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Book review: Methodist Morals: Social Principles in the Public Church's Witness

by Dr. Jessica M. Smith on November 14, 2016

In recently released text *Methodist Morals: Social Principles in the Public Church's Witness*, Darryl Stephens helpfully illuminates questions like: where did the Social Principles come from? What is its history and relevance for The United Methodist Church's witness in the world?

Further, as 2016 General Conference charged Church and Society to bring recommendations to revise the Social Principles for 2020 by making them more "concise, theologically grounded, and globally relevant," Stephens' text underlines how and why these efforts are so critical for the Church's witness today.

The text is divided into three parts: a) a historical and critical analysis of the current text, b) a more in-depth look at two social issues – marriage and clergy sexual ethics - pertinent to contemporary United Methodist debate on these matters and c) a comparative look at two Methodist social ethicists Stanley Hauerwas and Paul Ramsey's response to the Social Principles and their respective ecclesiologies (i.e. theological positions on the role of the Church).

Social Principles arise from Social Gospel movement

Stephens traces the Social Principles' origins to the Social Creed tradition in Protestantism and post-World War II ecumenism. The purpose of the Social Creed, the predecessor to the Social Principles, was spurred by the Social Gospel movement of the early 20th century. Its style, according to Stephens, "reads as a cross between the Bill of Rights and the Ten Commandments...a manifesto of economic social justice." Written in a clear and concise form, its purpose was for putting forward clear public policy positions to reform federal regulations related to urban industrialization. (16). As Stephens writes, "The 1908 Social Creed was a foray into public policy that has marked Methodist social witness as a program for broad social change since that time and continues to wield broad

influence in US Protestantism today.” (17). With the UMC merger, Bishop Thomas headed the commission on the Social Principles, seeking a similar approach to unite the former two denominations with positions on social action. In 1972, General Conference approved the Social Principles.

As Stephens’ analysis of the Social Principles demonstrates, the Social Principles ability to speak at an international level as well as its ability to educate come out of a historical time of increased hope in ecumenism, the emergence of the United Nations and its advocacy for universal human rights as a central tenet of international peacebuilding, and the 1968 merger to form The United Methodist Church. The rhetoric and form of the Social Principles, Stephens demonstrates, is closely aligned with the UN’s Declaration of Human Rights, the Bill of Rights, and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Faith and practice

For Stephens, the Social Principles’ affinity with these public documents is both its benefit but also its challenge. His most trenchant criticism of the document is its lack of consistent theological grounding and global relevance. The Social principles Stephens writes, is “fragmented both theologically and ethically, hampering the ‘prayerful, studied dialogue of faith and practice’ advocated by General Conference.” (75). Clear support of democracy, human rights, full human development in community, stewardship and responsibility are all common ethical and moral themes in the Social Principles, yet the document struggles to engage what Stephens calls “sources of wisdom” including Scripture, history, and tradition to undergird these claims. Second, through a fascinating excursus on the Special Advices, comparative and historical look at marriage norms, the bias toward American English vocabulary, and unreflective muddying of the document’s upholding of democracy and U.S. government, Stephens expertly illuminates how the Social Principles is challenged to address the global nature of the Church.

The remedy for these difficulties is hard to prescribe. Stephens is not a strong advocate for one universal document, as he sees the Social Principles adaptations found in Europe as a witness to dialogue and diversity. He also worries about the way the Social Principles are legislated and calls for a “reconsideration of the efficacy of the majority rule at General Conference as a procedure for determining shared and/or culturally specific social witness statements.” (121).

History and social witness

The final section takes a step back to more deeply consider how the Church might move forward

given its history and origins related to social witness. To do this, Stephens compares Paul Ramsey and Stanley Hauerwas as two figures that proposed differing positions on the role of the Church in public life. For Ramsey, according to Stephens, the Church should guide individual's public engagement by maintaining its transcendent role as a principled, distinct body of principles, but that the Church should "stop short" of making public policy statements. Hauerwas posits a more "prophetic ethic" according to Stephens whereby the Church must speak to the world out of a distinct Christian vocabulary that does not "accommodate to the grammar of the world" (186). In Stephens' final chapter "The Challenges of Worldliness," Stephens takes issue with both positions – arguing instead that the Church's role in public life is more complicated and vexed than either positions. Instead, Methodism's practice and ecclesial social witness calls the Church to be "getting our hands dirty" in the politics of the world, in living out of the diversity of the Church's "worldwide nature" and drawing on the "wisdom" as a tradition. For Stephens, the worldliness of the Church is also its chance for redemption – a chance to wrestle for a blessing, to commit to contestation in covenant community, and to precariously seek sanctification through practices of dialogue in diversity. Overall, for those wanting to more deeply reflect on the social witness and ethical role of the United Methodist Church today and how to understand the role that the Social Principles plays, this text is a vital aid to that endeavor.

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