

The American Sexual Revolution and Methodist Sexual Ethics¹

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As described on *Night Call*, a radio show produced by the Television, Radio, and Film Commission of the Methodist Church, the 1960s were “an age of transition, between the old and new world,” when traditional mores were “broken down,” and young persons were “trying to find some new answers for this new world.”² Spoken by Dr. Allen Moore, a social theologian at Claremont School of Theology, these words help us understand the social and sexual predicament that youth and the church experienced during the 1960s. Youth turned to movies, television, radio, music, and even publications like *Playboy*, looking for answers to the questions brought about by rapid social and sexual change. Dr. Moore argues that youth were turning more to other sources for answers and less to the church because the church was not willing to have a frank, open, and honest conversation about sexuality. If the church wanted to be relevant during this time, then it, too, would have to find new ways to speak about sexuality. The Methodist Church did so in the 1960s through a radical sexual ethic, *the new morality*. The new morality allowed Methodists to experiment with new and progressive approaches to sex education, primarily through a curriculum entitled *Sex and the Whole Person*, which laid the foundation for Methodist support of abortion legalization and the rights of persons who identify as LGBTQI. Advocated on the local level by Methodist ministers and in the administrative level by the Board of Education and Board of Social Concerns, the Methodist embrace of the new morality made the 1960s the most sexually progressive decade in Methodist history. The new morality also reignited a conservative evangelical flame within the denomination that would continuously strive to reverse or limit the influence of the new morality. Thus, the

¹ This paper is a compilation of three chapters from Ashley B. Dreff, *Entangled: A History of American Methodism, Politics, and Sexuality* (Nashville, TN: New Room Books, 2018). For more information and evidence on how Methodist sexual ethics embraced the new morality in the 1960s please see *Entangled*.

² “Playboyism, A New Religious Alternative,” *Night Call* (September 29, 1969), 2:01–2:17, accessed 1/23/2017, http://catalog.gcah.org/DigitalArchives/NightCall/Dr_Moore_DA_1067.mp3. 7:00–7:18.

embrace of this new sexual ethic was the epitome of Methodist progressivism and the catalytic agent of Methodist evangelicalism.

First a few words need to be defined. Throughout this paper, the terms *evangelical* and *progressive* will be used to describe two extremes within Methodism. For the purposes of this paper, an evangelical is one who adheres to a literal interpretation of the Bible in regards to sexuality. For this person, changes in society and in sexuality should never alter or influence a biblical understanding of sexuality or the world. With this as their base, evangelical Methodists tend to believe that sex education should be solely guided by scriptural teachings, abortion ends human life, sexual relationships between cis-gender men and women are the only biblically sanctioned sexual relationship, and those who identify as LGBTQI must be celibate in order to maintain rightness with God. American religious historian, Marie R. Griffith defines evangelicals as “those who oppose changes in the norms governing social expectations and legal frameworks for regulating sex and gender.”³ This definition is apt for this paper if we also take into account the “norms” of theological frameworks. If scripture is the normative power in this situation, then evangelicals are those persons who deny any changes in “traditional” (read: literal) interpretations of scripture when it comes to sexuality. Any deviation from this theological framework or any act that threatens the power of the heterosexual relationship is thus deemed “sinful” or against scripture.

In the opposing camp, progressive Methodists are those who are open to new interpretations of scripture and to non-scriptural authorities in order to better understand the fluidity of sexuality. Again, turning to Griffith, she defines progressives as “those who are comfortable with at least some of those changes or who grow comfortable in time.” For Griffith, progressives want “*inclusive*” change, or to “expand access to power and influence for persons once excluded, marginalized, or

³ Marie R. Griffith, *Moral Combat: How Sex Divided American Christians and Fractured American Politics* (New York: Basic Books, 2017) xi.

stigmatized for behaving outside the norm.”⁴ Thus progressives tend to use scientific, sociological, and psychological frameworks to support new interpretations of scripture when it comes to sex education, abortion rights, and the rights of persons who identify as LGBTQI. If scripture is still the normative power, then progressives tend to be those who re-examine scripture, who use other sources to better understand scripture, or attempt to make scripture more inclusive of today’s diversity.

These two camps and these two labels are controversial and problematic. They risk grouping people together who do not want to be categorized the same way. They risk ignoring the middle majority which hold positions somewhere between evangelical and progressive. They risk disregarding the necessary nuance that often accompanies theological, social, and sexual discussions. However, “On any given sexual issue at any given time...the overall clash has ultimately crystallized into two sides: those favoring, to varying degrees, change and progress versus those keen to preserve order and tradition.”⁵ This holds true for Methodism. When it comes to how the denomination responds to changes in society, there, historically and contemporarily, tend to be those who try to preserve “tradition,” “orthodoxy,” or “historic” Methodism and those who try to adapt the denomination to speak to the needs of our diverse and ever-changing world.

One of the more poignant ways that these differences appear is through discussions of sex and sexuality. Evangelicals tend to focus on the act of sex. They stress the genders of those persons involved in the act. They stress the marital status of those involved. And they stress the results or consequences of those acts, primarily what happens if conception occurs. Progressives, on the other hand, tend to emphasize sexuality, the wholeness of a person as it relates to their sexual desires and their sexual identity. Progressives are more concerned with how the act of sex affects our

⁴ Ibid. Emphasis original.

⁵ Ibid., xii.

relationships with others, with self, and with God; in other words, how does the act of sex inhibit or complement our sexuality? Does the act of sex cause us to trust or love others more? Does the expression of our sexuality contribute to our growth as people of God?

Popularized in the 1960s, the new morality combined sexuality with authentic personhood. In order to continually be remade in the Image of God, one has to continually engage with one's sexuality as a God-given good. This ethic, however, meant different things to different people. Some understood it as a license for greater sexual freedom. Others understood it as an endorsement of "love makes [sex] right," married or not. Some understood it as a "need to think through what is right today" and a need to "think through the things [the church] said have been wrong."⁶ Strictly speaking, however, the new morality was a situational ethic that prioritized love above all else and de-emphasized rigid rules as dictating what acts Christians ought to do or ought not to do. It advocated human agency over institutional normativity. It was an ethic with "nothing prescribed—except love."⁷ Adopted and analyzed by prominent ethicists of the day, such as John A. T. Robinson and Joseph Fletcher, the new morality prioritized God's command to love as primary, as *the* orienting principle for life. Joseph Fletcher used the new morality to stress our duty to love God and love neighbor. When applied as an ethical framework, it "holds that whatever is the most loving thing in the situation is the right and good thing."⁸

Methodists were not the only Protestant denomination to adopt the new morality during the 1960s. However, with love as its orienting principle, the new morality fit well with Methodist theology. John Wesley preached sanctification above all else. Sanctification, most simply put, is a continuous engagement with God in order to reorient yourself towards love of God and love of

⁶ "Playboysim," 2:5–3:30.

⁷ John G. Milhaven and David J. Casey, "Introduction to the Theological Background of the New Morality," *Theological Studies*, 28, no. 2 (June 1967): 213.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 238.

neighbor. It is a striving to makes one's natural impulse, one's natural response to all things, one of love. As John Wesley advocated, holding love as our theological and ethical principle enables Methodists to easily comply with the standards of the new morality.

Sex Education

Methodists and other Protestants were first introduced to the concept of the new morality through the First North American Conference on Church and Family at Green Lake, Wisconsin.⁹ Held in 1961, the conference brought together the National Council of Churches and the Canadian Council of Churches. There, “convened ministers, counselors, and medical experts in human sexuality for a discussion focused on the ‘stresses and strains’ facing modern families.” Discussion included the problems of “unmarried pregnancy, masturbation, homosexuality, infidelity, abortion, and sin.”¹⁰ The conference developed an ethic for sex education, which promoted “authentic selfhood” instead of scriptural commandments as its orienting principle. Since social and sexual norms were challenged by the sexual revolution, the “churches needed to develop ways to talk about sex and sexual decision making that would empower youth and young adults—as well as their parents—to make choices that expressed their own moral commitments.” The conference concluded that the church needed to “re-evaluate attitudes toward marriage and sex, in light of biblical theology and scientific findings” as well as “develop a positive Christian ethic on sexual behavior which will be relevant to our culture.”¹¹ Having learned the benefits of the new morality, Methodists and other Protestant denominations returned home ready to reevaluate sex education using the new morality.

⁹ Donald T. Critchlow, *Intended Consequences: Birth Control, Abortion, and the Federal Government in Modern America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 194. Daniel K. Williams, *Defenders of the Unborn: The Pro-Life Movement before Roe v. Wade* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 51.

¹⁰ Heather R. White, *Reforming Sodom: Protestants and the Rise of Gay Rights* (Chapel Hill, NC: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2015) 116–117.

¹¹ Elizabeth Genne and William Genne, *Christians and the Crisis in Sex Morality* (New York: Association Press, 1962) 120.

The application of the new morality in sex education was the first time Methodists, and other Protestants, employed the ethic. They concluded that “*only* ethical norm that Christians should follow” was “love.”¹² Methodists in attendance took the new morality and in consultation with the Sex Education Task Force of the Board of Education created *Sex and the Whole Person*, a sex education curriculum designed to provide persons with the information necessary to empower individuals with the ability to make their own moral and sexual decisions. Written primarily by Frank E. Weir, the stated goals of *Sex and the Whole Person* were “(1) That you may understand what it means to be male or female; (2) That you may rejoice wholeheartedly in being such a person; and (3) That you may express this joy, in relationship to persons, in appropriate and productive ways.”¹³ Created by the Board of Education in 1962, this course upheld the General Conference mandate of creating “courses of study for young people regarding Christian attitudes toward sex and personality growth.”¹⁴ As a ten-week course, senior high school teenagers and their parents were taught “biblical, psychological, and physiological information” with the goal of developing “Christian standards concerning sex.” During the course, “no one is told, nor is the impression given, that a specific action is right or wrong.” Instead, “guidelines are set up by giving all the facts concerning all of the facets of sexual relationships, from definitions of terms, all the way through psychological and emotional actions and reactions to all forms of sexual stimuli.” The goal was to allow each person to “make his [or her] own decision about his [or her] sex life” using the Christian attitude learned during the course.¹⁵ This course was the first of its kind to teach parents and teens together, to make them more comfortable discussing sex in small groups, and to teach both at the same time the

¹² White, *Reforming Sodom*, 117–118, emphasis original.

¹³ Frank E. Weir, *Sex and the Whole Person* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1964) 5.

¹⁴“Guidelines for using *Sex and the Whole Person: A Christian View*,” 2; administrative records of the General Board of Discipleship, “Sex Education Resource Packet,” 2355–6–1:36, GCAH.

¹⁵ Lee Vance, “Sex Education for United Methodist Youth,” (Nashville, TN: The General Committee on Family Life, 1969) in *Sex Education Resource Packet*; Records of Health and Welfare Ministries, “Sex Education Resource Packet 1964-66,” 2355-6-1:38, GCAH.

realities of sex in the 1960s. Its willingness to allow for individual moral authority and agency instead of mandating rules which supported social and scriptural normativity was radical for the time and formed the basis for the denomination's new sexual ethic, the new morality.

Responses to *Sex and the Whole Person* varied. Attendees gave their testimony of the course. Lee Vance recalled:

Until now, the church has done little except to put out some Pharisee-like rules and regulations that say only one thing to a teen-ager—Don't. It seems to me that Christ, with understanding and love, would consider all of the facts and circumstances involved, to decide what was right in any particular situation. Now, at least, the Methodist Church is trying precisely that approach—a sensible, practical, and realistic approach to sex.¹⁶

Another attendee, Phillip Royal, stated:

The Methodist Church has taken a small step, but an important one, in the right direction. For many years, we have preached, taught, and discussed the matter of making [people] whole. We have proclaimed that the gospel makes [people] whole; yet we have neglected one important phase of the wholeness—sex. Now, however, a small voice can be heard saying, "Sex is an important part of life. We must learn to approach it with a Christian attitude if we are to be 'whole persons.'"¹⁷

These two testimonies make it is clear that the Boards of Education and Social Concerns were at the forefront of revising the Methodist sexual ethic in order to be more than a rules-based morality enforced solely in the light of Scripture. However, not everyone was as accepting of the new morality or of the Methodist Church's sex education curriculum.

Karen Booth, director of Transforming Congregations, argues that the "moral revisionism" of Methodist and United Methodist boards and agencies "began with the...development of sex education material." She understands the work of the Board of Education as "value-neutral...in which biblical guidelines on sexual morality were downplayed, or, at best, placed under the authority

¹⁶ "Guidelines for using *Sex and the Whole Person: A Christian View*," 2. The anti-Semitism of this response is rather repugnant, however.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

of psychology, sociology, and the new field of Kinseyan ‘sexology.’” In her mind, “God’s will” or God’s “purpose and plan for human sexuality would eventually become less and less relevant.”¹⁸ Booth argues that the curriculum relies too much on “psychoanalytic theory.” Despite it being a false claim, Booth finds problematic that the curriculum does not directly condemn premarital sex until the last few pages of the book.¹⁹ However, her main problem lies with the fact that “Scripture was tacked on as an afterthought.” She claims that “the two-page introduction...did not mention the Bible at all.” While it does not quote the Bible, the introduction does lay out theological claims:

The Christian faith does not offer an abstract standard of right. Rather, our choices are to be made on the basis of our relations to persons—in themselves, in relation to each other, and in the destiny that God wills for them.²⁰

Weir argues that the basis of Christianity is our relationship with others, with self, and with God. He is upholding the Great Commandment to love God with all of your heart, mind, and soul and to love neighbor as self.²¹

As Weir continues in his introduction, his theological grounding and framework becomes more evident as he deciphers the criteria for making a sound choice:

Is a sound choice one that the community approves? Often, it is—but the community may approve many wrong choices as well. Is a sound choice one that has desirable consequences? Yes, if we look at *all* the consequences, and particularly at what our choices do to, or for, the persons involved. Is a sound choice one that springs from a right motive? Yes—but our motives are a strange and uncertain mixture.

Perhaps, then, a sound choice is one that takes account of *all* these considerations. True, but it should do more. It should contribute to love and trust *between* persons. It should bring and express unity *within* a person, gathering up [their] energies and directing them toward an end that is the choice of [their] whole personality.²²

¹⁸ Karen Booth, *Forgetting How to Blush: United Methodism’s Compromise with the Sexual Revolution* (Fort Valley, GA: Bristol House, Ltd., 2012) 99.

¹⁹ Weir actually states that “Sex, according to the Christian faith, finds its proper place in Christian marriage,” as early as page 10, the end of the first chapter.

²⁰ Weir, *Sex and the Whole Person*, 6.

²¹ Matthew 22:35-40; Mark 12:28-34.

²² Weir, *Sex and the Whole Person*, 6. Emphasis original.

Weir provides guidelines for how sexual choices should be made. They shouldn't simply be choices which the community approves of, which have desirable consequences, or which are based in good intentions. They should be choices that live into our desire to love God. They should increase love and trust between people, including of the self. They should make each person involved more whole. The consistent refrain throughout is about how to be a "whole person" and not a "thing" and how to understand others as "whole persons" and not "things." A "whole-person relationship, whether it is just a comfortable friendship or a mature and deep love, requires commitment and faithfulness from both—or all—partners."²³ In other words, our sexual choices should contribute positively towards our relationship with God by allowing us to love ourselves as God continues to create and sustain us and to love our neighbors as God continues to create and sustain them.

The board members of the Boards of Education and Social Concern concluded that a rules-based ethic was not relevant to the changing society of the 1960s, and if the church was going to have any claim over morality, it needed a new framework. They developed the above, a sexual ethic which combined "biblical, psychological, and physiological information on sexuality" into a "new morality."²⁴ They used the previous ethic's basis that God created all persons in God's image and that a vital part of this image was sexuality. Thus, sexuality was good because sexuality was of God. They removed the previous ethic's rules-based framework, which deemed certain acts good or moral and others bad or immoral. In its place, they advocated what ethicists called *situational ethics*, giving persons the full moral authority to decide for themselves what to do in a given situation that would best honor their sexual selves. They believed that in honoring one's sexual self, one, in turn, honored God. This new ethic did not *forbid* sexual expression in any situation; although it did still *encourage*

²³ Ibid., 9.

²⁴ "Guidelines for using *Sex and the Whole Person*," 1.

waiting until marriage to engage in sexual intercourse. Most importantly, it upended the institutional norms of society and of previous Methodist ethics in exchange for human agency.

The Methodist endorsement of the new morality continued in less official ways throughout the late 1960s and into the mid-1970s. Leon Smith, a SIECUS board member and director of Educational Ministries in Marriage for The UMC wrote an article in 1975 entitled “Religion’s Response to the New Sexuality.” His goal was to establish that “sexuality is a good gift of God” and to “discover and affirm positive healthy ways of functioning as sexual beings.”²⁵ Smith argued that Protestant denominations in the U.S. and Canada had responded to the rapid changes in sexuality in twelve ways, a few of which are worth mentioning for the purposes of this paper: (1) He witnessed “a great increase in sex education in the churches for persons of all ages” and “for ministers themselves.” (2) Churches were moving away from “rigid rules for sexual conduct” and toward “broad ethical principles which individuals might use in specific situations as guidelines in their sexual decisions,” also known as the new morality. (3) Churches were beginning to affirm “personal freedom and responsibility in sexual behavior” and were “beginning to support efforts to abolish legal restrictions on private sexual activities.” This included overturning anti-sodomy laws, legal access to contraception for all persons, and legal access to safe abortions. (4) Finally, many church leaders were beginning to understand homosexuality not as a “deviant” form of sexuality but as a “variant” of sexuality.

Smith understood that these trends emerging within the major Protestant denominations were rooted in a “deeper understanding of the Bible” and “an effort to spell out the implications of ethical principles derived from faith.” Smith connects the new morality to necessary social and even legal changes in American society. The new morality is based in the idea of upholding human agency

²⁵ Leon Smith, “Religion’s Response to the New Sexuality,” *SEICUS Report*, 4, no. 2 (November 1975): 1.

and trusting that individuals will strive to increase love and trust between each other and will seek out whole-person relationships. This ethic allowed Methodists to support abortion legalization and the rights of LGBTQI persons during the 1960s, cementing this decade as the most progressive decade in Methodist history.

Abortion

One of the aspects of sexuality which was re-entering the public realm in the 1950s and 1960s was whether or not women should be legally allowed to abort a pregnancy and under what conditions. Due to increasing restrictions on therapeutic abortions from hospital boards, women were forced, once again, to seek abortions outside of the medical profession and a sterile environment. Recognizing that women were suffering and dying due to these harsh and unwarranted conditions, Methodist clergy stepped in to help women no longer suffer from the physical and emotional pain of an unwanted pregnancy. Through the Clergy Consultation on Service on Abortion, twenty-one clergy operated a “counseling and abortion referral service for women in need of safe abortions.”²⁶ Six of these clergy and the only woman on the board were Methodist. All of them found it abhorrent that over one million women each year sought illegal and unsafe abortions which caused “severe mental anguish, physical suffering, and unnecessary death of women.” Added to this, failed abortions and abortion bans often resulted in the “birth of unwanted, unloved, and often deformed children.”²⁷ Using the new morality as an ethical code, Methodist clergy sought to alleviate the suffering of women, children, and families by acknowledging women, even pregnant women, as whole-persons. Thus, they found women safe, sterile, and professional abortion services and provided counseling.

²⁶ Griffith, *Moral Combat*, 216.

²⁷ As quoted in Tom Davis. *Sacred Work: Planned Parenthood and Its Clergy Alliances* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 129–130 and Griffith, *Moral Combat*, 216-217.

After *Roe v. Wade* legalized abortion nationwide, the Clergy Consultation Service on Abortion ceased operation. In its place, Methodists ensured that an alternate religious perspective would be present in the increasingly politicized abortion rights debate to counter that of the now prominent evangelical pro-life voice. Thus, in 1973, under the guidance of The UMC's General Board of Church and Society and The Women's Division of The UMC, sixteen religious groups gathered to form the Religious Coalition for Abortion Rights (now know as Religious Coalition for Reproductive Rights). The coalition wrote pamphlets addressing abortion from a religious point of view; they worked to protect abortion clinics from anti-abortion rhetoric and blockades; and they were a moral voice in support of abortion for Congressional sessions, including statements against the Hyde Amendment.²⁸ Through this organization, religious groups who held vastly different opinions on when life began and the morality of abortion, all agreed "that every woman should have the legal choice with respect to abortion, consistent with sound medical practice and in accordance with her conscience and religious beliefs."²⁹

Prior to the creation of this organization, the 1970 General Conference of The UMC declared that women must have access to abortion services "upon request."³⁰ Thus by 1970, through various organizations and statements, The UMC used the new morality to support the legalization of abortion as a necessary means for women's human agency. The denomination deemed it necessary to provide individual persons, including pregnant women, with the necessary scientific,

²⁸ Davis, *Sacred Work*, 145–146. The Hyde Amendment sought to prevent the use of federal funds for abortion services. Federal funds were increasingly used for population control throughout the 1950s through the 1970s. Many people sought to prevent the federal government from using funds to prevent population growth via abortion. For more see Daniel K. Williams, *Defenders of the Unborn: The Pro-Life Movement before Roe v. Wade* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

²⁹ "Statement of the Religious Coalition for Abortion Rights before the Subcommittee on Civil and Constitutional Rights of the Committee of the Judiciary U.S. House of Representatives" (March 24, 1976), 2, Folder: "Religious Coalition for Abortion Rights 1979, Women's Division, 2593-7-6:1, GCAH.

³⁰ Williams, *Defenders of the Unborn*, 108.

psychological, and sociological information and a theological framework through which to make their own sexual decisions, including the decision to abort a pregnancy.

Rights of LGBTQI Persons

In the 1960s, Methodists worked with the gay community of San Francisco to advocate for LGBTQI rights. Resulting in the Council on Religion and the Homosexual (CRH), fifteen Protestant clergy and fifteen representatives and members of local homophile organizations came together for a four-day consultation in 1964. For the first time, clergy found themselves listening to and learning from the gay community about the community's needs and how the church could assist them in bettering their lives.³¹ Don Lucas, a gay man and representative of the San Francisco Mattachine Society, reported to the consultation:

The homosexual is a human being. He has a soul and Christ Consciousness just as do all other human beings. He loves, lives, and has feelings and emotions which are really no different from those of his so-called heterosexual counterpart. All human beings are looking for understanding, love, and approval. The homosexual is no exception. It is felt that the church is best suited to demonstrate to all human beings these attributes, because they are primarily of a spiritual nature.³²

Here, Lucas challenges the church to serve the community by recognizing and welcoming homosexual persons and by updating its doctrine to reflect modern notions of sexuality. He stated

³¹ White, *Reforming Sodom*, 84–86. The more informative document to emerge from this retreat is the “Consultation Report,” written by Glide minister, Rev. Donald Kuhn. At thirty-nine pages, it chronicles the responses from both the clergymen and the gay activists who attended the retreat and provides background to the founding of the Council on Religion and the Homosexual in 1964, shortly after the retreat. The “Consultation Report” begins with a word from the male homosexual community, with Don Lucas speaking on their behalf. Prior to the retreat, Lucas asked one hundred fifty people, who identified as male homosexuals, questions on how they perceived the church's outreach or lack thereof to the homosexuality community. Only forty agreed to answer his questions, and from these forty interviews he presented the consultation with many conclusions, of which only a few will be analyzed and read: “The church does not understand [homosexuality] because it is afraid to delve into the subject. . . . The church should stop limiting its moral concerns to safe subjects such as alcoholism, etc. . . . The church should study the subject of homosexuality, do research in this field, and make known its findings. . . . The clergy must be educated about homosexuality before they, in turn, can educate their congregations.”

³² Donald Kuhn, *The Church and the Homosexual: A Report on the Consultation* (San Francisco: Council on Religion and the Homosexual, 1966), 7–8, LGBT Religious Archives Network, accessed 1//2017, <http://www.lgbtran.org/Exhibits/CRH/ImageSet.aspx?AID=16&P=1>; the item can also be found in the records for the General Board of Church and Society at the United Methodist Archives, Drew University.

that the church “is not perceived as anti-homosexual. Rather it is anti-sexual.”³³ In order to fully understand homosexuality, Methodists had to first understand sexuality. The new morality provided them with the tools to better understand the goodness of God-given sexuality and how that sexuality contributes to the wholeness of persons, heterosexual and non.

Four years later, the Evangelical United Brethren and the Methodist Church united to form The United Methodist Church. With this union and with the rapid social change of the 1960s, the uniting General Conference decided that a new statement on social issues was needed. Thus, the Social Principles Study Commission was tasked with writing a brand-new document which would speak to the United Methodist understanding of social issues of the time. After four years of work, the Social Principles Study Commission presented their work to the 1972 General Conference. Of particular interest is the paragraph entitled “Human Sexuality.” It originally read,

We recognize that sexuality is a good gift of God, and we believe persons may be fully human only when that gift is acknowledged and affirmed by themselves, the church, and society. We call all persons to disciplines that lead to the fulfillment of themselves, other, and society in the stewardship of this gift. Medical, theological and humanistic disciplines should combine in a determined effort to understand human sexuality more completely. Although men and women are sexual beings whether or not they are married, sex between a man and a woman is only to be clearly affirmed in the marriage bond. Sex may become exploitive within as well as outside of marriage. We reject all sexual expressions which damage or destroy the humanity God has given us as birthright, and we affirm only that sexual expression which enhances that same humanity, in the midst of diverse opinion as to what constitutes that enhancement. Homosexuals no less than heterosexuals are persons of sacred worth, who need the ministry and guidance of the church in their struggles for human fulfillment, as well as the spiritual and emotional support of a fellowship which enables reconciling relationships with God, with others and with themselves. Further we insist that homosexuals are entitled to have their human and civil rights insured.³⁴

³³ White, *Reforming Sodom*, 8.

³⁴ The entire paragraph can be found in the *DCA* (1972), 484. The entire report of the Study Commission is found on pages 483–487.

The above paragraph lives into the new morality by calling for whole-person relationships with others, with God, and with self which enhance our humanity. It upholds human agency and acknowledges that other “humanistic disciplines” can help us better comprehend the fluidity of our God-given sexuality. Similar to *Sex and the Whole Person*, it encourages waiting until marriage to be sexual. In a very radical move and providing support to the work of the Council on Religion and the Homosexual, the paragraph acknowledges that homosexuality is a normal sexual variant, and thus, persons who identify as lesbian or gay need the support of the church in their fight for human dignity.

In 1972, the above paragraph caused an uproar with some United Methodists gathered at General Conference. Its support of the gay and lesbian community was understood by some as anti-scriptural. A lay delegate from Southwest Texas, Don Hand, believed that the paragraph was “a serious departure from the teachings of the Christian tradition that risked conforming the moral standards of the Church to the licentious behavior of the world.”³⁵ Hand understood the paragraph, specifically its call to support the rights of gay and lesbian persons, as supporting the so-called moral laxity of the 1960s. To correct this, Hand suggested an amendment to the final sentence. He proposed adding “though we do not condone the practice of homosexuality and consider this teaching incompatible with Christian doctrine” to the last sentence of the paragraph.³⁶ Hand believed, if supported, this final sentence would not “do violence to either side.”³⁷ This amendment

³⁵ “Don Hand: Homosexuality and the 1972 Social Principles—Did the Conflict Begin with ‘the language?’” *Juicy Ecumenism* (July 4, 2014), accessed 1/10/2017, <https://juicyecumenism.com/2014/07/04/don-hand-homosexuality-and-the-1972-social-principles-did-the-conflict-begin-with-the-language/>.

³⁶ It then read, “Further we insist that homosexuals are entitled to have their human and civil rights insured, though we do not condone the practice of homosexuality and consider this teaching incompatible with Christian doctrine” (*DCA* [1972], 712). Later on, the word *doctrine* would be changed to *teaching* (*DCA* [1972], 718).

³⁷ “Don Hand: Homosexuality and the 1972 Social Principles.”

has come to be called the “incompatibility clause” and is the most debated clause in the Social Principles, if not in United Methodist history.

Hand, and those who supported his amendment, reacted to a fear of change. Those who supported the original passing of the incompatibility clause were terrified that the rapid social and sexual change of the 1960s was infiltrating the church and threatening its institutional norms, primarily heterosexual marriage. The new morality was the main threat, however. By emphasizing whole person relationships, the new morality, rightfully, necessitated that gay and lesbian persons be allowed to engage in same-sex relationships as the best means to increase love and trust between persons and to live into the Great Commandment to love God with all of one’s heart, mind, and soul by acknowledging and living into their God-given and good sexuality. However, the idea that gay and lesbian persons were of sacred worth was too much for some United Methodists to handle.

An Evangelical Response

The new morality was a radical form of Methodist ethics. When applied to sexuality, it faced staunch criticism as “nothing but a philosophy of sexual libertinism.”³⁸ Some Methodists today look back on the new morality as an ideology of “moral ambiguity” where “scripture was tacked on as an afterthought.” Instead of prioritizing “God’s revealed will for human sexuality and behavior” as revealed in Scripture, the new morality “exalt[ed] human intellectual reasoning as the ultimate guide to making moral decisions.”³⁹ According to evangelical Methodists, ethical principles based on the new morality were full of “psychological jargon,” their “scripture lessons were sketchy and superficial,” and their ethical lessons often provided “loopholes to justify [any] behavior.”⁴⁰ Evangelicals tended to uphold Scripture as the sole authority; thus any inference that human

³⁸ Elwyn A. Smith, “Notes on the Practice of The New Morality,” *Pittsburgh Perspective*, 7, no. 4 (December 1966): 23.

³⁹ Booth, *Forgetting How to Blush*, 103.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 104–105.

reasoning, without scriptural guidance, was sound enough to make moral and sexual decisions was a direct threat to their understanding of the world.

The new morality inspired more than just criticism; it provided a platform for a newly reinvigorated evangelical Methodist voice. Charles Keysor penned an article entitled “Methodism’s Silent Minority” in 1966. Published in *Christian Advocate*, Keysor spoke to and for “those Methodists who are variously called ‘evangelicals’ or ‘conservatives’ or ‘fundamentalists.’” Keysor preferred the term “orthodox” for these persons, who, like himself, “hold a traditional understanding of the Christian faith.” Evangelical Methodists, Keysor claimed, were “not represented in the higher councils of the church” and their “concepts are often abhorrent to Methodist officialdom at annual conference and national levels.”⁴¹ His article was well-received and inspired the beginning of a magazine and a movement, the Good News Movement, within the newly formed United Methodist Church.

The Good News Movement garnered support primarily by attacking “church school curriculum.”⁴² Finding the publications produced by the United Methodist Publishing House to be too progressive, Keysor asked, “Why should viewpoints contrary to United Methodist doctrine be forced upon large numbers of people who want only to be 100 percent Methodist in the church school?”⁴³ Riley B. Case, evangelical activist and author of *Evangelical and Methodist*, argues that lay persons in the local church,

were confronted almost weekly by Sunday school literature that seemed at odds with their own understandings of the Christian faith. Otherwise loyal Sunday school teachers and parents were convinced something was wrong, although they weren’t always sure what it was. The material was either too hard to teach or did not have enough Bible stories or left out the plan of salvation.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Charles W. Keysor, “Methodism’s Silent Minority,” *Christian Advocate* (14 July 1966): 9.

⁴² Riley B. Case, *Evangelical and Methodist: A Popular History* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 20014) 47.

⁴³ Charles Keysor, “Cyanide in the Church School,” *Good News* (January-March, 1970):32.

⁴⁴ Case, *Evangelical and Methodist*, 47.

Response to Good News' criticism of the church school curriculum was "overwhelming" and "more than any other concern, basically launched the Good News movement."⁴⁵ Keysor successfully convinced Methodist evangelicals that Methodist produced materials had weak theology. However, his main agenda was convincing others that liberalism or "modernism" was being forced upon Methodists in the pews by those in the administrative ranks as local churches were mandated by General Conference to only use materials approved by the Curriculum Committee of the General Board of Education.⁴⁶

Sex education curriculum was part of the church school curriculum that was deemed problematic by Keysor and his evangelical following. Keysor and his followers argued that the problem with United Methodism was multifold. First, the Board of Education was, like other administrative ranks of the denomination, controlled by "white male liberals": seven clergy, thirteen professors, and the remaining nineteen were bishops. Second, they argued that the "whole educational system was under attack" from both the left and the right, making Sunday school "irrelevant." Third, "the new cultural ferment" brought with it "a new philosophy of Youth Ministry . . . in which youth were to be given not answers, but rather tools so they could find answers for themselves"—a direct attack on the new morality and *Sex and the Whole Person*.⁴⁷ When viewed in light of sex education and the philosophy behind *Sex and the Whole Person*, which sought to provide senior high school teenagers with guidelines to help them figure out their own sexual selves, it becomes apparent that one of the things Good News was fighting against was sex education.

The Good News Movement began due to their critique of church school curriculum, including *Sex and the Whole Person*. They argued that these materials were not based in scripture and placed

⁴⁵ Ibid., 47.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 59

⁴⁷ Ibid., 61.

science and cultural change as superior to scripture. While a deep engagement with *Sex and the Whole Person* would disprove this belief, Keysor and his predecessors reignited an evangelical movement which seeks to take-over (or as they would claim, take back) The United Methodist Church. While the movement began by condemning sex education curricula, it grew by condemning abortion and the rights of persons who identify as LGBTQI. The Good News Movement and its ally organizations seek to undo the remaining few remnants of the new morality which continue to form the foundation of some United Methodist statements on sexuality.

Conclusion

As has already been stated, the new morality was not an ethic of rules. It was an ethic of human agency, which examined the situation at hand and encouraged those involved to do whatever would increase love and trust between persons and create whole-person relationships. Only by engaging in loving relationships can we truly know and love God. The Methodist Church and The United Methodist Church sought to provide relevant and revolutionary sex education to senior high school teenagers and their parents. They produced dozens of pamphlets across the 1960s and 1970s to guide parents in discussions with their children, to inform children about their own bodies, and to recommend other scientific and medical resources for both parents and children. The administrative ranks of the denominations made great strides in trying to correct what they understood as the errors of the past when sex was narrowly defined and not understood as a vital part of our whole being. The UMC encouraged proper sex education as a guide to help teenagers decide for themselves how to approach their own sex lives. While this attitude was not an endorsement of premarital sex, it did not forbid it. This rather candid and modern attitude was in direct contrast with the American evangelical notion of a Christian sex life, which promoted strict celibacy outside of heterosexual marriage. The UMC also endorsed abortion “upon request” by 1970 and argued that women had a right to full control of their reproductive lives. Finally, by 1972, The UMC was willing

to acknowledge that persons who identify as LGBTQI were persons of sacred worth who needed the support of the church in their striving to be treated equally.

The new morality was a morally demanding sexual ethic. Elwyn A. Smith argued that “The new morality is the most demanding ethical concept in the market places of ideas” for “[o]nly the most mature persons are capable of practicing it.” Only a truly mature person can place love of God and love of others above themselves. Only a truly mature person can fully understand a situation and prioritize love. Only a truly mature person can transform love into social reform. He stated it best when he said, “Rules are for the weak; emancipation is for the mature.”⁴⁸ The new morality provided Methodists with a framework adapted for the evolving society. If the only thing that mattered was love, then the church could better speak to and even help guide the changing social and sexual world, and the Methodist Church did just that. Beginning in the 1960s, Methodists experimented with revolutionary forms of sex education which later allowed them to support abortion legalization and the rights of persons who identified as LGBTQI.

As the evangelical United Methodist voice grew louder across the 1970s, the new morality was increasingly challenged, particularly when it was used to support abortion legalization and to advocate for the equal rights of LGBTQI persons. As the evangelical voice has grown stronger, both within American society, American Protestantism, and American Methodism, The UMC has become less progressive when it comes to sex. By the mid-1970s, through the increased political advocacy campaigns of the Good News Movement prior to General Conferences, the denomination began advocating a sexually gray area that endorsed the new morality and understood sexuality as a God-given good, while, at the same time, demeaning same-sex relationships as against Christian teaching and qualifying when women can seek abortion services. This dual sexual framework, which sought to appease all United Methodists, led only to confusion as to where The UMC stood in terms of

⁴⁸ Elwyn A. Smith, “Notes on the Practice of The New Morality,” *Pittsburgh Perspective*, 7, no. 4 (December 1966): 26.

sexual ethics. The base of new morality is still capable of speaking to the ever-changing social and sexual climate of 2018, but it is still deemed anti-scriptural by some. If The UMC wants clarity on sexuality and on its future as a denomination, it must decide whether or not it will sustain the new morality as an ethic.

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