

A Marriage of Christianity(s)
Christian Exploration in a Time of Change
Pastor's Lenten Study
2019

In any relationship, particularly those moving toward a marriage, as I enter into a time of premarital counseling, it becomes increasingly obvious that, almost without exception, the two individuals are very different from one to another, and yet seeking to be united to create something new. I also think all of us understand that any marriage has its challenges, has times that are tough, frustrating, even divided. And yet, to make it successful, marriage has to be filled with compromises. It has to be filled with a deeper understanding and acceptance of each other, of the pluses, the disagreements, and the challenges. If either is not willing to explore, compromise, or communicate, more often than not, the marriage will become frustrating, angering, and more deeply divided, where, unless something significant happens, the outcome could ultimately be a divorce. So, part of the role of the pastor is to assist the two individuals to learn about systems, techniques, finding similarities, and how the two could, if willing to practice, become one. The role in premarital counseling is to help the two grow, understand, explore, trust, examine, and ultimately find a way to unite into something healthier. To offer the tools that can assist them through both good times and bad. As one author stated, to offer opportunities to become something more, where the sum is greater than the individual parts. I believe we are in such a time.

As General Conference unfolds this week, we also enter a time of exploration, of potentially becoming something more; with the possibility that the sum of our pasts, our differences, our understandings and experiences of faith all could combine to lead us into a time filled with possibilities. Those possibilities exist because of a God that lay at the core of who we are. With God there is always the potential to find something more, something new, something stronger, greater, even essential as we continue to explore our way into the future. It is true with any couple. It is true with any church. It is true with a denomination. So, to begin this Lenten study I want to take some time to define the two entities; the two very different understandings of Christianity, the two individual belief systems that created the need for a special session of our own General Conference. Understanding the two sides goes well beyond the issue of homosexuality. It is so much deeper than that one issue. So, to understand each we need to explore, like a couple in premarital counseling, the differences, the similarities, the aspirations, the histories and more. Out of that exploration my hope is to find at least some of the essentials that can lead us toward a greater expression of our faith, a greater understanding of our strengths, the challenges that may face us in the unknown future, the potential places of compromise, and our potential marriage one to another. So, here is what I'm proposing for my Lenten classes.

Part one will explore the two individuals, the two sides, if you will. We'll examine the whole idea of conservative evangelical Christianity, and the whole idea of liberal progressive Christianity. In as much as I don't find those labels helpful, they are what we have. Both sides carry tenets that could strengthen the other. Both offer perspectives that, when combined can strengthen each other's overall faith. Before getting to the place of exploring or even combining

ourselves into one Church, we first need to understand more clearly the basics of both personalities. From there, we can explore the next steps. That explains Part One.

Part Two will explore our own heritage; the underpinnings of Methodism and why that has become a sticking point for both sides. In as much as John Wesley was clear about his expectations of this movement, particularly in his time, we are less sure of how that history translates into our time. So, what were his hopes, desires, intentions, aspirations for this movement? What has changed and why? These are a few things we'll explore in Part Two.

Part Three will then explore the two very different sides of Jesus; his words, actions, fundamental understandings, and why he did what he did. Both sides find expression in his words and actions, his death and resurrection. He really is the perfect combination of the two individualized sides, and to whom both turn for foundational beliefs and practices. We'll also look at Paul; how his understanding changed the whole idea of Jesus and Christianity.

Part Four will begin to explore some of the elements that could allow a uniting of the two; places where we share ideals, personalities, strengths, even weaknesses that, I believe, have the potential of bringing us together to become stronger than the sum of the two parts. This should lead us toward a very interesting discussion. That brings us to part five.

Part Five will explore us, Aldersgate United Methodist Church; where we are, who we are, and how we can become a place where the marriage of the two individual parts can potentially come together to bring strength to us and set us on a path toward an even better future. We have both sides in this congregation. On each we have some who are quiet and some who are much more overt. We have those on the fence and others who find themselves somewhat in the middle. We represent our denomination, particularly United Methodists in the United States. We are a microcosm of the greater whole. If we can find a way forward, a way that is healthy, recognizes the strengths of the other, talks opening about the challenges, then maybe we can help others. It is at the heart of what makes us who we are. Now let's see if we can strengthen that even further.

That's the basic outline, yet in the midst of it all, we'll also spend some time exploring the history of Christianity; where the two aspects began to separate and where the two have, in the past, come together. Finally, we'll explore General Conference; how the discussions emerged, why, and what the decisions (or lack thereof - yup, I'm not convinced that a decision will come out of the time in St Louis) created.

I realize as I write this, the enormity of what I'm / we're trying to take on. The beauty is that this can expand beyond Lent, and move into the post Easter spring classes. I believe that to be a very realistic possibility. That being said, the Lenten study will give us the tools for further exploration, how General Conference will influence what we do as a church, including our discussion around becoming a Reconciling congregation. My hope is that, in the final days of this exploration we will find that, like premarital counseling, and ultimately a wedding, the potential strength that can be found in the combination of these two equally important aspects of our faith and practice; of what it means to be Christians united as one body, with one Spirit, and one Lord.

Part One - Who We Are I

-The many definitions of Evangelicalism and Progressivism; both seek to be in relationship with God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. But how does that similarities also create a divide

-What are the key, non-negotiable tenets of each and why each is seen as a deal-breaker

Part Two - Who We Are II

-One Body as United Methodists (if that still holds true) and Wesley's dream of this movement. Remember, he never intended this to become a denomination. It was a response to what he had seen in denominational Christianity.

-Our own defining Methodist history and why each party can state without pause that they are unapologetically the more accurate definition of what it means to be a Methodist.

Part Three - Who We Are III

-In premarital counseling we often look for where the major differences may be found, and why they are there. We'll do that in this section. More often than not, those differences come out of family histories. So this week we'll explore our "family of origin" differences and why recognizing those is important. Part Three will take Part One to deeper levels.

-We'll document those differences, much like I would in a premarital counseling session, and hold them until next week. I'll give each of us assignments that will help deepen our personal views of where we stand in the midst of those differences.

Part Four - Who We Are IV

-We'll take a more serious look at scripture and key verses for each side. It will not be a re-hashing of the Bible study we did last year as much as creating a foundation of this time of exploration. I'll focus more on the New Testament, not the Old; on Jesus and certain elements of Paul.

-We'll take some time to then examine Jesus and how both sides interpret his life, actions, death and resurrection. Then more specifically at Paul and how his interpretations changed everything and created the kinds of disagreements we have today.

-We'll not only define the differences but also the places where both connect, and create the possible similarities of who we are and what we could be

Part Five - Who We Are V

-Finally, we'll take a look at us, Aldersgate, the differences of theology, spiritual understanding, our differing passions and focus, and see if, given what we've explored, we can come together as an even stronger Body of Christ

-And yes, we'll explore the outcomes of General Conference and try and find a unified responses, and begin to look more specifically at what it means for us.

A Few of The Resources

Brian McLaren	"We Make a Road by Walking"
Martin Borg	"The Heart of Christianity"
John D Crossan	"The History of Christianity"
Leroy Barber	"Embrace"
Smith and Sellon	"Pathway to Renewal"
Eric Walker	"The Seven Laws of Abundant Living"
Anne Spangler	"Sitting at the Feet of Rabbi Jesus"
Sarah Ruden	"Paul Among the People"
Jack Miles	"God - A Biography"
Greg Riley	"One Jesus - Many Christs"
Thomas Bandy	"Moving Off the Map"
Foster and Beebe	"Longing for God"

...and quite a few others...

I'll introduce other resources as the class moves along. My hope is that this will help us come to terms with whatever happens at General Conference, but will not be dependent on whatever outcomes there may be in St. Louis. I think this will be a time of quality Lenten practices that can take us deeper in our own faith, and particularly in our understanding of who we are as we, like Brian McLaren states, "Build a Road While Walking."