

A historical painting depicting a group of soldiers in a wooden structure, possibly a fort or a ship's hold. The soldiers are wearing armor and helmets, and many have their hands clasped in prayer. The scene is lit with warm, golden light, suggesting a moment of reflection or a religious observance during a campaign.

Reconquering Mainline Protestantism?

Some conservative young Christians are proposing a 'reconquista' of liberalized Mainline Protestantism

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According to a Liberation Theology proponent serving as a United Methodist District Superintendent, Evangelicalism in most of Christianity is antithetical to Jesus Christ's teaching and lifestyle. See story on page 10



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COVER: See "Reconquering Mainline Protestantism" on page 6 to learn how optimistic young orthodox Christians are modern day "conquistadors" working to "reconquer" mainline denominations for the orthodox faith. Cover art: Romance of History, Mexico (1909) by Margaret Duncan Coxhead.

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Asbury Revival's Surprise for America

Evangelicals have prayed for revival in America for decades. But do we know what to do when it happens?

It's been more than one year since the revival at Asbury University in central Kentucky began on February 8, 2023. The widely publicized revival brought 50,000–70,000 people to Wilmore, Kentucky, population 6,000, overwhelming the infrastructure of a small community. Sadly, school authorities were obligated to shut it down after nearly continuous worship, night and day, across more than two weeks. It began in the university auditorium after a routine chapel service when students declined to leave, gaining national attention, and attracting visitors from around the world.

Asbury Theological Seminary across the street, a separate institution with common Methodist Holiness roots, opened its own chapel, auditorium, and gymnasium to accommodate the crowds. At one point, the main road into crowded Wilmore was closed to traffic. The worship was Methodist in spirit, which means simple, earnest, and non-flamboyant. Students and other worshippers sang hymns, prayed, shared testimonies, and confessed sins.

One Asbury Seminary professor recounted his brief visit to the university auditorium, citing a great sense of serenity. He could have stayed for hours, he said. But like the woman healed by the mere touch of Jesus's garment, as he described it, he felt whole and left contentedly after 90 minutes.

I was in Wilmore not long after the revival, attending the Wesleyan Theological Society. The revival's embers were still warmly felt, and everyone spoke of it glowingly. The seminary president recounted that a Malaysian seminary student at Asbury had prayed for years for revival. Back in Malaysia he sensed he should return to Wilmore, and in the Singapore airport he first learned of the revival. He surprised many when he entered the Asbury auditorium.

Wilmore is about sixty miles from Cane Ridge, a high point of the Second Great Awakening, originally hosted by Presbyterian clergy but attracting Methodists and Baptists, spawning the Restoration Movement now known as the Churches of Christ and Disciples of Christ. For a week, thousands worshiped amid shouts, groans, and falling to the ground in ecstasy over salvation or mortification over sin.

There was no equivalent drama at the Asbury Revival. The singing, prayers and testimonies were measured. The worship

remained student-led, but professors were often on the sidelines to assist, at times discouraging older people and visitors from taking center stage. There was no giant screen, pyrotechnics, or choreography. Other than electricity, heat and indoor plumbing, the technology for the Asbury Revival was not much more advanced than at Cane Ridge 223 years ago.

But the tone at Asbury was decidedly less emotive, which made a *Wall Street Journal* critique published this March a little odd.

In the article, **D.G. Hart** recalled Mercersburg Seminary's **John Williamson Nevin**, whose 1843 "The Anxious Bench" critiqued **Charles Finney's** revivalism. Amid public hoopla, conversions could be faked, Nevin's fretted. "What you see in a revival, he suggested, isn't necessarily what you get," Hart noted, asking, "Revivalism may produce some good, too, but can it be a mass vehicle for spiritual exhibitionism? Probably."

Hart also asked if the "emotional highs of revivals" can "endure the disappointments of life?" Perhaps, echoing Nevin's, "slow, steady growth in faith... is a more reliable path to Christian maturity?" Hart lamented: "The most fervent proponents of revivalism won't appreciate these queries."

Few if any at Asbury or in the wider Methodist world would resent these questions. Asbury Revival participants typically report encouragement and peace, not "emotional highs." Students from many Christian backgrounds attend Asbury University and Asbury Seminary. But both emerged from the Wesleyan Holiness movement, which emphasized the primacy of sanctification and perfection in Methodist spirituality.

For Wesleyan Holiness people, conversion, with or without "emotional highs," is only the start of a Holy Spirit-led journey

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Student-led worship services at the Asbury University chapel in Wilmore, Kentucky in February 2023 (Photo: Asbury University)

Mark Tooley



Mark D. Tooley is the President of the Institute on Religion and Democracy

Episcopal Chaplains Sought for 'Identify-Affirming Spiritual Care'

The Episcopal Church's appeal for encouraging vocations in military chaplaincy is "particularly" to provide "identity-affirming spiritual care" for a small percentage of the 1.3 million active duty service members, according

to the bishop charged with overseeing Armed Forces and Federal Ministries.

Bishop **Ann Ritonía** told the Episcopal Church's House of Bishops Spring meeting held February 28 to March 4 at Camp Allen in Navasota, Texas, that

there are 104 Episcopal chaplains—94 in active military duty, seven ministering in Veterans Affairs, and three ministering in federal prisons. Ritonía emphasized the need to encourage vocations in military chaplaincy, "particularly to ensure that LGBTQ+ service members have access to identity-affirming spiritual care."

To place these numbers in context, the Anglican Church in North America's Jurisdiction of the Armed Forces and Chaplaincy (the endorsing agency and canonical residence for professional chaplains with the ACNA and other participating Anglican bodies) has more than 300 chaplains, of which 187 are active duty military. This is despite being a smaller denomination than the Episcopal Church as measured by membership.

The largest Protestant denomination in the United States, the Southern Baptist Convention's North American Missions Board, endorses more than 3,700 chaplains, while the second largest,



The Rt. Rev. Ann Ritonía was consecrated bishop suffragan for armed forces and federal ministries during a Sept. 30, 2023 service at St. John's Lafayette Square in Washington, D.C. (Photo: Episcopal Church Office of Communication)

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the United Methodist General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, endorses about 1,700, of which one-quarter serve as military chaplains.

Beyond the number of endorsed chaplains, Ritonia's comments to the bishops illustrate where the Episcopal Church sees its role in this space: to ensure "access to identity-affirming spiritual care." This has

become a major issue, as TRICARE (the uniformed services health care program for active duty service members) covers hormone therapy for gender dysphoria. TRICARE generally doesn't cover sex reassignment surgeries, but the program's website notes that "active duty service members may request a waiver for medically necessary gender affirming surgery."

According to the Congressional Research Service, in 2016, the RAND Corporation estimated that approximately 1,320 to 6,630 of the 1.3 million active duty service members identified as transgender. Between January 1, 2016, and May 14, 2021, DOD reportedly spent approximately \$15 million to provide "gender-affirming care" (surgical and non-surgical care) to 1,892 service members. ✚

Worst Persecutors of the Church Named

Advocacy group International Christian Concern (ICC) in February made available to the public its report on the worst persecutors of the church in the year 2023.

The report assumes a similar approach to the U.S. State Department in its list of Countries of Particular Concern (CPC) and Special Watch List (SWL) designations. The chief difference is that the ICC report documents the worst persecutors of Christians worldwide and categorizes them by country, entity and individuals.

Countries listed as the worst persecutors are Nigeria, North Korea, India, Iran, China, Pakistan, Algeria, Eritrea, Indonesia, and Azerbaijan.

Nigeria, India, and Indonesia, while listed by ICC as persecutors of Christians, were not designated as CPCs by the State Department, nor were they placed on the SWL.

On January 24, reports emerged that at least 31 Christians were killed by Fulani Militants in Plateau State, Nigeria. ICC listed the Fulani as an entity that persecutes Christians.

Entities listed by ICC included the Allied Democratic Forces, Al-Shabaab, Fulani militants, Sahel terror groups, the Taliban, and Tatmadaw.

The Allied Democratic Forces is among the militant groups active in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo. On January 30, an attack near the town of Beni resulted in the death of eight people, and an additional 30 people kidnapped by the group.

Al-Shabaab has been listed as an Entity of Particular Concern (EPC) by the State Department for their activities in Somalia and Kenya.

The Taliban has conducted a brutal campaign against Christians since reassuming power in Afghanistan in 2021. Since then, the Church has been forced to go underground and is largely cut off from the rest of the world.

The Tatmadaw, or the Armed Forces of Myanmar, seized control of the country after a military coup three years ago. A report by the Centre for Information Resilience has documented that the military of Myanmar has destroyed 107 religious buildings, with 67 churches among that total, in Chin State alone since the coup. The fighting in Chin State is most severe as it was the first state to actively resist the junta.

The five people listed as the greatest individual persecutors of Christians

in the world include: **Yogi Asityanath, Isaiaf Afwerki, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Xi Jinping, and Kim Jong Un.**

Asityanath is Chief Minister of the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, an epicenter of Hindu extremist targeting of Christians.

President Afwerki of Eritrea oversees a country where repression is normal policy.

President Erdogan of Turkey has supported the Azerbaijani effort to ethnically cleanse the Armenian Christian community in Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh). Erdogan has also intervened in the conflicts in Libya, Syria, and Northern Iraq promoting an Islamist Ideology.

Both President Xi of China and Kim Jong Un of North Korea perceive Christianity as a direct threat to their rule. In China, the Church has been co-opted by the Communist Party. For several years, North Korea has been regarded as the most dangerous place to be a Christian. ✚

INTERNATIONAL CHRISTIAN CONCERN PRESENTS
PERSECUTORS
OF THE YEAR

20
23



Reconquering Mainline Protestantism?

by Mark Tooley

Some conservative young Christian men are proposing a “reconquista” of liberalized Mainline Protestantism. The proposal was debated in a recent exchange in *American Reformer*. A skeptic derided the plan for wasting time with institutions that no longer matter. A reconquistador countered that conservatives too often retreat and now must, like progressives, work long-term to reclaim institutions like the Mainline. After all, the Mainline has a glorious history, still has some traditionalists in its ranks, and has endowments, plus beautiful buildings, which would adorn a revived American Christianity.

As a lifelong United Methodist, I began, as a college student at age 20, representing my Northern Virginia congregation as a lay member to the Virginia Annual Conference (Methodist equivalent of a diocese or synod) in 1985. As the reconquistador noted, aging churches are anxious to elevate their rare young members. I was terribly distressed by the reflexively progressive assumptions of clergy and lay leadership at the conference level, in contrast to people I knew in my local church, who generally were more conservative.

After graduating from college, I became our congregational missions chair, and I learned about the United Methodist General Board of Global Ministries. By the 1980s, the GBGM had largely abandoned missions evangelism in favor of Liberation Theology, which included funding pro-Marxist Sandinista advocacy, among other dubious causes. With the zeal of a young man, as a sort of reconquistador of that time, I made it my cause to reform the \$100 million missions agency based in New York. Virginia’s bishop organized a group of us to visit the missions agency executives in 1989, which ended unsatisfactorily. We met with the bishop and organized legislation for the 1992 governing United Methodist General Conference to steer the missions agency back towards traditional evangelism.

I attended the 1992 General Conference, a tense 10-day ordeal occurring every four years with one thousand delegates and many more observers and lobbyists. And I watched as missions executives successfully lobbied to defeat the reforms threatening their policies. Progressives partly hijacked the General Conference to focus on the 1992 Los Angeles riots over the police beating of **Rodney King**. An attempt to pull United Method-



The conquistadors pray before entry to Tenochtitlan from Romance of History, Mexico (1909) by Margaret Duncan Coxhead.

ist agencies out of the Religious Coalition for Abortion Rights failed. But progressives failed to liberalize the church’s marriage and sexuality teachings, which was always their chief focus.

Convinced that any reform of United Methodism required informing the laity, in 1994 I quit my government job to join the staff of the ecumenical Institute on Religion and Democracy as its United Methodist director to work for denominational change full-time. I did not realize it would become my career. Across 30

years I have attended all the United Methodist General Conferences, many agency board meetings, often adversarially, and have worked with all of the major evangelical renewal groups in United Methodism, which collaborated in coalition. Thanks to their work, United Methodism, almost uniquely among Mainline Protestant denominations, never liberalized its teachings on marriage and sexuality.

That will change at the General Conference this April/May, because, as the reconquistador noted, 25 percent of U.S. United Methodist churches, nearly all of them conservative, have quit the denomination under a temporary policy that ended in December 2023, allowing congregations to exit with their property. (Most of the seven million United Methodists in Africa likely will leave next year after an expected liberalization vote at General Conference this May.) The reconquistador portrayed this massive exit as an unnecessary conservative rout in contrast to progressive perseverance.

But the exit of at least 7,660 U.S. churches from United Methodism was a great victory, only possible thanks to conservative legislative wins at the General Conference. Now, through a new Global Methodist denomination, traditionalists can replant orthodox Methodism in vast swaths of America where Methodism has died, thanks to decades of progressive indifference to evangelism. The reconquistador wondered why, since conservatives won at the last General Conference in 2019 by a narrow majority, it was they who exited.

In recent years, conservatives in U.S. United Methodism only prevailed legislatively because the denomination’s membership is global, and the growing churches in Africa are strongly conservative. At the 2019 General Conference, conservatives won by 53 percent, but 30 percent of the delegate total was from Africa, without whom it would have been

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a progressive triumph. Although conservatives theoretically could have continued legislatively winning on sexuality thanks to African votes, the U.S. church continued to liberalize, often in defiance of official church law. Nearly all U.S. bishops are liberal, nearly all church agency staff are liberal, 12 of 13 official seminaries are liberal, most U.S. clergy—probably at least 60 percent—are liberal. The church in the U.S. has declined numerically every year since 1965 with no end in sight. A church poll over 30 years ago showed 69 percent of laity identified as conservative. A poll several years ago, before the exits, showed 44 percent, a plurality but no longer a majority. That number now might be down to 25 percent or lower. United Methodism in the U.S. has no institutional capacity to plant new churches, to reach young people, or to reach many non-white people. It's largely content with its chronic decline. In 1968 it had eleven million. It now has under five million. Saving orthodox Methodism with any hope of renewal meant exiting the old, dying, sclerotic denomination.

Like the reconquistadors, I had hope as a young man for reclaiming and renewing the once great historic Mainline Protestant denominations: United Methodist, Evangelical Lutheran, Presbyterian (USA), Episcopal Church, United Church of Christ, American Baptist, and Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). I worked with the often vigorous and

influential renewal groups in all those churches, almost none of which still exist. Lacking the international membership and African allies that United Methodist conservatives had, the conservatives in other Mainline denominations decisively lost their votes on sexuality. Some conservative congregations managed to exit. For most of these denominations, it was under 10%. New, mostly small conservative Protestant denominations emerged from the refugees: Anglican Church in North America, Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians, and the North American Lutheran Church, among others.

The Reconquista admirably wants to renew the dying old denominations. Theoretically, dedicated young people could join these churches and gain positions of influence. But how many such young people are willing to join and stay in typically small, mostly elderly congregations with often progressive pastors? The Reconquista hopes for leverage through congregations that have stayed conservative and vital, but such churches are rare. Average Mainline congregations are a mix of conservatives, progressives, centrists and the indifferent. Even conservative-leaning congregations often have left-of-center pastors.

Mainline Protestant denominations had about thirty million people sixty years ago and perhaps have 12 or 13 million today. Their seminaries and leadership liberalized early in the 20th century,

but conservative laity were often unknowing, liberal clergy avoided controversy, and multigenerational loyalty retained millions of members. Now denominational brands in America are dying, and religious vitality has shifted to non-denominational evangelicalism. Thousands of Mainline churches will close in the coming years. Thousands already have. Buildings and agencies with endowments will survive, but the future is bleak.

Maybe some of the reconquistadors, during the collapse, can help small groups buy or gain by transfer some of the Mainline church buildings for new congregations. Maybe the reconquistadors can help keep the best of the Mainline Protestant traditions alive. Those traditions include liturgy, sacrament, hymnody, historic Protestant teachings, reverent worship, a patient sensibility, and a social awareness that seeks the wider public good. Reviving the denominations institutionally, barring supernatural intervention, is nearly impossible. The progressives who control them, who cannot plant new churches or win new members, depend on these bureaucracies, funded by endowments, for their livelihoods.

Mainline Protestantism is institutionally dying. It should be honored for centuries of accomplishment that served God's Kingdom and America. But a new chapter in American religious life is now opening. We can trust that God has good surprises ahead. ✚

Asbury Revival's Surprise for America

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to greater closeness with God. **John Wesley** had his celebrated "conversion" at a Moravian meeting on Aldersgate Street in London, listening to Martin Luther's Preface to the Epistle to the Romans. Wesley's heart was "strangely warmed," as he recalled: "I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death."

For Wesley and his theology, God worked through heart and head. Wesleyan

spirituality is not so much about emotional highs but steady, methodical perseverance through divine grace. Any spirituality, even if practiced alone, can be faked. But Methodism, like all major Christian traditions, knows God sees the heart.

Hart, in his mild critique, accurately noted the Asbury Revival pleased many evangelicals for attracting favorable publicity, even from *The New York Times*. It also offered a counter narrative to supposedly relentless secularization. Anecdotal-ly, the spirit of the Asbury Revival over the

last year has spread globally through its many international participants, besides throughout the U.S. Hopefully a social scientist someday will try to quantify its influence. Likely decades from now we will learn of new churches, and perhaps even new denominations or communities, that arose from the revival.

The Asbury Revival was a needed reminder that God often has surprises, and His redemptive work continues. Most of God's redemptive work doesn't occur dramatically at large public events. Mostly it unfolds quietly in the lives of believers. But occasional large, public outpourings are helpful reminders of the Gospel's power. ✚

Interview with the Redeemed Zoomer

by Mark Tooley



Richard Ackerman, widely known as “Redeemed Zoomer” (left) was interviewed by IRD President Mark Tooley (right) via Zoom on March 21, 2024. The edited transcript below captures highlights of their conversation. (Photo: Zoom screen capture / IRD)

Some young people identifying as the “Reconquista” are advocating the reclamation of Mainline Protestantism for theological orthodoxy through their active witness and resistance (see page 6 of this issue). The most prominent online reconquistador is college student and Presbyterian Church (USA) adherent **Richard Ackerman**, commonly known online as “Redeemed Zoomer.” He is a YouTube personality known for content related to the popular video game Minecraft while simultaneously explaining Christian beliefs and creeds. He has more than 350,000 YouTube followers. I’m skeptical of their project but appreciate their youthful energy.

Mark Tooley: Redeemed Zoomer has a popular online following, and you’re the most prominent to my knowledge of all the reconquistadors. So, Redeemed Zoomer, tell us a bit more about yourself.

Redeemed Zoomer: Thank you for having me on the show. I’m a college student in real life but I do a lot of evangelism online and I’m an activist, like you said, for reformation in the mainline Protestant churches. I’m a YouTuber, I’m a Presbyterian, and I started a nonprofit called Presbyterians for the Kingdom as part of the broader Reconquista movement.

The goal of Presbyterians for the Kingdom is to promote good theology in denominations that do not have good theology these days, to try and restore the beliefs that these denominations were founded upon.

MT: You live on the East Coast, I believe?

RZ: When I’m at my university, I’m in Texas, but I’m originally from New York.

MT: Have you found a Presbyterian Church USA congregation where you can worship faithfully?

RZ: Yes. My home church has some problems with liberalism, but at least it still preaches the gospel. The problem is many PCUSA churches literally do not believe the gospel at all anymore. They do not believe the Bible is the Word of God. Some of them don’t even believe God is something that’s actually real. They think God is just a metaphor for social justice and stuff. Those are the things we need to address first.

Of course, there is a problem when churches preach political and social wokeness. That is something we are opposed to, but a much bigger problem is when churches starve their congregations of the saving gospel. That is problem number one for us.

MT: It’s very unusual for many people under the age of 50 to have any interest in denominations much less the historic

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Mainline Protestant denominations. What specifically provoked your personal interest in being part of the Presbyterian Church USA?

RZ: My initial draw to the PCUSA was simply because it was a local church near me and the summer camp where I converted to Christianity was run by someone who was a member of the PCUSA. So I had some connections to that church. But when I compared it to non-denominational churches that a lot of people in my generation go to, I found that it was much richer and more historically rooted than those churches. I came to the conclusion that the reason why Christianity is losing so much ground in the West—and has been for the past 100 years—is because the institutional churches have been getting weaker as these disunited, disorganized non-denominational churches have been getting stronger.

I think if we're going to see a revival of Christianity it needs to be from within the historic established institutional churches rather than trying to split off and start brand new churches.

MT: Of course you appreciate tradition, you appreciate liturgy, you appreciate traditional hymns, you appreciate the aesthetics of the beautiful old sanctuaries built by Mainline Protestantism.

RZ: Yeah.

MT: How many are in the Reconquista movement?

RZ: Over 2,000 Mainline Protestants are part of our movement in some way. Most of them are young but there are some older people. There are some Gen X and Baby Boomer pastors who are part of our movement either publicly or privately. Pastors are usually part of our movement privately because they could be canceled by their bishops if they're too public about it. But, yeah, a lot of people are part of our movement. A lot of people are on our online community. We have a Discord community where faithful orthodox Mainline Protestants can congregate.

MT: So you are Methodists, Presbyterians, Lutherans, Episcopalians. Any other groups represented?

RZ: The RCA, the Reformed Church in America, and American Baptist Churches USA. The Seven Sisters of the Mainline. The denominations that are part of Reconquista are really any denomination

“Because liberal Christians don't care about going to church. Liberal Christianity never lasts very long and that's why.”

that is in communion with these broadly liberal Mainline churches because they all share resources, share pastors, so retaking one means retaking all of them and losing one means losing all of them because they're all really in communion.

MT: People, individuals, and groups have spent decades trying to return the mainline Protestant denominations to orthodoxy, dating all the way back to the 1920s but certainly many more recent movements in the 70s, 80s, 90s, 2000s. All of these denominations have officially liberalized on sexuality except for the United Methodists, which will likely do so in May of this year. I don't think the American Baptists have done so officially, maybe they have in de facto.

What do you say to the old-timers who have tried to renew these denominations? What new formula do you propose that will give you success where they failed?

RZ: It's simple: The answer is not running away. When you look at these splits, when you look at these conflicts between the progressives and the conservatives, the conservatives were always very quick to give up the fight, much quicker to give up the fight than the progressives. The

recent formation of the Global Methodist Church is a very good example of this, where the conservatives won the vote and left. Yes, you could say they had reasons for leaving, but when the progressives lost the vote they didn't leave. They kept fighting harder and harder.

Generally in these conflicts the progressive sides have always been a lot more persistent, a lot more resilient, a lot more willing to keep fighting even after they lost battles. Most of the time conservatives have split off not because they had to but because they anticipated future progressive victories.

For example, the PCA, the largest conservative Presbyterian denomination, split from the southern Mainline Presbyterian Church not because they had to, not because they were forced out, but because they were worried that the Southern church might unite with the more liberal Northern church. Now of course that did happen, probably because the conservatives all left. But it's usually conservatives: they go in starting with a retreatist mindset. They're like, “We'll try to change some things; if that doesn't work we're out of here.” That was the case with **J. Gresham Machen**, who tried to reform Princeton. Even before he got kicked out, he said that if we can't get rid of these liberals we have to leave.

So the progressives win because they have a persistent mindset. They have a fighting mindset. They have a conquistador mindset, and conservatives lose because they have a retreatist mindset. They have a “giving up” mindset. We need to abandon the retreat mindset because retreatism doesn't just apply to the church. Retreatism is the reason why the culture keeps drifting to the left, because people who are not on the left keep retreating. They retreat from mainstream universities, mainstream cities, mainstream everything. And they always try to start something on the side. But we need to reverse the retreatist mindset and shift to a Reconquista mindset.

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United Methodist Sees 'Imperialist Jesus' as 'Bowed Down to Satan'

by Bethany Moy



Evangelicalism in most of Christianity is antithetical to Jesus Christ's teaching and lifestyle, according to a Liberation Theology proponent serving as the Frederick District Superintendent in the Baltimore Washington Annual Conference in the United Methodist Church.

"We have come to accept the Gospel of Jesus as an imperial theological discourse which condones, endorses and sustains the powers of domination and oppression of this world," asserted Dr. **Eliezer Valentín-Castañón**, delivering the annual Oscar Romero Lecture and Dean's Forum on March 19 at United Methodist-affiliated Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C.

Valentín-Castañón sought to present evangelism from what he termed a prophetic, liberating, and Wesleyan perspective, which he believed Romero, the Roman Catholic prelate of the Archdiocese of San Salvador assassinated in 1980, would have shared.

In his address, Valentín-Castañón touted religion scholar and Public Religion Research Institute President **Robert P. Jones'** book *The Hidden Roots of White Supremacy*.

"It illustrates how this doctrine has permeated our own ideological understanding of evangelicalism in a white European mindset," Valentín-Castañón praised.

"This imperialist Christianity has turned Jesus into the glorious king who is all powerful and perfect. This imperial Jesus we find in the Church is substitute for the peasant Jew in Nazareth. The one who rose from the impoverished working-class family, who came from an unknown place called Nazareth and was crucified by the Roman forces occupying

Palestine, for proclaiming an anti-imperialist message of human liberation," Valentín-Castañón insisted.

He alleged, "Over the centuries, this imperialist Christianity turned the anti-imperialist Jesus into one that seems to have accepted the offer Satan made him in the desert. The Jesus that most of us have come to know in the Christian world today seems to have bowed down to Satan therefore to all the powers and principalities of this world. This was the Jesus that was introduced into my own fundamentalist church."

Valentín-Castañón maintained that imperial Christianity "has created a vision of the Godhead as an all-powerful, all-knowing, and ever present being, a God that is so beyond us that God is out of reach for us mere mortals. This imperial Christianity presents us with a God that is distant and unconcerned without humanity and human frailty. This ideation of the Godhead has left us convinced that God, whom we have been told loves us, is only interested in us if we are concerned with the spiritual holiness that will lead us in the perfect world where God resides in heaven."

The United Methodist District Superintendent claimed that Christians have been presented with a reading of the Gospel of Matthew's heaven that is far away.

"In the New Testament, heaven as the final destination for our salvation is not actually the final place for those that believe in the goodness of the construction worker, the prophet from Nazareth," Valentín-Castañón asserted. "Therefore, God's place is now present amongst us according to Jesus. God is present in our midst. God has pitched a tent with us as we read in John 1:14. This is what the

The Rev. Dr. Eliezer Valentín-Castañón delivers the 2023 Monsignor Oscar Romero Lecture on March 19, 2024 in Oxnam Chapel at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, DC (Photo: Wesley Theological Seminary livestream capture / YouTube)

Incarnation has done. God has pitched a tent among us and is here right now."

Valentín-Castañón continued, "This imperial theology has God express a desire to maintain heaven as something separate from us, which certainly fits a political ideology of alienation, where human beings have to only be concerned with getting to heaven where they will be saved. This is the epitome of the neoplatonic theology which bases God's dwelling, heaven, as God's prison."

Imperial theology, Valentín-Castañón insisted, has created a "perfect God that can only be perfect when it is separated from humanity's imperfections and corruption."

"This imperial Christian theology has also used the Gospel of John to justify this view of the Godhead," Valentín-Castañón alleged. "A God that is more concerned with God's self than with humanity's mystery. Some of us may say that's because of our sins. The argument here is we have turned a God that was supposed to be the God that identifies with the poor and the oppressed, as we

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Bethany Moy serves as a Spring 2024 intern with the Institute on Religion & Democracy. Moy is pursuing a Master's degree in U.S. Foreign Policy at American University in Washington, DC.

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MT: Are there enough reconquistadors to engage in this long-term process, across potentially several decades, to make it work?

RZ: The math checks out because there are far more conservative Christians than progressive Christians. If the total number of Christians who are active in churches, if every single non-denominational Christian started attending Mainline Protestant churches, the mainlines would be completely taken over within a year. Because liberal Christians don't care about going to church. Liberal Christianity never lasts very long and that's why. Even within Mainline churches, the conservative congregations keep growing and the progressive ones keep shrinking.

The task of Reconquista is really just convincing people in conservative groups and conservative denominations that they need to return to the mainline, that they need to come back into the fold. If we can do that, then their victory is mathematically guaranteed.

MT: Won't it be difficult for some of the Reconquistadors, especially as they marry and have children and want sound Christian education for those children, if they're in a Mainline Protestant denomination or congregation that lacks children, has no programs for children, or those programs are more progressive? Won't they be tempted to give up on the Reconquista?

RZ: That's a very big issue. Yeah, for the Reconquista to be successful and for people who have a family to be involved in it will require conservatives making subcultures. It'll require making conservative subgroups, whether it's joining conservative churches in the mainline because there are lots of very active, vibrant, healthy conservative churches in the mainline—that's the first strategy. If that's not possible, it's possible for groups of families within a more lukewarm church to organize a Bible study to

teach their kids together. There are many possibilities. It's not going to work if you send individuals in to try and transform a church, because no one can stand alone. That's why Jesus sent out the disciples two by two. You have to send in groups and, hopefully, most of the Reconquista will not be about trying to send people into progressive congregations to change the congregation. It will really just be to bolster the existing conservative congregations, knowing that they're going to outlast their progressive counterparts.

If there's a local Mainline congregation that's already celebrating same-sex rites, for example, you would not join that congregation. I wouldn't advocate people join that one. No, if someone's already a member of one of those congregations, and they think they can still have a good impact, I'd say stay by all means. But, reconquista does not advise anyone to join those churches. Reconquista only advises people to join conservative churches within the mainline because those are the only ones that are going to be left in 30 years.

The Mainline is basically a hollowing out tree, so if we just inject a bunch of faithful young Christians now, within a generation they're going to be the only ones left mathematically. It's a foolproof plan. The only question is: Are people willing to do it?

MT: You have a very large social media following. Your YouTube followers number over 200,000?

RZ: 350,000.

MT: 350,000 is an amazing number. I'm guessing the vast majority of these people are not themselves in Mainline churches, but actually cheerleaders from Evangelical churches? What is your sense?

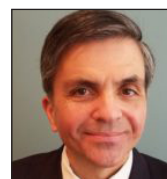
RZ: Evangelical churches, Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox. The majority of my followers are not Mainline Protestant but a lot of people have joined Mainline Protestant churches because of my videos.

So, I would encourage people, especially a lot of young people, [who] are kind of floating between denominations. They're not really committed to anything. So, I would say to those people, "why not join the mainline?" There's a movement starting. It can be something to fight for. A lot of young men want something to fight for. There aren't many Mainline Protestants among my followers, but I'm kind of glad because that means there's a lot of room to get more people into the Mainline.

MT: Mainline Protestantism obviously played an enormous role in building and shaping American democracy, serving as the mediating structures in America's Civil Society. Do you want to perpetuate that Mainline Protestant tradition, or do you have an alternative political role in mind for a reconquista Mainline Protestantism?

RZ: Political theory is not my specialty. I don't see why it shouldn't continue. I think that America was one of the most successful societies ever and it was founded upon the Mainline church. I don't think you can restore a culture without restoring the Church it was founded upon, so I definitely affirm the necessity of restoring the Mainline churches for restoring any sort of identity to American culture. Now, what would the ideal political system look like after a successful reconquest of the culture? That I don't know. I'll leave that up to other people to decide.

MT: Mr. Redeemed Zoomer, thank you very much for this introduction to your work. I wish you well and look forward to checking in with you maybe every five years to see how the Reconquista is coming along. ✚



Mark D. Tooley is the President of the Institute on Religion and Democracy.

A United Methodist Church building in Silver Spring, Maryland, is advertised for sale in 2021. The Baltimore-Washington Annual Conference merged two congregations and listed one property on the commercial market. (Photo: Source of the Spring)



Methodist Firesale and Creative Destruction

by Jeffrey Walton

A clergy friend shared late last year about his Anglican church plant's rental of worship space hosted by a former United Methodist congregation. That congregation successfully completed the disaffiliation process and joined the Global Methodist Church. It's a partnership reflective of what I call an "ecumenism of the trenches" between local ministries that seek to be a faithful, biblically orthodox witness in the same community.

Another United Methodist church near the same town did not disaffiliate, leaving behind about two dozen people, a challenging number to sustain upkeep of a building. If the UMC annual conference opts to shutter the church and list the property, which has already been done elsewhere in the conference, area

congregations experiencing growth are looking to buy.

This account evidences something that I earlier had gotten wrong: with the

I predicted a firesale
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I was wrong.

sunsetting of the United Methodist *Discipline's* paragraph 2553 allowing congregational disaffiliation with property, I predicted a firesale of United Methodist

properties in 3–5 years after an influx of disaffiliation payments was exhausted.

I was wrong. That firesale is, in several annual conferences, already underway.

The recent disaffiliation season and its aftermath may be an example of what is known in economics as "creative destruction," the dismantling of long-standing things in order to make way for innovation.

More than a few technological gains in the past decade came as companies snapped up infrastructure on the cheap following the financial crisis, including server farms and network trunk lines.

We may soon see something equivalent in the American religious landscape.

As the second largest Protestant denomination in the United States rapidly

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declines, vibrant Evangelical and Pentecostal churches—many of whom minister among new immigrant populations—are eager to lease or purchase worship spaces. They may be in a better position to steward these properties and to reach people groups that mainline Protestantism could not.

There are at least three ways this is taking shape.

First is what I term the “**disaffiliation shuffle**.” More than one-quarter of congregations have successfully completed the disaffiliation process, but it is still unclear how many congregants have departed—we have anecdotal evidence of local transfers between congregations, but hard data isn’t yet available. People vote with their feet and exit congregations that either failed to reach the required two-thirds supermajority or never held votes. What they leave behind are church congregations reduced in size, meaning less apportionment money for the annual conference that must be generated elsewhere, potentially through property sales.

These church buildings will sooner or later hit the market, and newer congregations meeting in shared spaces like theaters or schools (or at less than ideal times outside of Sunday morning) will jump at the chance to buy these houses of worship.

Second, as my colleague **John Lomperis** documented, the rate of disaffiliation has been uneven across the United Methodist denomination. Conferences that closed large numbers of churches before exits—including the North Georgia Annual Conference—saw a massive influx of assets to their bank accounts even as their budgets were scaled back.

The financial impact of exits remains to be seen. Presumably, there will be a short-term gain from exit fees. Conferences with expensive suburbs, like Virginia, eventually could make substantial money selling church properties even as they lose income from congregations. For example, a large United Methodist property near me, home to what was once the largest UMC congregation in Arlington, Virginia, sold for \$5.5 million and is scheduled for demolition to make way for a retirement facility.

Meanwhile, conferences that erected formidable roadblocks to disaffiliation, including the Baltimore–Washington Conference, have not received the same financial influx. These mostly more theologically revisionist conferences have been **merging congregations** and shuttering churches for years. In some cases, this is done under the “exigent circumstances” clause of The United Methodist *Book of Discipline*, as it was in the Oregon–Idaho conference this past November (where only 11 congregations successfully completed disaffiliation). Nearly all shuttered properties have quickly been listed on the commercial market.

Third, United Methodism simply has **too many buildings**. Some were constructed in an era with more agrarian communities. Additionally, a series of mergers between the Methodist Episcopal Church, Methodist Episcopal Church South, and the Evangelical United Brethren resulted in charges with multiple geographically proximate churches that aren’t efficiently distributed. Even if there hadn’t been a disaffiliation shuffle or a merging of congregations, the market forces of aging demographics and

building upkeep costs would likely result in many of these properties becoming available to others.

The United Methodist Church had more than 30,543 churches as of 2019 when the disaffiliation language was implemented. With 7,660 exited and apparently more than 2,000 closed since that time, presumably there are about 21,000 churches at present.

Each of these three scenarios is manifesting across different parts of United Methodism. As one of the most geographically widespread denominations in the United States, chances are that a formerly United Methodist church building is about to become available near you. Join me in praying for healthy, vibrant congregations of various Christian traditions to move into these spaces and share the gospel with their neighbors. ✝



Jeffrey H. Walton is the Communications Manager and Anglican Program Director at the Institute on Religion & Democracy.

United Methodist Sees ‘Imperialist Jesus’ as ‘Bowed Down to Satan’

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have seen throughout the scriptures, into a God who is so far from us that we can hardly identify him as God.”

Valentín-Castañón recounted spiritual practices that he said Christians have been told they must do or care about to get to heaven, not mentioning salvation as a free gift from God.

“We must engage prayer, engage worship, engage fasting, and many other spiritual disciplines. These are the things that will take us to heaven. We have forgotten that the Jesus we find in the gospels indeed speaks to much more than that. When we read in the scriptures of that idea of Jesus being committed to being in the world, we find a Jesus that speaks to

the powers of this world and condemns the wrongdoings that are harming their fellow human beings.”

“Imperial Christianity has developed a theology that will accommodate these conditions. They are due to our sinful nature, therefore not much can be done about that. Imperial theology says that things will get better someday in heaven. In the meantime, we live and wait till we get to heaven. In the end the world [as] we know it will be consumed and the kingdom of God will be established as it is in heaven. This is not the Jesus of the Puebla. Nor was it the Jesus that Romero lived out in El Salvador. This is not that Jesus that we find in the gospels.” ✝



The Rev. Lindsey Altvater Clifton of First Presbyterian Church in Bethlehem, PA. (Photo: First Presbyterian Church via Presbyterian Outlook)

Presbyterian Church (USA) Considers Forcing LGBTQ Affirmation

by Josiah Hasbrouck

An increasingly revisionist Presbyterian Church (USA) will take up legislation at its 226th General Assembly June 25–July 4 in Salt Lake City barring ordination of candidates who are not LGBTQ-affirming.

Designated OVT-001, the proposal, known as an overture in Presbyterian parlance, would change two sections of the PCUSA *Book of Order*. The first change alters section F-1.0403, “Unity in Diversity,” to read (changes in brackets, emphasis added):

The unity of believers in Christ is reflected in the rich diversity of the Church’s membership. In Christ, by the power of the Spirit, God unites persons through baptism, regardless of race, ethnicity, age, sex, [gender identity, sexual orientation,] disability,

geography, or theological conviction. There is therefore no place in the life of the Church for discrimination against any person. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) shall guarantee full participation and representation in its worship, governance, and emerging life to all persons or groups within its membership. No member shall be denied participation or representation for any reason other than those stated in this Constitution.

This addition of “gender identity, sexual orientation” may initially seem unproblematic in the first two sentences of this section. Christ can indeed unite diverse people to himself, including those who struggle with gender dysphoria and same-sex attraction. However, the inclusion of the categories of gender identity

and sexual orientation implies that there is nothing problematic about gender dysphoria and same-sex attraction.

This becomes clear in the rest of F-1.0403, which bars all discrimination against anyone in these categories (what the Rationale section of OVT-001 refers to as “protected classes”), especially regarding “worship, governance, and emerging life” in the PCUSA.

All humans are created in the image of God and must be treated with dignity and respect—this must not be denied. The *imago Dei* does not, however, mean that nobody may be denied a role in church governance for practicing transgenderism or homosexuality.

In 1 Timothy 3, the Apostle Paul writes that elders must be “above reproach” and

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deacons must be “blameless” (among many other qualifications). Earlier in the same epistle—and in multiple other epistles—Paul follows the Old Testament’s condemnation of practicing homosexuality, demonstrating along with Jude that it is no more licit under the New Covenant than it was under the Old. Given this, it seems reasonable to conclude that homosexual activity would be worthy of reproach and blame, disqualifying one from holding church office.

Though Scripture does not address transgenderism as explicitly as homosexuality, biblical principles can nonetheless be applied to the issue. God created humans male and female, nowhere giving either license to act as the opposite sex. There is much that could be said in support of this, not least of which is the observation that Christ’s resurrection vindicates the goodness of the bodies God has given us, not bodies that we determine for ourselves. When we are resurrected at the return of Christ, we will all be resurrected in our sexed bodies, regardless of which gender one identifies as. To act against a part of our bodies so fundamental as our biological sex is to act against God’s design and purpose. Such a violation of God’s intentions must also disqualify anyone from church office.

The second change to the *Book of Order* would amend section G-2.0104b, “Gifts and Qualifications” to read (changes in brackets, emphasis added):

b. Standards for ordained service reflect the church’s desire to submit joyfully to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in all aspects of life (F-1.02). The council responsible for ordination and/or installation (G-2.0402; G-2.0607; G-3.0306) shall examine each candidate’s calling, gifts, preparation, and suitability for the responsibilities of

ordered ministry. The examination shall include, but not be limited to, a determination of the candidate’s ability and commitment to fulfill all requirements as expressed in the constitutional questions for ordination and installation (W-4.0404) [and in

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the principles of participation, representation, and non-discrimination found in F-1.0403]. Councils shall be guided by Scripture and the confessions in applying standards to individual candidates.”

This would require all PCUSA elders and deacons to submit to the amended version of F-1.0403’s tacit endorsement of homosexuality and transgenderism. This change to the *Book of Order* would not only allow PCUSA church officers to disobey Scripture by living homosexual or transgender lifestyles, it would require officers to be unfaithful to Scripture by forcing them to commit to allowing ordination of individuals who are living in sin and unqualified for ordination.

In contrast, the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), which broke from a predecessor body of the PCUSA in 1973 and is the largest conservative Presbyterian denomination in the United States, has in recent years debated several overtures that would bar anyone identifying as gay from ordination. These overtures have met with mixed success in General Assembly and presbytery votes, but the General Assembly did adopt a study committee’s report concluding that same-sex attraction is sinful and Christians “should not identify with their sin so as to embrace it or seek to base their identity on it.” This directly contrasts OVT-001’s claim that “sexual orientation and gender identity are matters of core identity.”

The proposal of OVT-001 is no surprise—the PCUSA has allowed same-sex marriage since 2014. This is symptomatic of the denomination’s more fundamental rejection of Scriptural authority, which has resulted in conservative Presbyterian churches breaking away from the PCUSA and forming other denominations as early as 1936. The PCUSA has not gained the world in return for losing its soul, as the once-powerful denomination’s membership steadily declines.

Most Presbyterians committed to God’s design for human sexuality as revealed in Scripture and nature have already jumped ship from the PCUSA. Should OVT-001 be approved, however, any dissenters who have not yet sought other passage may be told to walk the plank. ✚



Josiah Hasbrouck is part of the Fellows Program of the John Jay Institute and was a Summer 2023 intern with the Institute on Religion & Democracy.

Fond Farewell to John Lomperis

by Jeffrey Walton

In February the Global Methodist Church announced that it had hired longtime UMAction Director **John Lomperis** to serve as General Conference Business Manager for the fledgling denomination.

I write to share with readers this happy news as well as comments from John, a personal friend across two decades. John's detailed reporting and analysis has formed the backbone of much of this magazine and IRD's blog, *Juicy Ecumenism*, since its inception. He will be missed as we send him on to a new season of service to evangelical Wesleyanism.

On April 5 current and past IRD staff joined with members of the IRD Board of Directors and UMAction Steering Committee to thank John

for 20 years of faithful service in calling Methodists back to their historic, biblical Christian teachings. Just after the John Wesley Institute's Mere Methodism conference at the Alexandria Lyceum, we dined with John at the historic Gadsby's Tavern where Presidents George Washington and Thomas Jefferson dined.

John writes:

For most of the past two decades, I have pursued a labor of love, seeking to help as many fellow United Methodists as possible come to a new day of biblical, Wesleyan faithfulness and a renewed focus on making disciples of Jesus Christ.

*I am deeply grateful to **Mark Tooley**, my IRD colleagues, IRD's board, UMAction's Steering Committee and*

*Advisory Board, and the many supporters, prayer warriors, and allies who have stood with me and UMAction's ministry of "contending for the faith" through much heartbreak and joy, many disappointments and victories. I am also indebted for the many years of ministry of the wider United Methodist renewal movement, which so many of us discovered as an invaluable lifeline. Friends of UMAction, please remember that the vital ongoing work of Good News and the Wesleyan Covenant Association (WCA) is still needed and worthy of your support. My colleague, Dr. **Ryan Danker**, is also doing an important, support-worthy ministry of helping churches of a variety of denominations rediscover the great riches of our Wesleyan theological tradition through IRD's John Wesley Institute.*

For my part, my service to evangelical Wesleyanism is now entering an exciting new chapter. I appreciate prayers for myself and the Global Methodist Church as we move forward in making disciples of Jesus Christ who worship passionately, love extravagantly, and witness boldly. ✝

At left, from left to right: IRD Board Chair Paul Marshall, past IRD Evangelical Director Chelsen Vicari, IRD President Mark Tooley, past UMAction Director John Lomperis, past IRD Vice President Jerald Walz and Anglican Director Jeff Walton (Photo: IRD)



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