

'No Male and Female'
Ruminations on the New Creation
Missio Dei: Boston Colloquy
GBHEM, UMC
November 2017
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*Abstract and Key Points: The paper explores the ancient, biblical vision of the new creation. A reckoning with 'missio Dei', in our time and for our connectional situation, deserves and requires such a comparative reference. Within the exploration of the new creation, the gospel affirmation of the full humanity of gay people readily arises. This paper moves from pastoral experience to theological traditions to scriptural interpretation to reasoned debate. * Forty years of pastoral ministry carry the content of the rumination in the first section. * The Wesley quadrilateral, applied to traditions and temptations in theological reflection, shapes the second section. * Exegesis and exposition of Galatians in general, and Galatians 3:28 in particular, with reliance on the best extant commentary on Galatians (Martyn, Anchor Bible) grounds the work of the third section. * The fourth and last section attempts to bring reason to bear, following experience, tradition and scripture, regarding the trouble and dilemma for the UMC now, in conversation with the recent collection of writings by general superintendents (Finding Our Way). The gospel affirms the full humanity of gay people, as shown in experience, tradition, scripture and reason.*

A. Pastoral Experience

I am grateful for the magnanimous, loving people whom we have known in the experience of pastoral ministry, who have embodied and awaited the new creation.

Jan and I went to London in late August 2017 to celebrate our 40th wedding anniversary. We had not been there for several years. Yet the memories and ghosts of earlier visits quickened quickly, once we had landed. We had taken a church group through London in 2000. One parishioner, then in her mid-eighties, along with her husband struggled to move her luggage along through customs, back then. I could feel her alongside us in customs again this summer. She sang in the choir; she led in the service ministry; she volunteered to answer the office phone. In her early years she had ridden along with her mother to Methodist gatherings in New Jersey, to sort out the shape of the WSCS. She remembered the mission work in China before it ended. When asked about her service, her giving, her happy singing, and her faith she invariably said, ‘We just don’t want to leave anyone behind’. That was her way of speaking about the *missio Dei*, the divine inclusive incursion into the orb of the human condition, by the way of the guidance to leave no one behind. She very much meant, by the way, to include gay people

in the loving evangelism and stewardship of the church, in its own frail attempts to live into the *missio Dei*—‘we just don’t want to leave anyone behind’.

On our recent London excursion, once we were settled into a hotel near Westminster Abbey, other ghosts and memories emerged. Alongside, by the mind’s eye, sauntered long dead Ralph Ward, our one-time general superintendent, who took a group of us in 1972 to London and into the Abbey. He made sure we saw the Methodist sites. He arranged a dinner at Methodist Central Hall, recalling Leslie Weatherhead. The superintending minister of Central Hall moved us, moved us to tears, even those of us only 17 at the time, speaking of the Second World War. Central Hall, he reminded us, had hosted the birth of the United Nations. This summer, Jan and I worshipped at Westminster Abbey, our feet resting on the memorial to William Wilberforce, and then went across the street to see the Hall again. In 1977 or so, Ralph Ward, by then removed to New York City, hosted some of us who were by then seminarians in the same city, at a Friday evening gathering at Washington Square UMC, to support ministry with gay people. He and his Manhattan DS, (if memory serves, the Rev. Bernie Kirkland), presided with grace and love: ‘this work is crucial to the future life of the church’, said Ward. Some years later, after his retirement, Jan and I saw Ralph and Arlene

in the narthex of Riverside Church, after worship which concluded that day with the singing of 'Love Divine, All Loves Excelling'. *Finish then thy new creation...*

We also sang that hymn at the funeral of Arlene Chapman in Watertown, N.Y, in 1989. Her husband Bruce (BU undergraduate, Yale Divinity), along with my Dad, took me to my first major league baseball game at age 8 in Cooperstown, NY. (The last place teams, Al and NL, were conscripted to play once a year upstate, as punishment for their losing ways. One of the teams was, of course, the Mets). Driving home, I foolishly waved my new Mets hat at a passerby on Route 20. The wind blew it away. But Bruce turned the car around and we found the thing. In 2011, at Annual Conference, Bruce spoke quietly and gently into the microphone, *"In 1980 and 1984 I was a General Conference delegate. I opposed the inclusion of gay people in orders and marriage. Others did too. How utterly wrong I was. How foolishly wrong we were."*

Bruce still supports Boston University, with an annual gift to Marsh Chapel. Tom Trotter was the first person to preach at Marsh Chapel, after it was finished in 1949. Today Tom's grandson is an intern at the same chapel. Both Bruce and Tom were at BU during the Thurman and King years. As a pastor, Bruce could tell you what every pastor knows who has at least five years of good

working experience: virtually every extended family system in Methodism and beyond has, somewhere, at least one gay person in it. I asked Bruce a year ago what he would teach seminarians about ministry, after his own 60 years of experience: ‘*Stay close to your people*’, he said.

Jan and I have had the honor to serve in ten churches, one district, one University pulpit, and several general church efforts, including this promising one in Boston 2017, focused on *missio Dei*. Every congregation we have served has had gay women and men in it, or in the extended families therein. That any of these good people have stayed at all in connection with our connection given our exclusion of them from the *missio Dei* is truly a wonder. I love my church and am staying with it. Born and baptized a Methodist, I will so die and be buried. I am not giving over the church I love to a mode of exclusion contrary to the heart of the church in which I was raised, and have lived and served. But we should be mightily circumspect, considering *missio Dei*, about what bigotry against gay people has already done--to us. I pass over the innumerable women and men who have left ours for ordination in other denominations. I pass over the hurt to evangelism and stewardship that comes with ribald exclusionary doctrine. I pass over the diminishment of membership, particularly in the congregations of the US north and extended north, due to young adults, especially millennials, who sense

the homophobia in our sanctuaries and find another place. Here is what I mean: this is a spiritual issue, not one of numbers, a theological issue, not one of members, a biblical issue, not one of bodily strength, a homiletical issue, not one of disciplinary interpretation. This cuts to and cuts into our soul. Gay people are people, but we preach otherwise. God loves gay people, but we teach otherwise. In Christ 'there is no male and female', but we argue otherwise. Such spiritual, theological, biblical and homiletical malignancy and mendacity is crippling us.

Nevertheless, a lifetime in pastoral ministry has provided Jan and me with many snapshots of grace touching the lives of gay people, that grace being the beachhead of God's incursion into life: here is a young man, age 19, in the rough, poor rural upstate NY border country, realizing his identity, struggling with his family, his church, and himself, and talking slowly to a novice minister, in the snow of February, 1982; here is that same pastor, a bit older, attending a community dinner in his city neighborhood, seated with 8 women—no, he suddenly realizes, seated with 4 bright, happy, earnest, loving couples, September 1991; here is the minister calling on a recently retired school teacher, and her partner, long time and long suffering servants of God and neighbor and members of a United Methodist church, listening as they are crying and crying out in bitterness over the ignorance and exclusion they have known in a large,

purportedly accepting city, 2004; here is a minister of the gospel, new to University deanship, employing and deploying an openly gay campus minister to serve across a large campus, one with a liberal history and spirit, that nonetheless had never hired such a person for such a position, 2008. And here he is in September of 2017 offering prayers, at the BU School of Public Health for those who ministered to and those who died of AIDS thirty years earlier (often without willing pastoral care from their churches). To repeat: any competent pastor who has done the minimum two dozen or so weekly visits over at least five years knows full well that almost every family system, near or far, has within it gay women and men. This issue in relation to *missio Dei* is not somehow out there, long ago, far away, foreign, peripheral or minimal. Unresolved, the issue will hobble the ministry of the church, across the globe. *Missio Dei*, the mission of God or the sending of God, the preaching of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and him crucified, starts with God's love. A preliminary incision to curtail the divine love, and thus the *missio dei*, by excluding, dehumanizing, and imprisoning gay people in a pseudo-biblical jail constitutes the articulation of another gospel, not that there is any other gospel. As Theodore Runyon argued in *The New Creation: John Wesley's Theology Today* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), sanctification moves from a gospel of new creation to the renewal of all creation: 'The cosmic drama of the renewing of creation begins, therefore, with the renewal of the *imago dei* in

humankind (12)...Salvation consists, therefore, not only in reconciliation but in service, not only in an experienced sense of God's reality and presence but in a life lived out of that reality, extending divine transforming power into every aspect of both individual and social existence (223)'.

B. Theological Traditions

I am grateful for the open, broad minded traditions of our church, especially our theological traditions, the spiritual waters in which we have learned to swim, from prone float to butterfly, and especially the Wesley quadrilateral, that four verse hymn to Jesus as our beacon not our boundary.

As we consider the *missio Dei*, we could perhaps give shared attention to our sources of authority for our apperception of that mission, across the United Methodist Church. At our best, our love of Christ shapes our love of Scripture and tradition and reason and experience. We are lovers and knowers too. Yet we are ever in peril of loving what we should use and using what we should love, to paraphrase Augustine. In particular we sometimes come perilously close to the kind of idolatry that uses what we love. We are tempted, for our love Christ, to force a kind of certainty upon what we love, to use what is meant to give

confidence as a force and form of *faux* certainty. It is tempting to substitute the the security and protection of certainty for the freedom and grace of confidence. But faith is about confidence not certainty. If we had certainty we would not need faith.

1. Errancy

Your love for Christ shapes your love of Scripture. You love the Bible. You love its Psalmic depths. Psalm 130 comes to mind. You love its stories and their strange names. Obededom comes to mind. You love its proverbial wisdom. ‘One sharpens another’ comes to mind. You love its freedom, its account of the career of freedom. The exodus comes to mind. You love its memory of Jesus. His embrace of children comes to mind. You love its honesty about religious life. Galatians comes to mind. You love its strangeness. John comes to mind. You love the Bible like Rudolph Bultmann loved it, enough to know it through and through.

You rely on the Holy Scripture to learn to speak of faith, and as the medium of truth for the practice of faith. Around our common tables in this colloquy we share this reliance and this love. We all love the Bible. I have been

studying and teaching the Bible for four decades. The fascinating multiplicity of hearings, here, and the interplay of perspectives present, absent, near, far, known, unknown, religious and unreligious, have a common ground in regard for the Scripture. We may all affirm Mr. Wesley's aspiration: *homo unius libri*, to be a person of one book.

But the Bible is errant. It is theologically tempting for us to go on preaching as if the last 250 years of study just did not happen. They did. That does not mean that we should deconstruct the Bible to avoid allowing the Bible to deconstruct us, or that we should study the Bible in order to avoid allowing the Bible to study us. In fact, after demythologizing the Bible we may need to re-mythologize the Bible too. It is the confidence born of obedience, not some certainty born of fear that will open the Bible to us. We need not fear truth, however it may be known. Luke may not have had all his geographical details straight. John includes the woman caught in adultery, John 8, but not in its earliest manuscripts. Actually she, poor woman, is found at the end of Luke in some texts. Paul did not write the document from the earlier third century, 3 Corinthians. The references to slavery in the New Testament are as errant and time bound as are the references to women not speaking in church. The references to women not speaking in church are as errant and time bound as are the references to

homosexuality. The references to homosexuality are as errant and time bound as are the multiple lists of the twelve disciples. Did you ever try to get the list just right? Peter, Andrew, James, and John—and after that it is a free-for-all. The various 'twelve' listings are as errant and time bound as the variations between John and the synoptic Gospels.

Our discussion this week in Boston does not occur within traditions which affirm the Scripture as the sole source of religious authority. We are not Baptists, Calvinists, or Lutherans. We do not live within a Sola Scriptura tradition. The Bible is primary, foundational, fundamental, basic, prototypical—but not exclusively authoritative. As an example, many synoptic passages present an idealized memory of something that may or may not have happened in the way accounted, somewhere along the Tiberian shore. Matthew is writing 55 years after the ministry of Jesus. What do you remember from 55 years ago? Nor were they written for that kind of certainty. They were formed in the faith of the church to form the faith of the church. They are, as W. Bruegemann once put it, *stylized memories*.

2. Equality

You love the tradition of the church as well. *Though with a scornful wonder we see her sore oppressed...* John Wesley loved the church's tradition too, enough to study it and to know it, and to seek its truth. One central ecclesiastical tradition of his time, the tradition of apostolic succession, he termed a 'fable'. Likewise, we lovers of the church tradition will not be able to grasp for certainty in it, if that grasping dehumanizes others. The Sabbath was made for the human being, not the other way around, in our tradition.

Our linkage of the gifts of heterosexuality and ministry, however traditional, falls before grace and freedom. We roundly cajole our Roman Catholic brethren for requiring universal combination of the gifts of celibacy and ministry for ordination. 'You may love God or a woman but not both at the same time.' But then we turn around and by the same logic require universal combination of the gifts of heterosexuality and ministry for ordination. 'You may love God or your partner but not both at the same time'. It is theologically tempting to shore up by keeping out. But it has no future. Equality will triumph over exclusion, just as gospel ever trumps tradition. *It is coming like the glory of the morning on the wave...*

3. Evolution

You love the mind, the reason. You love the prospect of learning. You love the Lord with heart and soul and mind. You love the reason in the same way that Charles Darwin, a good Anglican, loved the reason. You love its capacity to see things differently.

Of course, reason unfettered can produce hatred and holocaust. Learning for its own sake needs the fetters of virtue and piety. More than anything else, learning must finally be rooted in loving. Do we still hear the one thing requested in Psalm 27? To inquire in the temple. Inquiry!

The universe is 14 billion years old. The earth is 4.5 billion years old. 500 million years ago multi-celled organisms appeared in the Cambrian explosion. 400 million years ago plants sprouted. 370 million years ago land animals emerged. 230 million years ago dinosaurs appeared (and disappeared 65 million years ago). 200,000 years ago hominids arose. Every human being carries 60 new mutations out of 6 billion cells. Yes, evolution through natural selection by random mutation is a reasonable hypothesis, says F. Collins, father of the human genome project, author of *The Language of God*, and, strikingly, a person of faith. Yet 38% of Americans reject evolution (*Gallup poll, May 22, 2017*).

It is tempting to disjoin learning and vital piety, but it is not loving to disjoin learning and vital piety. They go together. The God of Creation is the very God of Redemption. Their disjunction may help us cling for a while to a kind of faux certainty. But their conjunction is the confidence born of obedience. And their conjunction waits for us on the shore line of the new creation, the forecourt of the *missio Dei*.

4. Existence

You love experience. The gift of experience in faith is the heart of your love of Christ. You love Christ. Like Howard Thurman loved the mystical ranges of experience, you do too. You love experience more than enough to examine your experience, to think about and think through what you have seen and done.

But a simple or general appeal to the love of experience, in our time, is not appealing or loving. It is not experience, but our very existence which lies, right now, under the shadow of global violence. We are going to need to move our focus toward a balance of religious experience with existential engagement in our time, in our culture, in our world. For example: to have any future worthy of the

name we shall need to foreswear preemptive violence. How the stealthy entry of such an ethical perspective could enter our national civil discourse, 2002-2017, without voluminous debate and vehement challenge, is a measure of our longing for false certainties. Our existence itself is on the line in discussions or lack of discussions about violent action that is preemptive, unilateral, imperial, and reckless. One thinks of Lincoln saying of slavery, ‘those who support it might want to try it for themselves’. Not one of us wants to be the victim of preemptive violence. We may argue about the need for response, and even for the need of some kinds of anticipatory defense. But preemption? It will occlude existence itself. Our future lies on the narrower path of responsive, communal, sacrificial, prudent behavior and requires of us, in Niebuhr’s phrase, ‘a spiritual discipline against resentment’.

There are indeed theological temptations in an unbalanced love of Scripture, tradition, reason or experience. Let us face them down. Let us face them down together. Let us do so by lifting our voices to admit errancy, affirm equality, explore evolution, and admire existence. The measure of ministry today, a new creational *missio Dei*, in the tradition of a responsible Christian openness, is found in our willingness to address errancy, equality, evolution and existence, in our rendering of the meaning of traditions.

C. Scriptural Interpretation

I am grateful for my teachers, especially Raymond Brown and J.

Louis Martyn, who together sparked and sustained a life-time of love of the Bible, a love of the strange world of the Bible. Martyn, in particular, has had a lastingly personal impact on my life work in preaching and teaching. It is his subtle, apocalyptic interpretation of Galatians which has inspired many of us for decades, and to which, in the course of rumination upon the new creation, we now turn: *J.*

Louis Martyn, Galatians: The Anchor Bible: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary (New York: Doubleday, 1997)

1. Exegesis

Every generation comes upon the strange world of the Bible for itself, afresh. Paul's letter to the churches of Galatia, from the mid-50's of the first century, may open for us some new and truly remarkable insights, especially fit for those in United Methodist ministry in 2017. This fiery little letter has exploded before: at the outset of the mission to the Gentiles (Paul); at the creation of the New Testament (Marcion); at the dawn of the Reformation (Luther—who called

the letter "my Katie von Bora"); in the Wesleyan movement ("*finish then thy new creation...*"); in the heart of the Civil Rights movement (M. L. King, "Letter from Birmingham Jail"). And why would that surprise? Consider the key sentences (unless otherwise noted, Scriptural citations in this paper are from the RSV): "(The gospel) came through a revelation (apocalypse) of Jesus Christ." (Gal 1: 12b). "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me, and the life I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God who loved me and gave himself up for me." (Gal 2: 20) "There is neither Jew nor Greek; there is neither slave nor free; there is no "male and female"; for all of you are One in Christ Jesus." (Gal 3:28). "For Freedom Christ has set us free! Stand fast, therefore, and do not be enslaved again." (Gal 5:1) "God forbid that I should boast in anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the cosmos has been crucified to me, and I to the cosmos. For neither is circumcision anything nor is uncircumcision anything. What is something then is the New Creation." (Gal 6:14)

When these theme sentences from Galatians, the Magna Carta of Christian Liberty, are read seriatim, steadily, and in a spirited mode, one hears something entirely new. The new creation is the very *missio Dei*. "Instead of being the holy community that stands apart from the profane orb of the world,

then, the church is the beachhead God is planting in his war of liberation from all religious differentiations. The distinction between church and world is in nature apocalyptic rather than religious... 'God has founded his church beyond religion' (Bonhoeffer) (J. L. Martyn, 37)."

What does Galatians 3:28 offer us, here and now? In this passage, Paul makes use of a pre-Pauline baptismal formula, which he then interprets. In the apocalyptic now of the New Person of Christ—in full reality, that is—these oppositions no longer exist: religious\unreligious; rich\poor; male\female. Here Paul teaches as he preaches, not of creation, but of new creation. He intentionally, sharply, and harshly contrasts the former with the latter, the creation which is in reality non-creation with the new creation. Furthermore, and most pointedly, Paul intentionally recites and rejects Genesis 1:27. "The variation in the wording of the last clause suggests that the author of the formula drew on Gen 1:27, thereby saying that in baptism the structure of the original creation had been set aside." (Martyn, 376).

Martyn places Galatians alongside Romans in this way: "In Rom 1:18-32, Paul uses an argument explicitly based on creation, drawing certain conclusions from the "things God has made" in "the creation of the cosmos" (Rom 1:20). In effect, Paul says in this passage that God's identity and the true sexual

identity of human beings as male and female can both be inferred from creation... *What a different argument lies before us in Gal 3:26-29, 6:14-15!* Here the basis is explicitly not creation, but rather the new creation in which the building blocks of the old creation are declared to be non-existent. If one were to recall the affirmation ‘It is not good that man should be alone’ (Gen 2:18), one would also remember that the creational response to loneliness is married fidelity between man and woman (Gen 2:24, Mark 10:6-7). But in its announcement of the new creation, the apocalyptic baptismal formula declares the erasure of the distinction between male and female. Now the answer to loneliness is not only marriage, but rather the new-creational community that God is calling into being in Christ, the church marked by mutual love, as it is led by the Spirit of Christ (Gal 3:28). (Martyn, 381)

Martyn, again, to conclude: “The result of such a radical vision and of its radical argumentation is the new-creational view of the people of God...It is Christ and the community of those incorporated into him who lie beyond religious distinctions... Baptism is a participation both in Christ’s death and in his life; for genuine, eschatological life commences when one is taken into the community of the new creation, in which unity in God’s Christ has replaced religious-ethnic differentiation. In a word, religious and ethnic differentiations and that which

underlies them—the Law— are identified in effect as the “old things” that have now “passed away”, giving place to the new creation (2 Cor 5:17).” (Martyn, 382)

2. Exposition

This initial exegetical examination reminds us that Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians is one of the great high peaks of the New Testament. It is about a whole new life, a new creation. In fact, it may be the highest peak in the whole range, the Mount Everest of the Bible. It is written to address this question: “Must a Gentile become a Jew before he can become a Christian?”. Is there a religious condition to be met, prior to the reception of God’s apocalypse in Christ?

After Paul had been converted to Christ, he spent 17 years in unremarkable, quiet ministry. We know nothing of these two decades spent in Arabia. All the letters we have of Paul come from a later decade. Paul was converted to Christ, as he says earlier in this letter, “by apocalypse”. Christ revealed himself to Paul. Thus, for Paul, the authority in Christ is not finally in the Scripture, nor in traditions, nor in reason, nor in experience. Christ captured Paul through none of these, but rather through revelation, the apocalypse of God. There

is a singular, awesome freedom in the way Paul understands Christ. We have yet, I believe, in the church that bears His name, to acknowledge in full that freedom.

After these 17 years, Paul went up to Jerusalem to meet with the pillars of the church. Can you picture the moment? All in one room: Paul, Peter, Andrew, James, John, Titus, Barnabas. And in that room there was argument, difference. Paul preached the cross of Christ to unreligious people, and the unreligious--the uncircumcised--heard. What would the Jerusalem elders say? Jesus was a Jew, and had been circumcised. So also were all the first Christians, including Paul himself. But God had done something astounding. It was the Gentiles, not the Jews, who fervently believed the Good News. Should these unreligious children of God be brought back into the Covenant of Circumcision? No, they all agreed, no. God had done something new. So, Peter went to the circumcised, and Paul went to the uncircumcised. Peter went to the Jews, and Paul to the Gentiles. They agreed to disagree, agreeably. And the meeting ended and it was settled. The freedom of the gospel trumped the ordered inheritance of tradition.

But do you know how sometimes it is not the meeting but the meeting after the meeting that counts? What was settled in Jerusalem was unsettled later.

Peter could not be counted on to hold the line, and Paul told him so, to his face. Peter was inconsistent about freedom—sometimes he ate with the unclean Gentiles—that’s all of us by the way. Sometimes, when somebody was watching, he backed away. And Paul caught him at it and as he says, “opposed him to his face” (Gal. 2:11). We could wish that all opposition in church was so clean, direct, personal, and honest. “One of us is wrong and I think it’s you!” Paul doesn’t talk *about* Peter, he talks *to* Peter.

Paul envisions the end of religion, Christ “the end of the law” (Rom. 10:4). In its place, he pictures the community of faith working through love. In our conversation that would put us close ‘*missio Dei*’. Whatever does not come from faith is sin. Your primal identity does not come from your religion. Christ brings a whole new life, the end of religion and the beginning of the church, understood as the community of faith working through love.

The new creation moves even farther, from religion to economics. As potent as is the power of religion to determine identity, money is stronger still. This is why in the Gospels Jesus speaks so repeatedly about money, about its dangers...where moth and rust consume. If you are used to solving your problems

by writing a check, you are doubly endangered by the real problems, for which no check is large enough.

Paul sees what we still hardly ever do see. Finally, one's place on the map of economic life is not one's primal identity. It is interesting to remember that John Wesley at the end of his life worried about the growing wealth of his poor Methodists. They did what he told them. They earned all they could. They saved all they could. They gave all they could. They prospered. And in their prosperity, they were endangered. They forgot the poor, once they were not poor. Their diligence, frugality, and industry, all wondrously good things, also contained the potential to obscure their primal identity. We are not what we spend, nor are we what we buy. We are stewards, not owners. And finally, we only truly own what we give away. Neither slave nor free. No, your primal identity does not come from your wallet, either.

What could mark more indelibly than religion and money?

In the new creation, there is no gender. In direct contradiction to the unfortunate statement this summer of the 'Nashville Nine': in Christ there is 'no male and female'. At least, according to Paul in Galatians. Gender is swallowed

up in victory. We have yet, I doubt, to take seriously the Good News of liberation found in these passages. Your identity does not come from your sexuality, your gender, your orientation.

In this passage, Paul points to a clue to our discussions about *missio Dei*. Here, in Galatians 3: 28, your identity is not to be inferred from creation...but from new creation! This apocalyptic baptismal formula declares the erasure—who says there is nothing radical about Christ?—of the distinction we so heighten, that between male and female.

In the *missio Dei*, in the new creation, God is calling into existence a new community of faith working through love. There is our identity. Not what is natural but what is heavenly about us forms our primary identity. That is, the Bible itself, from the vantage point of this great mountain passage, opens the way for an understanding of identity that is not just nature or creation, but new creation. This is the community of faith working through love. Here, there is a place where God is doing something new, revealing something new. And, most strangely, it may be those who are not so easily confined by the creational categories of male and female, who are on the edge of the new creation. I know what Paul writes in Romans, but you still must ask yourself, at this point, which is the crucial Pauline

passage, Galatians 3 or Romans 1? It is a serious question. It is in Galatians that Paul speaks of the new creation. Gender and orientation do not provide our primal identity. 'No male and female' means no gay and straight, no homosexual and heterosexual. God is doing something new, which includes all in the community of faith working through love, and includes with full grace the full humanity of gay people. This is what the Bible, the Bible, teaches.

The trajectory of Paul's preaching in Galatians, and thus in total, makes ample space in our churches for gay people. If you love Jesus, and especially if you love the Bible, then you may just find courage not only to defend a moral life in a post-moral culture, but also to preserve freedom for those who have found a whole new life, and so are harbingers of the new creation.

D. Reasoned Debate: Finding Our Way

I am grateful to those women and men who have given their lives in ministry through the superintending leadership of our connection, and especially for their steady willingness to 'reason together', with an irenic spirit, even across profound differences. A recent set of examples is found in *Finding Our Way*:

Love and Law in the United Methodist Church. Rueben P. Job, Neil M. Alexander, eds. (Nashville: Abingdon, 2014).

With courage, several church leaders recently published this book of divergent views regarding faith and homosexuality in United Methodism. Out of sincere respect for these writers, I want to engage their work, in reasoned discourse. With respect, and out of love, I differ with most of what is written in *Finding Our Way*. The passages below will give the details. But the singular heart of that difference is...*the gospel* itself. I move in four steps here: summary, overview, discussion, and concluding thoughts.

Summary: After a personal introductory frame from Job and Alexander, seven UMC general superintendents offer 10-20 page statements about Methodism and gay people, following which Job concludes with a call to prayer. Two write directly about the full humanity of gay people, one in affirmation (Talbert) and one in denial (Yambasu). Three offer administrative insights (Palmer—the discipline must be upheld), (Lowry—the center cannot hold), (Carter—the connection needs support). Two offer mildly inclusive reflections on recent conference level experience (Ward, Wenner).

Overview: One feature of this collection--at least to my mind and ear and perhaps I am wrong--is its lack of sustained theological reflection, biblical interpretation, and homiletical assessment. Does the gospel offer grace, freedom, love, acceptance, pardon, and hope to sexual minorities or not? Does the gospel disdain silent or spoken bigotry against sexual minorities or not? Where do the crucial Scriptures (John 14, Galatians 3, Ecclesiastes 3, Amos 5), or the tradition (Bristol, Appomattox, Seneca Falls), or human reason (diagnostic library, psychological research,) and experience (case studies and stories of gay children harmed by religious bigotry) intersect with these chapters? Not, it seems, with frequency, granted occasional interjections, more from Talbert and Carter than others. One major exception is the attention Lowry pays to Acts 15 (and so, it might have been, to Galatians 2), the Jerusalem Conference. He is right to do so. His reading of the passages however is, to my mind, the opposite of their meaning (see, above, J. L. Martyn, Anchor Bible Commentary, *Galatians*, among many others). Lowry argues that the point of the Jerusalem Conference was order. Was it? Or was it freedom, the freedom for which Christ sets free, the freedom over against the inherited order and tradition, to include the uncircumcised? Paul in Galatians 2 leaves behind tradition for gospel. (Freedom, not order.) The uncircumcised are the recipients of the gospel (then) as are gay people (today). Lowry: 'the famous debate at the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 is a debate over

order, the doctrinal discipline of the church' (74). Well, in the account as recorded in Galatians 2, the debate is about the gospel, about freedom, not about order. At the Jerusalem Conference, according to Galatians 2, Paul, in choosing to leave behind religious order, textual rigidity and an inherited holiness code in order to preach the gospel to the 'genitally unclean', men who were not circumcised on the eighth day, led the church to decide that gospel trumps tradition, and grace trumps order. The Jerusalem Conference is the perfect biblical citation for this debate-- when read by and through the lens of Galatians 2 and following. In Christ 'there is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, there is no male or female'. Nor gay nor straight. Are gay people 'people' or not? 5/5 or 3/5 human? (We have a bad habit in this country of finding ways to fractionalize the marginalized.) We baptize, confirm, commune, forgive and bury gay people. Yet we somehow cannot find our way to marry or ordain them? Can we not live 'in all things charity'?

Discussion: *Palmer's* distinction to prefer and privilege the term 'uphold' over 'enforce' (his assigned theme), in interpretation of the book of discipline stands out in the flow of the book. *Ward* honors the 'brave witness' of a lesbian couple who suffered the bigotry of the Mississippi conference to bear witness to their love for each other. *Talbert* has said and done the right thing, well prior to this collection, and his essay is the truest of the seven. He simply and

categorically states that the discriminatory language about gays in our church is wrong and cannot claim allegiance, loyalty or support. The UMC today provides ‘liturgical resources for pastors who may choose to use facilities of congregations to bless animals, fowls, inanimate objects, and more. Are not our LGBT sisters and brothers of sacred worth like all God’s creatures’? (37) He and his African colleague are the only two who fully and directly state what they personally think regarding the full humanity of gay people. *Carter* calculates (perhaps accurately, but there is no documentation) that small progressive jurisdictions have more presence, voice, vote and leadership on boards and agencies than do larger and more moderate jurisdictions. *Yambasu*. Yambasu equates homosexuality with promiscuity, sexual slavery, and adultery, describes the Bible as infallible, and places the denigration of gay people on par with the venerable inheritance of the ten commandments (87). His is the voice, or at least the chosen voice for this volume, of Methodism in Africa. To the extent that his view represents African Methodism, it is a communicative benefit to have such a remarkable and disappointing perspective stated in the raw. *Lowry*. Lowry implores us to keep covenant with one another. Many would respond that the question is not whether to keep covenant, but in and about what to keep covenant. If the gospel of Jesus Christ, crucified, requires the affirmation of the full humanity of gay people and the full rejection of bigotry against sexual minorities, then the point of covenant is

mutually to commit to that gospel. Covenant on behalf of rules of discipline that deny the gospel is false covenant. Today, as Lowry would perhaps concede, a substantial USA UMC majority now affirms same gender marriage, and ordination for gay people. *Wenner* concludes: “I pray and work for a future where we will find ways to embrace diversity on many issues, including human sexuality, allowing us to think differently. Perhaps we may even be able to live with different answers concerning clergy who live in faithful and loving homosexual partnerships and those who choose to conduct same-gender marriages.” (98)

Thoughts: The first task of an interpreter is to honor and affirm the texts interpreted. In this case, rightly, our general superintendents, interpreters of the book of discipline, affirm the value of the book to be interpreted. Once the general conference has passed off a version of the discipline for another four years, it falls to the bishops, along with others, to interpret and apply it. It may help all of us to rehearse again some of the basic modes of interpretation of texts, biblical texts and others, taught and learned years earlier. Most passages, including your favorite scriptural passage, parable, story, psalm or teaching, allow of more than one faithful reading. There may for sure be out of bounds readings, but multiple legitimate ones, too. Simply on a non-literalist hermeneutic, diversity of readings of the discipline itself should be expected. So, the dozen or so affirmations in the

discipline of the requirement of pastoral care for gay people may rightly be read as a requirement for pastoral ministry for gay people who are getting married or discerning vocations. Gay marriage and ordination may be understood as not only permissible, but required, to the fulfillment of these paragraphs. With respect of other contentious issues, the Discipline allows for difference. For instance, Discipline affirms a moderate pro-choice position regarding abortion. But when it comes to marriage and ordination, we do not exclude those who practice surgical abortion, nor those who reject such practice. We have a position as a church. But we allow for differences in practice, practices that both agree with and conflict with our stated position. For instance, we further do admit that while all abhor war, some are pacifist and some are not, and all are part of the UMC. Why we can allow latitude regarding issues of abortion and warfare, but not regarding love and marriage, is difficult to understand. Finally, on marriage: UMCBOD Para. 340 2.a.3.a. *(Duties of pastor) To perform the marriage ceremony after due counsel with the parties involved and in accordance with the laws of the state and the rules of the United Methodist Church. The decision to perform the ceremony shall be the right and responsibility of the pastor.* So. Do we mean this? Are we going to ‘enforce the discipline’? Here the burden of responsibility is clearly, unequivocally placed upon the pastor whose ‘right and responsibility’ it is to decide to marry a couple. There is no shading here, no hem or haw. The pastor

decides. After due counsel (pastoral care) and in accordance with state law and church rules. No comment here is offered to the situation when state law and church rules, both of which are to be upheld, are different. Rightly, the Discipline leaves these difficult (pastoral) decisions in the hands of the minister. “The decision to perform the ceremony shall be the right and responsibility of the pastor”. Not the General Conference. Not the General Superintendent. Not the District Superintendent. Not the Charge Conference. The pastor. As it should be.