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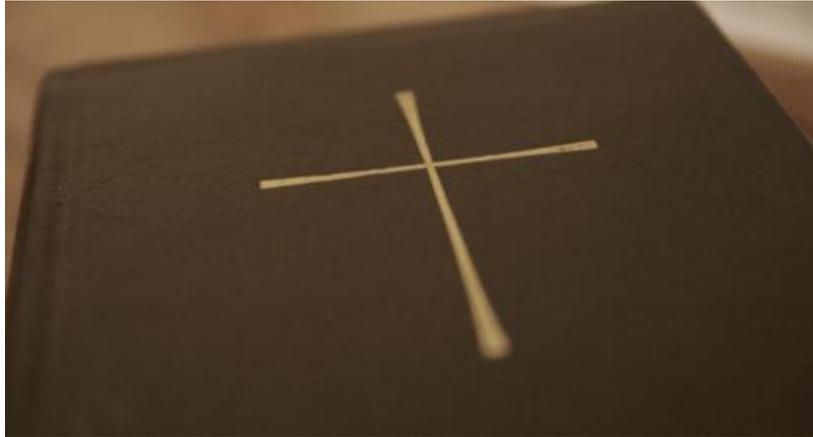
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When the Bible is the Root of Evil

By Rev. William Alberts
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For many Christians, religion is about correct belief, not right behavior. For them, *The Bible's* overriding appeal is the authority it proclaims, not the empathy it inspires. It is about meeting the believer's quest for certainty, not an oppressed person's need for compassion – and justice . The primary goal is personal salvation, not interpersonal solidarity – unless the solidarity is with those of like-minded belief, or with those designated to be “harvested,” or with those whose destitution serves to reinforce the superiority of the good doers. It is about obtaining immortality for one's own soul, far more than demanding morality in human affairs

In fact, for many Christians, *correct* Biblical belief is often used to rationalize, justify and accommodate *immoral* behavior toward those *The Bible* has condemned as “enslaveable” or “abominable” or “unredeemable” and thus exploitable. The psychic insecurity of these Christians and their corresponding need for certainty, require them to not only possess, but to propagate, their one true belief in Jesus Christ as the Son of God and savior of the world — which prevents them from participating as equals in the democratic process. Instead, they seek to exploit the political process to impose their beliefs on to others, rather than as a way to empower everyone rights and well-being. Politics is about gaining the upper hand, rather than everyone lending a hand.

Christians certainly have a right to their own religious pathway to salvation – for themselves. But, tragically, the salvation of biblically-bounded Christians *depends on, is intrinsically linked to*, the damnation – or subservience — of whole groups of people condemned by these Christians’ inerrant *Biblically*-based beliefs.

The United Methodist Church, the second largest Protestant denomination in the U.S., demonstrates how *The Bible* can become the root of evil. At this moment, United Methodism is threatened with a schism over its discriminatory positions on homosexuality. An issue that has dogged the denomination for decades. Which leaders have evaded by the repeated creation of diversionary committees to study homosexuality and report back four years later to The Church’s quadrennial General Conference.

But its contradictions have final caught up with The United Methodist Church. At last year’s General Conference, some 864 delegates were faced with over 100 petitions on “human sexuality” – which, for official United Methodism, is the theologically correct way of categorizing its discriminatory policies against gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and queer persons. A growing number of delegates submitted petitions calling for the full inclusion of LGBTQ persons into the life of The United Methodist Church: ordaining them as ministers, recognizing same-sex marriage and the right of ministers to perform these marriages in their churches, and removing The Church’s *Book of Discipline’s* discriminatory references to homosexuality. (‘GENERAL CONFERENCE HISTORY WITH LGBTQ,’ By Kathy L. Gilbert, www.umc.org, Apr. 27, 2016)

Conversely, the petitions of many other General Conference delegates demanded that the *Book of Discipline’s* “biblically-guided” exclusionary language on homosexuality not be changed. (*Ibid*) Not even the Supreme Court’s legalizing of same-sex marriage in 2015 could influence these delegates’ biblical mind-set. In the words of Rev. Thomas Lambrecht, a leader of *Good News*, a biblically-based United Methodist advocacy group, “Our commitment to biblical truth does not depend upon judicial affirmation by the Supreme Court of this or any other nation.” (“Same-sex marriage ruling adds to church debate,” By Heather Hahn, www.umc.org, June 26, 2015)

The resulting stalemate and threat of division led the 2016 General Conference delegates to request that The Church’s Council of Bishops provide what is called A Way Forward out of the impasse. The bishops responded by “recommend[ing] that the General Conference defer all votes on human sexuality and refer the entire subject to a special Commission named by the Council of Bishops, to develop a complete examination and possible revision of every paragraph

in our *Book of Discipline* regarding human sexuality,” and report back to a special General Conference in 2019. (“Statement by the Council of Bishops: An offering for a way forward,” www.bwcumc.org, May 18, 2016)

The “biblical truth” on homosexuality in The United Methodist Church’s *Book of Discipline*?

–You shall not lie with a male as with a woman, is an abomination. . . . If a man has sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman, both of them have done what is detestable. They are to be put to death; their blood will be on their own heads. (Leviticus 18: 22; 20: 13)

–They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator . . . Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed shameful acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their error. (Romans 1: 24-27)

–Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. (I Cor. 6: 9-10)

–But at the beginning of creation, God ‘made them male and female.’ ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh’ . . . Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate. (Mark 10: 6-9)

These “biblical truths” are contradicted by other *Scripture*. Like Jesus being recorded as saying that one of the two greatest commandments is, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” (Mark 12: 30-31) Also, “So in everything, do to others what you would have them do you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.” (Matthew 7:12) And in his Sermon on the Mount, “when Jesus saw the crowds,” he did not distinguish between heterosexuals and homosexuals when he said to them, “Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.” (Matthew 5: 1-12)

In a like manner, Paul the Apostle is reported as teaching, “So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith . . . There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3: 25-29) However, Paul provides a classic example of how one’s Christian faith can accommodate racism, patriarchy and homophobia. He also teaches: “Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ” (Ephesians 6: 5-9). And, “Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says” (I Corinthians 14: 34-35). Also, “The law is not laid down for the just but for the . . . ungodly and sinners . . . for murderers, the sexually immoral, men who practice homosexuality, enslavers, liars, perjurers and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine.” (I Timothy 1: 9-10)

Paul reveals that Christianity was an integral part of the day’s culture of slavery, patriarchy, homophobia and xenophobia, and that cultural influence shines through *The Bible*. Paul also could have taught, “There is neither heterosexual nor homosexual, nor bisexual or transgender or

queer, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” But he obviously didn’t. Biblically-bounded Christian denominations still need to confront their own involvement in the oppression of people *The Bible* has designated as *the Other*.

The United Methodist Church provides a classic example of how a Christian denomination can profess inclusion and love while practicing exclusion and loathing – with a *straight* face. United Methodism’s *Book of Discipline*’s position on “Human Sexuality” is, “We affirm that all persons are individuals of sacred worth, created in the image of God . . . [and] need the ministry of the Church in their struggles for human fulfillment, as well as the spiritual and emotional care of a fellowship that enables reconciling relationships with God, with others, and with self.” And in the next breath: “The United Methodist Church does not condone the practice of homosexuality and considers this practice incompatible with Christian teaching.” (“Social Principles: The Nurturing Community,” www.umc.org) A classic example of the biblical root of evil perverting the pages of *The Book of Discipline*.

While “all persons need the ministry and guidance of the Church in their struggles for human fulfillment,” The United Methodist Church *is the greatest obstacle* facing lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) persons in “their struggles for human fulfillment” in United Methodism itself. *The Book of Discipline* prohibits “self-avowed practicing homosexuals” from being ordained ministers — no matter how qualified they are and how committed to a loving same-sex relationship. They also are prevented from professing their love for each other in marriage in a United Methodist Church. And United Methodist ministers who perform such loving and fulfilling marriage ceremonies are brought to church trial and defrocked or punished – or otherwise removed.

How sad! I’ve had the honor of performing a number of same-sex marriages. One was of two men in a loving relationship for years. When the one became terminally ill, they decided to marry. I performed their marriage ceremony in the ill partner’s hospital room. They exchanged their vows as he lay in bed, both partners energized by their love and the affirming presence of close friends and attending nurses. A few weeks later he died. It was then that his partner said to me, “Thank you for making possible the happiest day of our lives.”

Professing inclusion and practicing exclusion. *The Book of Discipline* has a section on “Equal Rights Regardless of Sexual Orientation” that states, “Certain basic human rights and civil liberties are due all persons. We are committed to supporting those rights and liberties for all persons, regardless of sexual orientation.” (“Social Principles: The Social Community,” www.umc.org) However, *The Book of Discipline*’s doctrine on “The Nurturing Community” states, “We affirm the sanctity of the marriage covenant that is expressed in love . . . between a man and a woman. . . . We support laws in civil society that define marriage as the union of one man and one woman.” (“Social Principles: The Nurturing Community,” *Ibid*) That statement is the opposite of “nurturing” for LGBTQ persons and their families, friends and supporters.

How does *The Book of Discipline* deal with The Church’s glaring rejection of LGBTQ persons? By cushioning it with the language of acceptance and caring. Never mind that “the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching [and] therefore self-avowed practicing homosexuals’ are not to be . . . ordained as ministers.” Pay no attention to the dictate,

“Ceremonies that celebrate homosexual unions shall not be conducted by our ministers and shall not be conducted in our churches.” (“What is the denomination’s position on homosexuality?,” www.umc.org) Forget about the fact that “a clergy member . . . may be tried when charged . . . with . . . conducting ceremonies which celebrate homosexual unions; or performing same-sex wedding ceremonies” (“Book of Discipline: Para. 2702 Chargeable Offenses and the Statute of Limitations,” www.umc.org) And don’t be puzzled by the contradictory policy: “The General Board of Finance and Administration shall be responsible for ensuring that no board, agency, committee, commission, or council shall give United Methodist funds to any gay caucus or group, or otherwise use such funds to promote the acceptance of homosexuality or violate the express commitment of The United Methodist Church ‘not to reject or condemn lesbian or gay members and friends.’ (Para. 161f)” (“What is the denomination’s position on homosexuality”, *Ibid*)

The United Methodist Church has it both ways: expressions of affirmation and caring serve to distance The Church from the spiritual, emotional and legal violence it perpetuates against LGBTQ persons – and from society’s violent physical climate toward them it helps to generate. In the face of forcing LGBTQ persons to remain in the “Church closet,” *The Book of Discipline* issues this denial to all United Methodists: “We implore families and churches not to reject or condemn lesbian and gay members and friends. We commit ourselves to be in ministry for and with all persons.” (“Social Principles: The Nurturing Community, *Ibid*) And, “We support efforts to stop violence and other forms of coercion against all persons regardless of sexual orientation.” (“Social Principles: The Social Community,” *Ibid*)

How much can one trust The United Methodist Church’s pronouncements? Similar to its position against homosexuality, *The Book of Discipline* states, “We believe war is incompatible with the teachings and example of Christ. We therefore reject war as an instrument of national foreign policy.” Also, “We oppose unilateral first/preemptive strike actions and strategies on the part of any government.” (Social Principles: The World Community,” www.umc.org) Nevertheless, in spite of some strong internal resistance, United Methodist leaders approved the building of a monument at Southern Methodist University to the worst war criminal of the 21st century: The George W. Bush Presidential Center. A United Methodist president who is responsible for the unnecessary, falsely-based, preemptive criminal invasions and rape of Afghanistan and Iraq is honored; whereas, a same-sex couple’s love for each other is dishonored. Another such war criminal is Bush’s vice president, fellow United Methodist Dick Cheney, who is also “in good standing” in The United Methodist Church. The Church is bringing the wrong persons to trial!

Building a monument to a president who is responsible for the falsely-based, horribly destructive invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq calls into question *The Book of Discipline*’s “Declaration on the Rights of Religious Minorities.” That declaration states, “We urge policies and practices that ensure the right of every religious group to exercise its faith free from legal, political and economic restrictions.” (“Social Principles: The Social Community, *Ibid*)

Here, again, The Church has it both ways. *The Book of Discipline* also states, “The mission of the Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.” Moreover, “The United Methodist Church affirms that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, the savior of the

world, and Lord of all.” Next the rationalizing cushion for this faith-based imperialism: “As we make disciples, we respect persons of all religious faiths and we defend religious freedom for all persons.” Then the equally contradictory biblical clincher to justify the religiously motivated domination of non-Christians as *lesser*: “Jesus’ words in Matthew provide the Church with our mission: ‘Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything that I’ve commanded you’ (28: 19-20), and ‘You must love the Lord your God with all your heart . . . [and] You must love your neighbor as yourself.’ (22: 37, 39).” (“Book of Discipline Section 1: The Churches,” www.umc.org) Such faith-based imperialism helps one understand why a reported “astonishing 87 percent of all white evangelical Christians in the United States supported the president’s decision” to invade Iraq. (“Wayward Christian Soldiers,” By Charles Marsh, *The New York Times*, Jan 20, 2006) How many United Methodists were in that number? Or later accommodated after carefully worded protest?

Instead of “making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world,” the Way Forward for The United Methodist Church should be to transform *itself* into the *likeness* of all people in the world by practicing The Golden Rule. (Matthew 7: 12) It should begin that transformation by reconciling fully with LGBTQ persons. And that reconciliation should include providing reparations and restoration for the harm The Church has inflicted on them and their families and supporters.

A moral call for reparations has been issued by Rev. Gilbert H. Caldwell, a retired United Methodist minister, civil rights leader, and a leader of the movement for the full inclusion of LGBTQ persons in every aspect of The Church and society. Seven years ago, in an article on, “William Alberts, Jimmy Creech and Gregory Dell; Punished for their Ministry!,” Caldwell wrote about us three: “They have been tried, convicted and punished by The United Methodist Church because in their ministry, they performed services of commitment for same gender couples!” Caldwell pointed out that persons wrongly “convicted and imprisoned . . . have a right to sue to be financially compensated for the damage done to their lives.” He applies that model of reparatory justice to The United Methodist Church: “Does our denomination that expresses authentic compassion on so many fronts, dare to be compassionate enough to acknowledge the pain it has caused my colleagues and brothers, Bill, Jimmy and Greg?” Caldwell ends with, “Change is on the way. Let us never forget any of those the denomination harmed through denial, exclusion and punishment. They were/are right, and the denomination was/is wrong.” (*Reconciling Ministries Network*, June 14, 2010)

(For an analysis of my forced retirement as a United Methodist minister after performing a same-sex marriage, and the related 13-years-long lawsuit I successfully pursued, see Alberts, “Easter Depends on Whistleblowers,” *Counterpunch*, Mar. 29, 2013, and Alberts, “The Church of ‘Something Else’ in ‘an Ecclesiastical Desert,’ ” *Counterpunch*, Nov. 27.2015)

In its current deliberations on providing “A Way Forward,” The United Methodist Church should include a statement of confession recognizing the guilt and marginalization, along with the spiritual and emotional violence it has inflicted on LGBTQ persons and their families and friends, and seek their forgiveness. The Church should also offer to restore to active ministry those clergy who were forced out for performing same-sex marriages. That restoration should

include reparations for the emotional pain and financial loss those ministers and candidates for ordination have endured. The denomination's motto — "Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors" — should apply to all applicants for ministry, including those candidates who, over many years, have been shut out because of their sexual orientation.

The Judicial Council of The United Methodist Church should also end any current deliberations on whether to remove Bishop Karen P. Oliveto — United Methodism's first openly gay, married, bishop — from her post and revoke her ordination as a minister. Whether Oliveto, or any other minister, the qualification for ministry should depend on "the content of one's character," not the constitutional make-up of one's sexual orientation. In Oliveto's case, the delegates to the Western Jurisdictional Conference of The United Methodist Church elected her bishop because she has demonstrated, through many years of ministry, that she is an *authentic self-avowed practicing Christian*.

Finally, the Way Forward today requires The United Methodist Church to fully integrate into its life a scientific understanding of psycho-sexual development. That understanding will shoot holes in The Church's theology of free will and sin regarding LGBTQ persons, which theology is used to control and reward and punish people. But that acquired psychological wisdom of "human sexuality" will immeasurably deepen and broaden The Church's understanding of empathy and love — and transformation. Hopefully The Church will even come to the place where it affirms that *love is love*, whether born of biological affinity or free will.