

BIBLICAL OBEDIENCE

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The United Methodist Church

In gratitude for the witnesses of

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A growing number of United Methodist clergy are conducting same gender unions in violation of the Church's law. (§2702.1b) They are doing so out of love for those they are uniting. They also see the Church's prohibitions contradicting Wesleyan hospitality in our *Discipline*. "Inclusiveness means openness, acceptance, and support that enable all persons to participate in the life of the Church, the community, and the world; therefore, inclusiveness denies every semblance of discrimination. The services of worship of every local church of The United Methodist Church shall be open to all persons." (§140) In addition, some clergy cannot comply with what they see as discriminatory prohibitions and are therefore seeking to restore justice in the Church's life.

Those who want to terminate the clergy membership of these persons should reflect on the interactions Jesus had with the Pharisees and his neighbors. In his ministry, Jesus violated religious regulations and challenged the biases of his people as he fulfilled the Great Commandment of love (Mt 22:37; Deut 6:5; Lev 19:18) and met basic human needs. (Mt 12:1-14, 22) After Jesus violated Sabbath regulations, the Pharisees "went out and conspired against him, how to destroy him" (Mt 12:14); after Jesus cured a demoniac, they claimed, "It is only by Beelzebul, the ruler of demons, that this fellow [Jesus] casts out the demons." (Mt 12:24; Mk 3:22; Lk 11:15)

The Gospels answered the opponents with passages from Isaiah about the one whom the Lord has anointed. Those passages identified who Jesus is, what he will do, and by implication, how disciples are expected to follow Jesus. Matthew claimed Jesus was not moved by Beelzebul, but was anointed by the Spirit of God. (Is 42:1-4, in Mt 12:18-21) That meant Jesus is the "beloved" of God who is "chosen" to advocate justice and bring it to pass. God is also "well pleased" with this "servant" because he "will not break a bruised reed or quench a smoldering wick"—an apt description of those wounded by the Church's exclusion. In Luke's Gospel, Jesus read in the synagogue another passage from Isaiah. (Is 61:1-2, with 58:6, in Lk 4:18-19) His people were appalled when Jesus said he is the anointed one in the prophecy; his people were enraged when Jesus said he will fulfill his calling as Elijah and Elisha did. Elijah went abroad and fed a Gentile widow during a famine, although hunger was rampant among his own people; Elisha cured a commander of a menacing army of his leprosy, although there were many lepers in Israel. His people attempted to hurl Jesus over a cliff, but he escaped because his time had not come. (Lk 4:16-30) Because the Gospels say the Spirit of God and not an evil spirit empowered Jesus to promote justice and challenge the biases of his people against those who were different, we should not be hasty in our attempt to terminate the clergy membership of those who are doing what Jesus did. A question, however, remains. Why did Jesus violate religious regulations?

Jesus violated the regulations because of the difference he saw between human traditions and the word of God. When the Pharisees complained that the disciples did not observe dietary regulations, Jesus answered, "For the sake of your tradition you make void the word of God." (Mt 15:6; Cf Mk 7:13) In Mark's version, Jesus said, "You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition." (Mk7:7) Debate over the Sabbath vividly

illustrates the distinction. Human traditions had accumulated around specific ways to observe the Sabbath. Because those human traditions “make void,” or lead people to abandon the more basic commands of God, Jesus disobeyed those traditions, and practiced biblical obedience by observing the “weightier matters of the law, justice, mercy and faith.” (Mt 23:23; Cf. Mic 6:8) By doing so, Jesus kept the Sabbath holy. (Ex 20:8) Similarly, while disobeying traditions in our disciplinary prohibitions, clergy are seeking to fulfill the weightier matters of restoring God’s justice and spreading God’s love.

In addition, as issues changed, Jesus shifted the focus from one biblical witness to another more relevant witness to God’s word and work. We see this in an exchange with the Pharisees and the disciples. Jesus began by affirming what United Methodists have often cited: “At the beginning, [God] made male and female.” (Mt 19:4; Gen 1:27) However, when the ensuing interactions changed the issue under consideration, Jesus set that passage aside for the new issue and spoke of another ordering in creation that we have abandoned. Jesus said, “There are eunuchs who are been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom. Let anyone accept this who can.” (Mt 19:12)

United Methodism has accumulated in the *Discipline* a tradition of prohibitions based on God creating male and female, but has nullified and abandoned biblical obedience to another way people are born or “made.” Those who are violating United Methodist prohibitions are supported by what Jesus said about another ordering in God’s creation. Because this claim may sound rather novel, it is necessary to place the new ordering Jesus mentioned in the broader range of biblical witnesses to God’s activities.

There is a strand in the Bible that only builds on God’s creative acts by fiat in Genesis 1. God creates creatures and draws sharp distinctions among them, separates creatures from other creatures and says they are good—light from darkness, water from land, species of every kind distinguishable from others, and male and female. From this perspective, combining the distinct kinds, or crossing what separates them, violates the goodness God created and was therefore prohibited. That perspective generated a number of prohibitions, including the breeding of different kinds of animals and planting different kinds of seeds in the same field, wearing different types of textiles (Lev 19:19) and males crossing over their distinctiveness. (Lev 18:22; 20:13) The same perspective eventually led Ezra and Nehemiah in the post-exilic period to demand that Jews who had married Gentiles “send away all their wives and their children.” (Ezra 10:2-3, 10-11; Neh 13:23-30) In the development of this strand in the biblical witnesses that we use in our prohibitions, God created distinct creatures and intended to keep them apart permanently.

There is, however, another strand of God’s creative activities based on Genesis 2 that leads to the new ordering Jesus mentioned. (Mt 19:12) In this story, God does not separate, but gathers different creatures or blends their ingredients, and makes them a part of a new creation. Water and the earth are brought together, as are a host of different plants, to create the Garden of Eden. Woman as a distinct creature may have come from man in this account, but in the culmination of this story, two distinct creatures “become one flesh.” (Gen 2:24) This strand is crucial for Christians. Boaz, a Jew, married Ruth, a Gentile descendant of Moabites whom Israelites despised. (Ruth 4:10-12; Neh 13:1) Their descendants, including King David (Ruth 4:17, 21), blended ingredients from Jews and Gentiles. Later, Matthew’s genealogy of Jesus heightened the blending. We see three Gentiles in the ancestry of Jesus, namely, Rahab, the harlot, Ruth, and Bathsheba, counted by the Jews as a Gentile because she married Uriah, a Gentile. (Mt 1:1-17) Thus, our Lord, Jesus Christ, came from an ancestry of mixed marriages

between Jews and Gentiles, clearly contradicting the excesses in Ezra and Nehemiah! We see the same story in the birth of the church. The Holy Spirit equipped the apostles to bring together the first multi-lingual, multi-cultural mega-church (Acts 2:5-11) and blended this variety into a single faith community. (Acts 4:44) Philip, the evangelist, spread the faith further. Under his ministry, Samaritans, seen as those who had blended different ethnicities and faiths (Acts 8:4-25), and a eunuch, who crossed the lines of distinct identities (Acts 8:26-39; cf Lev 20:13), were converted to Christ. Thus, the new ordering Jesus mentioned in Matthew 19:12 was making explicit what was implicit in Hebrew Scriptures and confirming what we will see below the Council in Jerusalem decided.

The tension between the stories of creation is resolved when positive elements from the two stories in Hebrew Scriptures become, in the New Testament, two stages in the fuller sweep of God's mission. First, God creates creatures with their distinctive identities and affirms their goodness, and, second, God gathers a variety of creatures, with unfolding variations in their identities, and makes them a distinguishable part of a larger whole. Truly a further ordering in creation. Space only allows for one paradigmatic illustration of this scenario that occurs elsewhere in the Bible. When the Church decided not to circumcise Gentiles at a Council in Jerusalem, they were saying Gentiles did not need to become Jews before they became Christians. The goodness in the distinct identities of Gentiles, including the Samaritans and the eunuch, were retained (!), and, together with Jewish Christians, were brought together as distinguishable parts of a larger whole in the new household of faith. (Acts 15:1-21; ¶140) With biblical obedience we join this mission of God. In the traditional language of the triune God, what the Father as the Source is creating, is not violated however much they are transformed by the Son as the Savior and the Spirit as the Sanctifier. God is One. (Deut 6:4; Mk 12:21)

These lines of reflections lead me to say the following. First, I support those who are celebrating same gender unions based on the biblical foundations in the ministry of Jesus Christ for the mission of the triune God. Second, the prohibition of same gender unions in our *Discipline* has nullified and abandoned key passages in the biblical witnesses to God's work, and is weighed down with human traditions that constrain us from fulfilling the Great Commandment with weightier matters of the law--justice, mercy, and faith. Third, we should therefore forego any further uses of those provisions in the *Discipline* for charges and in trials. Fourth, we now need hallowing conferences to develop a consensus around more appropriate strands in the biblical witnesses to God's activities for the issue at hand, and develop related traditions that baptize us into God's expansive mission. With consensus on those points, we will become more faithful to the Great Commission (Mt 28:18-20) and better able to reach new people and new generations for Christ. Dear God, help us. Amen.

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