

IN ALL THINGS CHARITY / A SERIES

SEEING
BLACK &
WHITE
IN A GRAY WORLD

THE NEED FOR THEOLOGICAL
REASONING IN THE CHURCH'S
DEBATE OVER SEXUALITY

BILL T. ARNOLD

Praise for *Seeing Black and White in a Gray World* . . .

This little book is a must read for those who want a clean and clear account of the issues we face within United Methodism. John Wesley would have been delighted with both its style and content. We move beyond the sentimental preacher-talk and the pious middle ground; we come face to face with the benefits of straightforward logic, accurate historical fact, and gracious engagement with the real alternatives before us. Both friends and foes need this brisk tonic if we are to make any progress in the debate that is raging all around us.

William J. Abraham

Outler Professor of Wesley Studies
Altshuler Distinguished Teaching Professor
Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University
Dallas, Texas

As a pastor who leads a local church that is unashamedly God-centered and passionately people-focused, the issue of same-sex attraction is a regular part of our ministry. It seems to me sentimentality is ruling the day when it comes to this very tender, sensitive issue. Clear biblical teaching rooted in historical Christianity must trump a kind of mushy grace when it comes to the moral issues of our day for followers of Jesus. I believe Bill Arnold does that in this book.

Jorge Acevedo

Lead Pastor, Grace Church
A multi-site, United Methodist congregation
Cape Coral, Florida

Dr. Arnold makes a clear and convincing case supporting our current United Methodist stance on same-sex practices. He sets the issues within the context of classic, orthodox understandings of sin, salvation, and the nature and ministry of the church. His gracious and thoughtful presentation adds greatly to our ongoing conversation about human sexuality and God's Divine plan for our lives.

G. Lindsey Davis

Bishop, Kentucky Annual Conference
Louisville, Kentucky

It is no secret that United Methodists are deeply divided over the issue of homosexuality. Unfortunately, an even bigger threat to unity lies just beneath the surface—namely, the loss of intellectual virtue in debate. People on both sides of the issue routinely resort to caricature, intemperance, impatience, grandstanding, and logical fallacies galore. At our worst, we resemble a bad episode of the *The Jerry Springer Show*. In stark contrast, *Seeing Black and White in a Gray World* is patient, courteous, respectful, and carefully reasoned. Indeed, Bill Arnold exemplifies a Wesleyan approach to argumentation. For this reason, even those who will likely disagree with his conclusions should read this book. And we should all seek to emulate it.

Jason E. Vickers

Associate Professor of Theology and Wesleyan Studies
United Theological Seminary
Dayton, Ohio

The United Methodist Church is covenantal in nature. For true connection and authentic community to exist, there must be clear agreements on issues of theology and practice. Dr. Arnold, reasoning through one of the most sensitive presenting issues straining our covenant, offers orthodox followers of Jesus solid Bible study, practical theology, and appropriate vocabulary to help negotiate the conversations facing us all in this season. I am grateful to Dr. Arnold, whose scholarship makes me a better pastor.

Carolyn Moore

Founding Pastor, Mosaic UMC
Augusta, Georgia

If you are looking for something that is well articulated, theologically rooted, fairly written, logically approached, and carefully documented then you will certainly appreciate this book! Dr. Arnold deals forthrightly and lovingly with the hard questions around our United Methodist struggle with same sex practices. He offers us a strong scholarly account of the history of the scriptures as well as an accurate accounting of our rich doctrinal heritage. This book is truly insightful and challenging as it moves us to the core issues in our debate on human sexuality. Wherever you find yourself in the debate, this is a must read!

Al Gwinn

Bishop, Retired, United Methodist Church

One of the most difficult conversations to have in the current ministry context is the conversation about same-sex practices. It is divisive in our denomination and challenging in our churches primarily because we err on the side of grace *or* truth. To be faithful witnesses of the Gospel, we must recapture what it means to be like Jesus, who was full of grace *and* truth. With this book, Bill Arnold leads both our heads and our hearts in that direction.

Bryan Collier

Lead Pastor, The Orchard UMC
Tupelo, Mississippi
Director, The Wesleyan Covenant Network

The issue of same-sex attraction is a challenging one for the church in our current cultural climate. Bill Arnold provides a way forward that is not only solidly reasoned and deeply rooted in Scripture and historic Christianity, but articulated with grace and sensitivity. *Seeing Black and White in a Gray World* is a positive contribution to a difficult conversation.

Kimberly D. Reisman

Executive Director, Next Step Evangelism Ministries
West Lafayette, Indiana

You can't build good practices on bad thinking. Presenting false dichotomies and then seeking some perceived middle way ironically stands as a stumbling block to understanding and resolving conflicts or tamping down ugly polemics. Bill Arnold's book shows how bad thinking—plausible though it seems—leads to more confusion and conflict rather than to healing and harmony. Arnold draws on the church's rich resources and illustrates by irenic yet pointed analysis that we must continue to search for true answers to difficult questions, especially with regard to thorny issues of sexuality. This is the kind of tool we need if ever we are to get serious about bridging denominational rifts.

Steve Rankin

Chaplin and Minister to the University
Southern Methodist University
Dallas, Texas

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SEEING
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IN A GRAY WORLD

About the In All Things Charity Series

John Wesley is often credited with the saying, “In essentials unity. In nonessentials liberty. In all things charity.”

As the world becomes more religiously pluralistic and societies and cultures grow more contentious and divided, it will behoove the church to gain clarity in its discernment of the distinction between essentials and nonessentials. We must not shrink back from boldly articulating the core truths of the Christian faith. At the same time, we must grow in the quality of our character as our very conversations witness to the gospel in the presence of a watching world. Said simply, our relationships within the church are the barometer of our witness to the world.

Jesus minced no words when he told his disciples that the authenticity of their association with him would be known only by the quality of their love for one another. Later in prayer, he would connect the loving unity of the church to the believability of the gospel. See John 17.

The apostle Paul, in the celebrated thirteenth chapter of his first letter to the Corinthian church, in essence tells us the absence of charity, or love, signals failure.

As a publisher, Seedbed does not want to avoid the difficult subjects of our time. Nor do we want to agitate the church with unnecessary controversy. For this reason, Seedbed created the In All Things Charity series. The series will contain books across a range of challenging issues. For the series, we are selecting authors who we believe embody the variety of character that enables them to demonstrate confidence in their point of view with truthful love in their approach.

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THE NEED FOR THEOLOGICAL
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BILL T. ARNOLD

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SOWING FOR A GREAT AWAKENING

For the Kentucky Annual Conference,
and especially one of their senior leaders,
Rev. Walter L. Arnold

Other books by Bill T. Arnold

Encountering the Book of Genesis: A Study of Its Content and Issues
(Baker, 1998; paperback 2003)

Encountering the Old Testament: A Christian Survey
(with Bryan E. Beyer; Baker, 1999; second edition, 2008;
available in German, Chinese, Portuguese, Korean)

*The Face of Old Testament Studies: A Survey
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*Readings from the Ancient Near East: Primary Sources
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P R E F A C E

This is a *very* different book than I typically write. Because this is different for me, I've decided to tell you about myself here in the preface. This seems to be the norm nowadays, as a way of informing you of my presuppositions, convictions, and values. Others involved in this debate have done something similar, and even though this is quite different from the way academics usually do things, here goes.

I am an academic in the field of biblical studies. I teach Hebrew and Old Testament studies in a theological seminary. Most of my teaching is focused on helping students become better readers of the Old Testament, especially in moving from the text of the Bible to sermon preparation. Over the years, my research has focused on interpreting the Old Testament (with commentaries on Genesis and 1–2 Samuel), as well as ancient Near

Eastern history. I've spent a good deal of time writing about Hebrew grammar and historical topics (such as the Babylonians in biblical times, and why they're important). I've also written an array of introductory materials for beginning students.

I am also an ordained elder in The United Methodist Church. I love our church. I love its rituals, its history and heritage, and I love its Wesleyan theology. Other than the influence of my godly parents, God worked through The United Methodist Church more than anything else to redeem my life, nurture my faith, teach me the Scriptures, confirm my calling, and ordain me to the ministry. I have also served as a delegate to two of our church's General Conferences.

My experience at General Conference in Tampa (April 24–May 4, 2012) gave rise to this book. On the way to Tampa, I decided to read something beyond my normal reading list, something considerably out of my narrow research interests. I needed something directly related to the denomination I was going to Tampa to serve. And so I chose Adam Hamilton's book *Seeing Gray in a World of Black and White*.¹ I chose Adam's book for several reasons, one of which is that I know and respect

1. Subtitled *Thoughts on Religion, Morality, and Politics* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2008). I will occasionally also draw on his subsequent book, *When Christians Get It Wrong* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2010).

the author. We have met a few times, and I have followed his ministry with interest. He has built a great ministry in our denomination, and continues to provide important and inspiring leadership in The United Methodist Church. Adam's several publications have provided the church with helpful resources for strengthening family life, deepening one's faith through forgiveness and reconciliation,² and he has provided leadership among the denomination's leading-edge pastors. In these ways and many others, Adam is a gift to our denomination.

I was also aware that Adam had taken a position quite different from mine relating to the UMC's Social Principle on human sexuality, and had become a leading voice to change our statements on this topic, as well as our requirements for ordination. Since Tampa 2012 was surely going to be another General Conference in which we would struggle with the issue, I wanted to understand Adam's approach.

I was not disappointed in Adam's honest and straightforward book seeking a "third way" through and beyond the controversies confronting the church today. I *was* disappointed, however, by other features of the book. I was surprised by the number of unsupported

2. With books such as *Making Love Last a Lifetime: Biblical Perspectives on Love, Marriage, and Sex* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2004); *Forgiveness: Finding Peace Through Letting Go* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2012); and others.

assumptions, errors of reasoning, and flawed arguments running throughout the book. I also had questions about some of the theological assumptions, and Adam's reliance on pragmatism, sometimes at the expense of theology. But I'm getting ahead of my story.

As much as I like and respect Adam Hamilton, I decided—against all my natural inclinations—to write this book in order to draw attention to various shortcomings in *Seeing Gray*. Is it possible that we in the UMC have not been discerning enough about Adam's teaching on the topic of same-sex practices? Perhaps his well-deserved status as a preeminent leader in our church has led us to be less than critical (by which I mean “analytical”) about his position on this issue. I will show here that the reasoning used in his book is flawed on a number of levels, but especially in the tendency to make assertions as true statements that do not flow naturally from established premises. His approach, which I will use as representative of others arguing in similar ways, proposes a *simplicistic alternative for a complex issue*. In *Seeing Gray*, Adam has set up a false dilemma between the Reverend Jerry Falwell and Bishop John Shelby Spong. From here, he moves to additional assertions and propositions that are either unfounded or illogical.

I want to repeat that I am only using Adam's book as representative of others in the same vein. *Seeing Gray* has been as influential as any, and merits a closer

PREFACE

look. And I hope in this critique to showcase how such approaches offering middle-way solutions on the complex question of human sexuality are not, in the long haul, helpful to the church. The current UMC approach is already a balanced and healthy third-way alternative. We affirm the sacred worth of all people, and welcome everyone into the loving arms of our Redeemer. At the same time, we invite all to enter into the fullness of life with God through personal and social transformation into the image of Christ. This invitation extends to the highest ideals of human sexual expression, specifically a call to monogamous heterosexual love. This is indeed a third way between those who simply accept and celebrate same-sex practices on the one hand, and those who condemn both the practices and the people who experience same-sex attraction on the other. The UMC stands between these approaches, and offers a better way, a third way. But this third way is achieved through discerning and teaching the black-and-white truths of Christian faith rather than trying to find gray that isn't there. This may be said to be the centerpiece of my response and the core assertion of this book.

Chapter 1 (“Seeing Gray That Isn’t There”) explores Adam’s arguments in an introductory way, critiques his general approach, and considers how his approach relates to the presenting issue of human sexuality. Chapter 2 (“Falwell or Spong? Really?!”) considers a

number of specifics in Adam's attempt to find a middle way between controversial issues. These first two chapters detail my critique of his book, and attempt to clear the deck in order to construct another way of thinking about these issues and of working through the debate over human sexuality in particular (chapters 3–6).

The rest of the book calls for a return to the rich theological resources and doctrinal heritage of our church. Chapter 3 (“The Fork in the Road”) confronts the problems we encounter when we look for middle-way solutions that are not possible. Chapter 4 (“Promises and Pitfalls of Compromise”) considers the dangers of seeking compromise as an end in and of itself, which may result in something no one wants—a surrendering of principles. Chapter 5 (“A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to Utopia”) warns that change itself is not always a good thing, and that the church has a unique role in its relationship to culture. And chapter 6 (“Homosexuality at the Center”) directly considers the most important social issue of our day, and turns to The United Methodist Church's theological resources for answers.

The church's debate in recent decades over human sexuality has been driven by deep emotion, and by experiences we have had with friends and family members who embrace and celebrate same-sex practices. Above all else, our debate has been buoyed by the prevailing

winds of change in North American culture. Such foundations for the church's debate are inadequate and risky. In contrast, this book is a call for theological reasoning in the church's debate on this issue. I have chosen Adam Hamilton as my conversation partner. I hope you, as my reader, will remember that I have done so precisely because of my appreciation and respect for Adam. In recent correspondence with him, Adam has graciously reminded me that he and I agree on a great many centrally important points. I am quite certain he is right about that. The common ground we share theologically is vast, more so than the issues about which we disagree. In this sense, our disagreement on human sexuality is an in-house, family argument. It is my earnest prayer that the vast common ground on which he and I agree will be kept in view as you read through my critique of his work, and that this same vast common agreement will make it possible for the beautiful church we both serve to remain united in our mission "to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world."³

Because this topic is so important and so difficult to write about, I have consulted a number of friends and colleagues for their advice and input. The list of advisers

3. *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church 2012* (Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2012), 91, ¶120

is too long to include here, but you know who you are. Thank you. I am especially grateful to my sons David and Jeremy for numerous conversations on this topic. And to their brother, AJ, who would no doubt have joined these conversations had he not been fighting in Afghanistan at the time. Thanks to Rev. Aaron Mansfield, who helped with the “Questions for the Reader,” and to Andy Miller and J. D. Walt of Seedbed for a number of helpful suggestions. My wife, Susan, has endured countless reports about this book for months, and made insightful comments on the final manuscript. I will always be grateful.

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CHAPTER 1

Seeing Gray That Isn't There

Some things are perfectly obvious and true to anyone. Such truths require no further argument or persuasion. These are undisputed certainties. They are black or white.

This might include an assertion, for example, that the sky is above you as you read this book, or that the chair in which you sit is beneath you. One can think of exceptions depending on context. The astronaut in outer space may be thought of as having the sky around her, or the circus lion-trainer may hold a chair over his head. We understand these are exceptions. And besides, the word *sky* takes on a new meaning for the astronaut in space, just as a chair ceases to function as a simple chair when carried into a lion's cage, becoming a different thing

altogether in the hands of a lion-trainer. These exceptions do not change the simple black-and-white quality of the assertions that the sky is above you and the chair beneath you.

On the other hand, some topics are *not* perfectly obvious to all rational people. These are disputed assertions, about which sincere thinking people often disagree. Should Pete Rose be inducted into Major League Baseball's Hall of Fame? Should the US federal government be more involved or less involved in the affairs of its citizens? Would the Nazis have been victorious in World War II had Hitler not opened an eastern front against Russia? Most baseball fans, politicians, and historians have firm opinions on these questions, but most will also admit that these are not black-and-white issues but are instead "gray areas," or issues about which reasonable people can agree to disagree.

It gets more complicated, however. What counts as black and white may itself be up for debate. We humans get into intractable conflict with each other when we cannot agree over the shade of certainty or ambiguity an issue has. This is the background for the title of this book. The question before us is how to respond to a dispute in The United Methodist Church, in which opposing sides of the debate believe their positions are perfectly obvious and true. Each side considers its position a

black-and-white certainty, an obvious truth. Yet the two positions are mutually exclusive. They cannot both be right.

The question I will address here is whether we need more gray in the world around us, or whether it would be better—when all is said and done—if we were to see more black and white.

Adam Hamilton's Attempt to See Gray in a World of Black and White

I take up this question because of a vigorous attempt by Rev. Adam Hamilton to encourage United Methodists to see more gray. Adam is a respected pastor in The United Methodist Church. He planted the Church of the Resurrection (Leawood, KS) in 1990 and has guided the congregation to become the largest UM church measured by weekly attendance. He is truly a remarkable leader.

When Adam published a book entitled *Seeing Gray in a World of Black and White*, he became a leading voice in the UMC's debate on a number of controversial issues.¹ We begin by summarizing his arguments because they

1. Adam Hamilton, *Seeing Gray in a World of Black and White: Thoughts on Religion, Morality, and Politics* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2008).

have had widespread influence in the church. His arguments for seeing more gray reflect the views of many in the church today and will therefore serve us as a helpful representative in asking whether we might need instead to see more black and white.

Adam's call for finding gray is first defined as nothing less than establishing a new kind of Christianity, that of the *via media*, or "a Christianity of the middle way."² The stated purpose is to take a new approach to all controversial issues, listening carefully to both sides of our debate, and finding ways to integrate the legitimate aspects of both sides in order to forge a new way forward. Adam calls for a new reformation, drawing upon the best aspects of both fundamentalism and liberalism. He says this reformation will be led by people "who are able to see the gray in a world of black and white."³ The goal of this reformation is to provide new understandings of the Bible to shed light on debates about creation versus evolution, the problem of suffering, abortion, homosexuality, war, faith, and politics. Quite an agenda!

Before we get too far along in considering Adam's call for a middle-road Christianity, I need to take up three of the central assumptions at work in his book.

2. Hamilton, *Seeing Gray*, xvi.

3. *Ibid.*, xvii.

1. *The Issues*—We should note first that the various debated issues listed in the last paragraph, and discussed by Adam in *Seeing Gray*, are too diverse to be taken together. These include: the way we read the Bible (hermeneutics), science versus religion (in general), theistic evolution versus creationism (in particular), universalism versus particularism, the problem of suffering, abortion, homosexuality, war, politics, and a few others I haven't included here. All of these are issues Adam addresses in an attempt to find "a third way" between liberals and conservatives. (His use of the terms "liberal" and "conservative" is another problem, and I will devote a discussion to them in chapter 5.) This third-way approach is, for Adam, an attempt to constitute the "radical center" holding together the best of both extremes as part of a new Christian reformation.

Consider for a moment this long list of controversies. It might be misleading to suggest that this newly reformed Christianity can find a middle road through so many controversies, especially so many wildly diverse topics. I agree with Adam that these are some of the most important questions and debates of our generation. And I agree that a few of these have unfortunately moved the UMC to the brink of division. Moreover, I agree with Adam on his moderating positions on a number of these issues. One question we must deal with here is whether or not it is helpful, or

even possible, to treat them all together in one attempt to find middle ground.

For one thing, different groups will stand on different sides of some of these debates. Not everyone who agrees with Adam about theistic evolution will stand with him on the question of universalism. Someone's position on pacifism might put them in the "liberal" camp, while they also oppose all forms of abortion, making them appear quite "conservative." My point is that Adam's grouping of individuals into handy categories is simplistic and reductionistic, and makes it impossible to imagine finding a third way between liberals and conservatives. It is superficial to assume that all the debated issues in *Seeing Gray* can possibly have a third-way compromise that would move the church forward into a new future. These controversies are all too different from each other, and each has its own complex set of problems to address. For this reason and others, my response in this book will only touch on these briefly, while focusing especially on one of them, perhaps the most important and divisive one on the list.

2. *The Objective*—*Seeing Gray* presents an important but subtle shift away from truth-seeking as the primary objective in our debates. He argues that Christian participation in America's culture wars is hypocritical. Christianity has been used as a wedge in our culture wars because Christians have not taken seriously Jesus'

warnings against straining gnats while swallowing camels (Matt. 23:23–24). He identifies “our quest for truth” with a separatist tendency that demonizes others and results in black-and-white thinking.⁴ In one important passage of the book, Adam affirms the creeds of the church as important faith statements of early believers in their quest to identify the essentials of the faith. He also observes, however, that the creeds were “never comprehensive statements,” as though any condensation of essentials could ever be comprehensive. In the next sentence, he states flatly, “Ultimately, what is needed is humility.” He further asserts “humility is essential to Christian faith.”⁵

Of course, we all agree that humility is an important feature of any orthodox formulation of the Christian faith. We learn first in the *ordo salutis* (Latin, “order of salvation”) that we have sinned and are incapable of self-deliverance. We need a Savior. We need a loving Redeemer who is capable of doing for us what we cannot do for ourselves. Of course humility is intrinsic to Christian faith! But Adam’s discussion of this topic is a distraction because it implies I am less than humble, even arrogant, if I do not agree on this topic or another. And it is surely questionable to say, “Ultimately, what is

4. Hamilton, *Seeing Gray*, 9–13.

5. *Ibid.*, 14.

needed is humility.” Is humility really what is needed in the church today? One could easily make the case that boldness and courage—also features intrinsic to apostolic Christianity—are needed today as much or more so than humility.⁶ Indeed, boldness is not at odds with humility. The early Christians appear to have had both in abundance. Similarly today, when one is moved by conviction to speak out about this or that issue, it may require boldness and courage to do so. Whether one is prideful or humble in doing so is irrelevant to the validity of one’s claims.

3. *The Role of Pragmatism*—Adam’s book is firmly rooted in pragmatism. By this I mean decisions about controversial issues are often based on claims about what works or what is believed to be most effective in appealing to the greatest number of people.⁷ At times, this pragmatism has a confirming role, coming along later to confirm what he has assumed to be true. So, for example, in his chapter on homosexuality, Adam explains how he came to his current position on the

6. It may also be less than humble to speak of the early church creeds dismissively, and then call for humility as essential to Christian faith.

7. Pragmatism may be defined as seeing truth as consisting, not in correspondence with facts, but in consistency with experience. This is similar to philosophical instrumentalism, which holds that the value of ideas is not in whether they are true but whether they are successful.

matter by sharing a sermon he preached to his congregation.⁸ He grieved over the loss of “hundreds of people” in the year following the sermon, but he also “had more than a thousand people who joined the church during that same period of time.”⁹ The implication is clear. His new stance on same-sex practices reaches people; it works. The question needs to be raised: Is it legitimate to establish Christian practice along the lines of a business model in which measurable or numerical success determines truth?

Such pragmatism shows up more than once in *Seeing Gray*. But it rises to the surface most clearly in Adam’s concluding chapter when he discusses the alarming decline of United Methodism since the 1960s. He acknowledges a host of reasons for the loss of membership. He then asserts that “conservative Christianity” (we’ll come to problems with this language in chapter 5) is on the decline, and will continue to decline because it is becoming increasingly disconnected with emerging generations.¹⁰ At the heart of his discussion is the notion that the church, and the UMC in particular, is losing this generation of young people. The twentysomething crowd is at risk

8. Hamilton, *Seeing Gray*, 165–87.

9. *Ibid.*, 167–68.

10. *Ibid.*, 227–28.

because we have not changed our stance on social issues, particularly on same-sex practices.

Adam assumes at critical junctures in the discussion of *Seeing Gray* that both United Methodism and conservative Christianity must get on board with the “Emerging Church” or risk losing this generation of young people. The Emerging Church is described as a growing movement of young believers signaling the beginning of a new era, and made up mostly of former conservatives. This is what Adam understands to be the “radical center” holding together the best of conservatives on the right and liberals on the left, and is the future of the church.¹¹ What I find surprising in this discussion is that there is no argument here for why anyone would *want* to be on board with the Emerging Church. The case hasn’t been established that such a young persons’ movement is retrieving the lost orthodoxy of the mainline church or advancing the gospel more faithfully than anyone else. Rather, they’re growing, and we have to get with the growth program.

Is it true that this generation is lost to United Methodism because of our stance on human sexuality? Or is it just as likely or perhaps more likely that we would in fact lose more young people—and lose them faster—if we *did* change that position? It is possible that the evidence and arguments could be brought to the discussion that expose

11. Hamilton, *Seeing Gray*, 232.

Adam's assertion as unfounded, or at least challenge it as not established. One wonders if it isn't more likely that the largest and fastest-growing Christian universities and seminaries, campus ministries, and youth movements are ones that hold to traditional Christian definitions of morality and marriage. And perhaps the Emerging Church is just trendy, and what is needed instead is realignment with the early, primitive church.¹²

On the other hand, it could be that this whole point is irrelevant. My objection to Adam's pragmatism is that it misses the point. Whether he is right or wrong about the reasons for declining membership in the UMC, what does it matter? Should we settle controversial questions based on popular appeal (like a business demographic)? This is all too typical of American culture, in that we expect our church to settle disputes, or worse, to establish doctrine and practice, based on what the majority of our citizens believe to be true. What a new idea in the history of Christianity! In reality, it matters little what the majority opinion is among young people. Or among middle-aged people or older adults, for that matter. Christians should not settle moral issues on the basis of pragmatism.

12. Indeed, the insubstantial foundations of the Emerging Church movement are already crumbling under close scrutiny; Kenneth J. Collins, *Power, Politics, and the Fragmentation of Evangelicalism: From the Scopes Trial to the Obama Administration* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 171–205.

And my objective here is to show that the approach to human sexuality argued by Adam Hamilton and others is simplistic, misleading, and hurtful to the church.

While we're in the neighborhood of relevance, we might further ask how such pragmatism plays out in global Christianity. Data collected for the century from 1910 to 2010 suggest a significant southward shift in Christianity's center of gravity.¹³ In 1910, more than 80 percent of all Christians lived in the global North (Europe and North America). One hundred years later, in 2010, this had fallen to less than 40 percent, with a majority of Christians living in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. This trend seems likely to continue. The rising tide of Christianity in the global South is now outpacing its decline in the North, resulting in a net growth of Christianity globally. If we're being practical, we might ask whether the UMC's current crisis over human sexuality is relevant, seeing that the debate itself is limited to the global North. Again, from a strictly pragmatic perspective, what difference would it make what the dying portion of Christianity says about this issue?

Before moving on to specific logical problems in Adam Hamilton's quest for a middle-road Christianity, I

13. For these data and the assessment presented here, see Todd M. Johnson and Brian J. Grim, *The World's Religions in Figures: An Introduction to International Religious Demography* (West Sussex, UK/Maldon, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), esp. 7–131.

ask further whether this attempt to see gray in a world of black and white is really a new reformation of Christianity. Adam speaks of “holding together the evangelical and social gospels,” of “combining a love of Scripture with a willingness to see both its humanity as well as its divinity,” and finally, of “coupling a passionate desire to follow Jesus Christ with a reclamation of his heart toward those whom religious people have often rejected.”¹⁴ But these are features that characterized many of the *first* Reformers (especially the English Reformers, like John and Charles Wesley), and these are features of the church that have never disappeared entirely. What Adam is longing for here, it seems to me, is a revival or church renewal, not a reformation. Then the question becomes: Does church renewal come by finding a “middle road” through controversial issues, or by some other means?

What Is a Fallacy and Why Does It Matter?

So far I have pointed out some basic problems with three of the assumptions in Adam’s book *Seeing Gray*. We have seen first that it is simplistic and reductionistic to argue that all the debated issues in his book can possibly have a third-way compromise that would move the church forward into a new future. These controversies are all

14. Hamilton, *Seeing Gray*, xvii.

too different from each other, and each has its own complex set of problems to address. Second, Adam believes an obsession with truth-seeking cannot be the primary objective of the church in today's culture wars. What the church needs is humility. And third, we have objected to the idea that these questions can and should be answered based on what works best. Such pragmatism is not legitimate footing for theological reflection. Adam appeals to the loss of membership in the UMC as a reason to change the Social Principles. But we have observed that there may be a multitude of other causes for membership decline, even if we grant that our Social Principles are one of those causes.

My next objective in this first chapter is to present as clearly as possible why I object to Adam's reasoning in *Seeing Gray*. In particular, I find problems with the logic underlying these three assumptions. In order to explain what I mean, I need to turn briefly to the once familiar (but now largely lost) world of logic, with its focus on presenting, understanding, and evaluating arguments.

An error in reasoning is called a "fallacy," and arguments based on erroneous arguments are said to be "fallacious."¹⁵ We use the word *fallacy* in two ways. First,

15. Frances Howard-Snyder, Daniel Howard-Snyder, and Ryan Wasserman, *The Power of Logic*, 5th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2012), 34, 147–49.

we often use it in a general sense for anything we consider to be false or incorrect. But second, in a narrower sense, *fallacy* refers to a faulty or incorrect *process* of reasoning—a process that results in faulty or invalid conclusions. This is how I will use it here.¹⁶ I intend to show how the processes of reasoning in Hamilton's book only *appear* to conform to the rules of sound argument but that they, in fact, do not conform to such sound reason. My aim is not simply to *assert* that something is false or untrue. I hope to show *how* and *why* the arguments for many of his assertions are inadequate or invalid.

There are many types of fallacies. The hardest to identify only appear coherent and consistent in the flow of the argument but contain an error somewhere along the way in the *content* of the argument itself. I'll point out the various types of fallacies as they become important in the discussion.

Now let us return to the three principal assumptions in *Seeing Gray*.

1. *The Issues*—Adam has combined a number of debated issues and called for a new reformation of Christianity providing a third way through all these difficulties. I have objected that each of these controversies

16. Of numerous resources available to help understand this topic, a still helpful introduction is W. Ward Fearnside and William B. Holther, *Fallacy: The Counterfeit of Argument* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1959). See their pages 3–4 for these two ways of using fallacy.

and debates has its own complex set of problems, and that it is superficial to argue that a third-way compromise is possible in each case. But why would I object to such a noble enterprise?

Adam's discussion combines numerous controversial issues, each one causing strife and contention in the church. One such debate pits young-earth creationists against those who accept evolution. Others are divided over same-sex practices. *Seeing Gray* assumes that because a compromise might be found in one case—a compromise that would bring healing and wholeness to the church, and move the cause of Christ forward—then such a compromise can and should be found in each of the other debated issues. The aim of his newly reformed Christianity would bring controversy to an end, ushering in a period of harmony among believers.

Of course, this sounds wonderful. But Adam's process of reasoning here is unacceptable (that is, fallacious) because he has assumed what is true of one controversial issue is true of the rest. His process of reasoning assumes an attribute of one item in the group to be true of all items of the group. This error in thinking is a fallacy involving *ambiguity*, a type containing a subtle confusion between two closely related concepts.¹⁷

17. Howard-Snyder, et al., *Power of Logic*, 166. There are four such fallacies of ambiguity (166–74). In the assumption that all

It does not follow that, because one or more of the controversial issues has a solution, therefore every controversial issue has a third-way solution available. Adam seems to assume that all controversial issues are the result of extreme positions on either end of the spectrum, in which case either (a) a solution is attainable through humility and dialogue, or (b) a solution is already present but not articulated properly. At times, however, the controversies are simple *either-or* options, in which no middle-way solution is possible. This merely illustrates that each controversy is unique and needs to be addressed individually.

On the question of evolution versus creationism, for example, I agree with Adam completely that a mediating position is possible and would be helpful for Christians. There is room for real compromise on so-called “theistic evolution,” although we still have diverse ways of understanding precisely what we mean by God’s use of an evolutionary process in creation. But it hardly follows to assert that similar solutions are possible with regard to our debates on human sexuality. Adam has grouped these controversies together and called for a third way between all the difficulties. This process of reasoning

controversial issues can be resolved by finding a third way, Adam appears to be closest to the fallacy of *composition* (171–72), involving “an invalid inference from attributes of members of a group to attributes of the group itself.”

is not defensible. A helpful compromise in one case is no indication that such is possible in every case. And in fact, Adam admits that no such third-way solution is available on the question of same-sex practices. His chapter on homosexuality in *Seeing Gray* acknowledges how painful and divisive the issue is, presents a cursory survey of the biblical data (from a sermon he preached on the topic), and calls for an open and receptive ministry of local congregations (especially his church) to homosexuals.

I will return in chapter 3 to Adam's treatment of the biblical data. Here I simply point out that he has not, in fact, proposed a solution on this issue. This is no third-way or mediating position. In fact, in his call for local congregations to respond lovingly to homosexuals attending their services, I do not disagree.¹⁸ But by falling into the ambiguity fallacy, Adam has assumed (a) that, as a compromise between creationism and evolution is possible, similar compromise is possible and should be sought on the issue of same-sex practices, and (b) that such a compromise, once found, would be helpful and healing for the church. Because Adam's process of reasoning here is faulty, his conclusion is not established.

18. And in some respects, this has been the position of the UMC for four decades. The intractable debate, of course, is over the acceptance and celebration of same-sex practices, and especially over ordination and same-sex unions as Christian marriage.

He may, in fact, be wrong on both counts. Such compromise on the question of same-sex practices may not be possible, and if it were, it could, in fact, be hurtful and harmful for the church.

2. *The Objective*—As we have seen, Adam criticizes some Christians for their quest for truth, certainty, and purity of doctrine, which he says often results in a tendency to separate from those who disagree and to demonize the positions of others. “Ultimately,” he argues, “what is needed is humility.”¹⁹ I have objected that we all agree that humility is an essential feature of orthodox Christianity. Who would argue with his assertion that more humility is needed? The question here is whether this is really the missing characteristic of the church that prevents us from moving beyond our disagreements.

Adam’s elevation of humility as our greatest need is an example of the *Red Herring Fallacy*.²⁰ Such reasoning often introduces an idea into a discussion that is irrelevant to the topic, and tends to divert attention from the original issue at hand. When he raises the need for humility in our dialogue as Christians, Adam essentially changes the subject. Are Christians today arrogant?

19. Hamilton, *Seeing Gray*, 13–14.

20. More technically the *Ignoratio Elenchi* Fallacy, in which premises of an argument are logically unrelated to the conclusion. The Red Herring Fallacy is a general fallacy of irrelevance; see Howard-Snyder, et al., *Power of Logic*, 159–60.

Sometimes. Does that mean they are wrong about social issues? Not necessarily. I agree that we need humility, but I do not accept Adam's logic that humility on all sides will lead to compromise that is healthy and helpful.

To follow this line of reasoning a bit further, it is possible the arrogant Christian may be correct in his or her convictions about traditional sexual morals. Another Christian may also be arrogant, while accepting the changing societal views of sexuality. Conversely, a humble Christian may be either for or against changing the church's position on same-sex practices. So you see, while humility is of course needed for all followers of Christ, it is not relevant to one's position on our debated issues. This is a red herring fallacy.

3. *The Role of Pragmatism*—The third concern I have raised in this chapter is Adam's pragmatism, or the impulse to settle difficult moral questions on the basis of what seems to work best. While Adam admits that many factors contribute to declining membership in the UMC, he believes the current unwillingness to change our position on same-sex practices is one of those reasons. I have countered that moral questions should not be decided on the basis of majority opinion.

That much is obvious. But what may not be so obvious are the logical fallacies at work in Adam's presentation. Indeed, there are at least three fallacies intertwined in Adam's pragmatic approach. Two of these logical errors

are closely related, and all three are subtle and hardly distinguishable from each other. Only when we consider them separately can we see how mistaken it is to allow pragmatism to drive these important discussions in the church.

The first fallacy at the core of Adam's pragmatism is (a) *appeal to the people* (otherwise known as the "Ad Populum Fallacy").²¹ This mistake in reasoning attempts to persuade by appealing to the desire to be accepted or valued by others. Part of the appeal of Adam's approach is that he says he offers a compromise that by implication will make the UMC capable of reversing our membership decline. A slight variation of this fallacy, also one of the seven so-called Fallacies of Irrelevance, is (b) *appeal to force* (or the Ad Baculum Fallacy), which attempts to defend one's conclusion with a threat to the well-being of those who need to accept it.²² Such arguments need not be limited to threats of physical harm, like the Mafia's "offer you can't refuse." Appeals to force can also take the form of psychological well-being, and in this case, institutional well-being. Is the future of the UMC in jeopardy? Is our beloved church on the verge of

21. Howard-Snyder, et al., *Power of Logic*, 155–56.

22. Ibid., 153–55, and for the seven Fallacies of Irrelevance, see 149–60.

schism, cultural irrelevance, or possible extinction? Well, yes. Does the church need to change its position on same-sex practices, or else face continued decline? It hasn't been established, in my view, that the UMC decline is a result of our stance on same-sex practices, either singly or together with other causes. Such appeals to "the people" or "to force" are simply wrong-headed.

A third and even more subtle logical error in Adam's pragmatic approach is the (c) *False Cause Fallacy*.²³ In such reasoning, one *possible* cause of something is assumed to be a (or *the*) cause although other unstated causes may, in fact, be at work. The most common form of this logical mistake is sometimes called *post hoc, ergo propter hoc*, "after this, therefore because of this." This occurs when someone assumes that because event X occurred before event Y, then therefore X must have caused Y to happen. This form of false-cause reasoning is precisely at work in our current debates whenever someone implies that the 1972 decision to add a statement to the Social Principles naming same-sex practices as "incompatible with Christian teaching" led

23. Howard-Snyder, et al., *Power of Logic*, 183–86. Appeals to "the people" and "to force" are Fallacies of Irrelevance, while the False Cause Fallacy belongs to a group known as Fallacies of Unwarranted Assumptions, 177–88.

to the church's decline ever since. The cause-and-effect connection between that statement in 1972 and the UMC decline in membership is far from a certainty. The argument carries no force.

I agree wholeheartedly with Adam Hamilton that we need a renewal or revival in the UMC. (Notice that I am not calling for a new reformation of Christianity.) But this is not the same thing as expecting to find resolution to all these debates. Perhaps the renewal we long for is delayed for other reasons. Some would suggest (and this argument would have as much logical explanatory power as the arguments Adam has put forward) renewal is delayed *because* we are having such debates! Perhaps a study of renewal movements in the history of Christianity would find such movements marked by an impulse to return to primitive, early church emphases, rather than innovations in cultural understandings or compromises on social issues. But this is getting ahead of our story.

For now we have observed that Adam's basic assumptions (compromise is possible on all controversial issues, humility is needed over truth-seeking, and pragmatism as a guiding principle) are marked by fatal flaws of reasoning. Before moving forward now to address details beyond these three basic assumptions, I need to explain why my response will be focused especially on one of the controversial issues presented in *Seeing Gray in a World of Black and White*.

The Presenting Issue: Same-Sex Practices

This book addresses the question of human sexuality, and especially same-sex practices, as the “presenting issue” in our current debates. A *presenting issue* is an initial or first-level question that needs resolution. Often, such pressing questions expose other *underlying issues* that are really at the heart of the struggle. In this book, I take up the debate over same-sex practices as the presenting issue in the UMC, while acknowledging that a number of underlying issues are just as important. These include, above all else, the way we understand divine revelation and the nature of Scripture, the operation and results of God’s grace in our lives and in the world, and our understanding of our denomination as a global church. Human sexuality is the presenting issue, but it requires us to address a number of underlying issues as well.

By writing this book, I’m trying to be honest about this presenting issue as the one that threatens to splinter our church. I recognize that this will expose me to the accusation that I am a one-issue, narrowly focused member of the church by addressing this issue directly. In order to anticipate that objection, I reveal a bit more of myself here.

I come to the task of writing this book and addressing this issue reluctantly. This topic, even this style of writing,

is not my most natural comfort zone. I would frankly rather be doing other things. I reject the accusation that I am too narrowly focused here by simply reminding you as my reader that human sexuality, and specifically, what we as United Methodists say about homosexuality, has become the presenting issue for more than forty years. The convergence of issues threatening to divide our church today are deep-seated and essentially theological in their foundations. We differ on our understanding of Scripture, as we will see, and everything that flows from it in our theological task. At the General Conference in Tampa (2012), I sadly concluded that even our understanding of our church's wonderful mission statement is dramatically different: "to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world."²⁴ We cannot seem to agree on what it means to make disciples, and we have different views of transformation.

As Bishop Timothy W. Whitaker once observed, the problem we have when we talk about this presenting issue is that "the language being used is laden with assumptions on which there is no agreement."²⁵ With

24. *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church 2012* (Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2012), 91, ¶120.

25. Timothy W. Whitaker, "The Church and Homosexuality," <http://www.flumc2.org/pages/detail/967>, accessed May 31, 2013.

Bishop Whitaker, I prefer the phrases “same-sex attraction” and “same-sex practices” and will use these almost exclusively throughout. These phrases are neutral in the sense that they do not take up the possible causes of such attraction and practices. In this way, we can have the debate without advocating for such practices, which is implied in words like “gay” and “lesbian,” or endorsing one’s existential self-identity, implied by “orientation.” Similarly, “homosexuality” has its own negative connotations, and is a relatively recent word in human discourse. Bishop Whitaker recasts the debate, and explains further the importance of our words.

[T]he church views our identity in terms of our relationship to God, not in terms of our sexual identity. Once the church succumbs to the idea that our basic identity is sexual rather than theological in nature, then the church has already lost its way in the discussion. This is not to say that our sexual being is unimportant, but it is to say that it is more appropriate for the church to first view people as persons who are created in the image of God before it says anything about their sexual identity.²⁶

Regardless of what one believes to be true about this issue, we can all celebrate our church’s affirmation that

26. Whitaker, “The Church and Homosexuality,”

“all persons are individuals of sacred worth, created in the image of God” and that “God’s grace is available to all.”²⁷ In what follows, I commit to speaking to and about my sisters and brothers who disagree with me on this question in a way that is honorable and sensitive. I will make every effort to refrain from using hurtful and derogatory language. Our UMC statement identifies as incompatible with Christian teaching “the practice of homosexuality,” *not* those individuals who experience same-sex attraction. I desire always and everywhere to respect my brothers and sisters who disagree with me on this issue. I know my own need for God’s grace and mercy, and trust that you my reader will be equally gracious and sensitive to me.

In conclusion, Adam Hamilton’s call for a new Christian reformation, resulting in a church that sees more gray than black and white is wrongly argued from the start. The case has not been established that this is what the world today needs. Perhaps what the world needs is a church willing to seek more black and white than gray.

27. *2012 Book of Discipline*, 111, ¶161F.