

## **Inclusivism, Idolatry, and the Survival of the (Fittest) Faithful<sup>1</sup>**

William J. Abraham

Albert Cook Outler Professor of Wesley Studies  
Altshuler Distinguished Teaching Professor  
Perkins School of Theology  
Southern Methodist University

The quest for diversity and inclusion is a persistent feature of United Methodism today. Inclusivism is the “ism” of our generation if not our times. Inclusivism in fact trumps postmodernism and pluralism as the working ideology of The United Methodist Church. It is at once a theological commitment and a network of practices. Unlike postmodernism, an esoteric and systematically ambiguous philosophical movement, inclusivism is both a slogan of action and the code-word of an amorphous ideology. Unlike pluralism, an ambiguous notion birthed with the so-called Wesleyan Quadrilateral,<sup>2</sup> inclusivism really has taken hold of the imagination of the current leadership. The commitment to inclusivism is embedded in our primary discourse, in our long-range planning, in our policy documents, in our structural arrangements, in our favorite theological code-words, in our reward systems, and in the language and disciplines of our self-evaluation. Sometimes we substitute the language of diversity or hospitality to ease the monotony; in this essay I shall do the same.

However we name the reality, inclusivism is now the air we breathe within the higher echelons of mainline Protestantism. The commitment to inclusivism is subject to official audit; watchdog commissions keep a close eye on failure; its advocates do not hesitate to take appropriate action against failure or backsliding. At a more political level, the term shows up in the propaganda and buttons of activists, for whom it has become a non-negotiable moral and theological crusade. Innovations, however controversial or ill-judged, are hitched to its aura of persuasion. In some circles inclusivism has become a worldview, underwritten by claims to epistemological privilege. It has traveled sufficiently far to show up in the political posters of Sinn Fein, the political arm of the IRA in Ireland. In a trip to my hometown of Enniskillen last year I found a poster lauding the quest for “an inclusive peace” in the local offices of Sinn Fein. It was this experience that first triggered the turn to take a hard look at the idea of inclusivism. A concept that has achieved this level of internalization and use deserves to be examined with some care.

My aim here is to conduct a theological audit of our commitment to inclusivism. What does it mean? How did it arise? What are its strengths and weaknesses? Can we move beyond it into a better future?

What does inclusivism mean? At one level it is a thesis about power. Negatively, it begins with the observation that various networks of people have been excluded from

---

<sup>1</sup> In a paper on the church as a moral community there are two ways to proceed. If one already possesses a robust, comprehensive doctrine of the church, one can proceed from above and deal with the issue as a relatively abstract theological issue. If one does not, then one can begin from below and work upwards from a significant moral conundrum present in the contemporary church. I have chosen to work from below.

<sup>2</sup> The aim of the Quadrilateral was to secure a commitment to scripture, tradition, reason, and experience and then allow a pluralism of theologies derived from this “norm”. While the Quadrilateral and pluralism were logically distinct, they were materially inseparable.

the critical organs of decision-making in the culture and in the church. Positively, inclusivism is a call for radical action focused on the redistribution of power. Here is the heart of the matter: inclusion is constituted by the appropriation of power by excluded minorities.<sup>3</sup>

Necessarily, inclusivism requires the naming of victims and oppressors. The victims are readily identified in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, age, class, and even culture. The identification of oppressors is relative to the identification of victims. Blacks are oppressed by whites, Hispanics by Anglos, the poor by the rich, Jews by Gentiles, women by men, homosexuals by straights, Palestinians by Israelis, the old by the young and middle-aged, lower classes by upper classes, and adherents of popular culture by cultural elites. The core of inclusivism is a normative thesis: the oppressed must be confronted and the captives must be set free. Power within church and society must be redistributed so as to provide room for the excluded and the marginalized.

This theme, of course, is also the heartbeat of Liberation theology. How exactly this theology is to be related to the great tradition of Liberal Protestant theology is a contentious issue. Is it a continuation of Liberal Protestant theology's concern with injustice and transformation, as updated by Reinhold Niebuhr? Or is it a radical departure from Liberal Protestant theology on the grounds that Liberal Protestant theology was inescapably enmeshed in the ideology and practice of oppression?<sup>4</sup> How it relates to the classical theology of the Church is also contentious. Is Liberation theology itself an extension and enrichment of classical theology, or is the classical theology of the church itself in need of liberation? Both options are clearly possible and available in the literature. However these disputed matters are resolved, the call to inclusivism is a call to repentance, disruption, redirection, and reorientation.

How did this call to inclusivism arise? Clearly the origins of inclusivism lie, as far as the recent past is concerned, in the quest to rid the world of racism and patriarchy in the social revolution of the sixties. Inclusivism began life as a response to racism, the doctrine that white races are superior to black races, and to patriarchy, the doctrine that men are essentially superior to women. Twinning these evils, we might say that

---

<sup>3</sup> Note that inclusivism does not mean here the claim that all religious roads lead to salvation or to God. My usage is much more restricted and delimited, focused on a moral and political proposal central to mainline modern Protestantism. Of course, it would not take much for inclusivism in my more narrow, morally constrained sense to be transformed into a claim about inclusivism in the wider sense. I attend to inclusivism in the wider sense in the last chapter of *The Logic of Evangelism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989). For a recent incisive analysis of inclusivism in the wider sense see Russell Reno, "At the Crossroads of Dogma," in Ephraim Radner and George Sumner, eds., *Reclaiming Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 105-137. The core idea of inclusivism in a broader sense that is intended here is made clear by Reno in the following section. "The motto of the dogma of inclusivism is broadly this: One God, many paths. The proponents of inclusivity think along the following lines. If God is truly a God of love, then his love must extend to all his creatures. Moreover, if his love is an affirmation (and if love is anything, then surely it is an affirmation of the beloved), then God's pervasive love must be an affirmation of us all. Finally, if we who are is diverse (Jewish, Christian, Buddhist, or Hindu), then God's universal love must be an affirmation of us all in our diversity. Ergo, God's love affirms the integrity of our Christianness, Jewishness, Muslimness, etc. In other words, God's love is inclusive; it vindicates and makes efficacious the many paths that humans have historically taken to the divine." Ibid, 128.

<sup>4</sup> Niebuhr persistently warned that love without justice is sentimentality and that justice without love is simply balance of power. In the current quest for inclusivism we certainly have plenty of sentimentality; but the crucial observation to make is that the quest for justice has been replaced simply by the reallocation of power.

inclusivism began life as a protest against the white, male leadership embedded in the power structures of society and church. Thus it was deeply linked to the exclusion of racial or ethnic minorities and women. In time inclusivism migrated as a solution to other forms of oppression and exclusion.

It is the originating circumstances that explain the pain and rage on the part of the victims and the guilt and readiness to comply on the part of those accused of oppression. The evils of racism and patriarchy were (and are) so obvious that change was inescapable; opposition was morally odious and understandably called forth protest and prophetic fervor. The originating circumstances also explain the ready compliance to change in both thought and practice. Racism and patriarchy are morally wrong; they are incompatible with the gospel; and they are at odds with any robust doctrine of creation. Only those who are self-deceived, or who are caught in the grip of morally corrupt forms of reasoning, would dare to oppose the call to inclusivism. Hence, as the boundaries of exclusion were extended and other victim groups were added to the initial list, it is easy to see how inclusivism became *de facto* the orthodoxy of modern mainline Protestantism. Challenges to inclusivism come across as a return to the evils of the past; they cannot but be a backlash motivated by a hidden quest for power and domination; they are racism and patriarchy in a new garb.

The morally charged nature of our situation makes it virtually impossible to question the place of inclusivism in the life of the church, society, or academy. Reformers will immediately be castigated as racists and oppressors. The situation is often compounded by the tacit claim that the oppressed and those on the margins have privileged access to the truth. Anyone outside these zones who raises critical questions may well be accused of various forms of cognitive malfunctioned due to the place of self-interest in their deliberations. Yet underneath the surface there are rumblings; it is only a matter of time before they will come to the surface and cry out for attention. I think it is high time we opened the books to take a fresh look.

We are aware, of course, that rumblings have been around for decades. Charges of the injustice of affirmative action, worries about the inequity of using quota systems, and complaints about the culture of political correctness, have long been with us. However, these strike me as slogans in search of truth rather than effective criticism. They are blunt instruments that tend to be taken back to the armory as soon as they are used rather than icons of illumination that can move us forward beyond our current worries. It is the more subtle worries, worries that folk are reluctant to voice, at least in public, which deserve our initial attention.

Consider the following observation. It is a marked feature of our life together that people watch very carefully what they say and how they say it. It is as if folk are walking on eggshells, treading carefully lest they bruise what is vulnerable and fragile. Changing the trope, folk constantly keep an eye over their shoulder; they expect to get hit from time to time. People fear that they will fail to communicate. Perfectly innocent remarks that happen to use certain critical code-words can easily be misinterpreted. Ideas and topics far removed from the neighborhood of exclusion suddenly get conscripted into a name, blame, and shame game. Folk begin to internalize their fears to the point where they appoint their own inner thought-police who keep watch on their ideas and thereby destroy intimacy, freedom, spontaneity, and creativity. Furthermore, astute observers often wait patiently to see how long it will take before the charge of exclusion will be made, before

some victim group complains, or before some new victim group calls for inclusion in the conversation. We might say that the theme of exclusion/inclusion has become the background music that sets the tone for conversation and action together. There is a subterranean note of judgment and accusation lurking below the surface.

Matters become even more acute when it comes to selecting speakers, panel participants, and modes of worship at meetings. With speakers and panelists, the solution is clear: simply ensure inclusivism in terms of gender, race, and the like.<sup>5</sup> With the actual content of worship the problem is much more difficult. It is clear that certain phrases and words are simply not usable: “Father”, “Son”, “Lord”, “King”, “Master”, “Kingdom”, “He”, “Old Testament”, and “Jesus” are shunned. This is a very short list of words, but they crop up so persistently in scripture, in the creeds, in hosts of hymns, in the doxology, in the benediction, and in the sacraments, that finding the right discourse turns out to be a recurring problem. For a time it was popular to refer to the Old Testament as the Hebrew Bible, but this is historically problematic, and it leaves the New Testament dangling without a complement. The most recent effort I have noted is to announce the Old Testament readings as coming from the first part of the canon.<sup>6</sup> “The Christ” is pressed into service as proxy for “Jesus”, but the expression is opaque, stilted, and unnatural. Substituting “realm” and “reign” for “kingdom” takes the political edge off the language of the gospel. Replacing “Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer” for “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,” has turned out to be hopelessly modalistic rather than Trinitarian. The more changes we make in language, the more it becomes clear that either we have a terribly thin theological diet on offer, or that we have a whole new theology being pressed into service. The obvious theology to deploy is some version of Liberation theology.<sup>7</sup>

Naturally alienation begins to emerge, as folk find the neologisms and changes unconvincing. For those committed to Liberation, they see such alienation as a sign of unease, and this unease readily comes across to them as rejection of inclusion or refusal of the truth. For those designated formally or informally as oppressors, the potential for alienation has been there from the start, despite the fact that those accused of oppression have an enormous capacity to absorb criticism. Generally they reserve their grief and alienation for the closet or for a circle of trusted friends. Many people, and this includes some victim groups, feel that the goal posts keep moving. New victims arise to challenge the status of the old ones. The criteria of success keep shifting. A narrative of success suddenly does a u-turn and becomes a litany of hidden failure. Diversity audits provide ample opportunity to keep score and to locate gaps in the inclusivist agenda. The end result is the balkanization and fragmentation of the church as a whole. Reversing the extraordinary claims to unity depicted, say, in Ephesians 2, dividing walls are set up and guards posted to prevent dismantling. Within the ensuing dysfunction, inclusivism becomes a weapon of assault or of criticism against anyone who cannot go along with the

---

<sup>5</sup> Ironically, the result is not diversity but monotonous uniformity. I have served on national panels where in a group of, say, six, I was the only different voice in a chorus of voices intended to represent diversity.

<sup>6</sup> Thus a reading from Genesis was introduced as “A reading from Genesis, the first book of the canon”, rather than something like “A reading from the Old Testament in the book of Genesis”.

<sup>7</sup> The effort to use the suffering of children in church circles as the point of entry to the themes of Liberation theology has now become somewhat hackneyed and predictable. On very good anecdotal evidence I am convinced that the appeal to children on recent occasions by the Council of Bishops originated in a concerted effort to introduce the themes of Liberation theology into the bloodstream of the church.

latest call for justice and inclusion. What began as an effort to include excluded minorities and women becomes over time an instrument of exclusion silencing those who want to raise fundamental questions about crucial moral, educational, and theological proposals in the church.<sup>8</sup> At this point the danger of serious institutional dysfunction lies close to hand.

There is also the clear danger that the oppressed may become the oppressor. Truth be told, some among the oppressed have rapidly turned into oppressors. Given the moral privileging of antiracist and antipatriarchal modes of speech, once this or that favored cause has been housed within this horizon, it is very tempting to use the new power gained to press home the cause.<sup>9</sup> The march to progress becomes relentless, systematic, blind, pharisaical, self-righteous, and manipulative.<sup>10</sup> Crucial information can be withheld, due process can be set aside, and convenient lies can be told and then explained away. Good leaders, caught in a potential line of fire, readily develop political myopia as a strategy of success and survival. Those leaders who resist are punished. I have seen two distinguished white male leaders in two different seminaries (one a dean, the other a president), both of whom were unapologetically Liberal in disposition and totally committed to the cause of inclusivism and diversity, summarily dumped and despised by those who replaced them. They were subject to humiliating votes of no confidence, set packing to the margins to lick their wounds, methodically shunned, and then (among other indignities) systematically barred from serious committee assignments.

Inclusivism is indeed a matter of power. One cannot but wonder that inclusivism has become so popular and widespread precisely because it provides cover for the exercise of raw power. What is at stake is the control of pivotal institutions, access to patronage, promotion, honors, status, and money, and ownership of the social, moral, and spiritual capital of the church. If there is any truth in this, then we have a very serious moral problem at the very core of the church.

My own theological worries go beyond the problem of power and the corruption (and the complicity in corruption) one encounters from time to time. Consider this simple observation. When we worship together now in mainline corporate settings, the first question before us is not whether God is present but whether the right range of diversity is present. We have the functional equivalent of what some churches that are committed uncritically to church growth do when they make it clear that visitors are far more important in the worship service than God is. The first thing we do is look at who

---

<sup>8</sup> This applies even more forcefully in the academy where charges of exclusion are used to fend off commitment to intellectual virtue and rigor. The most egregious case I have come across in the academy is the charge of racist grading. The most egregious cases in the church operates in the neighborhood of debates about homosexuality.

<sup>9</sup> One of the persistent sins of would be reformers is to assume that because they managed to get it right on one big issue, say, racism, then they will certainly get it right on the next, and then on the next.

<sup>10</sup> For a fine analysis of the concept of manipulation see Marcia Baron, "Manipulativeness", *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, 77: 2 (2003), 37-54. One of the crucial strategies of the manipulator is to "reconceptualize something in a way that serves one's goals, and doing so in order to secure ... acquiescence." It is hard to doubt that the prominence of the language of inclusivism fits the bill neatly at this point. Another strategy noted by Baron is common. "... A may browbeat B by demanding a reason, as if B owes A an explanation and is obliged to do A's bidding unless B has an adequate reason. When a reason is put forward, A challenges either its adequacy or B's sincerity in claiming it as a reason."

occupies the best seats in the sanctuary. We have collapsed the church into a mutual admiration society, and, when that fails, we turn it into a mutual criticism society. One T-shirt recently captured the limiting case for me when it noted that embracing diversity was embracing God. At this point we are on the edge of idolatry. We have made a god of ourselves, putting our varied identities at the core of our worship. In Luther's and Tillich's terms, we have made the recognition of our identities the ultimate value in our universe.<sup>11</sup> The move from that to the straight theological claim that in embracing diversity we embrace God is surely a short one. We have indeed crossed the threshold from anthropocentrism into idolatry.

One influential leader made the point with telling if evasive simplicity in an address to the United Methodist Council of Bishops on April 30, 2001.

Some say we have made a God of diversity. They say that, whereas "inclusivity" should be a symptom of our Godliness, the "fruit," if you will, we have made inclusivity our God. It doesn't matter what you believe, they say, it only matters that everyone is at the table.<sup>12</sup>

What has happened overall is that a virulent form of moralism has poisoned the church. This is not easy to detect, especially in those Christian communities that were born to serve the cause of holiness. Generally speaking these communities have no difficulty spotting the trouble that stems from, say, Christian forms of erastianism, ritualism, aestheticism, dead orthodoxy, or asceticism. They can immediately discern when the prevailing political powers use the church for their own ends. They can readily see when the obsession with precise ritual turns into a weapon against the spirit of the gospel. They pounce on connoisseurs of church music who impose musical standards of the elite on ordinary believers.<sup>13</sup> They can see the perils of barren assent to orthodox doctrine a mile away. They promptly observe the silliness of imposing harsh standards of, say, fasting on fragile newcomers to the faith. However, those driven by moralism, have great difficulty seeing that their moralism can readily turn into self-serving idolatry. A spiritual ego-centrism develops that becomes virtually incurable; it is as if moral endeavor excuse moral blindness. We might say that "a unique form of self-poisoning by spiritual values takes place."<sup>14</sup>

In these circumstances, we will not be able to deal with the problems thrown up by inclusivism in a merely cosmetic or procedural fashion. Stringent calls for constructive dialogue, or little homilies about diversity in unity, or moralistic efforts at conflict resolution, will not be enough.<sup>15</sup> Nor will we be able to make appeal to the

---

<sup>11</sup> On one unforgettable occasion I found it quite impossible to participate in a Eucharist that had become in effect a party-political broadcast focused on a favored set of victims. I quietly withdrew from the service as soon as I could.

<sup>12</sup> Daniel K. Church, "Remarks," in James K. Matthews and William B. Oden, eds., *Vision and Supervision* (Nashville; Abingdon, 2003), 163. Church holds the influential position of General Secretary of the General Council on Ministries in The United Methodist Church.

<sup>13</sup> Happily they also pounce when pious sentimentalists insist that we sing thin theological nonsense.

<sup>14</sup> See Mother Maria Skobtsova, "Types of Religious Life," in *Essential Writings* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2003), 173. This whole essay is a searching analysis of the vices that befall various types of piety.

<sup>15</sup> I have played a very active role in these efforts myself over the years. See William J. Abraham and Donald E. Messer, eds., *Unity, Liberty, and Charity: Building Bridges Under Icy Waters* (Nashville:

academy, say, in terms of objective scholarship, analysis, or evaluation, as a way forward. The whole idea of critical, objective, scholarship, of the fostering of intellectual virtue, of the elimination of intellectual vice, all these will be reconfigured as bids for dominion and power. There simply are no objective academic brokers. Theory, sometimes presented as ‘critical theory’ of one kind or another, will be invented and deployed to keep criticism at bay.

We can also expect the invention and ready use of diversity audits. Such diversity audits are likely to exacerbate the problem rather than to relieve it. As Onora O’Neill has recently argued with telling effect, the use of audits and increased legislation tend to undermine the kind of trust without which institutions wither and become fragmented.<sup>16</sup> In terms of the problem of idolatry, audits and legislation simply seek to put inclusivism deeper into the hard-drive of an institution and thus provide a further protective shield against any kind of criticism; we might see audits as carefully constructed anti-virus programs.

It will not be possible, given these developments, to fix the problem by resort to the conventional means of grace, like prayer, bible study, preaching, the Eucharist, and the like. As we have seen above, the basic practices of the church are themselves the site of debates and worries about inclusion and exclusion. The spiritual practices of the church become embodiments of the agenda of inclusion. Our dysfunction has reached into the very heart of the church’s practices, so that looking to these practices to heal the church is a non-starter. The problem simply breaks out all over again.

Nor can we appeal to the instrumentalities of episcopacy and oversight to take care of the situation. Episcopacy too has become hostage to the fortunes of inclusivism. Episcopacy has become systematically dysfunctional, unable to speak a word of healing precisely because trust has been eroded and alienation simmers below the surface.<sup>17</sup> In some circumstances the shepherds of the sheep have given up fleecing the sheep and taken to eating them alive when it suits them.

Nor can we appeal to the gospel, and that for four reasons.<sup>18</sup> First, the gospel is impotent because the gospel itself is now defined or characterized in terms of inclusion. Inclusivism is identified as either the essence of the gospel or as constitutive of the

Abingdon, 1996), and *Dialogues on Differences: Homosexuality and the Nature of the Church* (New York: The General Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns, 2004).

<sup>16</sup> Onora O’Neill, *A Question of Trust* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). Consider the following comment. “If the new methods and requirements supported and didn’t obstruct the real purposes of each of these professions and institutions, the accountability revolution might achieve its aims. Unfortunately I think it often obstructs the proper aims of professional practice. Police procedures for preparing cases are so demanding that fewer cases can be prepared, and fewer criminals brought to court. Doctors speak of inroads that required record-keeping makes into the time that they can spend finding out what is wrong with their patients and listening to their patients. Even children are not exempt from the new accountability: exams are more frequent and time for learning shrinks. In many parts of the public sector, complaint procedures are so burdensome that avoiding complaints, including ill-founded complaints, become the central institutional goal in its own right. We are heading toward defensive medicine, defensive teaching and defensive policing”. See *ibid*, 49-50. We might now add “defensive ministry” and “defensive administration” to the list to make it representative of life in the church. O’Neill’s little essay should be required reading for all leaders in the church.

<sup>17</sup> For an insightful analysis along these lines see Russell Reno, *In the Ruins of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2002).

<sup>18</sup> The same objections, *mutatis mutandis*, apply to appeal to scripture.

gospel. Second, the gospel is ineffective because the kind of power actually represented in the gospel by the Cross and by the power of the Holy Spirit is *de facto* rejected in favor of the political power that has become the focus of attention and an addiction among us. We have taken to squabbling like the disciples of old on the road to Jerusalem about our seats in the kingdom, and we refuse to be dislodged from our priorities. Third, the gospel is null and void because the kind of transformative unity presented in Christ has been systematically undermined by the internal balkanization of the faithful. We have a paranoiac distrust of any corporate decisions that do not represent the commitment to inclusivism. Fourth, the gospel fails because the kind of identity promised in the gospel and in baptism has been trumped by our biological and ethnic identities. We are first identified in terms of race, gender, and ethnicity and only secondarily identified in terms of faith and baptism. Turning to the gospel has become another dead-end.

The choice before us is stark. Wherever inclusivism has morphed from anthropocentrism into idolatry, we have two plain options. Either inclusivism, as we now know it, will die; or inclusivism, as we now know it, will kill us.

We may all hope for a better way ahead, but the first step to that goal is realism and skepticism all around. Even a small dose of sanctified cynicism may be in order. I recommend this medicine realizing that proponents of unconstrained inclusivism will be deeply upset by my analysis. Some of them know full well what they are doing; most do not. Hence they will be shocked at my narrative. I think that we should expect and understand this reaction. Most partisans of inclusivism operate from the best of motives; they genuinely believe that they are serving God; they are totally convinced that the cause of liberation requires them to act as they do; they may even agree (and then genuinely regret) that lines have been crossed that should not be crossed. However, what we have to face here is not the good intentions of agents; we have to deal with reality as it is.

In the meantime ordinary believers have to survive. What should they do when they find themselves immersed in a world where inclusivism is the primary commitment?<sup>19</sup>

Happily, of course, the world of inclusivism has fluid boundaries. It is not as if inclusivism rules as the reigning ideology everywhere or in every local church. Many local churches have never heard of inclusivism; it is in fact hard work to implement it across the board in the life of the church. I know of some local churches where inclusivism has been systematically imposed from the top down by self-assured and self-appointed hierarchies of power; in these cases the older members or the recalcitrant were simply driven out over time, and there was a complete turnover in the congregations. However, these cases are (I hope) exceptional. For the most part inclusivism works more

---

<sup>19</sup> It is not easy to find the most felicitous way to frame the question before us. I spoke in an early draft of this paper I wrote here of the “faithful” rather than of “ordinary believers,” and I meant by that those whose primary commitment is to the gospel. I have kept the designation of the “faithful” in the title because of its directness. However, as I have already noted, inclusivists aggressively insist that they too are committed to the gospel, so that language already cooks the books in advance. So, to be fair to the position I am criticizing, I have tried to find as neutral a way as possible to pursue my quarry. In doing so I note three points. First, it is inevitable in our present situation that we cannot find a neutral way to express the issue before us. Our dysfunction spills over into disputes about how best to ask our questions. Second, for me the issue is precisely one of faithfulness to the gospel, so that anything short of this will not be robust enough in content. Third, as should be clear by now, my concern is not the commitment to inclusivism, but to forms of inclusivism that become abusive and spiritually suffocating.

at the level of inter-congregational institutions; in Methodist terms it works at the connexional level. Moreover, even where inclusivism is the working ideology, it is not always easy to maintain it as the continuing or even inevitable commitment of any group. Inclusivism finds itself constantly overridden or challenged by competing allegiances; financial solvency, for example, is a powerful reminder of reality. This is one reason why its advocates keep watch for institutional backsliding and are alert to new openings to press their cause and remake the ethos of the church. So we should not exaggerate.<sup>20</sup>

Yet we still need to ask: what should ordinary believers do in these circumstances? One thing they must not do is to try and turn the clock back. We will never get beyond inclusivism to a better future until we recognize the initial problems it was meant to address and until we agree that it is crucial to rid the church of racism and patriarchy. Even if fixing the problems means putting up with the sins of inclusivists, even if we have to grin and bear the excesses of inclusivism, any church that is faithful to the gospel must come to terms with the core insights that drive the inclusivist agenda. Thus the ordinary believer should be patient, recognizing that righting past wrongs is painful and difficult. We simply have to bear the sins of the fathers as best we can; beyond that we must in mercy bind up the wounds of the fathers with sensitivity. As Winston Churchill once quipped: “When you are going through hell, keep going.”<sup>21</sup> The moral and spiritual renewal of the church in this arena is inevitably a cross-generational operation. This is certainly true of all forms of renewal; hence we must be patient and long-suffering.<sup>22</sup> So patient endurance is surely the first order of business.

Second, it will not help to invite those who have ‘benefited’ from inclusivism to move us beyond inclusivism. This is a tempting strategy in that it would forestall charges of backlash and backsliding. After all, if moves to change come from within those groups currently identified as victims and oppressed, then it will be more difficult to argue that it is covert racists and oppressors who fuel the move beyond inclusivism. If the champions and beneficiaries of inclusivism can take the lead in moving beyond inclusivism, then everyone benefits. However, the danger here is that we will be setting up genuine victims, who have already suffered enough, to be the targets of hard-line inclusivists. We have all seen this happen. Genuine feminists have been excoriated for false consciousness simply because they developed a critical disposition towards the favored forms and instrumentalities of feminism. No one wants to be accused of bad consciousness or to be labeled an Uncle Tom or an Oreo. We should not be parties to plans that set good people up for such targeting. In an ideal world, the best way forward would indeed be that the champions of inclusivism become its best critics, but to ask for this would impose a burden that is inappropriate. Any move to go beyond inclusivism on the part of genuine victims is a task of great danger and a work of supererogation; it is not a moral duty.

---

<sup>20</sup> There are days when I am tempted to believe that inclusivism has peaked. I observe that many are profoundly uneasy, even though they remain silent in public. However, reality readily makes it easy to overcome such temptation.

<sup>21</sup> Quoted in Caitlin Flanagan, “How Serfdom Saved the Woman’s Movement,” *Atlantic Monthly*, March 2004, 114.

<sup>22</sup> I argue this case in “Staying the Course, On Unity, Division, and Renewal in The United Methodist Church,” in Kenneth Tanner and Christopher Hall, eds., *Ancient and Modern Christianity, Essays in Honor of Thomas C. Oden* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 2002) 170-183. For my analysis of the bigger picture on renewal see *The Logic of Renewal* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

Third, if inclusivism has become spiritually suffocating, then the ordinary believer will have to take whatever steps they can to ensure their spiritual welfare. This is very common in much of contemporary Protestantism. To put the matter in pastoral terms, when the sheep look up and are no longer fed, they simply wander off and find pastures wherever they can. When arrogant elites impose their pyrrhic, political victories on others, those imposed upon vote with their money and their feet. When inclusivism elbows out the great mercy of God and usurps the place of the cross in the gospel, ordinary believers readily slip away and find food for their souls elsewhere. It is easy to dismiss this as a form of ecclesial consumerism or of financial blackmail, but I think that this is a cynical, superficial, and false reading of the situation. One of the great advantages of the separation of state and church is that denominations can no longer use coercion to impose their will on the faithful. Hence, there are hosts of ways to bypass those arenas of ecclesiastical life and practice that have become corrupt and idolatrous. The sheep are no longer confined to retreating into a world of personal piety, important as that measure is; they can readily wander off to greener pastures and be fed. Nor is it acceptable for the sheep to take to whining and complaining; they need to find their feet and go get food. In the limiting case, where things are hopelessly out of order, say, in one's local church, then one can simply leave and go elsewhere. In cases where there is a real danger to one's spiritual life, I would not hesitate to endorse such a strategy.

Fourth, the best antidote to abusive and self-serving forms of inclusivism is to reinstate the gospel at the core of the church's life. As I noted earlier, this is at present a tall order. The gospel itself is either neutralized or co-opted by the advocates of hard forms of inclusivism, so any appeal to the gospel simply reinforces the status quo. However, the point to observe here is that we are not trying to convert hardliners but to speak up in a different language and with a richer agenda in the life of the church. Because whole networks of leaders have gone astray does not mean that we have to go with them. Because well-meaning ideologues have grabbed the microphone does not entail that all other means of communication are unplugged. Because suffocating and narrow moralists have bleated their way to the top does not mean that we have to follow them like sheep to the slaughter. Because hard-nosed strategists and their agents control critical committees does not mean that the rest of us should shut up and forget to vote our conscience. Indeed silence may well be a form of complicity. So ordinary believers should use every opportunity to change the subject and recover their nerve in the commitment to the gospel and the faith in which it dwells.

Inclusion arose as a legitimate effort to implement a glorious vision of equality that is embedded in the gospel; we can be grateful for those theologians, Liberal, Liberationist, and otherwise, who drove home the inclusivist insight. It is now time to get to the news behind the news and work for a change of speech and subject. It was Christ's cross and resurrection that won the victory over exclusion; it is the same cross and resurrection that will heal us of corruption and idolatry carried out under the banner of inclusion. If contemporary inclusivists cannot speak robustly in terms of the gospel, there is no reason the rest of us should follow their lead. When it comes to our turn to speak, we can change the subject and return to the first order discourse of the gospel. We can immerse ourselves in the great themes of the gospel; we can drink afresh from the mercy of God in the cross; we can ensure that the full faith of the church is tended to and taught; we can lift up Christ like the serpent in the wilderness and watch him draw all to

himself; we can cry out for a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the church; we can do all we can to ensure that the sacraments are duly administered; we can pray without ceasing for the comprehensive renewal of the whole people of God. The sharp-edged Word of God is not intimidated by its enemies; it is a healing Word of truth and salvation.

There is no recipe for how all this should be done. Clearly one point of entry for change is the long-haul renewal in evangelism and the making of disciples that is currently finding its way into the hard-drive of United Methodism.<sup>23</sup> In this instance, the sharing of the gospel as enacted by a rich band of multi-cultural and diverse witnesses would in itself provide a paradigm for change. In this case inclusivism is wonderfully subordinated to the gospel in such a way that the gospel becomes front and center in the practice of the church. The gospel supervenes beautifully in this instance on the practice of inclusivism.

Beyond this the ordinary believer will simply have to be versatile and creative in calling into question the corruption that we face. The strategies adopted for change will have to match the context. In academic institutions it will be possible to make the case that academic standards and virtue are at stake when inclusivism is made the reigning orthodoxy. Indeed it is not difficult to spot cases of racism and matriarchy introduced under the banner of inclusivism that can be challenged head on for what they are, that is, gross forms of injustice, preferment, nepotism, or special treatment. Moreover, academic communities that give up on intellectual virtue for the sake of inclusivism will quickly find themselves mired in intellectual vice; in the end we must have faith that intellectual virtue in the academy will win in any clash with the ideology of inclusivism and diversity.<sup>24</sup>

In other arenas, say, in the election of bishops, we can argue that criteria of effectiveness and faithfulness are every bit as important as inclusivism; so success in elections cannot simply be reduced to skin color or to the presence or absence of certain biological organs. At present it is, of course, very difficult to overcome the quota system in place for committees, but in time we may find (and until then we can hope) that effective action that serves the good of the whole church, whoever carries it out and gets the credit, will be welcomed and fostered. We can allow our good deeds to give glory to God rather than to ourselves. I know of one instance where a General and Jurisdictional Conference delegation adopted a process of discernment that moved beyond our current ways of doing business together. This required creative and courageous leadership from the female heads (both clergy and lay) of the delegation, but the overall outcome for the group as a whole became in time the center of gravity of the work done together. It was a splendid moment of grace in the church.

It is grace in the end that will heal us of our anthropocentrism and idolatry. While the short-term prospects are grim, the long-term possibilities leave open the prospects of a new day. No doubt, when we get beyond inclusivism (and at present there is no end in sight), there will be other sins to repent of and new problems to be faced. "Sufficient unto the day are the troubles thereof," so we had better stick to the troubles we now face before we worry about the ones up ahead. The church is a moral and spiritual community

---

<sup>23</sup> To be sure, there are serious efforts to fend off this critical element in the renewal of the church and to reduce renewal to the moral renovation of the tradition, but that is a topic for another time and place.

<sup>24</sup> For the crucial place of intellectual virtue in education see my "Education, Social Transformation, and Intellectual Virtue," forthcoming.

that is constantly beset with its own failings and corruptions. The church is always a community of holiness in the making. The most difficult corruptions of all are those that stem from her own quest for perfection; it is especially troubling when the best becomes the enemy of the good and the pretext for evil. Yet within her bosom the church possesses the medicine for her many illnesses, and there is no reason to think that someone someday will not find the recipe we need to cure us of our current waywardness. Once the medicine begins to take effect, the grace of God now resisted will be the source of boundless healing. It is the gospel of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, which alone can save us from our corruption and idolatry.