

## ❖ Discerning the Will of God

### Romans 12:2

**Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern the good and acceptable and perfect will of God.**

A highly-opinionated old lady by the name of Mrs. Boteler was a member of one of the churches I served in the course of my ministry. Mrs. Boteler resided in a retirement home. One day as she was seated with some other residents in the dining room, the conversation turned to denominational preferences. "If I were not a Lutheran," one lady commented, "I'd be a Presbyterian."

Another lady offered, "Well, if I were not a Baptist, I'd be a Nazarene." This was followed by a third statement, "If I were not a Catholic, I'd be an Episcopalian."

All this time, Mrs. Boteler, a life-long Methodist, sat silent. Finally one of her table-mates asked, "Mrs. Boteler, if you were not a Methodist, what would you be?"

Mrs. Boteler snapped, “Ashamed of myself!”

Well, I wouldn't be ashamed of myself if for some reason I decided to unite with a church of another denomination, but, like Mrs. Boteler, I, too, am a life-long Methodist, having grown up in the Methodist Church of Oakmont, Pennsylvania, founded by my great-grandfather, the Rev. N. P. Kerr, who was ordained in 1862.

The Methodist Episcopal Church was founded in 1784 by Bishops Frances Asbury and Thomas Coke. That was about the same time that our nation got its start. In fact, there are similarities between the U. S. government and our denomination.

As you know, our government has three branches: the executive, the legislative, and the judicial. Likewise the Methodist Church was organized with an executive branch – the Council of Bishops, a legislative branch – the General Conference, and a judicial branch – the Judicial Council.

The General Conference, which meets every four years, produces our law-book, called the Discipline. Only the General Conference can enact or modify church law.

In the year 1804 – only 20 years after the founding of our denomination - one of my Methodist ancestors purchased a copy of the Discipline. The book eventually came into my possession. In those early days, the Discipline was written in question and answer form. Questions included such matters as “How shall our ministers be appointed?” “How shall a local congregation be organized?”

One of those questions read, “Are there any exceptions to our rule that men and women shall sit on opposite sides of the church?” The answer read, “There are none.”

Obviously, we want to follow the Discipline, so if you men will kindly move to this side of the church, and you women take your place on this side. Oh wait, that rule was eliminated some 150 years ago.

Why, we might ask, was there ever such a rule in the first

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place? The answer is simple. Those early Methodists believed it to be the will of God. Perhaps they thought that having men and women sit on opposite sides of the church would be less distracting and prompt worshipers to pay more attention to the sermon. At any rate, they were convinced that they were following God's direction by imposing this rule.

Some years later the delegates to a subsequent General Conference voted to eliminate that restriction. Why? Were they saying, "Well, we know that God wants men and women on opposite sides of the church; but we want to sit with our wives or girlfriends, so we'll just get rid of that rule even though we know it's not what God wants us to do."

Of course not. They probably realized that this restriction imposed an undue hardship on families, and became convinced that God was calling them to eliminate it.

They were following the often appropriate admonition of James Russell Lowell: "New occasions teach new duties; time makes ancient good uncouth."

In all of my years in the Methodist Church, I've seen considerable changes. When I was a child, my mother, my grandmother, and my Aunt Mary always wore their best outfits plus a hat and gloves when they came to church. They would have been appalled if they had seen a woman in church without those accessories. Likewise, men wore suits and ties. Even my brother and I as little kids were compelled to wear scratchy wool pants and tight-fitting neckties to the Sunday service.

When we complained, Mother would explain that if President Roosevelt were to invite us to the White House, we would wear our very best clothes; and if we would dress up to visit the President's house, we should surely dress up when we enter God's house. It made sense to her!

Well, we never got the dinner invitation from the Roosevelts – which is not surprising since my parents were staunch Republicans – but we always went to church dressed appropriately for a visit to the White House.

When I look around this congregation, I see a few men

wearing coats and ties, I see some women in very stylish dresses; but I also see many worshipers in more casual attire, such as I myself generally wear to church. Do we who dress more casually feel that we are not showing proper respect for God? Or have we come to believe that God is more concerned with what's in our hearts and souls than what adorns our bodies? In today's society, if people were expected to come to Broadway dressed in the manner of churchgoers in the 1940's, attendance would plummet. Changing times require a re-examination of God's will for this time in the church's history.

My great-grandfather, in keeping with the Discipline of his time, occasionally expelled members for engaging in an activity so objectionable, they could no longer be part of the church fellowship – dancing. One of his diary entries reads, “Preached for an hour and a half on the evils of dancing” Then he wrote, “Tired.”

When I read that, I commented to Judy that I imagine he wasn't the only person who was tired at the conclusion of that sermon.

Were my great grandfather and most other Methodists of the day convinced that in prohibiting church members to dance they were properly discerning God's will? Absolutely. But as time went on, Methodists came to regard dancing not as an offense to God, but as a harmless recreational activity. Thus the prohibition against it was removed from the Discipline, again in response to what that generation discerned to be God's will.

In the year 1844, the Methodist Episcopal Church split into two separate denominations over the issue of slavery. The two denominations were reunited in 1939. In 1989 – 50 years after reunification – a Methodist historian was asked to describe that process at our annual conference session. After his talk, one of the persons present asked, “Why did it take almost a hundred years for the two churches to unite when the Civil War settled the issue of slavery in 1865?”

The historian replied, “Reunification required a considerable amount of spadework – mostly by undertakers.” I know exactly what he meant.

By 1960, my Aunt Mary and her cousin Virginia were the only members of our family still living in Oakmont. They remained active members of their home church. A pastor by the name of Jack Moon was appointed to Oakmont. Both Mary and Virginia came to love him and appreciate his ministry.

One Spring day, after Jack had been at Oakmont for ten years, I received a phone call from Aunt Mary who told me that she had bad news to convey. I anticipated the message. "You're getting a new pastor, aren't you" I said.

"Yes," she replied, "and we don't know yet who he is."

Seeing an opportunity to have a little fun with my aunt, I said, "Why do you say 'he'? Your new pastor just might be a woman."

"Oh," she replied, "we've never had one of those!"

"Well," I responded, "in all probability your new pastor will be a man. Of course, he could be a Black man."



Again Mary replied, “Oh, we've never had one of those.”

Aunt Mary's church was organized in 1893, but it was not until 1956 – the year I enrolled in seminary – that the Methodist Church offered full clergy rights to women; and until 1968, the church was racially segregated. Until that time, a Black Methodist pastor serving a church in, say, Knoxville would not have been a member of the Holston Conference, but would have belonged to a different Conference, not in the Southeastern Jurisdiction, but in the all-Black Central Jurisdiction.

Yet again, endeavoring to discern the will of God for their time in the church's history, the delegates to General Conference finally extended clergy rights to women and, later, eliminated the segregation that had been part of the denomination's structure since the 1939 reunification.

Both of these changes, as you can imagine, created considerable controversy. Some Methodists who objected to these changes left the denomination, perhaps convinced that the General Conference had misunderstood God's will for the

church.

Today, our denomination faces another issue which compels us once again to seek guidance from the Holy Spirit in discerning God's good and perfect will. As you know, a called session of the General Conference is meeting today for the single purpose of addressing the contentious issue of the church's stance toward people who are gay and lesbian.

At present, the Discipline prohibits the ordination of gay persons and prohibits United Methodist pastors from performing gay marriages. For years, some delegates to General Conference have argued that these prohibitions should be eliminated, while others have demanded that they remain in place.

At the last General Conference the Council of Bishops put together a diverse international panel of United Methodists who were commissioned to find a way forward that could resolve this issue in a way that would hold the denomination together and respect divergent viewpoints. The special session of the General Conference that has now begun

meeting will act on the various proposals from the panel.

As you follow the proceedings of this legislative body, I urge you to recognize that United Methodists who love the Lord and believe the Bible find themselves on opposite sides of this issue. No one is saying, “We know that what we want is wrong, but we want the church to approve it anyway.”

People on all sides of the issue want to see us follow the path on which God is leading the church at this time in our history. We differ in discerning what is God's will in this matter. Some strongly believe that God is calling the church to ordain and officiate in marriages of all people, gay or straight; while others are equally adamant that God wants our denomination to retain the present prohibitions against such actions. Both sides are convinced they are correctly discerning the will of God.

I do not envy those whose task it is to come to some resolution of this divisive issue in a way that holds us together and respects divergent viewpoints.

Every time the General Conference enacts legislation, it is because the majority of delegates regard that legislation as an expression of God's will for the church; and every time a subsequent General Conference alters or repeals a piece of legislation, it is because the majority of delegates to that General Conference are convinced they are following God's direction for their time in the church's history.

And every time a change is made, there have been those who have disagreed with the action of our legislative body, as there will surely be this time regardless of what the Conference decides. We are not always blessed with a perfect understanding of God's will. Who knows – when we get to heaven where all things are made clear, God may be saying to us Methodists, “Where did you ever get the idea that I wanted men and women to sit together in church?”

So let me urge you to do these things: First, pray for the delegates at General Conference. Ask God to guide them in discerning God's will for our church at this time in our history. Then, listen to what people on all sides are saying. Respect those with whom you differ.

Earlier this week, I attended the Holston Conference Ministers' Convocation in Pigeon Forge. On Tuesday morning, the delegates to General Conference from Holston – including Karen Wright, a member at Broadway - who are now at the conference, were introduced. Kim Goddard, Superintendent of the New River District, spoke for the delegation.

Kim grew up in the Bear Springs United Methodist Church, one of five churches on the Eggleston Charge in southwest Virginia. I was her Supervising Pastor when she was in seminary.

In her remarks, Kim said this: “There is a crisis facing our church that has nothing to do with human sexuality. All around us are thousands of people who do not know Christ as Lord and Savior, and we are not reaching them. Pray that at this special General Conference session, we may find a way forward through the present controversy so that we may focus our time and energy on the primary purpose of our church which is to make disciples of Jesus Christ. And I say “Amen” to that!

Also, keep in mind that regardless of what transpires at this called session of the General Conference, Broadway Church will open its doors next Sunday, the Food Pantry will continue to serve the needy, and the choir will prepare music for Lent and Easter. There will be no drastic, immediate change. Regard this conference as one part of a process that will continue for some time as devout United Methodists of all persuasions seek to find a way forward that will be faithful to God's will for the church we love.

Our scripture text reminds us that God is calling us to allow the Holy Spirit to so transform us and renew our minds that we may find the wisdom to discern God's will in every situation. May God bless the United Methodist Church, and reveal to us the path we are to follow at this time in our long and noble history. Amen.