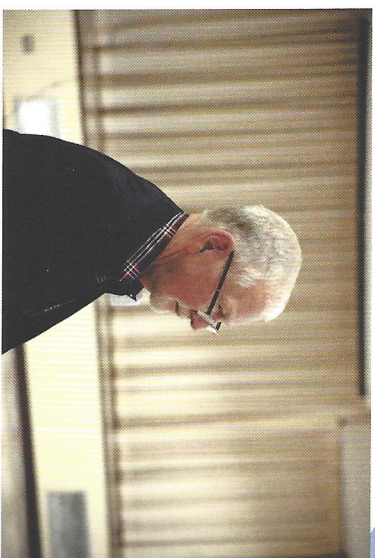


As I look at those examples in misusing the Bible, and church rules being wrong in history, I have to question the 45 year old statement in our Discipline that questions the worth of persons who are in same gender relationships. When there is a difference between a church teaching or a religious rule and what Christ stands for, I will go with the latter.

I am also a passionate United Methodist who loves John Wesley--I love his radically inclusive spirit (like Jesus), and I love his teachings such as "WE DO NOT HAVE TO THINK ALIKE IN ORDER TO LOVE ALIKE" I think this Wesleyan motto needs to be followed more in our Methodist circles right now.

*Harvey C. Martz, D. Min., June, 2017
Martz was serving as senior pastor of St. Andrew United Methodist Church, Highlands Ranch, CO, when he retired. He now serves as Vice Chair of the United Methodist Association of Retired Clergy (UMARC).*



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AN APPROACH TO THE BIBLE AND THE UNITED METHODIST BOOK OF DISCIPLINE

Harvey C. Martz

Shortly after the United Methodist Association of Retired Clergy (UMARC) was inaugurated, Donald E. Messer and I received a letter in which the writer asked how we can justify our stance of inclusiveness in light of negative references to homosexual behavior in the Bible and in the United Methodist Book of Discipline. I wrote the following response.

Thanks for writing. I am taking seriously your question about how we justify our position according to the Bible and the United Methodist Book of Discipline.

The most important part of the Bible for me is the life, teaching, and example of Jesus. I also believe that there are parts of the Bible that are not consistent with Jesus' life and teaching. For instance, I Samuel 15:1-3 states that God instructs King Saul to slaughter the men, women, children, and babies of the Amalekites. This does not seem consistent for me with the teachings of Jesus about violence, so I am choosing to stand with Jesus.

Similarly, there are sections of the Bible that endorse slavery (Ephesians 6:5-8, Colossians 3:22, Titus 2:9, and I Peter 2:18—slaves obey your masters). I do not believe that Jesus would echo that command for submissiveness or for owning another person, so I choose to believe Jesus first.

There are other passages that seem to approve a subservient/second class role for women: (Ephesians 5:22--wives, be subject to your husbands, or I Timothy 2--let a woman learn in silence with full submission). I wonder if you hold to those teachings yourself, or if you too have practiced the more egalitarian perspective that Jesus models in his relationships in the Gospels: speaking in public to the Samaritan woman at the well, something Jewish law prohibited him from doing as a self-respecting rabbi.

Missing from Jesus' teaching is any condemnation of same gender marriage or same gender relationships.

What I find missing from Jesus' teaching is any condemnation of same gender marriage or same gender relationships. There are, of course, six or seven verses of the 38,000 Bible verses that prohibit same gender behavior, and the context of those verses in Leviticus is a reference to the dogmatic roles of men and women. The larger Leviticus context is about following the purity code which also prohibited (considered an "abomination") eating shellfish and handling the skin of a dead pig. Most churches don't teach those prohibitions although they are also called "an abomination."

The New Testament references to same gender relationships are written in a culture when those relationships with both male and female temple prostitutes were common in Corinth. For instance, St. Paul would have known about the 1000 prostitutes at the Temple of Aphrodite on the Corinthian acropolis. It was also a culture where a loving commitment in a same gender relationship was completely unknown.

Once more, when we look at Jesus, his concerns in the Bible are not about same gender relationships or same gender marriage--they are about hypocrisy, greed, self-righteousness, superficial religion (going through the motions), hubris, tribalism, and caring for the vulnerable. He seems to be consistent about the danger of discounting someone's worth by casting them as "The Other," and thereby, demeaning or even hating them.

As to the Book of Discipline, I approach it with the awareness of the times in history when church authorities/leaders have taken what now looks like an unChrist like stand: the Crusades which slaughtered thousands and thousands of Muslims in the Holy Land as well as innocent Jews and others while the Crusaders were on the way to The Holy Land; the execution of Jan Hus in Prague who was a Reformer 100 years before Luther; the persecution and threats against Luther himself.

I identify with Luther, who used "evident reason" to say that there are parts of the Bible that are not as important as the teachings of Jesus. Luther also said the Bible is the cradle in which Christ lies, and what is most important is Christ and not the cradle.

One of the many egregious persecutions in religious history was the persecution of the scientist Galileo in the early 1600's, because he dared to question the biblical statement that the earth revolves around the sun. That persecution was carried out by recognized, "legitimate" church authorities.

Other instances of church leaders or church rules being wrong are the advocacy for slavery by some Methodist leaders in the 1840's or the effort in the early 20th century of some church leaders to keep women from voting by citing the Bible passages mentioned above. In my opinion, there are instances in church history when religious authorities get things wrong, and those wrongs need to be righted.