



UMAction

December 2002 BRIEFING

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UM Bishop Denounces Christian Beliefs As “Idolatrous”

United Methodist Bishop Joseph Sprague of Chicago has denounced as idolatrous traditional Christian beliefs about Jesus’ eternal deity, virgin birth, bodily resurrection, atonement and Jesus’ unique role as Savior. Sprague’s speech was given earlier this year at United Methodist Iliff School of Theology in Denver.

The full text of Sprague’s speech is at www.ird-renew.org/umaction.

Sprague claimed, “Jesus was not born the Christ,

fact...Jesus was born to human parents...his conception and birth through the natural processes of procreation.”

“I believe in the resurrection of Jesus, but I cannot believe that his resurrection involved the resuscitation of his physical body,” Sprague said. He charged that “linking of resurrection with bodily resuscitation” is “idolatry.”

The Bishop rejected “the substitutionary atonement theory that portrays Jesus’ blood on the cross as satis-

Jesus because I understand, at least in part, the symbolic nature of such religious, theological language.” He then went on “to unpack this ancient, obtuse language about Jesus” in ways that reject the “orthodox language” he had said he was affirming.

Sprague claimed the Gospel writers “were writing theology, Christology in particular, and not history.” He said he was not dealing with John’s Gospel because “Jesus simply did not preach, teach, or describe

Action: Contact the Chairperson of the North Central Jurisdiction Episcopal Committee: Shirley Cook, 806 Olive Road, Oxford MI 48371. Respectfully ask that committee to investigate Bishop Sprague’s denial of Christian and United Methodist beliefs about Jesus Christ.

rather by the confluence of grace with faith he became the Christ. ...Jesus did not possess trans-human, supernatural powers... His divinity was derived, given as a gift, from his relationship of trust and obedience with God.”

Sprague asserted, “The myth of the virgin birth was not intended as historical

ifying an angry deity through one majestic human death... The concept of blood sacrifice is superstition at best...”

Sprague also rejected as “arrogant” the belief that “Jesus is the only way to God’s gift of salvation.”

Early in his speech Sprague said, “I can affirm the orthodox language of the ancient creeds regarding

himself as John suggests.”

UMAction defends the Joseph Sprague’s constitutional right to believe and advocate whatever he chooses. We believe it is wrong for him to attack the traditional Christian faith while he serves as a Bishop of a church that strongly affirms that faith. Integrity requires that he resign.

UM Bishop Whitaker Defends Christian Beliefs

Responding to United Methodist Bishop Joseph Sprague's denial of key Christian beliefs, Bishop Timothy Whitaker of Florida made a written statement affirming the traditional Christian understanding of Jesus Christ's eternal deity, virgin birth, bodily resurrection, atonement for the sins of the world, and unique role as Savior.

Whitaker's statement is at www.ird-renew.org/umaction.

Whitaker dismantled Sprague's arguments and declared that the church's future depends "upon a faithful transmission of the apostolic witness and the universal faith by the power of the Holy Spirit."

"I must admit that I find Bishop Sprague's comments on the divinity of Jesus to be rather incoherent," Whitaker wrote. "He is not as clear to me as is the consensus of the tradition that affirms that

Bishop Timothy Whitaker of Florida has defended traditional views of Jesus Christ.

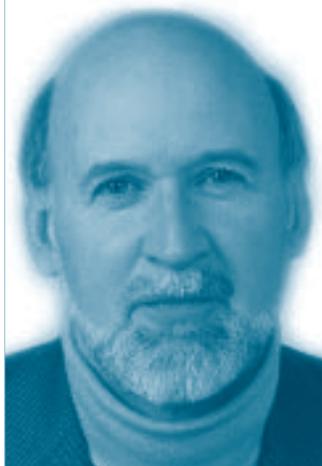


Photo courtesy UMNS

Jesus Christ is the Son of God by nature..."

Whitaker said, "if Bishop Sprague means that the language of the councils and creeds does not establish normative rules for understanding the trinity and the person of Jesus Christ, or that this language is merely poetic imagery with no definitive theological substance, then I think he is mistaken. ...He is not as careful about attending to the directions and boundaries of beliefs established by the councils and creeds as he should be, particularly in his reflections on the divinity of Jesus Christ. It may be that he assumes certain liberties because of his rather vague interpretation of the symbolic nature of the language of the councils and creeds."

Whitaker disagreed with Sprague's rejection of Jesus' virgin birth and said we should "take the virginal conception seriously as an integral part of Christian faith."

Responding to Sprague's denial of Jesus' bodily resurrection, Whitaker said, "If Jesus' body was not involved, then the so-called

resurrection meant only that Jesus survived death, not that he overcame it. ...It is important today to confess the resurrection as a sign of God's purpose to transform nature and history because this victory gives us hope..."

Disagreeing with Sprague's opinion on Christ's atonement, Whitaker affirmed "the apostolic witness that Jesus dies 'for' us or 'instead of' us. ...I do not think that the notion of sacrifice can be removed from the church's teaching about the mystery of the cross because its meaning is embedded in Jesus' own words of institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper."

Whitaker said Sprague "is valiant in his attempt to find new ways to express ancient truths. Yet one wonders why he thinks his new ways are more relevant than the language of the councils and creeds of the church."

Whitaker's critique of Sprague's speech was gentle but remarkable. United Methodist Bishops rarely criticize each other in public.

Action: Thank Bishop Timothy Whitaker for defending Christian and United Methodist beliefs. Address: 1122 East McDonald Street, Box 1747, Lakeland FL 33802-1747. Fax: 863-687-0568. E-mail: bishop@flumc.org. Ask your own Bishop what he or she thinks about Bishop Sprague's theology. Bishops' names and addresses are at www.umc.org/locator/offices/bishops.htm

Christ's Eternal Deity?

Jesus was not born the Christ, rather by the confluence of grace with faith he became the Christ, God's beloved in whom God was well pleased. ...Bishop Sprague

I must admit that I find Bishop Sprague's comments on the divinity of Jesus to be rather incoherent...
...Bishop Whitaker

Virgin Birth?

The myth of the virgin birth was not intended as historical fact but was employed by Matthew and Luke in different ways to appoint poetically the truth about Jesus as experienced in the emerging church. ...To treat this myth as a historic fact is to

You compare!

do an injustice to its intended purpose and to run the risk of idolatry itself. ...Bishop Sprague

...The virginal conception of Jesus provides an opportunity to challenge...the naturalistic reductionism of the Enlightenment. There are...theological considerations that should cause us to take the virginal conception seriously as an integral part of Christian faith.
...Bishop Whitaker

Christ's Bodily Resurrection?

I believe in the resurrection of Jesus, but I cannot believe that his resurrection involved the resuscitation of his physical

body. ...God does not work this way. ...Bishop Sprague

If Jesus' body was not involved, then the so-called resurrection meant only that Jesus survived death, not that he overcame it. Belief in survival after death was commonplace in the ancient world; it was not new, and it could not inaugurate a movement.
...Bishop Whitaker

Christ's Atonement?

The concept of blood sacrifice is superstition at best and an idolatrous allegiance to a non-Jesus methodology of God-human relationship at worst. ...Bishop Sprague

...I do not think that the notion of sacrifice can be removed from the church's teaching about the mystery of the cross because its meaning is embedded in Jesus' own words of institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper.
...Bishop Whitaker

SURVEY

Please return this survey to UMAction, 1110 Vermont Avenue NW, Suite 1180, Washington DC 20005-3593. Make copies and give to others. You may also get this survey and respond on line at www.ird-renew.org/umaction.

What do you think about Bishop Joseph Sprague's denial of Jesus Christ's eternal deity, virgin birth, bodily resurrection, atonement, and Jesus as the only Savior? Check each answer that agrees with your views.

- I agree with Bishop Sprague.
- I disagree with Bishop Sprague.
- Bishop Sprague should resign.
- All other Bishops have a responsibility to join Bishop Whitaker in publicly sharing what they think about Bishop Sprague's denial of Christian beliefs.
- The North Central Jurisdictional Episcopacy Committee should investigate Bishop Sprague if he does not resign.
- All bishops and clergy should uphold their consecration vows to defend the doctrines of Christianity and our church.
- All United Methodists should pray for all our Bishops and their faithfulness.



United Methodist Bishop Joseph Sprague (center) is arrested by Cleveland Police after blocking a session of the denomination's 2000 General Conference in protest of the church's opposition to homosexual practice.

UMNS photo by Paul Jeffrey

New Study Shows Conservative Churches Growing, Liberal Churches Declining

A new study shows liberal-led “mainline” denominations are continuing their downward membership spiral while many conservative churches continue to grow.

The survey of “Religious Congregations and Membership: 2000” compared the membership of most U.S. denominations between 1990 and 2000. In that decade the United Methodist Church lost 6.7%, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) 11.6%, the Episcopal Church 5.3%, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America 2.2%, the American Baptist Church 5.7%, the Disciples of Christ 1.9%, and the United Church

of Christ 14.8%. During that time the U.S. population increased by more than 13%.

Growing churches were theologically conservative or traditional: Southern Baptists increased by 5%, the Assemblies of God 18.5%, the Roman Catholic Church 16.2%, the Churches of Christ 18.6%, the Church of God 40.2%, the Presbyterian Church in America 42.4%, and the Wesleyan Church 46.9%.

When “mainline” denominations have any membership growth, it tends to occur in conservative regions of those churches. For example, in the Atlanta, Georgia

Action: Is your congregation growing or shrinking? Discuss the reasons why with your pastor and other local church leaders.

area, United Methodists grew by over 20% in ten years.

The Director of the Glenmary Research Center that conducted the study told *The New York Times* he was “astounded” that growing churches were conservative, while “the more liberal the denomination...the more they were losing.”

UM Officials Oppose War With Iraq's Saddam

Some United Methodist Bishops and Board of Church and Society officials are opposing any U.S. military action to depose or disarm Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein.

This is a complicated situation on which Christians can and do have different views. But too many church officials react with quick, automatic condemnation - and a total certainty that there can be no justification for any military action against Iraq, under any conceivable circumstances.



UMNS photo by Joretta Purdue.

Jim Winkler of the Board of Church & Society with Bishops Beverly Shamana, Clifton Ives and Lloyd Knox demonstrate at the White House against a U.S. war to depose Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein.

“Today, we find sometimes our opposition to war is met with anger, even from some of our own people,” admitted Jim Winkler, General Secretary of the United Methodist Board of Church and Society in Washington, D.C.

Winkler said the U.S. should “cease threatening” the violent overthrow of Saddam Hussein,

should begin negotiations with the Iraqi government, should stop bombing Iraq, should lift economic sanctions, should embargo arms sales to the whole Middle East, and should support UN weapons inspections in Iraq.

Bishop Clifton Ives of West Virginia, the Board’s President, sounded similar themes when he

UM Men Give Devotionals To U.S. Military

The Nashville-based General Commission on United Methodist Men is republishing a devotional for the U.S. armed forces that was first published by the Methodist Church during World War II.

The "Strength for Service to God and Country" booklet was

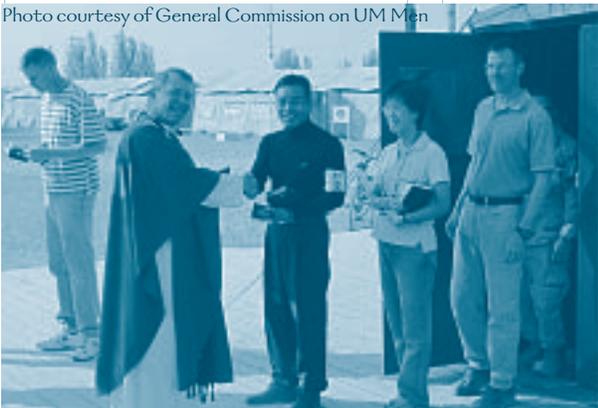
discovered and re-edited by a teen-aged Boy Scout whose grandfather had used it as a young soldier.

The 377-page collection of inspirational messages and prayers was written to uplift spirits of soldiers, sailors, and airmen during war.

Now the General Commission on United Methodist Men (GCUMM) is raising \$3 million to send this same devotional book

United Methodist Men's devotional being distributed to U.S. troops in Kyrgyzstan.

Photo courtesy of General Commission on UM Men



that was sent to U.S. service personnel after the attack on Pearl Harbor to U.S. service men and women following the September 11 attack upon the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

Action: If you would like to help United Methodist Men raise money to send this devotional to one million members of the U.S. military, please send a check to GCUMM, PO Box 340006, Nashville TN 37203-0006. For more information, contact Larry Coppock at 615-340-7149 or lcoppock@gcumm.org.

Action: Study and discuss this document: "Discernment Needed? What Mainstream Christians Know and Don't Know About Possible War with Iraq." It is at www.ird-renew.org. It explores how churches might address the issue of U.S. military action in Iraq. Share this document with your pastor.

addressed the Board's Directors at their October 2002 meeting. Ives criticized the 2000 General Conference for adding words to the United Methodist Social Principles acknowledging most Christians believe war is justified in some circumstances, such as tyranny, genocide, or aggression.

Ives claimed that the Board of Church and Society is criticized frequently because it does not "accommodate society's thirst for war." Many in the church are

"swept up in society's rush to war with Iraq," Ives said.

Bishop Ives joined Winkler and Bishop Beverly Shamana of Sacramento, who also serves on the Board of Church and Society, in reading a statement in front of the White House opposing U.S. military action against Iraq. Other Bishops who came to Washington to criticize President Bush were Joseph Sprague of Chicago, John Hopkins of Minneapolis, Peter Weaver of Philadelphia, and Linda

*UM Action Briefing is the quarterly newsletter of the United Methodist committee of the ecumenical **Institute on Religion and Democracy**. Mark Tooley, Editor. IRD was founded in 1981 to promote reform of America's mainline churches, with a special focus on their political activities. For more information call, write, or e-mail us. We are a 501 (c) (3) organization. Contributions to IRD and UMAction are tax-deductible.*

Lee of Michigan.

Bishop Sprague called for massive protests and acts of civil disobedience against a war.

Bishop Sharon Brown Christopher, as President of the Council of Bishops, wrote a pastoral letter opposing U.S. military action against Saddam.

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Don't Leave Our Church!
Stay and Work for Reform!

† We tell you the painful truth about what has gone wrong with The United Methodist Church: unfaithfulness and far-left partisan politics by too many high church officials. We don't enjoy bringing you bad news, but we must tell the truth.

† The good news is the growing movement to restore Scriptural faithfulness in our church. More and more United Methodists are working together for reform and renewal.

† Don't leave! Our great Methodist heritage is too valuable to be abandoned. Join with us to help The United Methodist Church return to its Wesleyan roots as a growing, evangelical, Christian church living Christ's Great Commission: "Go and make disciples of all nations." (Matthew 28:19)

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UM Lobby Agency Debates Partial-birth Abortion

The Directors of the United Methodist Board of Church and Society, in a surprising rejection of a staff recommendation, refused to alter the United Methodist Church's opposition to partial-birth abortion. They voted at the Board's October meeting in Herndon, Virginia.

The Board of Church and Society, supported by apportionment dollars from local churches, is the United Methodist Church's lobby office in Washington, D.C.

The 2000 General Conference added this language to the United Methodist Social Principles: "We oppose the use of late-term abortion known as dilation and extraction (partial-birth abortion) and call for the end of this practice except when the physical life of the mother is in danger and no other medical procedure is available, or in the case of severe fetal anomalies incompatible with life."

Before this language was adopted, the Board of Church and Society staff had opposed any legal restrictions on partial-birth abortion. This procedure involves cracking the skull of the unborn child and vacuuming out the skull's contents before extracting the body of the child from the mother.

The staff asked the Directors to support adding a "health" exception to the partial-birth abortion language in *The Discipline*. The General Conference had rejected this proposal in 2000, since most medical authorities say there is no health situation that requires a partial-birth abortion.

But one staffer, Linda Bales, supported deleting the church's entire stand against partial-birth abortion. She

asserted the church is "opposing a medical procedure that is available for women to choose. You're reducing choice."

Several Directors rose to disagree with Bales. Hank Shelton of Memphis pointed out that the current stance against partial-birth abortion does not call for its criminalization. It simply expresses opposition to the procedure.

Les Fowler of North Carolina said it was the clear intent of General Conference to oppose partial-birth abortion. He said it would be inconsistent to approve of partial-birth abortion while Church and Society opposes human cloning as a violation of the sanctity of human life.

Marget Sikes of Georgia and Jessica Moffatt of Oklahoma also urged retaining the current stand against partial-birth abortion.

In the end, the proposed deletion of the current stand was defeated by a vote of about 15 to 6. The Board of Church and Society has over 60 Directors, but many were absent or were present but did not vote. The vote was an unusual rejection of a direct staff recommendation.

Action: Thank the Directors who defended our church's stand against partial-birth abortion. Their addresses are at www.umc-gbcs.org/gbscbd.htm.
