

Might cases exist in which a United Methodist pastor would refuse to offer a person Communion?

“No more place among us...”

Mark W. Stamm

In the “General Rules of the United Societies,” John Wesley described a system of accountability in support of persons who had become convinced of their need “to flee from the wrath to come.”¹ The outline of his practice is well known to many of us, at least as a historical witness. Small classes (of no more than twelve members) met weekly under the supervision of a class leader. Their work was organized around a three-fold charge: (1) Doing no harm, (2) Doing good, and (3) Attending the ordinances of God, also known as the means of grace. The process was designed to assist their growth in grace.

Perhaps less well remembered among us is the final paragraph of the rules, from which I draw my title for this article. What about a person who joined the society and then refused to observe its rules? Wesley wrote,

We will admonish him of the error of his ways. We will bear with him for a season. **But if then he**

repent not, he hath no more place among us. We have delivered our own souls.²

Wesley also practiced the discipline of the quarterly ticket, which he described in the following terms:

As the society increased I found it required still greater care to separate

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the precious from the vile . . . To each of those of whose seriousness and good conversation I found no reason to doubt I gave a testimony under my own hand . . . These also supplied us with a quiet and inoffensive method of removing any disorderly member.³

Such practices continued in American Methodism, both in respect to Holy

Communion and to wider participation in the life of the Methodist Church.⁴ We may have little experience in such disciplines of expulsion and even less inclination to practice them, but they are unmistakably part of John Wesley’s witness to us.

Does this witness have anything to do with us and with our contemporary practice of Holy Communion? As my friend Daniel Benedict asked when he called on me to write this article, “Is the Table open to all persons, or following Wesley, might cases exist in which a United Methodist pastor would refuse to offer a person Communion?” As my brother knew well, I

address the subject of Eucharistic discipline, along with the theoretical possibility of excommunication, in the seventh chapter of my recently published book, *Let Every Soul Be Jesus’ Guest: A Theology of the Open Table* (Abingdon Press, 2006, 140-159). I note there some biblical foundations for the practice, most notably the disciplinary *ordo* described in Matthew 18:15-17 (“If another member

of the church sins against you . . .”), and an example of expulsion witnessed in 1 Corinthians chapter 5 (“Do not even eat with such a one.”). Besides discussing biblical sources and John Wesley, I note that some sixteenth-century Reformers established disciplines of excommunication and that twentieth-century martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer had endorsed the practice. If practiced, I argued, excommunication should be understood as an ecclesiastical discipline of extreme last resort.

I wrote the above-noted chapter before Judicial Council Decision 1032, which ruled that *The Book of Discipline* “invests discretion in the pastor-in-charge to make determination of a person’s readiness to affirm the vows of membership.”⁵ That decision, of course, came in response to the Reverend Ed Johnson’s refusal to allow a gay man to take membership vows in the South Hills (Virginia) United Methodist Church and the subsequent suspension that Virginia Conference Bishop Charlotte P. Kammerer imposed upon Johnson. The Judicial Council decision lifted that suspension and reinstated Pastor Johnson to his charge. Unresolved questions remain. While that controversy and decision is not specifically about excommunication—indeed, membership is not required to participate in a United Methodist Communion service—the event creates a potential trajectory of practice related to our topic. For causes not unlike those noted in Decision 1032, the church does, in fact, exclude persons from presiding at the altar. Might it also decide to exclude some persons from receiving the sacrament?

The possibility exists, but serious qualifications should be stated. First of all, excluding one from the Table would be an extreme measure of last resort, one that would be followed only after all other disciplinary means had been exhausted. As one sees in the Matthew 18 text, expulsion is the third stage of discipline after other, more private appeals have been attempted. One sees a similar restraint in Wesley’s descriptions: one would be sent away from the Society only after they had “[borne] with him for a season.” Any discipline of exclusion from the Table should be perceived as medicinal—strong

medicine indeed—but medicinal nonetheless. Ideally, and pastorally, one would always be seeking the full restoration of the offender.

If the church were to practice some form of excommunication, it would need to clarify its intentions. Excommunication is not the discipline for those who struggle with sin and its residue in their life, otherwise the church would have to cease offering the Lord’s Supper altogether. The Anglican tradition in which John Wesley was formed had a rubric that called for its priests to issue a warning to anyone whose actions were causing “grave and immediate scandal to the congregation.”⁶ Such exclusion was meant for extreme cases, to protect the integrity of the church and its mission, and to protect its members against harm. It is the kind of discipline that one would apply, for instance, to a publicly defiant white supremacist.⁷

If such discipline were to be practiced in The United Methodist Church, for the sake of justice we would need to do

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serious work of discernment regarding the behaviors that could lead to excommunication. A church cannot seriously practice excommunication without making a list, and that is always a daunting challenge. Wesley presents such a list in the General Rules, but his would not be particularly helpful for us now: “The wearing of calashes, high-heads, or enormous bonnets”⁸ Indeed! No, each generation must make a list of its own and there must be more than one item on it. What might ours include? Doubtless some would list homosexual practice. But, what about greed or lack of hospitality? What about those who advocate war as an instrument of national foreign policy?⁹ Again, justice demands a list that includes more than one offense.

Moreover, one cannot discuss disciplinary exclusion from the sacrament without asking who would administer such weighty decisions. This brings us back to the original question: might cases exist in which a United Methodist pastor would refuse to offer a person

Communion? Who would decide when someone should have “no more place among us,” even if only temporarily? Scripture implies that any such discipline should be administered corporately—first, in conversation with two or three others and finally with “the church” (Matt. 18:17). An excommunication discipline that would be administered by a single person—such as the pastor of a local congregation—cannot stand up to the critique of Scripture, much less the traditions of a connectional polity. Indeed, procedures within United Methodism exist for removing a person from local church or annual conference membership and they are administered collegially, according to carefully enumerated procedures.¹⁰ We would never allow a single person to make such a weighty determination. In like manner, decisions to exclude a person from Communion for moral cause should be made collegially. One could apply the same logic to preventing one from taking membership vows for moral cause.

For the sake of integrity, the church must retain the right to exercise disciplines of excommunication. Our *yes* means little if we cannot also say *no* when our core values are violated.¹¹ Remembering that excommunication is a measure of last resort, most hope that we will not have to exercise it. To avoid that day, however, the church should develop an ongoing discussion of Eucharistic integrity and discipleship. Such a discussion might proceed along the lines that *This Holy Mystery* offers in the section “Extending the Table.” There evangelism, justice, and mission are discussed in relation to our participation in Holy Communion.¹² Such a discussion should focus on the invitation to Communion offered in *The United Methodist Hymnal*, which says the following:

Christ our Lord invites to his table all who love him, who earnestly repent of their sin and seek to live in peace with one another. Therefore let us confess our sin before God and one another.¹³

What does the church look like, and what does it do, when it takes the demands of that invitation seriously? How can we

better support people in embodying such a way of life?

Earlier, I made light of John Wesley's reference to "The wearing of calashes, high-heads, or enormous bonnets."¹⁴ As readers of the General Rules will discover, that reference occurs in his discussion about "the 'putting on of gold or costly apparel.'"¹⁵ In contemporary parlance, we might say that it was a discussion of conspicuous consumption. What would happen if we could once again enter a serious discussion of this topic instead of avoiding it (or merely joking about it) for fear of giving offense? Might that conversation, and similar discussions, be a way of responding to the Communion invitation with deeper integrity? □

1. John Wesley, "The Nature, Design, and General Rules of the United Societies in London, Bristol, Kingwood, and Newcastle upon Tyne" (1743), *The Works of John Wesley*, Vol. 9, *The Methodist Societies, History, Nature, and Design*, ed. Rupert E. Davies (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 69. See also *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church*, 2004 (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House), ¶ 103, pages 71-74.

2. John Wesley, "General Rules," *The Works of John Wesley*, Vol. 9, 73.

3. John Wesley, "A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists," *The Works of John Wesley*, Vol. 9, 265.

4. Lester Ruth, *A Little Heaven Below, Worship at Early Methodist Quarterly Meetings* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2000), 112-118. Karen B. Westerfield Tucker, *American Methodist Worship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 63, 65, 71-73.

5. "Church court reinstates pastor who denied membership to gay man," United Methodist News Service.

http://www.umc.org/site/c.gjTJbMUuE/b.1144999/k.E558/Church_court_reinstates_pastor_who_denied_membership_to_gay_man.htm (Accessed March 17, 2006.)

6. *The Book of Common Prayer* (1662). <http://www.eskimo.com/~lhowell/bcp1662/communion/index.html> (Accessed March 17, 2006.)

7. Mark W. Stamm, *Let Every Soul Be Jesus' Guest* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2006), 152.

8. John Wesley, "General Rules," *The Works of John Wesley*, Vol. 9, 71.

9. *The Book of Discipline 2004*, ¶ 165.C.

10. See, for instance, the procedures for church trials as described in *The Book of Discipline*, 2004, ¶ 2701-2719.

11. See discussion in *Let Every Soul Be Jesus' Guest*, 152.

12. Gayle Carlton Felton, *This Holy Mystery, A United Methodist Understanding of Holy Communion* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2005), 55-62.

13. *The United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), 7, 12.

14. John Wesley, "General Rules," *The Works of John Wesley*, Vol. 9, 71.

15. Ibid.

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Holy Communion

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