

2020 Episcopal Address

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“THE STRUGGLE OF OUR TIMES”

The crisis of faith crashes over them and over their families and friends. Aged Mordecai stands before the beautiful Queen Esther. Her future and the future of her people hang in the balance. Mordecai speaks a prophetic word of wisdom which echoes down to our time. *“For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father’s house will perish. And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?”*

Such is the call and claim of our time. **For such a time as this, the Lord Jesus Christ calls us to faithful service in love, justice and mercy for all!**

Consider another image. This one from the famous opening of Charles Dickens’s *A Tale of Two Cities*. “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to heaven, we were all going direct the other way.”

Dickens’s words capture the struggle of our times.

A significant portion of this episcopal address was written for an article in *Firebrand Magazine* that posted on June 29, 2020. I wrote that piece with an eye to using the content later use in my episcopal address to the Central Texas Conference. There can be little doubt that we are living through tumultuous times. In the presentation “Forward to a New Spring,” we note at least seven separated and explicit struggles, which we are all confronting.

1. The COVID-19 pandemic,
2. The high possibility of a pandemic rebound due to opening back up
3. Ongoing issues of racial injustice and the struggle over inclusion
4. The growing economic crisis caused by the pandemic
5. The upcoming General Conference, vote on the Protocol and likely separation into a post-separation UMC and a new traditional focused Methodist Church
6. The aging of the denomination
7. Changing secular environment

We are in a period of great historic shifts in the life of the Christian church and more specifically in the United Methodist branch of the church universal. And yet, this is a time of great opportunity and promise. The Wesleyan branch of Christianity called Methodism was birthed in a similar time of crisis and tumult. In the struggle of our times, we are called to be a people of hope.

Hope is not optimism. Nor is it a whistling in the dark denial of reality. In the struggle of our time, hope for Christians is grounded on a deep faithfulness to the triune God. As the great British New Testament scholar Bishop N. T. Wright puts it in his magisterial autobiography of the Apostle Paul:

“Hope could be, and often was, a dogged and deliberate choice when the world seemed dark. It depended not a feeling about the way things were or the way they were moving, but on faith, faith in one God. This God made the world. This God had called Israel to be His people. The scriptures, not least the Psalms, had made it clear that this God could be trusted to sort things out in the end, to be true to His promises, to vindicate His people at last, even if it had to be on the

other side of terrible suffering. “Hope” in the sense is not a feeling. It is a virtue. You have to practice it, like a difficult piece on the violin or tricky shot at tennis. You practice the virtue of hope through worship and prayer, through invoking the One God, through reading and reimagining the scriptural story, and through consciously holding the unknown future within the unshakable divine promises.” (*Paul: A Biography* by N.T. Wright, page 45)

A true hope in the Lord is built on a faithfulness when we align our wants, wills and even wishes with God’s desires. Christian hope, not the cheap cultural substitute so often hawked in our world today, lives in rock solid allegiance to Jesus Christ as Lord. The deeper struggle of our times is where our true and ultimate allegiance lies. Are we disciples, committed disciplined followers of the Lord Jesus Christ or what Mr. Wesley famously called “Almost Christians?” “Real Christian hope is the fruit of faith and the seed of charity. It’s also a breath of life from the Holy Spirit that fills our lungs to sustain both our faith and our love.”

Beneath the evident surface struggle of our times lies a far greater danger. We are in a life and death struggle over the doctrinal convictions, the core beliefs, which delineate what it means to confess Jesus Christ as Lord. The deep struggle of our times is over the essence of the Christian faith.

The searing words of the second paragraph of the letter of Jude both frame and highlight the struggle taking place in our midst today.

“Dear friends, I wanted very much to write to you concerning the salvation we share. Instead, I must write to urge you to fight for the faith delivered once and for all to God’s holy people. Godless people have slipped in among you. They turn the grace of our God into unrestrained immorality and deny our only master and Lord, Jesus Christ. Judgment was passed against them a long time ago” (Jude 2-4, CEB).

I note this struggle through a couple of anecdotal illustrations. The first came in a conversation with a highly regarded retired clergy person. This man had been a serious episcopal candidate. We were discussing what doctrinal convictions were required for ordination.

I queried, “Would you vote for a candidate for ordination who did not believe in the Trinity; someone who was essentially a unitarian?”

He paused and noticeably thought for a moment. Then he slowly nodded. “Yes, yes I would.”

Consider the implications of such a statement. At the very heart of the Nicene-Chalcedonian understanding of the Christian faith is the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. The United Methodist Church holds in its “Articles of Religion” (which are constituted as its core ruling doctrine) a non-negotiable trinitarian commitment.

“Article I – Of Faith in the Holy Trinity: there is but one living and true God, everlasting, without body or parts, of infinite wisdom and goodness; the maker and preserver of all things, both visible and invisible. And in unity of this Godhead there are three persons, of one substance, power, and eternity – the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.”

Another incident took place in a conversation between district superintendents at a gathering of cabinet members across the state. Remember, the district superintendent (DS) is formally an extension of the episcopal office. In a discussion bordering upon an argument with other district superintendents, one prominent DS (not from the Central Texas Conference) asserted that talk of crucifixion should be jettisoned. She stated, “we have to stop preaching that Jesus died on the cross for us... it does damage to people.” Another agreed and argued further that “here [in holy communion, there] should not be any

confessional language at all.” He went on to say, “We have to stop making people feel guilty and like they need to confess sins, when they come to church. We aren’t Catholic.”

As the comments were shared with me, all I could think of was the apostle Paul’s clarion conviction of faith: “But we preach Christ crucified, which is a scandal to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles”

A third incident comes in an exchange with a member of our Board of Ordained Ministry. Together we reflected on our mission statement, “to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.” This man argued that we need to leave out the part about Jesus Christ and emphasize the “transformation of the world.” Christology was to him, at best, a minor sideline. Further discussion revealed that he perceived Jesus as a great teacher but could not affirm the Chalcedonian understanding of Christ as Lord and Savior.

Once again, I could not help but think of the earliest Christians’ three-word credal commitment: “Jesus is Lord.” The courageously soaring statement of Philippians 2:6-11 echoed in my pained heart “that at the name of Jesus everyone in heaven, on earth, and under the earth might bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father”

The United Methodist Church as it is currently constituted has lost much of its theological core. We are paying the price today for generations of pastors and seminary teaching having ignored core doctrines of the Christian faith. Like Jude I wish to write about the salvation we share but instead am convicted of the need to “fight for the faith delivered once for all.” However harsh it may seem, “Godless people have slipped in among [us].” Disguised in the form of pluralism and tolerance, we have embraced doctrinal indifference. With such an embrace has come the destructive chaos of cheap grace turned into “unrestrained immorality” which denies “our only master and Lord, Jesus Christ” (Jude 3).

Scholars debate precisely what was meant by “godless people” in Jude’s day. In all likelihood, those so labeled by Jude saw themselves as good and even godly. There is reason to believe that they were upholding a vision of grace that freed them from a doctrine of sin. As N. T. Wright and Michael F. Bird put it, “They deny the moral implications of the gospel, thereby effectively denying the authority of Jesus himself”

The application of Jude’s label of “godless people” appears unduly harsh in today’s permissive theological climate. It carries implications of a harsh judgmentalism. Yet once again, Jude would instruct us: judgment is real. “Judgment was passed against them a long time ago” (v.4). His argument about judgment takes up the major part of this letter. As Alister McGrath argues in *Heresy: A History of Defending the Truth*, false teaching is best seen as a form of diseased Christianity. Jude’s strong label serves as a warning that doctrinal indifferentism too long tolerated and even embraced leads to “godlessness.”

In our day, the disease that infects us brings disguised destructive consequences. Those who advocate an expansive view of grace so as to leech out the moral implications of the gospel no doubt believe they are faithfully reflecting divine grace. “Godless people” may have good intentions, but we should be well advised that the “road to hell is paved with good intentions.” The application to our day and time is straightforward. The philosophical climate of radical individualism in American culture (and The United Methodist Church), combined with a hedonistic addiction to the pursuit of personal pleasure, salted with partisan vituperativeness, and soaked in personal arrogance is leading us far from submission to Jesus as Lord.

The doctrine of permissive, cheap grace - evident in much of The United Methodist Church’s current theological argument - is ultimately destructive of individuals and the church itself. Likewise, the

tendency to slip into a denial of the fullness of Jesus Christ (fully human, fully divine) carries with it the ultimate weakening of the very moral attributes offered by a Savior who calls us to holy living. Our Lord's teaching is not just one opinion among many. Orthodox Christology as promulgated by the Nicene Creed matters.

The current dispute in The United Methodist Church is largely a battle over where we draw the line of faith. The presenting issues of whether or not clergy should be allowed to perform same-gender marriages and whether it is permissible to ordain "self-avowed practicing homosexuals" are the proverbial tip of the iceberg in the "fight for the faith delivered once for all." The massive iceberg beneath the water is the ongoing argument over just what constitutes the theological and moral foundations of contemporary Methodism.

One fascinating example of this lies in the contentious debate in The United Methodist Church over just where the doctrinal and moral lines should be drawn. In my experience, I have dealt with many who advocate an understanding of grace that will cover almost any behavior without repentance or a change in behavior. When pressed as to where a line might be drawn in terms of understanding sin, I often encounter a refusal or an intellectual inability to articulate any doctrinal (and often few moral) boundary lines. Pertinently, Kenda Creasy Dean has stated, "Arguably, issues of identity and openness pose the most daunting challenges facing American Christianity in the twenty-first century." She went on to query, "Where is the line between identity and openness?" (*Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers is Telling the American Church*,).

The antinomian convictions of modern society that have infected the church are consistently failing people. The spiritual hunger we encounter, while often imbedded in a radical individual hedonism, is a sign of a desperate searching for something better, something deeper. Perceptively, Dean remarks, "Perhaps young people lack robust Christian identities because churches offer such a stripped-down version of Christianity that it no longer poses a viable alternative to imposter spiritualities like Moralistic Therapeutic Deism".

If we turn back to Jude's witness, we encounter again the outlines of a vibrant orthodoxy that can survive the diseased Christianity of our time. It is the answer to the struggles of our time. Jude offers us a place to stand in the "fight for a faith delivered once for all." Jude challenges us in three ways – (1) to rediscover radical allegiance to Jesus Christ as Lord, (2) to recognize reality, and (3) to reclaim Christian orthodoxy.

First, Jude can assert a family connection through James to Jesus himself. His pedigree is impeccable. Instead of making such a claim, Jude connects his teaching authority to Jesus Christ. He is "a slave of Jesus Christ" (v. 1) Later in the letter he drives home this cardinal conviction of his relationship: "our only master and Lord, Jesus Christ" (v.4). It is here our fight for the faith must begin. The letter of Jude is a passionate call for modern Christians to rediscover radical allegiance to Jesus Christ as Lord. Bluntly put, the Methodist movement must reclaim the central place of allegiance to Jesus Christ as our only master and Lord over and above the standards of secular culture.

In a perceptive piece of writing, Matthew Bates notes that our understanding of the word "faith" has become diminished over time. "The Greek word *pistis*, generally rendered 'faith' or 'belief,' as it pertains to Christian salvation, quite simply has little correlation with 'faith' and 'belief' as these words are generally understood and used in contemporary Christian culture, and much to do with allegiance. At the center of Christianity properly understood is not the human response of faith or belief but rather the old-fashioned term fidelity".

Jude's strong affirmation of the Lordship of Christ challenges us to submit our preferences to His purpose. Theologically speaking, the fight for the faith delivered once to all is anchored to a foundation of reclaiming Chalcedon Christology and the concept of radical allegiance. Again, Bates comments, "Jesus as the universal Lord is the primary object toward which our saving 'faith' – that is, our saving allegiance is directed. We must stop asking others to invite Jesus into their hearts and start asking them to swear allegiance to Jesus the king."

Second, Jude calls us to face reality. Consider for a moment as the brother of James (and thus a brother of Jesus) all the things Jude might well have written about. He tells us at the start of his letter that his preference was to write about "salvation." Instead, Jude understands the context of his day. He recognized the reality of his time. In our time, the temptation is to be consumed by concerns for institutional connection and possible schism rather than face the deeper doctrinal issue before us. Jude perceived the threat to the heart of the gospel in false teaching. We must do the same in this day and time. He would teach us not to hide from the reality of our time but confront the theological poverty of our day with the truth of the gospel.

In recognizing this reality, Wright and Bird pointedly connect Jude's insight with the church of today: "Parts of the Christian church today seem ideationally vacuous, with little or no confessional content to their faith. They tend also to be places where manifold forms of immorality are permitted and even celebrated. In such a context, we are to contend for the faith without being contentious over tertiary matters." As Christendom fades into the cultural background, it is time to wake up to the reality of the struggle of our times.

Third, Jude calls us to reclaim orthodoxy. Significantly he speaks of the "faith once delivered," not of a new or expanded personal interpretation. Jude does not engage in culturally popular proclamation. His scriptural references are tough and to the point. "But you, dear friends, remember the words spoken beforehand by the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ" (v. 17). Without apology he reclaims the connection of theology with moral practice.

Our modern failure in much of the church to hold to the historic theological core of the Christian faith erodes our very ability to speak to the moral anarchy of our times. For far too many, Christian theological and ethical commitments have been reduced to matters of opinion and political advocacy. It is past time to reclaim the heart of the gospel against the raging hedonism and selfishness of our age. C. S. Lewis's warning almost three-quarters of a century ago to a group of young Anglican priests and youth workers still holds today:

"I insist that wherever you draw the lines, bounding lines must exist, beyond which your doctrines will cease to be Anglican or to be Christian; and I suggest also that the lines come a great deal sooner than many modern priests think. I think it is your duty to fix the lines clearly in your own minds: and if you wish to go beyond them you must change your profession. This is your duty not specifically as Christians or as priests but honest men.... We are to defend Christianity itself—the faith preached by the Apostles, attested by the Martyrs, embodied in the Creeds, expounded by the Fathers. This must be clearly distinguished from the whole of what any one of us may think about God and man...."

The deep struggle of our times is a fight for the faith delivered once for all. Today, The United Methodist Church (and the Methodist movement as a whole) is wrestling with whether it will rediscover, recognize, and reclaim its roots at the heart of this faith. The time of theological toleration saturated with moral indifference is past. The reality before us is of a diseased Christianity that we must counter by rediscovering radical allegiance to Christ, recognizing the reality of the battle we are in, and reclaiming core Christian orthodoxy.

*“To the one who is able to protect you from falling,
and to present you blameless and rejoicing before his glorious presence,
to the only God our savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord,
belong glory, majesty, power, and authority,
before all time, now and forever. Amen.” (Jude 24-5, CEB).*