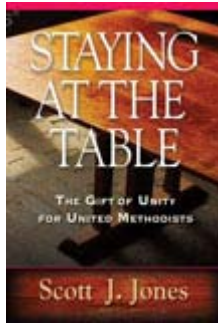


CIRCUITRIDER *Reviews*



Staying at the Table: The Gift of Unity for United Methodists

by Scott J. Jones (Abingdon Press, 2008)

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Staying at the Table: The Gift of Unity for United Methodist by Scott J. Jones

Scott Jones, Bishop of the Kansas Area, has offered a gift to The United Methodist Church. His stated aim, as a church leader, is to contribute to the continuing conversation about how best to think about, receive, and live more fully into God's gift of unity.

Expanding upon his work in his earlier book, *United Methodist Doctrine: The Extreme Center*, the major contribution of his new book is in the format of the book itself. It consists of his essay (about half of the book) followed by responses and reflections from a diverse group of United Methodists expressing a range of viewpoints.

As noted in Bishop Will Willimon's response, a major historic role of bishops is to be a sign of the unity of the body of Christ. Bishop Jones carries forward this role with heartfelt sincerity and conviction. He is passionate about his view of Methodist doctrine as occupying what he calls "the extreme center," totally opposed, as he states it, to "the dead center." He presents unity as God's gift to the church and briefly outlines scriptural theology and metaphors for unity found in the writings of the apostle Paul.

However, it is apparently not simple for United Methodists even to agree on the content, let alone the import, of our doctrine. Jones describes what he determines to be the "four levels" of doctrine, with

scripture reigning supreme. But others see no such internal hierarchy and include in one operative list of sources of Methodist doctrine the first Collection of Methodist hymns, the collection of Minutes from the first Methodist conferences, and more recently a wider use of creeds, The Social Creed and Our Theological Task.

This is only to point out that Jones' attempt to define the "extreme center" through the lens of essential doctrine is, at the outset, beset by the same diversity of viewpoints and opinions that mark some of the key issues he goes on to discuss. This perhaps fits Jones, self-described as a "compatibilist," that is one who welcomes diverse opinions and conversation. Nevertheless, in such conversation, more precise definition of terms from Jones would help sharpen the dialogue, including such expressions as "essential teachings," "appropriate diversity," "a church big enough to include lots of kinds of people," scriptural interpretation in "changed cultural situations," and so forth.

Certain respondents, including Mary Brooke Casad, point to a focus on mission as the way for United Methodists to live with diversity. However, if Jones is correct that the current *Book of Discipline* now points to the local church as the primary arena for accomplishing mission, another important question left unaddressed by this book emerges. It is not clear that Christian unity, denominational cohesiveness and the kind of relational, personal, thick, stubborn familial allegiance that is nurtured in the setting of a local congregation (or even of an annual conference) are one and the same. What is possible within the life of a local congregation may not be possible in the setting of the General Conference. Bishop Devedhar cautions against the politicization of the General Conference setting in citing the complimentary meals sponsored by caucus groups, for example. James Harnish, writing from a congregational context, notes how the very nature of General Conference tends to separate people on the circumference rather than pulling them towards the center. And Bishop Dyck dreams of local churches as workshops of "peacemaking discipleship."

Decades ago in the Viet Nam peace negotiations, negotiators first spent months negotiating the shape of the table. While initially trivialized, we now know that the shape of the table and our positions around it are essential to the outcome of the conversation. Sadly, the table on the cover of *Staying at the Table* is an old-style long rectangular table, signaling hierarchy, formality and limited give-and-take. The kind of dialogue Jones begins to envision and champion will require a table of a different shape and a renewed commitment to honest and open exchange among equal partners.

Respondent Amy DeLong asserts that “unity will never be achieved in the presence of silence and in the absence of truth.” Not impossible, if Bishop Jones and others press their vision. For as Methodist-trained Kofi Annan has said of other more lethal situations: “Dialogue is everything.”



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