-sex marriage and made cohabitation without marriage an acceptable practice for church members by an 85% majority. Shacking is now sacred; making promises with your body you do not keep with your life is now blessable. "I am yours, but only until my personal growth requires a new partner."

Of 600,000 members 30 years ago, only 164,000 British Methodists remain today. Our mother church is hemorrhaging and will die, the cut being made with her own hand. What the Bible terms *fornication* or *immorality* and warns against because it damages people, they now treat as an adult freedom compatible with the faith. They have merged with the culture as its smiling, non-judgmental chaplains. All that will be left is a Methodist Board of Trust managing abandoned real estate. Reduce the faith, and you will be reduced. The coming schism will free part of our church to follow our British friends into increasing folly and decline. It will free another to repent and recover the work of discipleship without current distractions. What is lost may yet be found again!

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