



# Our Difficulty with Dialogue

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As United Methodist Christians, how shall we enter into dialogue when there is significant controversy? This is no frivolous question. We have difficulty with authentic theological conversation. I believe there are several reasons why.

First, our denomination, and other mainline churches as well, have been influenced by the relativism of our contemporary culture. In 1984, Alan Bloom, professor at the University of Chicago, published *The Closing of the American Mind*, which topped the *New York Times* bestseller list for six months. Bloom's book was a scathing critique of America's educational system, which he said had replaced moral truth with a "values relativism" that prevents students from talking with any conviction about good and evil, truth or falsehood. America's liberal higher education, he charged, has forsaken "the great moral truths upon which civilization rests."

Relativism, of course, undermines the credibility of orthodox belief. It says, "You have your beliefs and I have mine, and that's just splendid. Each of us has a bit of the truth." But Christian orthodoxy says, "Truth exists, whether we believe it or not, and believing falsely is anything but splendid." Unfortunately, in a relativistic culture, orthodox truth-claims always appear intolerant.

Second, the legacy of "theological pluralism" has left United Methodism with what one might call a democracy of ideas. **We may, in fact, be more guided today by an intellectual democracy than by the doctrines and biblical traditions of our church.** The problem with this, of course, is that while all persons are created equal, their ideas don't share that same endowment. Some ideas are true, some

are not. Some are consistent with our doctrinal heritage, others are not. It is the task of the church and its leaders to help the faithful understand the differences between the two.

**What we learned some time ago is that pluralism is a perfectly good sociological term to describe ethnic, cultural, social, and political diversity in the church, but a very poor term to describe a theological position.** Retired Bishop Jack M. Tuell noted years ago that pluralism has had a destructive effect on the church: "In recent years we have tended to lose sight of that central 'core of doctrine' and have allowed ourselves as United Methodists to dwell on the 'divergent interpretations,' to which we have given the hideous name of 'pluralism.' And sometimes we have talked as though it is our 'pluralism' which holds us together and which is our most distinctive mark! . . . To suggest this is to suggest only chaos and disintegration ("What We Believe," *The Interpreter*, March/April 1982, p. 8).

Fortunately, delegates at the 1988 General Conference in St. Louis approved a new theological statement for the church, which omitted the reference to theological pluralism. Instead, the phrase "the primacy of Scripture" is found repeatedly. But while pluralism is no longer found in our *Discipline*'s current theological statement, the popular term "diversity" has taken its place, carrying with it basically the same meaning.

Third, our dialogue today seeks hurried agreement, thus obscuring the deep differences that made the dialogue necessary in the first place. It seems that United Methodists today are reluctant to even admit we have serious differences. Some even claim that to disagree vigorously means we demonize or demean.

Unfortunately, that can happen. Genuine dialogue, however, will not ignore disagreements or pretend our deepest differences make no difference.

Fourth, in the church's dialogue today, language has often lost its integrity. It is not unusual to hear terms and words used in theological discussion that sound orthodox and biblical. However, one sometimes senses that the familiar terms being used no longer carry the scriptural meaning that the listener assumes is still there. Too often there has been, as one has said, an "evacuation of meaning." Traditional theological terms may still be used, but something very different may be meant by them. The sad reality is that in much of our theological conversation today, language is being used not to communicate and clarify, but to obfuscate and qualify.

Doctrine defines who we are as the people of God. It spells out what we should believe and teach and hold to be true as Christians. "Inattention to doctrine," says Oxford professor Alister McGrath, "robs a church of her reason for existence, and opens the way to enslavement and oppression by the world."

We must begin talking about doctrine once again in the United Methodist Church. We must do so honestly and with civility, always remembering, though, that we aren't at liberty to re-write the script. □



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