



A Gift and a Task

John L. Hopkins

Dearly beloved, the Church is of God, and will be preserved to the end of time, for the conduct of worship and the due administration of his Word and Sacraments, the maintenance of Christian fellowship and discipline, the edification of believers, and the conversion of the world. All, of every age and station, stand in need of the means of grace which it alone supplies.” (*The Book of Worship for Church and Home*, The Methodist Publishing House, 1964, 1965)

Several years ago, I received a card from a colleague that said, “If things don’t start looking up, I may have to ask you to stop helping me!” I laughed, but reflected on whether my recommendations were really helpful or not. As we approach the 2004 General Conference, a lot of people want to help the church by providing recommendations on many areas of church life—some of them controversial. Will these recommendations be helpful? How will we deal with controversial issues as Christians?

It is helpful to remember that the church we love is not an institution to be perfected, but the Body of Christ that enables us to receive the means of grace for our salvation. Theologically, our understanding of God and scripture cannot be separated from our accountability to the church as the Body of Christ. In short, we cannot know Jesus Christ and understand scripture apart from the whole church. Although we may have controversies within the church, we can never resolve them by staying in groups of like-thinking people and holding out for our position. The church—General Conference for United Methodists—is of God and will be preserved to the end of time to provide the means of grace which it alone supplies.

When I was assigned bishop of the Minnesota Area in 1996, I quickly learned that most of our churches in Minnesota have someone who came from a perfect church in Iowa. We are blessed by these good Christian folks who understand correct doctrine, have heard good preaching, been inspired by a great choir, and know what color the carpet should be in the sanctuary. These good people want to help their new church be just like their perfect church in Iowa. Isn’t that great? Unfortunately, perfecting the church in our image usually leads to controversy. (I should note that Iowa receives Minnesotans eager to do the same kind of perfecting.)

I have discovered that most conflicts in the church occur not from people with bad intentions, but from people with good intentions. Unfortunately, as they share how the church ought to be, they find that controversy abounds. This does not mean we avoid serious discussion about the church at every level, rather we should recognize that we are dealing with a community and not an institution. If we want to be open to the means of grace the church provides, we must be gentle with our own wish dreams. The Body of Christ—*kerygma, koinonia, diaconia*—is not something we create; it is the gift of God.

In his book, *Life Together* (Harper, 1954, pp. 27-28), Dietrich Bonhoeffer, describes how our vision of the church can actually destroy the very community we seek to build. While Bonhoeffer’s use of male pronouns places him in an earlier era, I believe his insights about the Body of Christ transcend time.

“He who loves his dream of a community more than the Christian community itself becomes a destroyer of the latter, even though his personal intentions may be ever

so honest and earnest and sacrificial.

“The man who fashions a visionary ideal of community demands that it be realized by God, by others, and by himself. He enters the community of Christians with his demands, sets up his own law, and judges the brethren and God Himself accordingly. ...He acts as if he is the creator of the Christian community, as if his dream binds men together. When things do not go his way, he calls the effort a failure. When his ideal picture is destroyed, he sees the community going to smash. So he becomes, first an accuser of his brethren, then an accuser of God, and finally the despairing accuser of himself.”

Bonhoeffer concludes, “...because God has bound us together in one body with other Christians in Jesus Christ, long before we entered into common life with them, we enter into that common life not as demanders but as thankful recipients.”

When Jesus said, “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them” (Mt. 18:20), he gave us a gift and a task. The gift, of course, is that he will never leave us. The task is that we gather with others to be accountable in his name. **In the midst of controversy at General Conference, we cannot walk away from others and expect Jesus will go with us.** Let us enter General Conference “not as demanders but as thankful recipients.” □



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