

A Sermon For The Uniting Conference of The United Methodist Church

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Fathers and Brethren and Sisters in Christ:

Here we are this morning, gathered together from over the world and from all sorts and conditions of men—to celebrate a birthday, *our* birthday as The United Methodist Church. In just a few moments now, we shall join in a ceremony symbolizing our new covenant of unity and mutual growth together. The aura of every newborn thing is an aura of hope. And so it is with us today. We stand here on a threshold. A new horizon looms ahead.

In some ears, it may sound fantastic to relate *this* day to the first Pentecost recorded in Acts 2—what with no rushing mighty wind, no tongues of fire, no glossolalia, etc. But actually, the lasting meaning of *that* Pentecost was its opening the way for others to follow after.

And while the day of Pentecost was getting on, they [the disciples] were all together with one accord in one place. . . . And they were filled with the Holy Spirit . . . and began to speak . . . as the Spirit gave them the power of utterance . . . about the great deeds of God. . . .

This is, of course, an abridgement of the longer text, with the marvels omitted and also those two bits of local color that still intrigue me: the one where Peter denies that the disciples are drunk because it was too early in the morning (about the same time of day as *now!*); and that other one about the 3,000 new members added in one day. What a frustration it must have been for Peter to have all that happen, with no board to report it to!

Clearly, though, that first Pentecost was less significant for what happened *then* than for what came after. Pentecost was the day when the real work of the church began, when the Christian people accepted the agenda of their unfinished business in the world and began to get on with it! Those first Christians were not very well-furnished in terms of ecclesiastical apparatus. Their organization was shaky, their polity and discipline sketchy. Their theologians were in typical disagreement, and their most prominent "lay leaders" were Ananias and Sapphira!

Even so, *that* Pentecost was ever thereafter memorable as the Church's *birthday*,

as the day when Joel's prophecy was fulfilled—when the Holy Spirit would come and abide as God's governing presence in the midst of his People—and this memory remained, even when the rushing mighty wind subsided to homiletical zephyrs, when glossolalia was relegated to the margins of Christian experience, when the tongues of fire gave way to controversy and conflict. Pentecost is rightly remembered as the day when the Christian church was launched on its career *in* history, for the world. In every age, her performance has been scandalously short of her visions and dreams—and her plain imperatives. And yet also in every age since the first Pentecost, it is the Christian church that has marked off the crucial difference between man's best hope and his genuine despair.

I know as well as anyone that this analogy between that first birthday and this one of ours does not apply foursquare. Our new church does not represent a radical break with our several past histories nor is there a comparable intention toward a radically new future. Even so, the analogy between that first Pentecost and this one could be edifying to us, too. This is the day when *the real work of the UMC begins*. It is a day when doors are opened that heretofore were closed, when new possibilities of reformation and renewal are literally "at hand."

The essence of the event is self-evident: it is the accomplished fact of the United Methodist Church. Where once, scarcely a generation ago, there were five churches, now there is one. Where once our differences kept us apart—with different languages and folkways—now they are overcome or at least contained within a larger circle of committed fellowship. We have been Christian brethren, after a fashion, for the better part of two centuries—but *separated* brethren. Now our memberships and ministries have been mingled without compromise or indignity; our separate traditions have been sublated and made one.

Obviously, no part of our venture in unity is really *finished* as yet. Our joy in *this* union ought to be tempered by our remembrance, in love, of those others of our Christian brethren, whom we acknowledge as such, and yet from whom we are still separated. Moreover, the various practical, domestic problems posed by our agenda in this Conference loom large and exigent. It will *not* be a debonair fortnight; few of us are likely to be content with the outcome. And yet, here we are and this is our birthday. Here we turn a new page in modern church history—and, just as smugness is excluded from our celebration, so also is cynicism.

Let us then ask ourselves what this fact of a new church makes possible. What will it take to turn this beginning into the reality of its promise and of our hopes? We can offer our ungrudging gratitude and honor to all those whose toil and tears, faith and fortitude have led us to this hour—so long as we are all clear that none of their laurels (and certainly none of ours) is for *resting on*. We have much to be grateful for, nothing to be complacent about. Our joy this day is foretaste: foretaste of a future that can be even more creative than we have yet dared to ask or think.

This means that, as we turn from our ceremony of beginnings to the tasks that follow, our foremost need is for a vivid sense of the church we have been called to be. By what norms shall we seek to transform our covenant into genuine *koinonia*? By what principles are we willing to be guided in the agonies of growth that lie ahead? To what heavenly vision are we prepared to be obedient in the difficult days and years that even the blithest optimist can foresee?

One thing is for sure: what has served till now as our *status quo ante* will simply not suffice for the upcoming future. For all its great merits—for all its saints and heroes—the standing order is now too nearly preoccupied with self-maintenance and sur-

vival. The world is in furious and agonizing turmoil, incomprehensible and unmanageable. The church is in radical crisis, and in the throes of a profound demoralization, at every level: of faith and order, life and work. In such times, business as usual simply will not get our business done. Our own past golden age (the 19th century)—the heyday of pietism in a pre-urbanized society—has faded. Frontiersmen for tomorrow must be as dynamically adaptive to the *new* "new world" as our forefathers were in theirs.

There is, of course, a bit of glibness here—for the brute fact is that we have no clearly visible alternative to the *status quo* ready to hand, available merely for our choice and application. For all their advertisements, none of the new experiments in celebration of our own brave new world can honestly be hailed as the shape of things to come. Nor is it the case that any of our sister churches have had vouchsafed to them the blueprints for Zion's Ark, space-age model—though some [notably the Roman Catholics] have recently exposed themselves to more massive and more fruitful self-examination than we.

For freedom we have been set free, from the outdated past—but it begins to look as if we have been condemned to freedom as well: condemned to come up with something better than protests and complaints and self-righteous criticism of others; we are condemned to *responsible* prophecy, reform and renewal—or else to the fatal consequences of destructive discontent. If, in this new church of ours, we are to avoid "the dinosaur-syndrome" (with its zeal for furnishing later ages an abundance of fossils) or its opposite, "the Elijah complex" (with its self-pitying self-righteousness about our minority status), we *must* find our way forward in conscious concern for the continuum of the Christian tradition and history in which we stand with our forefathers: always aware of God's habit of linking the past and the future by means of

the hopeful acts of men in decisive *present* moments—like *this one!* We *must* learn to discipline our imaginations and inventions, not by our own constrictive biases but by God's open-hearted mandates for his people, by patterns that will serve our *common* life in the Body of Christ.

One version of the style of the new church that is to be has already been encapsulated in a phrase now familiar from the discussions of the Consultation on Church Union. It is a sort of motto that could qualify as a charter for authentic unity and effective mission: "We seek to be a church truly *catholic*, truly *evangelical*, truly *reformed*." These words themselves are obviously not new; COCU has no copyright on this motto. Its significance lies in its summation of three essential dimensions and concerns of *any* company of persons calling and professing themselves Christian. Each of the terms has had a varied history of interpretation and misinterpretation; each has been a fighting word at one time or another. It is only when all three are taken and held *together*—each balancing and explaining the other two—that we can recognize their relevance as goal-points for the church we aspire to be: catholic *and* evangelical [*both*, not either/or]; catholic, evangelical *and* reformed—viz. with both catholic and evangelical concerns brought under perennial reassessment and re-formation in each successive new age.

One of the virtues of the motto is that it suggests a rich range of meanings, without specifying any single one of them as obligatory upon all. Certainly the interpretation I now propose makes no claim to finality. My only concern is to interest you in trying to understand its possible import for us in the UMC and in our efforts to shape her future during these next two weeks and the next two decades.

The basic meaning of the word "catholic" is "whole," "universal," "open." It reminds us that true unity not only allows for diversity, it *requires* it. "Catholic" has never

rightly meant "uniform," "lock-step," "produced by template." It means "*inclusive*"—a community in which all the members "*belong*" equally and by right of membership, in which all ministers share equally the basic office of representing the whole church, by right of ordination. It means "*open*"—a community whose boundaries are set by the Christian *essentials* (the *bare essentials* at that) in which it is bad faith for anyone to deny full membership to any other save by the canons of faith in Christ and the Christian discipline that derives from that confession. This rules out all distinctions based on race, sex, class and culture—and so also all distinctions based on partisan emphases on this doctrine or that, this form of worship, or that, this pattern of polity or that. Here is the plain teaching of Wesley's sermon on "Catholic Spirit"—a sermon we would all do well to recall and to update in terms that might fit our own condition. A church tormented and befuddled by racial strife is not yet truly "catholic." A church that cannot manage her global ties without "colonialism" or "autonomy" is not yet "truly catholic." A church that proudly (or humbly!) sets her own polity and folkways above those of other churches may be "united" but she is not yet "truly catholic." A church that opens her sacraments to all other Christians but is herself not yet eligible for sharing in the sacraments of some of the others is not yet "truly catholic." And if the main fault here lies, as we may think it does, with others fencing us from *their* sacraments, this does not alter the fact that we have rarely asked, with appropriate dignity, what is required of us, and them, for the valid mingling of our memberships, ministries and sacraments. It is also true that the other churches are not fully catholic, either—and this is the ecumenical tragedy!—but if we are to join them in the search for a more inclusive, integral "*catholic*" fellowship in Christ, the least we can do is to commit ourselves to just such a fellowship in this new church

of ours—and to open our hearts and minds to yet further bold ventures in quest of Christian unity.

But catholicity by itself is not enough. The church is called to mission, and her mission is both her message *and* the demonstration of that message in her corporate life. Her message is not *herself*, either—it is her witness to the *Christian Evangel*: to the scandal and folly of Christ incarnate, Christ crucified, Christ resurrected, Christ transforming human life and culture, Christ in the world, Christ for the world; Christ in us, our hope of glory! Thus, the church we are called to be must be "truly evangelical"—a church ablaze with a passion that God's Gospel shall be preached and heard and responded to in faith and hope and love by all who can be reached and instructed and gathered into the fellowship of God's covenanted People. The *fullness* of the Gospel embraces all human concerns everywhere and always; but the *heart* of the Gospel is startlingly simple: that God loves you and me and all men with a very special love and that Jesus Christ is the sufficient proof of this love to every man who will receive and confess him as Savior and Lord. The Gospel is the good news that it is God's love that pardons, heals and reconciles, God's love that demands that we be fully human and opens up this possibility for us, God's love that can sanctify our memories and our hopes. And yet, this same Gospel also reminds us, in every human circumstance, that our salvation comes from God's sheer unmerited favor. In no sense can it ever be earned or bought or wheedled—it does not come by any merit or demerit, by any good works or bad, by any claim that we can bring on our own behalf. The word "evangelical" is concerned above all with *the faith that receives the Gospel wholeheartedly and in trust*; it stresses faith as a gift from God, faith as man's basic response to God, faith as the mortal foe of all human *pride*—and yet also faith as the loyal ally of all true human *dignity*. The church

evangelical is, therefore, radically Christ-centered—disengaged from any final dependence on ecclesiastical apparatus of whatever sort, save only as it ministers to her central mission: that men may receive God's gift of saving grace in Christ and learn to live in the world in true communion with the Holy Spirit and with one another. The church evangelical is a proclaiming church—but it is also a *teaching church*. Wesley often pointed out that the difference between *his* movement and the others—equally zealous in proclamation—was his provision of *societies* in which converts came to learn the meaning of the Gospel in *depth* and in *concrete life-situations*.

We Methodists and EUB's alike—by profession and fond memory—are grateful heirs of evangelical fathers and brethren, but we can scarcely boast of having fully claimed their legacy. A church falling behind in the race with an exploding and huddling population is not "truly evangelical," despite its self-advertisements. A church that counts her evangelical harvest chiefly in terms of members added to the rolls is not *truly* evangelical. A church the vast majority of whose members do not really understand the great issues entailed by "the Protestant principle"—God's sovereignty, man's justification by faith alone, the witness of the Spirit, the life of grace, the authority of the Scripture as the prime source of divine revelation, etc.—such a church is not only not truly evangelical, she is, indeed, partaker in the greatest tragedy of modern Christianity: *the abject failure of the teaching church*. Here we are—Christians by name and sign—organized to the teeth and involved in titanic labors of all sorts, and yet the generality of our people do not really know what the Christian faith purports, do not really believe in their hearts and minds what they profess with their lips, and, of those who do, there are few who can give a rational accounting of it to themselves and others. The proof of this turns up in every great upheaval—

doctrinal, moral, social. The church evangelical must not be doctrinaire—but surely her people should be clear about the crucial priorities between God and man in the mystery of salvation and in the enterprise of our becoming fully human. Wesley and Asbury and Otterbein and Albright understood these priorities in their day and in their terms. Those days and those terms are not ours—but the same task remains: of calling all men to the love of God above all else and of all else *in God*.

And yet, even the best conceptions of "catholicity" and "evangelical zeal" sag out of shape as history moves the church along through time and change. The provisional becomes permanent, creative experiments from an early age become vested interests in a later one, the pragmatic *warrant* for a given polity becomes defensive and self-maintaining. What once was a sign of "catholic spirit" becomes a new sectarianism; what once was an authentic evangelical concern becomes calcified into *theories about evangelism* that do not get the whole Gospel preached and heard and appropriated for life in the secular city. And so the church, even as she seeks to be truly catholic and truly evangelical must also be truly reformed—constantly open to God's judgment upon the insidious idolatries of every successful venture, aware of the waning of every heyday—a church eager to be reformed, re-newed: to have her spirit and power repristinated.

A church truly reformed is one that is open, intentionally and on principle, to creative change of every sort (in teaching, discipline and administration)—not haphazard or reckless change, but not timid and grudging, either. The church reformed lives by the Scriptures for they alone provide a decisive appeal to the constitutive tradition of Christ without the dead-hand of traditionalism; the Scriptures alone provide for radical, mandated change without the gusts and shallows of human ingenuity. Their authority does not rest upon their letter nor

yet with any arcane or coterie interpretation—but rather upon the public sense of the texts and their original intentions, enriched by the wisdom of the teaching church through all the ages, sifted by the canons of critical reason and vital Christian experience in the modern world.

But the church reformed is also under the judgment of the future. The eschatological orientation of faith is forever demanding that the old be constantly re-examined and re-constituted—always with an eye to the urgent, the needful, the effective. The reforming spirit calls for self-examination without self-justification, self-criticism without self-loathing, creative discontent rooted in the conviction that the *good is the enemy of the best*.

It may seem to some a mite unseasonable to suggest that the UMC needs to take conscious, urgent thought of being or becoming "truly reformed," *just now!* We are a church re-formed: what with our new Plan and our newer Report and with 10 more days to pull and haul away at their discussion, amendment and adoption. Surely *this* is enough for the present moment. Well, ye-s-s—in a way—but that's partly my point. This Plan and the Report in the form in which they will stand when we adjourn will doubtless be the very best we can do, under *all* the circumstances, etc., etc. But for how long will *that* be good enough? The answer: not much beyond the results being printed in the new *Discipline*. Wherefore, *now* is the time, as at that first Pentecost, for young men to see visions and for old men to dream dreams—visions and dreams that ask more of the Methodist people than we have ever asked before, visions and dreams that offer a richer, fuller life for all God's People, visions and dreams that see this "new" church re-newed yet again and again, not only "in the Spirit" but in her structures, functions, folkways.

This is not a proposal, not even indirectly, for any specific reform—yours or mine or anybody else's. It is, however, an open ad-

vocacy of the *idea* of reform and of "the Protestant principle" of *semper reformanda*. When more of us get accustomed to the notion that this new church of ours *can* be re-made for yet more effective mission, for still more authentic democracy and local initiative, for still more efficient, adventurous leadership—and that all this can be done and *should* be done forthwith!—then the pooled wisdom of our fellowship will surely be enabled to prove that rational, responsible change is a far more faithful pattern of obedience to Christ than the most devoted immobilism can ever be.

This, then, is our birthday—a day to celebrate, a day to remember, a day for high hopes and renewed commitments. This is a day when the eyes of the whole Christian community are focused on us and especially those of our Methodist brethren in Britain who are with us here in spirit. This *is* the day that the Lord has made. Let us *really* rejoice and be glad in it—glad for the new chance God now gives us: to be a *church united in order to be uniting, a church repentant in order to be a church redemptive, a church cruciform in order to manifest God's triumphant agony for mankind*.

Till sons of men shall learn *his* love
And follow where *his* feet have trod
Till glorious from the heavens above
Shall come the city of our God!

Let us pray:

O God of unchangeable power and eternal light, look favourably on thy whole Church, that wonderful and sacred mystery; and, by the tranquil operation of thy perpetual providence, carry out the work of man's salvation; and let the whole world feel and see that things which were cast down are being raised up, that those things which had grown old are being made new, and that all things are returning to perfection, through him from whom they took their origin, even Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.