



Staggering Lessons From the Biggest Church Split in American History: United Methodists

February 7, 2024 [Gerry Wagoner](#)

One scholar (Ryan Burge) calls the split in the United Methodist Church, "The biggest schism in any American denomination in the history of our country." It took place between 2019 and 2023.

2023 Marked the end of the opportunity for these congregations to leave the United Methodist Church (UMC) and in particular, to leave with their property. A split in American Methodism has happened before, but it hasn't happened like this and it certainly hasn't happened over these issues (LGBTQ).

This is an emblematic story, one that illustrates the major changes that have been taking place over the last several decades. In the background

to this divide is a century of theological change. In the more liberal Protestant denominations this has meant outright theological warfare between theological liberals and theological conservatives, even in the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

The Methodists

First of all, who are the Methodists? Well, the Methodists are a protestant denomination in the United States—the largest denomination being known as the United Methodist Church. Methodism didn't begin as a denomination. It began as a devotional group or a holiness group within the Church of England. The founder, John Wesley, was himself a minister of the Church of England, as was his famous hymn-writing brother, Charles. Like Adventism, the Wesley Brothers basically established a new denomination, though that is not what they set out to do. John Wesley sought to bring about revival and reformation within the Church of England, of which he was a priest.

The term 'Methodism' started as a pejorative term due to their methodical way of devotion. By the time you come to the Revolution in Colonial America, you had a lot of Methodists here. Though originally called the Methodist Episcopal Church, the church split into two factions in 1844 during the buildup to the civil war (1861-1865).

Circuit Riding Preachers

Methodism grew in the American frontier because of the philosophy of the circuit riding preacher. This was also the way that some American federal judges worked—they rode a circuit on horseback. They went from place to place and held court wherever they would arrive. That's why the federal appeals courts are still called *circuits*. The circuit riding Methodist preacher was a staple of colonial America and helped to establish Methodism as a central pillar of the American Protestant experience.

One of the things that made Methodism popular in America is that it seemed to fit the American democratic ethos and our democratic spirit. It spread because one preacher riding the circuit could minister to several churches while the Episcopalians were still trying to figure out how to expand a diocese.

The current Methodist denomination is the result of a merger that led to the United Methodist Church. By the 1960s we had the major mainline Protestant denomination known as the United Methodist Church.

Some Methodist preachers were well known across the nation. You had Methodist churches that often dominated the courthouse squares in county seat towns. You also had urban Methodism and rural Methodism. You had Methodism in the North and in the South. Urban Methodism is partly the explanation for why theological liberalism began to gain ground among Methodists.

As is often the case with denominations that have Universities and Seminaries, these institutions become incubators of liberalism. For the Methodists, one of the centers of that liberalism was Boston University. By the time you reached the 1920's, mainline Protestantism, particularly in the North, was being torn apart by controversy between the theological liberals known as the Modernists, who argued that Christianity had to be theologically and doctrinally modernized in order to fit the modern age. The conservatives were arguing for the continuation and protection of biblical orthodoxy.

Because of its episcopal structure, Methodism had been resistant to the kind of splits that had taken place in other more liberal denominations. Interestingly there were regional differences in the Methodist Church.

The theological liberals were more successful at pressing their agenda north of the Ohio River. Meanwhile, Methodism in the South was more conservative. In that light, Methodism is mirroring other denominations, including the Baptists. The Southern Baptist Convention, by the time you reach the early 1900's was markedly more conservative than the Northern Baptist Convention.

After the Civil War, Methodism had rejoined the northern and the southern churches. They also added a large part of the Church of the Brethren as they formed the United Methodist Church.

The Church of the Brethren used to be part of the German Baptist Brethren; the [Old German Baptist Brethren](#) split off as a more conservative group in 1881 (my own heritage is eight-generations of Old German Baptist Brethren). The Church of The Brethren was a larger, more liberal group with way more trust in higher education, a tendency that would prove to be a downfall for them.

The United Methodist Church at the time was the largest Protestant denomination in the United States of America and it was clearly associated with America and the American spirit.

Over the course of the last thirty years Methodism experienced significant division with theological conservatives seeking to hold on to biblical orthodoxy and evangelism and historic Christian missions as a task of the church. They were opposed by a large faction of liberal United Methodists who substituted social justice for evangelism.

Here's an interesting fact, the conservatives won most of the major battles that actually came before the church in their General Conference

meetings held every four years. Meanwhile, the institutions of the church were being taken over by a liberal wing of the church.

Like the Seventh-day Adventist Church, the United Methodist Church still has an official teaching that homosexuality is [incompatible with Scripture](#). However, over the last twenty years, rebellious bishops and rebellious Methodist pastors have been affirming and even consecrating LGBTQ relationships, including same-sex marriages. They had openly homosexual or openly LGBTQ pastors and now bishops. They reached a breaking point. The question was, how would the break happen, because Methodist church structure was basically established in order to prevent this very kind of break. There was a reversion clause in the Methodist movement in the United States, saying that if a congregation leaves the United Methodist Church, the property stays with the denomination. It doesn't go with the exiting congregation.

When you deal with small churches that might have no options, or large churches, that have huge investments, that reversion clause became a ballast keeping many churches in the United Methodist Church, even though they were no longer comfortable being there. There were reform movements, such as what was known as the [Good News](#) movement which was seeking to bring reformation and revival to the church. By 2011, conservatives within the United Methodist Church were aware of the fact that there were essentially two denominations within the church and a split was the only solution. The theological divisions were simply too great.

That's a good lesson for us in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. This is a huge worldview issue. A denomination can't go in two directions at once on key issues of the truth of the Scripture, the integrity of the Everlasting Gospel and the continuation of the faith once delivered to the saints. The

church is either going to stand or fall. When it comes to United Methodism, quite bluntly, it fell.

As you might expect, there's some interesting twists in this tale.

There were those in the United Methodist Church trying to bring reformation to the denomination. The same effort exists in Adventism, including a committee attempt at revival and reformation by the GC.

Secondly, there were those in the United Methodist Church trying to arrange the strongest form of exit for conservative congregations. Before COVID, given the arrangements that were being made, conservatives seemed to have a pretty strong hand in exiting the church, or remaining in the church and the liberals leaving (although, quite frankly, that was never really much of a possibility, giving the fact that liberalism is not self-sustaining. It needs a host to survive on). During COVID, the UMC General Conference meeting to finalize this was not held. In the ensuing time, the liberals gained ground and the conservatives lost ground. By the end of the day, the conservatives basically left with some arrangement that allowed them either to take their property or to offer some compensation to the United Methodist General Conference in order to gain their property back.

Conservatives recognized that they had reached the breaking point and they began to break away. The official period for this break away was from 2019 to the end of 2023, ending just a few days ago.

Here's What we Know

- Methodism was at one point, America's largest Protestant denomination.

- To date, 7,659 churches have left the United Methodist church, 25% of the total membership. In North Texas, 81% of the congregations left. Across the entire state of Texas, about 50% of churches left.
- According to Professor Ryan Burge, who teaches political science at Eastern Illinois University "It's the biggest schism in any American denomination in the history of our country."
- The Methodist church voted in several General Conference sessions to not allow LGBTQ clergy. The liberals in the church just ignored the votes, similar to how liberals in the SDA church have disregarded three General Conference Session votes to not allow the ordination of women (WO). It takes little imagination to see how closely the Adventist Church follows this pattern.
- The UMC is on track to liberalize its official standards on sexual morality, becoming a denomination that officially affirms same-sex weddings and non-celibate gay clergy. They are also refusing to extend basic tolerance to any remaining conservative members. These are hallmarks of apostate Protestantism, along with increased sodality towards the Roman Catholic church.

Going back to the early 20th century, in most denominations, the liberals won. That's basically true throughout almost all of what we call mainline Protestantism. You look at the Episcopalians, the Congregationalists, and you look at the Disciples of Christ, the United Methodists, the mainline Lutherans, and the more liberal Presbyterians. In each case, the liberals prevailed; these churches became Apostate Protestants. They are also demonstrating increasing ecumenical benevolence towards the Roman Catholic Church, a consistent contemporary hallmark of progressive denominations (Rev. 17:5; 13:3-4).

You had split after split, or you had the liberals just take control of the denomination (that actually has become more of the norm).

What you see here is that over a period of time, many of the conservative congregations in United Methodism simply said, "We can't tolerate this any longer."

This raises a huge point. At some point, a congregation, or for that matter, an individual Christian, may find him or herself in the position of having to choose between staying in a denomination that is simply theologically compromised or worse, apostate, or leaving and paying whatever the price is of that leaving.

You need to understand the emotional toll that is taken there. Many of these people who have now pulled out of the United Methodist Church, their fathers, their grandparents, their great-grandparents, their ancestors were deeply involved in the church and absolutely committed to the church.

They built those buildings, they built the infrastructure of the United Methodist Church, and now basically, it's been taken over by liberals flying a rainbow flag.

We simply say to our conservative Methodist brothers and sisters, in leaving, you are doing exactly the right thing.

The WO LGBTQ Connection

- There is one other theological issue and that is the fact that the United Methodist Church has for decades now, ordained women to the ministry, something that I believe is unbiblical.
- Among the churches leaving the United Methodist Church over LGBTQ issues, 18% of those congregations either have, or have had women as pastors.

- Among the churches that didn't leave the United Methodist Church, 30% have female pastors.
- The hermeneutical method used to justify the ordination of women and the acceptance and ordination of LGBTQ persons are the same method. The interpretive principles are essentially identical. They both share an ideological enemy, patriarchy and a plain reading of the Scriptures.

Here's something fascinating. Those churches that left the UMC over LGBTQ+ and still have a female pastor have temporarily withdrawn into an inner citadel of conservatism only to discover that the enemy has followed them there—in their compromised hermeneutic.

Sooner or later they too will yield to LGBTQ+, having already surrendered their only defense against it by editing Scripture to accept WO.