

MINNEAPOLIS: THE REAL ISSUE

February 18, 1994
AJ McKelway

Sinking speechless in a vortex of absurdity and decline, even a dying church can be momentarily awakened. So it was in 1933 when at an ecumenical gathering in the Berlin Sports Palace Dr. Reinhold Kraus pronounced to an enthusiastic crowd a re-imagining of God inspired by the needs and aspirations of an oppressed people. He argued that the German nation could no longer tolerate "weird stuff" like a Jewish heritage and Jewish Messiah. A new day demanded a new conception of God. Freed at last from the constraints of an outmoded Bible, a new German christianity, he insisted, would forge a new image of God out of the spiritual power felt in German blood and German soil.

The "Sports Palace scandal" shocked a somnolent church awake and protestant pastors, earlier reluctant to challenge the theological modernism of the new Germany, moved toward the Confessing Church to join Barth, Niemöller and Bonhoeffer in saying "No! No! and again No!"

And now, over a half-Century later, an American church caught in a spiral of material decline and spiritual decay is also stopped in its tracks. A church mesmerized by the ceaseless cant and cavil of a politically correct officialdom has been jolted awake by a scandalous re-imagining of Christian faith in Minneapolis -- and we, too, must say "No! No, and again, No!"

Saying "No," however, will not in itself accomplish much. The Confessing Church in Germany, begun so bravely at Barmen, found its numbers and effectiveness reduced to insignificance by the insidious appeal of national- and self-interest. This happened because the pastors who said "No," never grasped the underlying problem. They had been taught to believe that the God revealed in scripture may also be discovered in the dynamics of human nature and history, and that for this reason the church should adapt its message and language to conform to those revelations as well. Thus, it became possible for some to embrace Christian Socialism, while others were attracted to a christian nationalism that easily placed the Swastika alongside the Cross.

If they found in cultural developments a disclosure of God equal to that of scripture, why should they have been surprised when that culture dismissed their Bible? If they were willing to see the will of God expressed in political authoritarianism, why should they have been surprised when some welcomed Hitler as a new Messiah? If they derived from their pride of race a sense of divine destiny, why should they have been surprised when their church became racist? They protested all of these things, but they were not willing to heed the warnings of Bonhoeffer and Barth and reassess the theology that had brought them to that place.

We must not make the same mistake. We are rightly appalled by the rank heresies celebrated at Minneapolis, and properly outraged that elders, teachers and officials of our church should have participated. We may be appalled and outraged, but we ought not to be surprised. We have no right to be surprised, because we, too, have placed modern culture side by side with scripture as the source of our understanding of the will and nature of God. We have done this in many ways, but most particularly we have done it by accommodating the Gospel to a modern preoccupation with the self: its needs, aspirations and satisfactions -- and the only difference between conservatives and liberals in our church is that they reshape the Gospel and re-imagine God according to different needs, aspirations and satisfactions.

p. 2

If for the better part of this century the so-called "conservative" side of our church has habitually identified the Gospel with a conservative politics of national- and self-interest, it was only natural that the other, "liberal," side do the same in respect to a politics of social action and concern. If evangelicals and charismatics discover God in satisfying self-absorption, why should we be surprised when the same thing happens in Minneapolis? The present provocation may emanate from liberalism, but we must not overlook the contribution of conservatism to this disaster.

In civic life many of us have borne the "L word" with some pride, and even in the church have not been ashamed of that label, so we "liberals" have a special responsibility to understand the theological errors that led to Minneapolis. The first involves Scripture. Having enthusiastically embraced various methods of biblical criticism, we failed to maintain an understanding of biblical authority. We imagined that the Bible, if open to criticism, is open to change. Under such influence distinguished scholars assisted in the production, and our church undertook the publication, of an absurdity called The Inclusive Language Lectionary. In that version of scripture words deemed inclusive were added to the text and those thought exclusive were changed. For instance, Mary no longer gives birth to "her first born son, but "her first born child," etc. etc.. If that lectionary enjoyed little acceptance, the attitude which produced it has become pervasive. The collapse of scriptural authority is everywhere evident in our disregard of the Bible's own way of speaking. Rather than interpreting its masculine imagery, we avoid or change it. The pronoun required by that imagery has become practically illegal. Seminary professors will not use it, and many will not allow their students to do so. Why, then, should we be surprised if the Bible's imaging of God, long held in such contempt in our churches, should in Minneapolis be altogether "re-imagined?"

From this neglect of scripture there has also developed a vast theological confusion. If our thinking about God is no longer held captive to the Word of God, then we are free to imagine God in ways that best suit our sensibilities. And we have done so, but always, of course, with the highest of motives. During the civil rights struggle we thought it perhaps useful when some recommended to African-Americans that they think of God as Black. Later, with the advent of Latin American liberation theology, it seemed useful and just to identify the will of God with a Marxist understanding of revolutionary praxis, and to interpret the nature of Christ "from below" as a revolutionary hero. From the truth that God is always on the side of the oppressed we jumped to the conclusion that the oppressed are always on the side of God, and thus, from that perspective we thought we could interpret the nature and redemptive work of God in ways superior to that of the Bible. It was then entirely consistent, when the women's movement sensitized us to their history of oppression, that the theology of the church gladly accommodated itself to this much larger and powerful revolution.

For the past twenty-five years we have acceded to the demand that our understanding of the nature, will and work of God be informed not so much by the Bible as by the needs and aspirations of those who either are, or feel themselves to be, oppressed. Why, then, should we be surprised when some, desirous of a greater self-image, should re-imagine God as like themselves -- and wonder what all the fuss is about? Why should we be surprised when a comfortable sense of the indwelling of God causes a representative of this view to dismiss the transcendence of God

p. 3

as "an orgy of self-alienation beloved of the fathers?" And why should we be surprised when, reacting against their own abuse, some women should reject the idea that God, himself, suffered and bore abuse for us on a Cross?

The re-imagining conference in Minneapolis has alerted the church to a very real and present danger to its very existence. But we cannot respond intelligently to this crisis unless we understand that it was not there created, but only illustrated. Nor will reproof and the withholding of funds alone remove the crisis. Unless we understand that what happened in Minneapolis was but a logical and inevitable extension of a larger theology long embraced by our church, there will be an increasing number of such occasions until, sooner or later, we cease to be a church of Jesus Christ at all.

For some, such a prospect is welcomed. Already sects abound which preach a message of personal privilege and prosperity. There are already gay churches dedicated to the celebration of gay pride and life. We also read and hear of the possibility of a Women's church. All of these sects imagine that, better than the church of Christ, a religion of self-interest will encourage a society of peace, freedom and justice. Just here, however, we need to heed the lesson of the German church under Hitler, where a theology of accommodation to self-interest prepared the way for the greatest oppression and horror to which history is witness. This was inevitable, because the deification of human values, however delicate or well meant, will ultimately display the human presumption that lies at the base of every oppression.

Unless our church repents and turns from the theological error to which it has long been captive, unless it returns to a proper sense of biblical authority, using it critically, but also with reverence and respect, unless it discovers again the radical transcendence of God and lets, in the words of Homrighausen, "God be God," unless it can do this, it will be of no use to itself or to a world in need.

RESPONSE TO THE THEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF THE OFFICE OF THEOLOGY AND WORSHIP

Joseph Small and John Burgess have provided both a fair description of the Minneapolis conference and a useful theological response to it. Specifically, they have cut through the weak obfuscation of its defenders and shown that the worship of "Sophia" was, in fact, anti-trinitarian and anti-scriptural. They demonstrate very well that the celebrative meal of milk and honey was, in fact, an anti-sacrament. Furthermore, they are correct in identifying the lectures on God and Atonement as dismissive of essential elements of Christian faith. Indeed, the lecture on Atonement was gratuitously insulting to the Cross of Christ - not different in kind from the anti-Christian cartoon of a crucified donkey discovered in the Roman catacombs.

On the other hand, the report fails at important points to draw the necessary conclusions from its own analysis. At one point it is contradictory: "Clearly, conference rituals attempted to discover and explore new language, not worship a new god. Just as clearly, however, conference rituals used language in ways that imply worship of a divine manifestation distinctly different from 'the one triune God...'" (p.1bt) Surely a "different" god is in this context a "new" god.

On the basis of descriptions of the worship of "Sophia" supplied by this and other reports, the essentials of which have not been contradicted by participants or defenders of the conference, the authors ought to have identified such worship as "idolatrous." Given the celebration of femaleness everywhere present in the conference's liturgies, they ought to have concluded that we are confronted in their use of the name "Sophia" with a form of self-worship characteristic of every idolatry. If there were any doubt on this point, it is removed by the exercise, variously reported and confirmed, by which participants were led to inscribe their own names on cards which were to present various "names" of God.

The study ought also to have identified the celebration with milk and honey, which was surely no less self-referential, as an act of self-excommunication. If the Reformers refused communication with those who could not discern the body of Christ in the sacrament in ways compatible with their own, how much more should the representatives of their traditions have refused to participate in a bogus sacrament overtly intended to exclude any presence of the crucified Christ?

While the report is rightly critical of the denials of divine transcendence and the efficacy of the Cross, they are not willing to admit that these are truths upon which the church "stands or falls," and that the denial of these truths in the church constitutes the most dangerous of heresies -- which must be recognized and named as such. While the report may be correct in stating in its last paragraph that "It will not do for the church simply to reject it [the Re-imagining conference] as heretical or pagan..." (emphasis added) it ought to have recognized that what is "pagan" lies outside the church and what is "heretical" lies within. It ought to have drawn the conclusion which follows its own analysis, namely, that, whatever may be said for the conference as a whole, it was characterized by broad participation in acts of worship and tolerance of views which, if permitted and encouraged, would threaten the very existence of the church of Christ.

p. 2

Response to Minneapolis has been burdened by a fundamental confusion about free speech, openness and tolerance. While these are civic virtues which Christians ought to defend with their very lives, their application within the community of faith is necessarily restricted. In its existence in the world and in relation to other faiths the church must exhibit these same virtues. But in so far as the church is a confessional community whose existence depends upon agreement to certain essential affirmations, it cannot tolerate in its own central acts of worship and teaching contradiction of those essential affirmations. Such contradiction is heresy, and a church that cannot bring itself to recognize heresy must, sooner or later, cease to exist as a confessional community. Now the "sooner" has at last in Minneapolis become "later."

A. J. McKelway

NEWS

United Methodist Women Get Taste of Sophia Worship

by Dottie Chase

A standing ovation for lesbians. A service of milk and honey to the goddess Sophia. A presentation denying the atonement of Jesus Christ. What is going on here? And why are there so many United Methodist women attending this conference?

Billed as "A Global Theological Conference By Women: for Women and Men," this meeting was promoted by Christian churches. Orthodox Christians, however, would find little historic Christian theology. Convening in Minneapolis, this was "Re-Imagining," an ecumenical gathering associated with the World Council of Churches (WCC) for those of the feminist, "womanist," or lesbian perspective. Many of the speakers voiced similar themes: condemnation of patriarchy and the exclusion of lesbians and homosexual men in the church.

Of the 2200 registrants, 391 were United Methodist. The Women's Division of the General Board of Global Ministries (GBGM) staff and directors were urged to attend this conference as this quadrennium's theological workshop (Women's Division staff and directors expenses were paid for by the division).

"They are exploring the sensual and sexual side of the divine, rooting around in the contemplative and introspective interplay with God," observed reporter Martha Sawyer Allen of the *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*, "and talking about women's daily experiences of the

divine in every culture as central to theology today."

Participants gathered around "talking" tables and were asked to scribble out spiritual thoughts with crayons, re-imagine God through emotional images, and sing a song of blessing to Sophia, the goddess of Wisdom.

When asked what she thought of the Sophia-oriented liturgy, one United Methodist Women (UMW) director said that she had never heard of Sophia before, but was sure she would learn more about her. This same UMW director decided not to participate in one of the table activities, but was encouraged to join in by her table facilitator even though participants were told from the podium

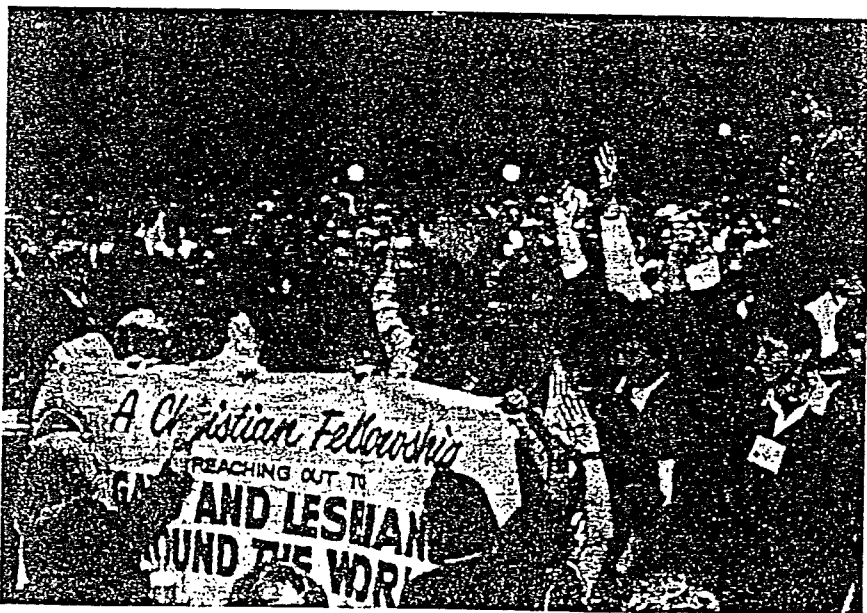
that they were either free to participate in activities or to abstain.

At one point in the conference, Melanie Morrison, co-founder of Christian Lesbians Out Together (CLOUT), requested time to celebrate "the miracle of being lesbian, out, and Christian." Then she invited all other lesbian, bisexual, and transsexual women to join hands and encircle the stage.

Religious News Service (RNS) estimates that "roughly 100 women converged upon the dais, many smiling. One held high the rainbow flag, which has become a symbol for the diversity among lesbians and gay men. Many of the women remaining in the audience rose to their feet and began to applaud."

The Rev. Kittredge Cherry, a minister in the predominately homosexual Metropolitan Community Church, was one of the women holding the rainbow flag. She told RNS that the goal of the demonstration was to help people "re-imagine" the church as the embodiment of justice for everyone, including lesbians and homosexual men.

The lesbian theme was heard repeatedly from major speakers. In a workshop called "Prophetic Voices of Lesbians in the Church," Nadean Bishop, the first "out" lesbian minis-



RNS PHOTO/Carlton Smith

Participants greet lesbian demonstrators with a standing ovation.

ter called to an American Baptist church, claimed that Mary and Martha in the Bible were lesbian "fore-sisters." She said that they were not actual sisters, but lesbian lovers.

Janie Spahr, a self-avowed lesbian clergywoman in the Presbyterian Church USA who was prevented by that denomination from serving a local church, said at the conclusion of her presentation that her theology is first of all informed by "making love with Coni," her lesbian partner. She then gave this challenge: "Sexuality and spirituality have to come together—and Church, we're going to teach you!"

Judy Westerdorf, a United Methodist clergywoman from Minnesota, told the workshop that the Church says God gives sexuality as a good gift, but that 1 out of 10 is a bad gift and you're not supposed to open it. (She was referring to claims that 10 percent of the population is homosexual, statistics that have been proven to be inaccurate.) Westerdorf added, "The Church has always been blessed by gays and lesbians, ...witches, ...shamans." She joked about the term "practicing homosexual," noting that her partner says she's not practicing, she's pretty good.

Theological Smorgasbord

The "Re-Imagining" event presented a smorgasbord of cultural ideas and religions, allowing attendees to pick and choose to their liking. "Be speculative," participants were told by conference organizers, "there is no 'answer.' We can't imagine what God is like. Being together in our own images is the ultimate."

There were other workshops that dealt with feminist theology, politics, music, and belly dancing.

One of the conference speakers lashed out against alleged oppression by Christian missionary teachings in India. Aruna Gnanadason, a native Indian feminist, explained



Conference participants celebrating the milk and honey ritual to Sophia.

The Presbyterian Layman

that the red dot on her forehead was a form of protest against those who said her forehead was only a place for the sign of the cross. She invited participants to join her in protest by crayoning a red dot on their foreheads as well. Gnanadason said that the red dot represented the "divine in each other." In this instance, the

about 500 individuals, began with singing to Sophia, and "bringing attention to our own bodies" and swaying to and fro. Participants were told that the ideal is to re-image Jesus within the feminist understanding from our cultural roots.

Presenter Deiores S. Williams, a

"I don't think we need a theory of atonement at all," said one conference speaker. "I don't think we need folks hanging on crosses and blood dripping and weird stuff."

mark of those not wearing the red dot was a very visible sign of those not fully participating with the conference activities.

Chung Hyun Kyung, one of the speakers, identified herself as a "recovering colonized Christian and a recovering feminist fundamentalist." The ideal is the "reincarnation of good," she said. Kyung explained that Asian theology totally rejects the idea of sinful man, propagating the understanding that humans are good and become better from the god within.

One major seminar was titled "Jesus," although no orthodox Christian understanding of Jesus was discussed. This seminar, attended by

"womanist" theology professor at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, said, "I don't think we need a theory of atonement at all." Her remark was greeted by applause. "Atonement has to do so much with death," she said. "I don't think we need folks hanging on crosses and blood dripping and weird stuff." Continuing, she said, "We do not need atonement, we just need to listen to the god within....If Jesus conquered sin, it was in the wilderness and life, not his death (resurrection). The first incarnation of God was not 'some dove on the shoulder,' but in Mary and her body." At this point, all the participants were encouraged to call out

“through a woman's body.”

Another feminist theologian who led the “Jesus” seminar was Kwok Pui-Lan. She said the Asian experience can't image any Jesus. She stated, “We cannot allow others to define our sin. What is our sin? Who is this funny God that would sacrifice a lamb. We don't even see a

Interreligious Concerns and a member of the Re-imagining Steering Committee; and Bishop Sharon Brown Christopher (Minnesota). UM funding sources were the Minnesota Conference Commission on the Status and Role of Women; Minnesota Conference UMW; Women's Division of the GBGM;

Christian faith of these denominations. To the contrary, the “Re-imagining” conference, the Women's Division's choice as the quadrennium's theological workshop, truly abandoned any form of orthodox Christian theology. As evidence, read the following liturgy of the service of milk and honey dedicated to Sophia:

“Our maker Sophia, we are women in your image: With the hot blood of our wombs we give form to new life. With the courage of our convictions we pour out lifeblood for justice....”

“Sophia, creator God, Let your milk and honey flow. Sophia, Creator God. Shower us with your love....”

“Our sweet Sophia, we are women in your image: With nectar between our thighs we invite a lover; we birth a child; With our warm body fluids we remind the world of its pleasures and sensations....”

“Our guide, Sophia, we are women in your image. With our moist mouths we kiss away a tear; we smile encouragement. With the honey of wisdom in our mouths, we prophesy a full humanity to all the peoples....”

“We celebrate the sensual life you give us. We celebrate the sweat that pours from us during our labors. We celebrate the fingertips vibrating upon the skin of a love. We celebrate the tongue which licks a wound or wets our lips. We celebrate our bodiliness, our physicality, the sensations of pleasure, our oneness with earth and water.”

Domie Chase is a United Methodist laywoman from Willard, Ohio. She has been a delegate to General Conference and has served on various national program boards for the UM Church. Susan Cyre of the Presbyterian Layman contributed research to this article.

More “Re-Imagining” information may be obtained by writing to ECUMW/RENEW, 587 Raford Wilson Rd., Commerce, GA 30529. A donation to cover processing expenses would be appreciated.

“We celebrate the sensual life you give us,” read the conference liturgy. “We celebrate our bodiliness, our physicality, the sensations of pleasure, our oneness with earth and water.”

lamb in the Asian experience. The Chinese do not have a word to compare to the Hebrew/Greek word for God.” Dr. Pui-Lan indicated that the Chinese do not believe God stands outside creation but that the humanist Confucian tradition emphasizes the propensity for good in humankind, and that they develop moral perfection and sainthood by maturing and emphasizing enlightenment.

Another seminar focused on the history and future of The Ecumenical Decade/Churches in Solidarity with Women. Begun by the United Nations, this program was limping along until the World Council of Churches gave it priority. It was noted that it is “truly amazing” that women have even stayed within the patriarchal churches. Participants were encouraged to ignore any charges of divisiveness; and not to worry about the collapse of unity within the churches.

Named as United Methodist sponsors for this event were: Bishop Forrest C. Stith, UM Co-Chairman of the U.S. Committee of the Ecumenical Decade/Churches in Solidarity with Women; Jeanne Audrey Powers of the General Commission on Christian Unity and

and Wesley United Methodist Church as a neighboring host.

“The seminaries and the Vatican can keep on defining orthodoxy largely for the passing-on of the traditions through the ordained clergy,” conference speaker and feminist theologian Elizabeth Bettenhausen told the *Star-Tribune*. “But we laity have always crossed our fingers behind our backs when they lay out what orthodoxy is. We know in our daily lives theology has to be much fresher and more flexible than the definitions of orthodoxy can ever be.”

For a conference which drew upon the mainline Christian denominations for its supporters, funding, and participants, this event utterly failed to represent the historic



Conference participants feeling for vibrations from “the Divine Spark Within.”

The Presbyterian Layman