

## STAYING THE COURSE

Dr. Stephen Long: Ecclesial Subordination to Liberal Institutions

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Recently, a number of friends called my attention to a post by Dr. Stephen Long, (Cary M. Maguire University Professor of Ethics, SMU). It is a deeply meaningful testimony related to his son's attempted suicide. His gay son survived, but the experience has led Dr. Long to change his position on homosexual practice.

I have at least a "hint" of his emotional/spiritual journey. We have a nephew living in a homosexual partnership, and another, not gay, committed suicide. I know these relationships are not at the intimacy level of a son, but it is "close to home," and very painful. I was emotionally deeply moved by Dr. Long's testimony about his son.

In a few days our United Methodist Church, in a special General Conference, will make decisions on whether we change our doctrine and discipline related to homosexual practice and marriage. The implications of our actions are monumental.

I was especially interested in Dr Long's writing about his mind change on the sexuality issue. One of the essays in the book, *Staying the Course*, published by Abingdon Press in 2003, to which I have been referring in these posts, was by Dr. Long.

The title of his essay was "Ecclesial Disobedience or Ecclesial Subordination to Liberal Institutions." He traced the rise of the particular tradition of thought and practice known as "liberalism," then asserted that "recent Church conversations on sexuality have made little to no mention of the social and political contexts that influence all forms of exchange at present. In fact, many of the arguments for gay and lesbian unions assume the normativity of those forms of exchange and invite the Church to become more accommodating to them, thereby subordinating the Church's theological tradition to that particular tradition of thought and practice known as "liberalism." (*Staying the Course*, pp. 41-42)

He describes how the liberal tradition in human thought began with Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, which argued against governmental interference with economic transactions. Smith argued that the market should be freed not only from political interference but also ecclesial interference.

This liberal tradition was passed on in the twentieth century by persons such as Friedrich Hayek who published his *Road to Freedom* in 1944. He argued that "no common end to economic life should be set forth, and no common "end" to the religious or moral life should be established either." He stated, "the individual should be allowed, within defined limits, to follow their own values and preferences rather than somebody else's."

Long declared that "This tradition of liberalism now dominates the way the majority of the world's people eats, clothes itself, finds shelter, seeks entertainment, and (most

unfortunately) worships. It requires that no 'common end' should define a peoples' life, but an individual's rights, preferences, and orientations should be safeguarded against communal encroachments." (*Staying the Course*, p 44)

He writes insightfully about how educational institutions and political exchanges have been "captured" by "liberalism," then closes with focus on the church.

"The inclusivist Church clearly mimics the dominant liberal institutions within North American culture and the forms of exchange they invite us to embody. In an effort to ensure that individuals are "accepted and fully supported" based on what they a priori possess, no common life is permitted. In fact, it is policed against. We are not held accountable for our economic exchanges, nor for our political or sexual exchanges. We are not held accountable because we are more formed by the assumptions of the liberal tradition, whereby each is allowed to choose his or her own good rather than pursue a common quest for the goodness of God rooted in a vision formed by Scripture, tradition, and a common discipline. Even the common task that states that the purpose of the Church is to make disciples for Jesus Christ has been publicly challenged by our episcopal overseers on the basis that it is an "imposed," oppressive norm, to which not all United Methodist Churches adhere.

Although it inevitably practices exclusions, the inclusivist Church asserts that it is nonjudgmental. For instance, a recent news report about the advertisement campaign planned by United Methodist Communications sets forth a strategy for new member recruitment based on billboard slogans such as "I believe none of us is qualified to judge." Of course, this is itself a form of dogmatic judgment. It is a dogma - "I believe"- and it is a judgment - "none of us can judge." As any first-year philosophy student should know, to say "thou shalt not judge" is a judgment. But the judgment in this slogan fits well the exclusionary basis of the inclusivist Church. It excludes any who would argue that one of the Church's tasks is precisely to judge - to make discriminations about what constitutes holy living and what does not. Herein lies the problem with the inclusivist Church and its subordination to liberal social institutions. It constantly passes judgments on others while proclaiming all the more loudly that it does not judge or exclude, but only seeks to include. Thus, it has little capacity for self-critical reflection. That makes the inclusivist Church more dangerous than those other more reasonable ecclesiologists that know they must make judgments that will inevitably exclude so they develop publicly accessible mechanisms by which such judgments are made." (*Staying the Course*, p.54)

His final words speak loudly to the issues confronting us at our upcoming General Conference. The "liberal institutions," about which he writes with reason and conviction, are far more imbedded in our present culture 20 years later, making his warning even more relevant.

"I do not see how The United Methodist Church can overturn its marriage practices and bless gay and lesbian unions without accommodating the Church's tradition more thoroughly to the tradition of liberalism that dominates American culture. Even though "spirituality" has become something of a cottage industry in our culture, these are dangerous times for the possibility of sustaining communal forms of religious life that

do not accept the modern liberal norm of “progress,” whereby everything must always be “new and improved.” Liberalism constantly wages war on the past, trying to sever persons from any historical tradition to force them to be “individuals” who choose for themselves based on their individual possessions. It does so as a tradition. I have no doubt that God will preserve the Church even through these times. But the Church must move into the future, as Gerhard Lohfink so beautifully notes, like someone rowing a boat across a river. We cannot move forward without always looking backward. Only when those who seek to bring changes to our marriage practices can do so by demonstrating continuity with our sacred teachings can we enter into the conversations that still need to take place. The “creation spirituality” that currently dominates the conversation does not maintain that continuity; it replaces it with the continuity of the tradition of the “American proposition.” Too much is at stake to alter our historic practices on such thin theological arguments.” (Staying *the Course*, p. 55)