

THE HEART OF THE MATTER

Address by

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to Methodist Laity Reform Movement

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John 14: 1-7 Matthew 16: 13-17

I shall never forget Don (this is not his real name). During the more than sixteen years that I taught at Candler School of Theology, Emory University, he was one of the most brilliant students. Today, he is one of our most outstanding UMC pastors. I remember the turning point in Don's spiritual and academic journey. I had just returned to my office. Don was seated in my secretary's office with his hands over his face and his head bowed as if he were praying. I said, "come on in, Don!" He entered my office, closed the door behind him and before I could greet him properly he blurted out: "**Dr. Morris, what's the heart of the matter? During my undergraduate work I was bombarded with philosophies and ideas that were often diametrically opposed and academically shallow. What is the center—the heart of it all?**" I thought for a moment and responded,

"Don, Jesus Christ is the Son of God, Lord of Creation and Savior of the world and, by God's grace, He is **our** Lord and Savior! **HE** is the heart of the matter and the truth of the matter. Thus, the center of faith and life is not a philosophy but a PERSON. The scriptures teach us that the heart of the matter is Jesus Christ, the One in whom 'all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.' (Col. 1: 15-20) He is the WAY the TRUTH and the LIFE."

"However Don, **this 'heart of the matter must become a matter of the heart!'** It is our responsibility to allow this truth of Christ to make that long journey from the top of our heads to the bottom of our hearts, which is the longest journey that most of us ever take. But, as long as we keep TRUTH at the top of our heads it is never transformational. However, if that TRUTH gets down deep in our hearts we will never be the same."

Now, brothers and sisters, this is precisely what happened to John Wesley and he was never the same. Christ Jesus "warmed his heart" and through the power of the Spirit of Christ he and his brother, Charles, launched a vital missionary movement. This is **THE HEART OF THE MATTER** that got our Methodist/Wesleyan movement started. Throughout our history, whenever and wherever we have allowed this "heart of the matter" to become a "matter of the heart," our movement has been blessed with spiritual vitality and growth. On the other hand, whenever and wherever we have yielded to the tendency to forget the "**HEART OF THE MATTER**" we have suffered significant and debilitating decline.

During my doctoral studies at Vanderbilt University, I majored in Social and Intellectual History—a study of how ideas are born, how they develop and change, how they are remembered and/or forgotten and the impact they have upon human history. This was an exciting academic journey, and it has informed my ministry for almost a half-century. Allow me to relate some of these teachings to the matter at hand. As a historian, I have noticed that this tendency to forget or even abandon "the heart of the matter," is a perennial temptation of the Church IN EVERY AGE AND IN EVERY PLACE. In addition, I have noticed that this losing sight of the "heart of the matter" is not something that happens overnight, like a HEART-

ATTACK. It is not so much a cataclysmic, sudden thing, as it is an insidious HARDENING OF THE HEART—a slow process.

Now, for the crucial questions underlying this article: IS THIS HAPPENING IN OUR METHODIST/WESLEYAN MOVEMENT TODAY, and if so, HOW IS THIS HAPPENING? Here, I wish to suggest a slow process and pattern that I have observed, both as a student of church history, a missionary-evangelist, a local church pastor, a staff member of two General Boards and as a professor of missiology and evangelism in a School of Theology. I suggest that a church, a denomination or a mission agency has turned aside from the HEART OF THE MATTER and will find itself in decline when it allows the following to happen:

I. WHEN IT RELAXES ITS WESLEYAN COMMITMENT TO THE AUTHORITY AND PRIMACY OF SCRIPTURES. Missionary congregations and movements are built upon the foundation stone of a missionary book. The Bible is a missionary book which features a missionary God whose unswerving will and purpose is to call, convert, create and commission a missionary people. This missionary theme is the “golden thread” which laces together all the 66 books of the Bible. This theme reveals that **God is a missionary God**, who from creation and fall and throughout history, has always been in search of lost humans and lost creation. To worship and to serve this **Missionary God** is to become a missionary people. Moreover, the Bible insists that mission is God’s idea and not merely a human invention.

But, this missionary mandate always suffers and is subordinated when the Church relaxes or forgets its Wesleyan convictions and commitments to the authority and primacy of Holy Scriptures. A slow but erosive process sets in. When scriptural authority is surrendered, secular authorities ascend the throne. Loss of THE HEART OF THE MATTER begins at this point. Ordinarily, when secular authorities are in control, theology is reduced to ideology. Once theology is reduced to ideology, the church spends most of its time and energy attempting to accommodate itself to the passing parade of current social and political fads. With absolute stress on the reigning secular and cultural orthodoxies, i.e., on pluralism and individualism, each church member adopts his or her own favorite ideology and attempts to read the whole of human experience through the peep-hole of that ideological bias.

Once this disease infects the church, a benign form of universalism takes over which robs the church of both its incentive and sense of urgency. Thus, a bold and confident Christian Gospel focused on THE HEART OF THE MATTER is usually replaced with “polite talk about God” interspersed with various social commentaries. This, ordinarily, leads to a “magnanimous, anything goes, temperament” which accommodates itself to cultural values. In North America this has actually led to a temperament that assumes it is impolite to witness one’s faith to another. This slow process causes the church to harden its heart against evangelism and missionary outreach. The Gospel loses its salt and becomes sugary. The church loses its warm-hearted evangelistic passion and all because it forsakes its Wesleyan commitment to the authority and primacy of scripture.

Now, after thirty years of research in missiological literature and after having done ministry in sixty-seven countries, I dare to speak boldly about what I have learned. **Denominations and missionary movements that are growing throughout the world are precisely those that have**

held to the authority and primacy of scripture. Those in decline are precisely those that have hardened their hearts against this critical conviction.

II. Second, the church turns aside from the “HEART OF THE MATTER” WHEN IT LOSES ITS COMPASSION FOR THE PERISHING. Here, we must face two very penetrating and revealing questions: (1) Are persons, who are not practicing Christian disciples, really perishing? (2) Do they really need a Savior? Very early in the Methodist/Wesleyan movement a simple summary of the distinctive features of our Movement was written. This summary puts forth the essential teachings of our Wesleyan missionary and evangelistic mandate. It says:

1. All persons need to be saved.
2. All persons can be saved.
3. All persons can know that they are saved, and
4. All persons can be saved to the uttermost.

The very first point challenges us to see that all persons on the face of the earth need to be saved. Thus, our Methodist/Wesleyan movement spread across the world with God’s love in our hearts and Fanny Crosby’s song on our lips. We sang, “Rescue the perishing, care for the dying, snatch them in pity from sin and the grave. Weep o’er the erring ones, lift up the fallen, tell them of Jesus the mighty to save.”

I am convinced that the Methodist/Wesleyan Movement, if it is to affirm and reaffirm THE HEART OF THE MATTER, needs to rediscover **a serious doctrine of sin and/or a serious theology of the perishing**. Now, I don’t think that it is necessary to go back to the 18th century belief in “eternal” punishment. Some earlier evangelists made God out to be worse than Hitler. They sometimes seemed to imply that God is the keeper of an eternal concentration camp from which there is no escape. No, we do not have to always think of “sinners in the hands of an angry God” in order to catch a vision of the perishing. Rather, we would do well to see people in exactly the way that Jesus saw them—through eyes of compassion.

Can we lift up our eyes to the plight of those who are perishing because of despair, anguish and loneliness? Can we see those who are victims of drug and alcohol abuse and often reduced to mindless zombies who are willing to sell their very soul for their drug-of-choice? Can we see those whose lustful passions take control, and like David of old, commit heinous crimes against God, other people and themselves? Can we see those who submit to the values of this secular world and wallow in selfishness and materialism? Can we see those whose lives are broken and torn apart because of sexual abuse, AIDS and violent harassment? Can we see those who are so anxious about life and its uncertainties that they can’t seem to get a hold on anything substantial enough to carry them through? Can we see those who are oppressed because of their skin color or gender or social status or lack of education or lifestyle? Can we see those who are so full of hate that their only thought is to kill or destroy?

People are perishing all around us. Can we see them? “Where there is no vision the people perish.” I would add, those who lose the vision also perish. They lose sight of THE HEART OF THE MATTER. Without a serious doctrine of sin and a genuine compassion for the perishing, the Church stumbles in darkness. It not only loses its original mission—it loses its life. **So, I would add—denominations, churches and missionary movements that are growing throughout the world are precisely those who hold to a serious doctrine of sin and a serious**

theology of the perishing. Those in consistent decline are those that have confused “universal grace” with “universal salvation” and therefore, advocate a weak-kneed form of universalism that says that all people are already inherently good. All they need to do is to become what they already are! They do not need to be saved.

III. Third, a Church forsakes the HEART OF THE MATTER WHEN IT HARDENS ITS HEART AGAINST THE POWER AND GIFTS OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. Any model of mission—no matter how well conceived—will be unproductive without the blessing, power and gifts of the Holy Spirit. It doesn't matter how much physical energy you generate or how much organization and management skill you display, or how much money you spend—the Kingdom of God will not be advanced unless and until all efforts are baptized in the Holy Spirit.

Eddie Fox and I have always believed that the Acts 1:8 SEQUENCE reveals the secret of Godly power for significant evangelism. “You shall receive power after the Holy Spirit is upon you and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, all over Judea and Samaria and away to the ends of the earth.” This means—no Holy Spirit—no power—no power—no witness—no witness—no evangelism and eventually, no evangelism—no church!

The church loses THE HEART OF THE MATTER when it resists the power and gifts of the Holy Spirit. I fear that the Holy Spirit, i.e., the Third Person of the Trinity, is the missing note in some of our United Methodist pulpits. As church leaders, both clergy and lay, we need to ask ourselves: “What kind of Christianity would we have had without Pentecost?” A clue to our answer can be found in noticing the content and temperament of the final chapters in Mark and John. Bible scholars tell us that Mark's Gospel actually ends at Chapter 16 verse 8. The remainder, according to biblical scholars, was added by later writers. Notice how verse 8 of chapter 16 reads. It says, “They were afraid!” In my opinion, John's Gospel is more descriptive. He says, “The doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews.” (John: 20:19)

Without the Holy Spirit the Church remains behind closed doors “for fear”! Is it possible that this is the reason why some of our churches are merely holding their own, and they sometimes seem to be without spiritual power and moral authority? They try to be faithful, but they are non-contagious. They are believers, but like some of the believers in the first century, they might have to freely admit to Paul the Apostle that they have not “even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.” (Acts 19: 1-2) Is it any wonder that some of our local churches tend to back away from their missionary vocation? Without the Holy Spirit, the Church not only loses THE HEART OF THE MATTER, it loses its power and the gifts that enable us to witness.

Again, after years of study and research, as well as, the joy of doing ministry on every continent, I am prepared to say—those denominations, churches and missionary movements that are open and receptive to the power and gifts of the Holy Spirit are growing. To the contrary, those that are not open to the power and gifts of the Holy Spirit are in significant decline.

IV. Finally, a church FORSAKES THE HEART OF THE MATTER WHEN IT COMPROMISES ITS COMMITMENT TO BOTH THE PERSON AND THE WORK OF JESUS CHRIST. I put this point last because it belongs first. That is, this is the most important point and it must be imprinted upon our minds and hearts and remembered forever. In the same way that it came to the early disciples, the ultimate challenge to

Christians of every age and in every place comes from our Lord Himself. He puts this challenge to His disciples: “Who do you say that I am?”(Matthew 16:13-17) That is, when you look at me, whom do you see and what do you perceive? Will our declaration be like Peter’s: “Thou art the Christ! You are the Messiah—Son of The Living God?”

This issue is being pushed to the forefront of our consciousness because in our secular, pluralistic, individualistic world it is increasingly challenging to make a clear declaration that Jesus is the Christ. To do so is to declare that Jesus Christ is the unique revelation of the eternal God, the bearer of salvation and the Lord of all creation. In other words: **THE HEART OF THE MATTER**. In many parts of the Western world, this declaration of faith grates on the ears of modernity. Therefore, some contemporary theologians and pastors feel it necessary to either explain away the uniqueness of Christ or simply deny it out-rightly. They even go so far as to label those of us who hold to the uniqueness of Christ as being arrogant and imperialistic. Well, let me put it plainly, if our Methodist/Wesleyan movement in its laudable search for relevancy turns aside from the conviction that Jesus Christ is God’s unique and definitive revelation, we are finished as a movement. What about us? Whom do we see when we look at Jesus?

For a number of years I have been asking a question that I would like to ask the reader. If at midnight tonight you and all the members of your local Church should suddenly cease believing in Jesus Christ as the divine Son of God, what difference would it make? In all honesty some would have to say, "Well, I don't suppose it would make a great deal of difference. Life would go on about as usual. I would still get up in the morning, go to work, come home at my regular hour and watch television until bedtime. I would continue to play a round of golf on Sunday, go to an occasional movie, take in a ball game, etc., etc. Life would go on about as usual. Now, I might have to surrender my ordination credentials or withdraw my church membership, but not necessarily so! I don't think that it would make much difference....None that I can think of!"

However, for those of us who have responded to Jesus’ question with heart, soul, mind and strength, we would be compelled to say, “If at midnight tonight I should suddenly cease to believe in Jesus Christ as Messiah, I don’t think I would want to go on living. All the lights would go out in my sky and all my hopes would be dashed to pieces. I think I would want to simply lie down and die. I have learned to say with Paul, ‘Life means Christ for me. For me, to live is Christ!’ Christ is everything to me and life without Christ would be unthinkable.” Now, if it means that much to us, is there anyone on the face of the earth for whom it ought to matter less?

Those of us committed to Jesus Christ as Son of God, Lord of all creation and Savior of the world, might use different language and imagery, but we would find ourselves affirming our faith and saying, “In my sin and guilt Jesus Christ is the sacrificial Lamb, the High Priest who offers atonement, my Savior from sin. In my suffering He is the powerful presence that will not leave me comfortless. He is the Pioneer who leads me through my misery and pain, giving it meaning and opening for me a new future.

When I am embarrassed by my own error and ignorance Jesus Christ is the Prophetic Teacher who points me to the light and knowledge of truth. In my loneliness He is the Friend who never leaves or forsakes me. He is a friend who stays closer than a sister or brother. When I am victimized by principalities and powers, He is the Liberator who unmasks the powers of darkness and breaks the iron curtains of oppression. When I face the desolation of death Jesus Christ is the One who will take me by the hand and lead me through the valley of the shadow. He is the Lord of Life who triumphs over the night of death and shows me the victory of Easter morning. I tell you, **HE IS THE HEART OF THE MATTER!**”

Churches and missionary movements of every denomination that hold to this exciting and serious Christology are growing. However, those churches that are in serious decline have turned aside from this heart of the matter. For them, it is no longer a matter of the heart.

When I was a lad of seventeen, I knelt at the foot of a cross and gave my heart and life to Jesus Christ. I was attending a local church service for the very first time in my life. That night, a little mountain congregation in the Central Appalachian Highlands sang a song that is etched upon my soul. It is the first Christian song that I learned. They sang: "Everybody Ought to Know Who Jesus Is." After singing this refrain over several times they went on to affirm: "He's the lily of the valley; He's the bright and morning star; He's the fairest of ten thousand to my soul. Everybody Ought To Know."

I believed it then, but I believe it more today than ever. Jesus Christ is the only hope this world has and everybody ought to know Him. Everybody needs to be His disciple. But, there are multitudes that do not know Him. And, many do not know him because **TOO MANY CHURCH MEMBERS HAVE FAILED TO MAKE THE HEART OF THE MATTER A MATTER OF THE HEART.**