

A season of repentance: An open letter to United Methodists

by [Richard B. Hays](#) in the [August 24, 2004](#) issue

A proposal: Let us stop fighting one another, for a season, about issues of sexuality, so that we can focus on what God is saying to the church about our complicity in the violence that is the deepest moral crisis of our time. And let us call the church to fasting and prayer in repentance for the destruction our nation has inflicted upon the people of Iraq.

One might have expected that the recent General Conference, held in Pittsburgh April 27-May 7, would voice concern and sorrow about the cycle of violence that has been exacerbated by our nation's invasion of Iraq. I was not present at the General Conference, but insofar as I have been able to determine, the highest legislative body of our denomination had nothing at all to say about the war, except that, according to the denomination's official Web site, "during the last minutes of the conference, delegates approved a resolution supporting calls for a full investigation of alleged abuses of Iraqi prisoners by the U.S. military."

This cautious call for investigation (an investigation urgently necessary, to be sure) was relegated to the conference's final moments, but the assembly found ample time to debate for many hours a stream of resolutions and actions dealing with homosexuality, judicial procedures for charges against gay clergy, same-sex marriage, and so forth. Not surprisingly, the press reports on the General Conference concentrated almost entirely on these "sexy" issues. Insofar as the conference turned its attention to "social" issues, the most important ones seemed to be whether to boycott Taco Bell and Mount Olive Pickles. Am I alone in believing that we are straining at gnats and swallowing a very large camel?

The Presbyterians, at their just-completed General Assembly, passed a powerful resolution declaring the U.S. military action in Iraq to be "unwise, immoral and illegal." By contrast, our denomination is asleep at the hour of crisis—or are we just distracted by the battle over sexual issues? Is it any wonder that President Bush (a

devout United Methodist), receiving no clear word from his own church on these matters, is able to persist in his present course of action with no visible moral compunction?

Here is the moral crisis in which we find ourselves. Within the past two years, the United States has launched a preemptive war, in flagrant disregard of traditional “just war” criteria, on Iraq. This military action has killed at least 10,000 Iraqis, the great majority of them civilian noncombatants. This is more than three times the number of people killed in the tragic attacks of September 11, 2001. Additionally, at this writing, more than 900 American soldiers have died in Iraq. And these fatality counts do not begin to include the many thousands seriously wounded and maimed, on both sides of the conflict.

The justifications proposed by the president and other leaders have proven false: no weapons of mass destruction have been found, Iraq was not involved in the September 11 attacks, and it had no role in sponsoring al-Qaeda. The fact that American soldiers were systematically torturing and humiliating Iraqi prisoners of war in Abu Ghraib prison is merely one painful symptom of the reckless manner in which this entire action has violated international law, despised human life, alienated allies and fostered enmity around the world.

Despite the emergence of these facts, at no time has the president acknowledged the misguidedness of this invasion; at no time has he or any other national leader, of either political party, called the nation to apologize or repent for these violent and highhanded acts. (Instead, the religious rhetoric that we hear in the public sphere is almost always self-justifying, seldom calling us to prayerful examination of our actions and motives.) Nor—here lies the greater shame—has our church spoken out in any effective way. A few of our bishops have made clear public statements against this war, but the church as a whole has not followed their lead. Because we have remained almost completely silent, we are tacitly complicit in these actions.

As Christians, what shall we say to these things? We are called to serve a Lord who taught his followers to turn the other cheek when attacked and to love their enemies. We should also recall the passionate exhortation of St. Paul: “Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God. . . . Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Rom. 12:19). At the heart of our call to be Jesus’ disciples is our call to be peacemakers (Matt. 5:9). Yet we fail repeatedly. The gospel diagnoses our true condition: “Their feet are swift to shed

blood; ruin and misery are in their paths, and the way of peace they have not known" (Rom. 3:15-17, quoting Isa. 59:7-8).

And so we are called also to repentance. "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 2:8-9). How can it be that our church has failed to call the attention of President Bush to these central teachings of the faith he professes? And how can we fail to enter into deeply penitent grief over the killing and torture that have been done in our name?

I am fully aware of the possible complexities of ethical debate over how the New Testament's teachings might apply to international affairs in a post-9/11 world. But my point is that *at present we are not having the debate at all*. In the United Methodist Church, we say nothing about the horrifying violence in Iraq, while at the same time we exhaust ourselves going around in circles debating issues of sexuality.

To be sure, both sides in the sexuality debates believe that important moral issues are at stake. But, as C. S. Lewis memorably suggested in *The Screwtape Letters*, one of the devil's favorite tactics is to distract our attention with nominally good causes from the matters of first importance, so that we continue on the gradual road to hell.

I am afraid that our attention has been distracted in just this way, on both sides of the sexuality debate, from serious moral reflection on the issue of war. And so we remain blind to the violence in our own hearts, a violence that surfaces in displaced form in our in-house wars over sexuality: theological conversation is supplanted by name-calling, power struggles and manipulation of the press.

In view of the present necessity, I make the following proposal. Between now and the next General Conference in Fort Worth (2008), let us refocus our priorities. Instead of obsessively debating sexual politics, let us first devote our energies to prayerful reflection on the teaching of Jesus against violence and for peacemaking.

To do this, we will have to leave some of our current debates unresolved and, nonetheless, welcome one another as brothers and sisters. If we can join hands together and raise our voices in calling the church and the nation to prayer and repentance, it will offer a surprising and powerful witness to a world desperately needing alternatives to violence. Wouldn't it be a wonderful thing to pick up the newspaper and read, "Methodists table sex debate, call nation to repent of war"?

As precedent for this proposal, I offer Paul's counsel to the Roman Christians that they should put aside their differences over clean and unclean food—that they should stop judging and despising one another—so that they could bear witness, as Jewish and gentile believers together, to the reconciling purpose of God. “Let us then pursue what makes for peace and mutual upbuilding. Do not, for the sake of [sex], destroy the work of God” (Rom. 14:19-20). There were sharp moral differences among the Roman Christians, serious questions about what God required. The stakes were high, but Paul refused to join the power struggle on one side or the other. Instead, he urged them, “Welcome one another, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God” (Rom. 15:7).

The affirmation of the church's unity at the conclusion of General Conference was a good starting point. But that unity will mean little unless we can bear witness together to “the gospel of peace” (Eph. 6:15). Let us then think of this next quadrennium as an extended fast, renouncing the acrimony that has clouded our discernment. The chief purposes of a fast are to clear our heads and hearts, to practice the discipline of detachment from what we suppose to be our needs, and to focus on hearing God rather than lobbying for our own agendas. Perhaps if we can take the measure of our own compromised sinfulness in matters of war and peace, we will find it possible to return to our conversation about sexuality later, and to see one another with new eyes as forgiven sinners, fellow witnesses to the one gospel of Jesus Christ in a violent and broken world.

During the past year, I have made lecturing trips to South Africa and New Zealand. In both countries, the first question repeatedly asked me by people in the churches, of all different theological stripes, was: “How can the Christians in America fail to speak out against this war?” In view of my own denomination's timid and faithless silence, I hardly knew what to answer. If we could together seek God's mercy for the chaos our nation has unleashed, I dare to hope that we might in time be able to offer a better answer to the nations, as well as to the One to whom we must ultimately render an account.