



How We Might Become Deeply Loving People

Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki

If we take John Wesley seriously, the point of all doctrine is to lead us to the fullest possible development of our minds, emotions, and bodies toward the glory of God, which is the love of God—God’s love toward us individually and communally, and our love toward God and one another as individuals and as a community. This is an understanding to celebrate, for it creates an image of a community where we joyously promote the fullest development of each and all, in love, to the glory of God.

When our denomination is rife with murmurs of “conform or divide!” then we must run, not walk, to our nearest copy of *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* in order to read the advices as to how we might become deeply loving people, truly reflecting God’s image (which is, of course, what Christian perfection is all about). The first advice is to beware of pride. At first blush this does not seem at all remarkable, for haven’t Christians always been against pride? Didn’t we name it as the main problem of Adam’s fall, and Lucifer’s before that?

But it is how Wesley defines pride that is so unexpected. “...if you think you are so knowledgeable of God as to no longer need human teaching, then pride is at the door. Yes, you need to be taught. . . by all people” (69). As if saying we need to be taught by all people were not plain enough, Wesley spells it out. We are to be taught, he

says, by those who disagreed with Wesley’s own teaching, by the “weakest preacher in London,” by those who are not Methodist, and indeed, even by those who are not Christian (“To imagine that none can teach you but those who are themselves saved from sin is a very great and dangerous mistake. Do not entertain that thought for a moment” [70]).

What is behind this teaching is

We are to “beware of being impatient with those who contradict us, and we are not to condemn or think harshly of those who cannot see just as we can, whether in a large matter or a small one”

—John Wesley

Wesley’s assumption that even for the most fully sanctified of Christians, “because we live in fallible human bodies, we will be subject to errors in judgment and action” (58). Wesley is convinced that to be human is to be fallible, and therefore no human being possesses total accuracy in all things. To assume that one is 100% correct is immediately to be in danger of idolatry, for such an attitude pretends that the finite self possesses the equivalent of the infinite wisdom of God. And this is pride! Thus, says Wesley, “what arrogance is this to set ourselves up as inquisitors-general or absolute judges

in these deep things of God!” (46). Our trust, then, in regard to the things of God, is to be placed in God rather than in the dictates of our own minds.

The image which such a teaching gives is of a church where no individual expects to see with absolute purity exactly the way things ought to be. Rather, we are to expect a church where we are continuously ready to learn from one another—especially from those with whom we disagree. In this mutual learning, the one thing we should beware is a pretension, whether in ourselves or others, of absolute knowledge.

This, of course, leads directly to Wesley’s teaching in his sixth advice, which is to “Beware of schism, or causing separation within the church of Christ. Such internal division begins when sisters and brothers in Christ, the members of his body, no longer have love

“for one another” (75). We are not to despise or put down any preacher, we are to observe every rule of the society, and we are not to tolerate any thought of separating from our brothers and sisters, whether their opinions agree with ours or not (75). We are to “beware of being impatient with those who contradict us, and we are not to condemn or think harshly of those who cannot see just as we can, whether in a large matter or a small one” (76). We are to “refrain from arguing with those who do not implicitly accept [Wesley’s] teachings or the teachings of other Methodist leaders” (77), and we are to

expect contradiction and opposition.

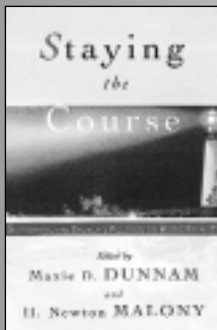
If we returned to this wise man's teachings, we would actually value theological diversity within our church as an opportunity for each and every one of us to avoid idolatry! We would also welcome such diversity as an unequalled opportunity to practice the love of God. For how very easy it is to love those with whom we agree, those who inspire us, those who actually love us in return. But what kind of a challenge is that? It's like trying to gain muscle strength by exercising with a feather! A true Wesleyan spirit would welcome theological diversity as an excellent opportunity to practice the love which is the very glory of God—not by separating from one another in the foolish name of "my correct doctrine," but by hanging in together for love of one another and God. And should we ever actually achieve this, as a denomination, can we dare to think what kind of an image it would present to the world, which has yet to learn ways other than violence and invasion to accomplish what it sees, always from its own perspective alone, to be in the other's best interests? Oh, for a Wesleyan spirit!

Return to Wesley indeed, and perhaps we might then together, as a loving image-of-God community, figure out how to use our differences as opportunities for practicing Christian perfection. And we might even forge new interpretations of Christian teaching that are of God's own leading as we wrestle with the challenges of biblical scholarship, diversities of various kinds, the data of science, and the ever-present questions of the best order of this church that we all so deeply love. We might find ourselves to be pressing on to Christian perfection. □



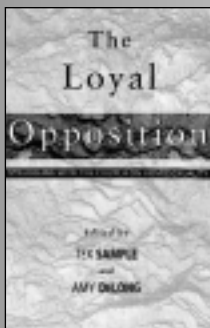
Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki is Professor Emerita at Claremont School of Theology. Her most recent book is *Divinity and Diversity: A Christian Affirmation of Religious Pluralism* (Abingdon Press, 2003).

The Debate on Homosexuality Continues



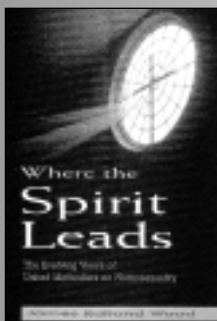
Staying the Course: Supporting the Church's Position on Homosexuality, edited by Maxie Dunnam and H. Newton Malony. The contributors to this volume argue that homosexuality is only one of many sinful human choices and that while gays and lesbians are people of sacred worth, Scripture and Christian tradition reject homosexuality as a viable Christian lifestyle.

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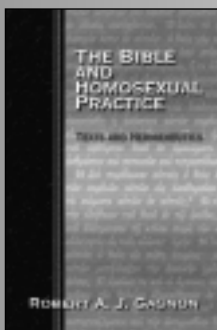
The Loyal Opposition: Struggling with the Church on Homosexuality, edited by Tex Sample and Amy DeLong. The contributors to *The Loyal Opposition* call for a principled, disciplined response to official church condemnations of homosexuality—one serious in its commitment to the difficult process of reconciliation and forgiveness. They remind readers that faithfulness to the gospel requires nothing less than the full inclusion of every person in the body of Christ—not least of all those who disagree with us.

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Where the Spirit Leads: The Evolving Views of United Methodists on Homosexuality, by James Rutland Wood. Drawing on extensive research, Wood examines a quiet shift in United Methodists' opinions and convictions on homosexuality—one that needs to be taken into account if a full understanding of who United Methodists are and what they should do is to be possible.

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The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics, by Robert A. J. Gagnon. In this, the most thorough analysis to date on the biblical texts concerning homosexuality, Gagnon demonstrates why attempts to classify the Bible's rejection of same-sex intercourse as irrelevant for our contemporary context fails to do justice to the biblical texts and current scientific data. Gagnon's book powerfully challenges attempts to identify love and inclusivity with affirmation of homosexual practice.

UI6-0687022797. \$39.00



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