

- ***READ Ephesians 4:11-13*** Every year I receive an invitation to a ministers' breakfast that is put on by one of the local funeral homes. It is my usual practice to go and participate with other men who serve churches in the Jackson area. Men from all sorts of religious backgrounds are there, and many of them are familiar with one another. I usually don't know anyone else that is there, but it allows for some opportunities to meet people from the community. This last breakfast that was back a couple of months back came with a particularly interesting discussion that I would like to share with you all to set the foundation for our study and considerations this morning.
- As is usually the case, I sat down at a table with three to four men that I did not know. We went through the normal introductory remarks of "Hi, what is your name and what church do you work with?" I mostly sat there and listened to others catch up with one another, but then a man who works with a local Methodist church engaged me in conversation. He asked again which church I "pastored", so I responded that I preach for the Pleasant Plains Church of Christ.
- He then proceeded to ask about how often I preached, so I responded that I was the primary preacher every week. He asked if we had any other pastors, so I responded that we actually have four pastors in addition to me as the preacher. He was confused as to what responsibilities the four pastors have if I was doing the preaching every Sunday. I explained that my primary responsibilities were with preaching and teaching and that the pastors took care of the pastoral duties of taking care of the spiritual needs of the members of the church. His next statement was one that I will not soon forget, "Wow! That sounds very simple and effective for you to focus on the preaching and teaching and they focus on the pastoring!" Folks, I am not making a bit of this up! After chuckling a little in my head, I responded with something along the lines of the fact that we simply try to keep things as simple as the Bible seems to indicate they are.
- Some weeks later, I am left understanding a little more why it is that this particular man might have been so intrigued by the simplicity of how things operate here within this church. You might have noticed from the news within the past couple of weeks that there has been a big controversy within the United Methodist denomination (UMC) over the way they would move forward in respect to the issue of homosexuality. Conferences, Councils, and Creeds were on the minds of nearly every person who is a part of that denomination, and I would like to spend our time of study this morning considering the Methodist model of handling business, some issues I think exist in the way they do things in respect to the Bible, and a couple of solutions that I believe would help them and all religious people when it comes to why and how we do what we do in our faiths.

I. The Methodist Model

A. The Methodist Constitution requires that the General Conference serve as the legislative body of the denomination.

1. The UMC website reads, "*The United Methodist Church does not have a central headquarters or a single executive leader. Duties are divided among bodies that include the General Conference, the Council of Bishops, and the Judicial Council. Each of these entities is required by our Constitution, a foundational document, to be part of our structure, and plays a significant role in the life of the church.*"
2. This General Conference is the "*the only body that speaks officially for the church. Meeting once every four years to determine legislation affecting connectional matters, it is composed of no fewer than 600 and no more than 1,000 delegates.*" The delegates to this conference come from not just all over the United States, but also all over the world. The decisions made by this conference carry weight among all of the United Methodist churches throughout the entire world. The Council of Bishops oversees the general ministry and mission work of the church while the Judicial Council deals in matters of disobedience to the rules outlined in the Book of Discipline.

B. The General Conference produces the "Book of Discipline" which serves as the rule book for the denomination.

1. That Book of Discipline serves as the set standard for law and doctrine within the UMC. Every four years the General Conference meets to decide on any changes or additions that are needed within the Book of Discipline. The current Book of Discipline from 2016 can be purchased online with the next edition slated for production after the next scheduled meeting of the General Conference in 2020 in Minneapolis, Minnesota.
2. From the denomination's website, *"Working within the boundaries of the Church Constitution and General Rules, the General Conference defines and fixes the conditions, privileges and duties of church membership; the powers and duties of elders, deacons, diaconal ministers and local pastors; and the powers and duties of annual conferences, missionary conferences, charge conferences and congregational meetings. It authorizes the organization, promotion and administrative work of the church. The General Conference also defines the powers and duties of the episcopacy, authorizes the official hymnal and book of worship, provides a judicial system and procedures, initiates and directs all connectional enterprises of the church and enacts other legislation for the operation of the church."*

C. When issues arise, delegates are sent to gather as the General Conference to vote on what should take place.

1. While there are normally scheduled Conferences every four years, there are times when special Conferences are needed to address exceptionally important matters such as would be the case back in February when the General Conference met to debate the issue of homosexuality within the UMC. For decades, the UMC has been debating the issue of how their churches were to respond to practicing homosexuals. The current official position is that the denomination recognizes homosexuality as being incompatible with Biblical teachings, but the vast majority of those who make up the Council of Bishops are in favor of inclusion of homosexuals.
2. With their support there have been strong pushes by different groups within the denomination for the church to change their stance in order to approve of and host homosexual weddings as well as ordain openly practicing homosexual clergy. The proposition for more inclusion is the One Church Plan while those who want to see the current policy continued support the Traditional plan.
3. After a couple days of debating on the issue, it was eventually voted 438-384 that the Traditional plan would remain in place. Many took to the mic during the discussion period to cry against this vote with many making statements that whole congregations would be leaving the denomination if it continues to ignore the changing culture with the denomination, especially those that make up the American contingent. Another aspect of this discussion within the denomination that is worthy of mentioning is the fact that the Judicial Council has actually ruled parts of the Traditional plan to be unconstitutional which means it will have to be reexamined when they get together for their next meeting at the end of April.

I use this example of what is going on within the United Methodist Church simply because it is probably on the minds of many of us who have seen it on the news or on social media, but the reality is that this type of organization and system can be found in many different denominations. However, if we look around at how we do things within this church then we quickly realize that things are way different and we simply don't subscribe to this type of model. But...why is that the case? Is it because we simply think our way is better? The reality is that we might very well think that is the case. However, we would have to follow that up by admitting that this model isn't of our own design. When comparing how we operate to what we see happening around us, we must be the first to admit that we don't do what others do first and foremost because there are some inconsistencies that can be found in the way they go about operating as a church and what we find described in the Bible.

II. The Issues With This Model

A. Organizing as an earthly entity larger than the local church.

1. The concept of having a General Conference, Council of Bishops, or Judicial Council that is made up of delegates from churches all over the world is a concept that is foreign to what we have given to us within the teachings of the New Testament. In fact, the only spiritual entities that can be found within the New Testament would be local churches and the church universal. **(Hebrews 12:22,23)**
2. Many of the New Testament Letters were written to local churches who were in need of Apostolic guidance on different issues. These churches consisted of individuals that lived in cities such as Rome, Corinth, and Thessalonica. When issues within these local churches arose, the Apostle Paul would write to address these issues and give instruction on what needed to be done. Instead of these churches sending delegates to create a General Conference, the disciples would seek out the guidance of the Apostles. This seems to be the clear pattern.
3. This is seen as being done in **Acts 15**. There were some Jews who were coming up north to Antioch from Judea teaching that the Gentiles who were coming to Christ also needed to uphold the requirements of the Law. Paul and Barnabas were in Antioch and strongly debated against these Jews, but the church decided that it would be good for Paul and Barnabas to go down to Jerusalem to inquire from the Apostles and elders of that church concerning what the truth on this matter was.
4. At this point we might be thinking that this sounds like the Methodist Model of dealing with controversies, but I would argue that what takes place in **Acts 15** is vastly different from what we have seen over the past couple of weeks. Firstly, this was not a grand council of men from all over. This was a localized issue in Antioch, and these brethren sought to gain Apostolic guidance from those men who Jesus had elevated to the position of leaders of the church in its earliest days. **(Matthew 19:28)** These were not random people making judgements based upon their own desires and opinions, but they were men, specifically Peter, Paul, Barnabas, and James, who were specially endowed with the Holy Spirit and looking at what God had been doing and drawing conclusions based upon the evidence. What takes place in **Acts 15** is vastly different from what has taken place within the UMC model over the past couple of weeks. Instead of local churches being autonomous and looking only to Apostolic teachings, they have banded together to create a body that has the power to litigate and speak for how multiple churches ought to operate. This model simply doesn't seem to harmonize with what we see in Scripture.

B. Voting on something God has already spoken on.

1. Additionally, let's point out that this particular issue isn't even an issue in which there should be much debate! While there are some issues that might require some real tough digging within Scripture to come to a proper understanding and conclusion, we must admit that homosexuality is not one of them. The New Testament and even the Bible as a whole is abundantly clear that homosexuality is a perversion of God's design for human interactions. In the beginning God put a man and woman together in marriage as one flesh. **(Genesis 2:24 & Matthew 19:4,5)** Paul would go on to speak against homosexual practices in **Romans 1:24-32 & I Corinthians 6:9,10**.
2. The reality is that the issue of homosexuality isn't really even up for debate, and this would be true concerning many other plain and simple teachings found within the New Testament. The issue resides in the fact that many people simply want to figure out some way to work around that has been handed down in Scripture. They refuse to acknowledge the fact that the writings of Scripture are not simply the opinions of men, but that they are of the mind of God. **(II Peter 1:20,21)** Anything less than full recognition of Scripture being the divine Word and containing the will of God will only lead men to thinking that they have the ability to decide for themselves what they will do on any particular issues. It will even lead them to adopting something else as their authority over the Bible itself.

C. Adopting a creed or set of rules other than that of the teachings of Jesus and His Apostles.

1. Both of these things, organizing in a greater capacity than the local church and making decisions on things God has already spoken on, can traced back to the reality that within the UMC they are required as being necessary by the UMC constitution. Again, the issues come down to an understanding of authority and why we do what we do within our lives as Christians. The reality is that I can find nothing at all said in Scripture that gives any sort of instruction for churches to adopt and operate based on the authority of anything outside of what has been handed down by Jesus or His inspired and Holy Spirit filled Apostles.
2. When Paul wrote to the Thessalonians to instruct them on how they were to respond to some strange teachings that had caused them great concern, he told them in **II Thessalonians 2:15**, *“So then, brethren, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught, whether by word of mouth or by letter from us.”* Notice that Paul instructs these brethren to not hold to any traditions except those that were handed down to them by the Apostles. We understand that Paul and the other Apostles were able to instruct such a thing based upon the authority that was given to them by Jesus as the leaders of the church. Only their traditions and teachings are to be held on to as truths that apply to all Christians who make up the Body of Christ across the world.
3. There is no need for a Book of Discipline, Constitution, or any other sort of creed book because the Apostles had already passed down the traditions that we are in need of knowing and following. They are the one who have received those things which lead to life and godliness (**II Peter 1:3,4**), and it is those things that they have shared with us through their writings which then allow us to have access to life, godliness, and the precious and great promises of God. Those things are only available through the writings of the Apostles and no other man or group.

III. The Solutions To These Issues

A. Keep it simple.

1. When comparing how we operate as an autonomous local church with our own local leadership dealing only with local issues to what we see within the massive UMC denomination, it can be easy to see how it is that the man I was speaking with was impressed by our simplicity. Yet, I want us to recognize that we are only organized in this simplistic way because it is how we see local churches within the New Testament organized. It is the simplistic design that we see given to us in **Ephesians 4:11-13**. I want us to recognize that it was the wisdom of God surely helped Him realize that keeping things simple as they are is the best way.
2. It can only be God’s wisdom that realized that local issues are best addressed by local leaders who look to the Word to make decisions. That is the difference between what we face today with what happened in Antioch. At Antioch in **Acts 15** there was not yet any organized work that contained the will of Jesus through His Apostles. Instead, they actually had the Apostles that they could directly go to for help. We simply don’t have that ability today with the Apostles long gone, but thanks be to God that He has given us their teachings contained within the Bible that we can look to for guidance. That may be too simplistic a mode of operation for some, but it is only as simple as what is laid out for us in the Bible. We should desire to be no more complicated or simple than what God’s Word reveals to us.

B. Submit wholly to Christ’s authority.

1. One important aspect of what is revealed to us in the Bible is the fact that Jesus Christ is reigning as King (*“How lovely on the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who announces peace and brings good news of happiness, who announces salvation, and say to Zion, ‘Your God reigns.’”* **Isaiah 52:7**). Jesus clearly stated that the church is His church that He purchased with His own blood. (**Matthew 16:18**) He has been declared as both Lord and Christ. (**Acts 2:36**)

2. All of this simply shows us the reality that we ought to only be concerned with doing what is His will in all things. When we reach a point where we recognize Jesus's authority over His church and His people then things will automatically become much more simple because we're not having to worry about what society might think. We won't have to worry about seeking to please anyone but our King. When we fully submit to His will then we will be on a path that leads us to where He would have us to go. It is truly all about Jesus. It is not about us and our desires. It is not about conferences, councils, or creeds of men. It is His church and we must be what He would have us to be...nothing more and nothing less.

When I look on TV and read in different places the struggles that are taking place in different religious bodies, it truly causes me sadness because so many of the issues that are taking place could be alleviated if those who desire to serve God would only allow themselves to take a step back and recognize how difficult they are making things on themselves by not allowing God's simple design to work in the way it was intended to work. God's wisdom far surpasses our own and any endeavor we pursue that deviates from that design will only be to our detriment. God didn't design His people to operate with conferences, councils, and creeds because He knew that wasn't what was best for us. May we all humble ourselves to submit to the wisdom of God. May we be content with the simple design of His church, and may we all reap the benefits of our faithfulness to His ways.