

Sharing the good news of Jesus and His Kingdom and equipping the church to do the same.



Greg West, Evangelist

He is Risen!

The greatest news the world has ever heard came from a graveyard in Jerusalem! Most of Jesus' early followers didn't believe in the resurrection because the tomb was empty. They believed because they saw Him! They were eyewitnesses to the resurrected Christ.

Listen to their words of witness! Here are Peter's: "For we did not follow cleverly devised stories when we told you about the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ in power, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty" (2 Peter 1:16). Here are John's: "We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ" (1 John 1:3). Here is Paul saying that Jesus, risen, appeared to many: "After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep" (1 Corinthians 15:6).

Here are some of the phenomenal implications of Jesus rising from the dead:

Jesus is who He said He was . . . "Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies'" (John 11:25). Therefore, all of life finds its meaning in Christ! You have purpose and meaning and there is a plan for your life!

Also, there is life after death and more... Life before death! Jesus defined eternal life this way, "Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent" (John 17:3). He defines eternal life in terms of a relationship rather than length of time. George Herbert famously said, "Death was formerly an executioner; the Gospel has made it into a gardener."

What's Going on with the UMC?

The United Methodist Church has long been united in form, though not in practice. In recent times, we have watched as the Episcopal Church, the Presbyterian Church, and the Lutheran Church split. However, there was hope the UMC could avoid such a split.

The General Conference (GC) is the international gathering of delegates from the UMC which meets every 4 years to guide the church and legislate changes. Approximately 850 delegates are elected from every Conference around the world.

There has been a long-standing division in the UMC regarding

the authority and interpretation of Scripture, the practice of homosexuality being the main issue presenting the divide. At every GC since 1972, this topic has come up and each time the church has affirmed the clarity of Scripture. The UMC's Book of Discipline, which contains, among other things, our doctrine and principles of organization, reads: "The practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching." Therefore, United Methodist pastors are prohibited from officiating same sex weddings and those practicing homosexuality are prohibited from serving as pastors. There was a special called GC in 2019 to deal

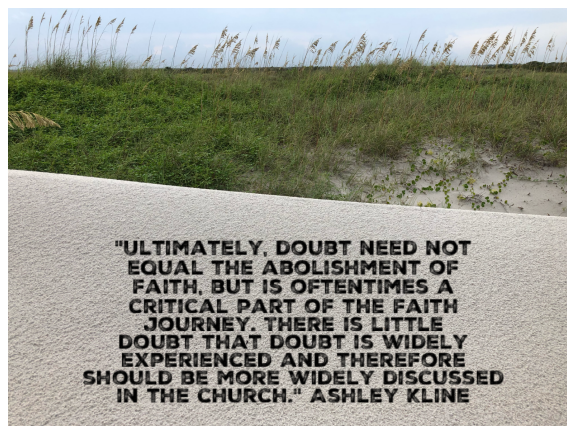


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Believing in Unbelief: Confronting Doubt

BY ASHLEY KLINE

ashley@lifeinhisname.net



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with the divisions based upon issues of human sexuality. The prohibitions against the practice of homosexuality were upheld. Those taking a progressive point of view, who are pushing for full affirmation of homosexual practice, see the issue at hand as one of justice. Those taking a traditionalist viewpoint see it primarily as one of Scriptural authority, considering homosexual practice as a rejection of God's Word. It became clear the divide was not going away. The direction of culture was made equally clear.

In 2016, a group of United Methodists who had a high regard for Scriptural authority gathered and formed the Wesley Covenant Associated (WCA). They agreed that if the UMC did not uphold the clear teachings of Scripture, they would start a new denomination.

In summer 2019, Kenneth Feinburg, a world renowned mediator, met with a group of theologically diverse United Methodists to see if a solution to the long division could be found. They came up with the Protocol of Reconciliation and Grace Through Separation. Amazingly, traditionalists, centrists and progressives agreed on this being the best way that the UMC move forward. It was a way to end the decades long division that consumed far too much time, energy and resources that could be used to fulfill Jesus' Great Commission! Things looked hopeful.

Then, the pandemic hit and General Conference 2020 was postponed until 2021. Some progressives felt they could not wait. Therefore, they split and formed the Liberation Methodist Connexion. The GC 2021 was postponed until 2022. In March of this year,

the announcement was made: General Conference further postponed until 2024.

On that same day, the Wesley Covenant Association announced that the Global Methodist Church, a new denomination, would launch May 1, 2022. A short time after these announcements, a pastor who served on the Commission on General Conference wrote an open letter to the church stating that the decision to postpone GC for a third time was done without integrity as part of a strategy to prevent the UMC from splitting.

So, it appears that the Protocol for Reconciliation and Grace through Separation's promise is on life support. Now, churches across the nation are making plans to separate from the UMC. Rather than one clear plan for separation accompanied by reconciliation and grace, a splintering is occurring.

We have a shared covenant as a church, the Book of Discipline (BOD). We have whole jurisdictions of our church that have voted to reject and ignore parts of the BOD pertaining to human sexuality. However, Bishop Sharma Lewis, our current Bishop in the Virginia Conference, has held to the covenant, upholding the BOD.

I grieve that when the historical questions of Rev. John Wesley are asked to those about to be ordained, many are not answering truthfully. "Do you know our doctrines and discipline?" – "Yes." "Are you in agreement with them" – **fingers crossed...** "Yes." When I shared this with a friend who serves in the UMC in Connecticut, he said that in this Conference they answer that second question with, "No," and are ordained anyway. We are already split and have been for a long time. The crucial question is can we formalize the split in a peaceful way?

▶▶▶ Belief

Doubt in God's existence, and therefore God's presence, is a common struggle experienced by believers and non-believers alike. Recently, I realized a truth I once refused to confess: I too had doubt.

Since coming to faith, I have constantly struggled to see God's presence due to doubts regarding His existence. Were the selfless acts of those who surrounded me in the body of Christ *really* a reflection of God's presence within them, or was I seeing no more than the influence of faith in God? Were these acts simply a result of mind over matter? When looking at early church martyrs, is it possible that their faith in God alone equipped them to choose death as opposed to the presence of God himself? Having a psychology degree, I believed in the infinite power and capacity of the human mind. However, I did not fully believe in the presence of God. This prevented me from being able to recognize so many examples of God's existence and presence.

A few weeks ago over lunch, a good friend of mine spoke a beautiful word into this doubt: our God is beyond human conception and understanding. If our God is unable to be conceived, how is it we can have faith in Him in the first place? When looking at other religions, it becomes clear that what we see are gods crafted by human hands.

For example, it is typical for other gods to have origin stories. In Hinduism, some state that the creator god, Brahma, one

of the main gods along with Vishnu and Shiva, was born from an egg. Others have him originating from Vishnu's naval. In either case, there is an explanation of where he came from. In contrast, our God is said to be eternal, having neither beginning nor end. The origins of the Judeo-Christian God are unknown and unexplained, going against our human inclination to have as thorough answers as possible regarding our origins (Psalm 90:2 – "From everlasting to everlasting you are God").

Additionally, many gods from other religions possess very human characteristics. When assessing many indigenous religions, those practiced by smaller native communities, we tend to see trickster gods. Tricksters are those characterized by deception and fraudulence, both very human.

On the other hand, the trinitarian Judeo-Christian God possesses characteristics counter to our human inclinations. Therefore, such characteristics would be difficult for the human mind to construe. For example, consider how our God abolishes the principle of "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth" and moves us from this principle to the completely counterintuitive "Love your enemies!"

Ultimately, doubt need not equal the abolishment of faith, but is oftentimes a critical part of the faith journey. There is little doubt that doubt is widely experienced and therefore should be more widely discussed in the church (Mark 9:24 – "Lord, I believe; help me overcome my unbelief").