

How Do United Methodists Know a Sin When We See It?

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Curiosity about American Methodist Teaching

The phrase “incompatible with Christian teaching” might lead the curious to wonder where the teaching in question can be found and who offered it. This could lead one to further curiosity about what Methodists in America focused on as Christian teaching and where one could find that teaching summarized. It might seem that current difficult differences simply trace back to the addition of a phrase to the Social Principles. Curiosity about how differences, in what is identified as Christian teaching, have emerged in American Methodism, however, will take us back almost a century earlier. Space for differences in Christian teaching can be seen within and between nineteenth-century theological works that Methodists used to train laity and preachers.

When a theologian examines nineteenth-century texts written to express American Methodist theology, in books that could be described as “Christian teaching,” it quickly becomes apparent that these texts assume that the readers know a sin when they see it. The texts refer to *sin* as transgression against God’s righteousness or against God’s law. Those phrases seem clear. Yet, while the most widely read Methodist theologies of the late nineteenth century are in general agreement concerning the doctrine of sin, they are not theologically specific about what constitutes sin. When a curious Christian seeks to discover why one act is a transgression and another act is not, the texts provide clarity, limited to what can be inferred from the Ten Commandments and Jesus’ commentary on them.

The implication of that observation affects today’s difficulties. Without theological clarity about why one thing is a transgression against God’s righteousness and another thing is not, or theological clarity about what principles or process to use to get from the Ten Commandments and Jesus’ expansion on them to particular situations and choices, American Methodists have relied on common sense—common sense that is inevitably informed by the civic culture around us.¹ The cultures from which American Methodists formed their common sense were and are quite varied, north to south, east to west, rural to urban.

For example, using their civic common sense, Methodists in Denver, in 1864, celebrated the slaughter of Cheyenne and Arapahoe women and children at Sand Creek. But Methodists on the east coast, using their civic common sense, deplored the same event as a massacre. The theological texts that Methodist preachers had studied did not define transgression against God’s law sufficiently to provide one interpretation that made sense to Methodists in both cultures. Turning to scripture also provided ambiguity: on the one hand, the commandment is “You shall not kill”; and on the other hand, the movement of the Hebrew people into the Promised Land involved the slaughter of prior residents, slaughter that seemed to have God’s sanction to kill. In engaging the tension between biblical texts, Denver Methodists used their civic common sense about sin to make a decision about what was a transgression against God’s law. They chose what made sense in their civic, cultural context as people who saw themselves inheriting the land God was giving them. The same interpretive problem appeared when southern Methodists thought about slavery, and when rural American Methodists thought about child labor on the farm. The

theological account of transgression against God's law relied on the civic community's common sense understanding of what was sinful and what wasn't. Portions of scripture were emphasized that seemed to illustrate the acceptability or unacceptability of particular behaviors. The selection of scripture depended, at least in part, on the prior common-sense view held by the civic community.

If this account of the nineteenth-century American Methodist identification of sin is correct, then it is no wonder that the twenty-first century global United Methodist Church is conflicted over the identification of a particular area that is viewed very differently in the significantly different civic cultural contexts in which Methodism serves Christ. A curious American Methodist might wonder why today's disagreement about what constitutes a sin is different from earlier disagreements, which did not divide the denomination. And what allowed the denomination to thrive even while it was not of one mind? Perhaps answers to those questions will begin to form when this chapter is read alongside the chapter by Morris L. Davis, "The Methodist Merger of 1939: 'Successful' Unification?" The task of the rest of this chapter is to illuminate the theological doctrine of sin taught prior to 1908, just before the first merger discussions began.

In the period from 1880 to 1908, the required texts that American Methodist preachers used to think theologically left room for significant disagreements within the one faith to emerge over time, disagreements about whether particular actions and motives are, in fact, sinful. Two factors contributed to the emergence of disagreement. In the 1880s, significant diversity began, in which theological texts were read by preachers as they were being authorized. No single theological language was used in the same way by all. Furthermore, all of the required theological texts implicitly or explicitly incorporated cultural values into their working definitions of sin. Differences in regional cultural values resulted in different, sometimes conflicting, definitions of sin among Methodists.

What Methodist Preachers Were Required to Read

Through the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, the number of American Methodist preachers who were educated through Course of Study was much larger than the number who were privileged to attend school. In the nineteenth century, both groups studied most of the same texts, laid out in the quadrennial Disciplines of each of the three largest Methodist denominations:² the Methodist Episcopal Church (MEC), the Methodist Episcopal Church South (MECS), and the Methodist Protestant Church (MPC). Because of these required reading lists, there was more similarity in the reading that most nineteenth-century preachers did than among preachers in the late twentieth century. In our time, seminary faculties have broad latitude in the texts used with students, once students have become familiar with the historic doctrinal sources.³ As a consequence, it is easier to identify what theological works preachers read (and were supposed to be examined on) in the late nineteenth century than more recently.

This allows the curious to examine a specific set of theological texts and to know something about the theology discussed by American Methodist preachers between 1880 and 1908. The year 1880, is a useful place to begin to notice diversity of theological conversations among the Methodist movement denominations. The MEC instituted a new set of course-of-study texts with the 1880 Discipline. Through 1879, it required English-speaking elders and local pastors to read and present British Methodist Richard Watson's *Theological Institutes*, first published in North America in 1825, from the second London edition.⁴ The Disciplinary revisions of Course of

Study of 1880, did not leave Watson behind, but, for the first time, they added a theological text for examination of elders, which was authored by a North American Methodist—John Miley’s work on atonement.⁵ At the same time, they required another North American Methodist author to be read by local preachers—Samuel Wakefield’s *A Complete System of Christian Theology*. Wakefield wrote to abridge some of the presentational features and to simultaneously expand upon Watson’s *Institutes* by addressing select theological issues not covered by Watson.⁶ In contrast, the MECS stayed with Watson as its primary core text for another thirty years, adding only another British Methodist to the list—William Burt Pope’s *A Compendium of Christian Theology*.⁷ The MPC also retained Watson as its primary theological text.

Thus, before even examining the content of the works named, the year 1880 stands out as a beginning expression of theological diversity in the texts studied and discussed by preachers in the MEC, as new preachers were examined on doctrinal texts not required of their predecessors or their contemporaries in the MECS and MPC. The modes of argument vary among these texts and so it was natural for the modes of theological argument to diversify among Methodist preachers as well.

Theological texts are even more diverse when the curious widen their gaze to notice the texts required for German-, Norwegian-, and Danish-speaking preachers. The standard German theological text for the entire period remained Sulzberger’s *Systematic Theology*, in some periods supplemented with his *Glaubensartikel und Hauptlehren*.⁸ The latter text was translated into Italian and became an examination text in 1892, for both traveling and local preachers. *Systematic Theology* was translated into Swedish and became the examination text in 1888, and thereafter was translated into Finnish and became an examination text in 1900. Yet it was not translated into Norwegian, Danish, or Spanish. Wakefield and Ralston⁹ were each translated into Norwegian and Danish and required beginning in 1880, in the MEC. Amos Binney’s *Compend*, expanded and reissued by his son-in-law in 1875, was translated and required of Italian preachers in the MEC and Spanish-speaking preachers in both the MEC and MECS.¹⁰ However, Japanese preachers in the MECS were examined on Raymond, beginning in 1902.¹¹ Thus, the sources of interpretive theological discourse began diversifying among Methodists as early as 1880, and the diversity increased, particularly in the northern U. S., over the next twenty years. All Methodists read John Wesley’s Sermons. Most Methodists were examined on either Wesley’s *Plain Account of Christian Perfection* or John Fletcher’s *Christian Perfection*.¹² The factor to notice is that interpretation of these eighteenth-century British texts began to diversify with the addition of nineteenth-century North American works to the examination of preachers after 1880. Yet the diversification did not occur evenly across North America. It came decades sooner and more broadly in the MEC.

In 1893, John Miley, retired from the faculty at Drew Theological School, published the first of his two volumes of *Systematic Theology*.¹³ In anticipation, the 1892 General Conference of the MEC added both volumes as the primary examination texts for English-speaking, traveling preachers. The final section of this study will show in more detail what was significant about this change. The gap between the kind of theological conversations required for MEC preachers and for MECS and MPC preachers widened even further in 1896, when the MEC required that Crooks and Hurst, *Theological Encyclopedia*, be studied by traveling preachers.¹⁴ The conversation among new MEC traveling preachers now included a description of the field of Christian religion rooted in the work of Friedrich Schleiermacher as interpreted by Hagenbach.¹⁵ With this addition to course of study, historical-critical approaches to Christianity became firmly a part of Methodist theological conversations among traveling preachers in the northern church.

At the same time, the MEC South and the MPC remained focused on eighteenth-century theological works that could still assume that the biblical text was historically accurate and historically complete. Thus began a theological difference among Methodists, between regions, with which American Methodists have lived for more than one hundred twenty years.

Theological Views of Sin

The account thus far has showed how the required reading for preachers allowed theological diversity to emerge among American Methodists as early as the late nineteenth century, but it has not yet explored what that diversity has to do with our own ability to “recognize a sin when we see one” today. To do that, the curious might look more closely at three specific works from the course of study reading lists: the catechisms used by Sunday school (as well as required for many preachers on initial admission to an annual conference), Richard Watson’s *Theological Institutes*, and John Miley’s *Systematic Theology*. These were the texts interpreting Wesley’s theology that were required of the largest number of traveling preachers from 1892 to 1908.¹⁶

Catechisms 1, 2 and 3

In 1852, the MEC’s General Conference authorized the publication of three catechisms that were designed to be used sequentially. They were published and republished both separately and together. Catechism 1 consisted of one hundred twelve questions and short answers. The intention was that persons new to Methodism, whether child or adult, would memorize the questions and the answers word for word. This knowledge was understood to provide the basic theology necessary for informed faith. These questions take up fewer than twenty small pages. Once they were mastered, then the Methodist was ready to turn to Catechism 2. The second built on the first, simply adding specific scripture texts in support of the questions and answers found in Catechism 1. Thus expanded, Catechism 2 comprises thirty-seven small pages, not quite twice the length. Both Catechism 1 and 2 were to be recited aloud in Sunday school, preferably at least monthly. To the extent that they were actually used in this way, they provided a common set of ideas and phrases, alongside the hymnody, shared broadly among Methodists in the MEC. Evidence for widespread use is found in both the translation of Catechism 1 into German by 1856, and republishing of the text until at least 1884.¹⁷

Question 30 provides the only definition of sin in Catechisms 1 and 2:

30. *What is sin?* Any transgression of the law of God. —1 John iii.4

Students of these catechisms must turn to section “VI. God’s Law. Duties to God and Man.” for elaboration. Here one finds that the first three questions point the student to the Ten Commandments:

85. *What does God require of man?* Obedience to his revealed will.

86. *What is the rule of our obedience?* The moral law.

87. *Where is the moral law given?* In the Ten Commandments. —Exod. xx¹⁸

After each of the ten is named, the last questions in this section (98–103) inquire about “our Saviour’s” summary and explanation of the commandments, including them with “the law” as a whole.

At this point, curiosity might lead one to wonder where all the other things that were considered sinful came from? Conspicuously absent from the catechism are things like drinking, smoking, dancing, owning slaves . . . the long list of things that would get one labeled a “sinner”

by many Methodist congregations in nineteenth-century America. Catechisms 1 and 2 do not provide a basis for identifying them as sins. The Catechisms do not even demonstrate a way to argue theologically for the sinfulness of the most common behaviors recognized at the time as sins.

Curiosity might ask if Catechism 3 fills the gap and solves the puzzle. It fills in some gaps, but it does so by adding select scriptures from the New Testament. It does not provide a theological way of thinking, from precepts the New Testament identifies to situations that the New Testament world did not imagine. Catechism 3 groups the questions from Catechism 1 and provides answers as principled statements, though still based on the more rule-like answers found in the earlier catechisms. Catechism 3 asks about the “purport” of each command, rather than asking for simple recitation of the biblical text. In this way, it uses unnamed mediating principles to arrive at implications. For example, the fifth command—to honor your father and mother that your days may be long upon the land—is addressed as follows:

Q. What is the purport of the fifth commandment? A. The fifth commandment concerns human relations, enjoining parental authority and filial honor, which implies love, reverence, obedience, support, and comfort from all children to their parents.

Q. What other duties are taught in this commandment, at least by inference? A. The reciprocal duties of superiors and inferiors; for example, rulers, magistrates, ministers, masters, and those who are subject to them, and also the mutual duties of husbands and wives.

Q. How is this command distinguished by an apostle? A. It is called ‘the first commandment with promise’ —Eph. vi, 2, 3.¹⁹

The mediating principles that move a command concerning family relations to apply to the political realm (rulers, magistrates) or to the realm of faith community (ministers) or to the realm of economic relations (masters) are not identified by the Catechism. Without specifying those principles, theological reflection upon them is unlikely. Under that circumstance, a reader of Catechism 3 is being trained to unreflectively use mediating principles that can come from anywhere, and most likely will come from the civic, cultural context of the reader.

The Larger German Catechism

Wilhelm Nast wrote the “Larger German Catechism,” which was authorized by the MEC General Conference and published in 1868.²⁰ It is not organized in the same way as Catechisms 1, 2 or 3, but it is substantially the same in the way it sets up short questions and short answers. It then adds in brackets commentary that parallels the “analysis” offered in Catechism 3. This catechism was important both because of its use in German-speaking congregations and because it was the catechism that was translated into other languages through the late nineteenth century. Just as Catechisms 1, 2 and 3 do, the Larger German Catechism identifies sin as transgression of God’s law and then immediately identifies that law expressly as the Ten Commandments.²¹ The bracketed commentary, which follows some of the answers and scriptural evidences, uses unidentified mediating principles to move from the general law to more specific kinds of cases. Thus, this text embodies the same difficulty just described—the unreflective use of mediating principles in the text invites unreflective use of regional and cultural mediating principles in identifying particular sins.

The Standard Catechism

In 1905, the MEC and the MECS jointly wrote and published *The Standard Catechism* of the two denominations.²² The preface indicates it was not intended to differ in substance from previous catechisms, but it does embody a significantly different arrangement than its predecessors. What is noticeable is that it still does not identify mediating principles in its interpretations of the Ten Commandments, though the interpretations are for the most part briefer than those in the MEC's Catechism 3. Further, discussion of sin is much shorter:

114. *What is Sin?* Sin is any violation of God's law, or any lack of conformity thereto.

Love is the fulfilling of the law (Rom. xiii, 10). Sin is lawlessness. (I John iii. 4, R.V).

115. *When the divine law is violated, what must follow?* Either penalty or pardon.

Unlike earlier catechisms, there is no further explanation of where God's law is found or in what the divine law consists. Evidently, the prior inclusion of the Ten Commandments and the Beatitudes as commentary on them, was supposed to be taken as complete exposition. Thus, just as with the earlier catechisms, the mediating principles—which guide how one moves in thought from the broad commands and Jesus's teaching about them to the specific situations that each faith community and person of faith must decide—are not articulated. And therefore, for the twenty or more years in which *The Standard Catechism* was used, mediating principles from the civic culture were likely to be extensively used, if not predominant, in the process of “knowing a sin when we see it.”

This extended discussion of the Catechisms of the MEC and then the standard catechism of MEC and MECS tells us about what Sunday school-educated laity were taught. It also tells us about what clergy were taught both in the MEC and MECS in some quadrennia.²³ Persons admitted provisionally and persons beginning as local preachers in most of the period (1884–1908) were examined on either Catechism 2 or Catechism 3. The German-language preachers were examined on the corresponding “larger Catechism” in German and the other English-as-a-second-language preachers were examined on Catechism 2 or the larger Catechism. To the extent that clergy moved slowly through the rest of their respective Course of Study and didn't get to the theological texts, the Catechisms provided the basis for the substantial articulation of their theologies.²⁴

To summarize, the Methodist catechisms of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries relied heavily on the regional, civic, cultural contexts of American Methodists to provide the mediating principles between the Ten Commandments (and Jesus' commentary) and specific situations not directly addressed by the biblical texts. The different mediating principles that are credible in different cultural contexts easily lead to differing conclusions. For more than a century, American Methodists have had disagreements among regions about what counts as a sin. Basic Methodist catechisms for laity were both adapted to and contributed to this situation.

Watson's *Theological Institutes*

Additional differences in how Methodists knew a sin when they saw one were likely to arise as a result of the theological texts preachers were required to read during Course of Study on the way to ordination. In the period 1880–1908, a significant difference can be seen between the basic theological text used in both the MECS and MPC and the quite different text required, beginning in 1892, in the MEC. The entire theological approach to identifying sin is different in Richard Watson's *Theological Institutes* and in John Miley's *Systematic Theology*.

Richard Watson (1781–1833) was a British Methodist preacher and theologian. His *Theological Institutes* was one of the very first attempts to systematize Methodist theology into

one text. His attempt took three volumes, the first published in 1823, in England. By 1825, that volume was published by Bangs & Emory in New York for the MEC book concern. Watson wrote in a period deeply influenced by the English Enlightenment. His systematic description of Christian faith is constructed on the assumption that what human beings most need is a moral law that is externally validated and that will hold them accountable. That is where his first volume begins. Watson simultaneously embraces the power of human reason to identify that moral law and argues that the use of reason is corrupted in practice. People choose “flimsy sophisms” to justify their behavior rather than principles of “rectitude and virtue.” He concludes that, though a natural moral law could be possible in theory, in the actual human situation a revelation of the moral law is necessary as an external validation and correction. Otherwise, humans will not adequately follow the law.²⁵ Therefore, human reason is not the source of the moral law; rather, reason approves the moral law revealed in the Christian Bible. Reason is not required to believe that the Bible is from God (though Watson does believe it is). Yet reason must take the Bible “seriously,” because it provides what humanity most needs in a moral law that will actually be adhered to in practice. The biblical moral law is explicit in areas where humanity has erred and needs guidance, is in accord with former revelations, has satisfactory external authentication, and provides for external promulgation because it is in writing.²⁶ The overall organization of Watson’s *Institutes* implies that relationship with God through Christ is secondary to, and its purpose is to be supportive of, adherence to the best version of moral law, the version found in Christianity. Thus, in this opening portion of the work, “duty” is the primary category for assessing the appropriate or inappropriate exercise of human free will.

The second part of the work, still in volume 1 and continued through volume 2, into volume 3, addresses the historic loci of Christian theology: the attributes and triune nature of God, the divinity and redemptive work of Christ, the morals of Christianity, and the institutes of Christianity (primarily concerning the sacraments). The origin and redemption of sin is carefully discussed in volume 2. In that context, Watson argues that the consequence of original sin is “privation of the life and image of God.”²⁷ Yet the discussion does not clearly illuminate what constitutes sin; it does not have to because the act that sets off the enduring consequences is clearly identified and, therefore, what makes later acts sinful is not relevant to the discussion.

It is not until well into volume 3, in the third part of the work, “The Morals of Christianity,” that Watson discusses the content that would allow Methodists to know a sin when we see it. Here Watson returns to duty. He sets this up by noting that “the Morals of the New Testament are not proposed to us in the form of a regular code.” Even in the books of Moses, all of the duties that constitute godliness are not found in specific injunctions or precepts; rather, some are found in general principles or “often take the form of an injunction in an apparently incidental manner, or are matters of obvious inference.”²⁸ This leads Watson to describe the moral law under the heading “The Duties we owe to God.” These duties are summed up in the word “godliness” which is described in the following categories: submission to God, love to God, trust in God, and the fear of God. All of these categories are internal duties. External duties include prayer and the Lord’s Day. External duties also include duties to neighbor or universal charity (including ethical justice, economical justice, and political justice).

How do we know a sin when we see it after reading Watson’s *Institutes*? It is the neglect of duty. What is a Christian’s duty? It is to obey the Gospels, in which we find “the most complete and perfect revelation of moral law ever given to men.”²⁹ These Gospels include injunctions found in the books of Moses, when those injunctions do not contradict other features of Christian faith. Since duty is a concept that is also defined in particular ways in different regions and civic

cultures, it is quite easy for a reader to bring cultural expectations into their understanding of duty.

In fact, Watson's analysis of political justice makes his judgment of the role of culture quite visible to American readers. Watson defines political justice in terms of subject and sovereign in his analysis of power relations, consistent with his English experience. He concludes, "[W]hat is called 'the social compact,' the theory of Locke and his followers on government, is a pure fiction."³⁰ Since American readers of Watson will surely disagree with him on this point, simple use of the text in America makes visible, and apparently validates, a role for cultural values in theological interpretation. This invites readers to bring their own civic, cultural assumptions about the content of duty into their theological views. Given the way the text understands sin in relation to duty, use of the text thereby invites different understandings of how we might recognize a sin when we see it. Watson's *Institutes* remained the primary theological text in the MEC and MPC through 1908.

Miley's *Systematic Theology*

Seventy years after Richard Watson began publication of his *Theological Institutes* in Britain, John Miley began publication of his *Systematic Theology*, which was adopted even before its publication as the required theological text by the MEC General Conference in 1892. The differences between the two are significant, as are some similarities.

Concern for morality provides the bookends for Watson's presentation, beginning with human agency and the necessity of moral law in the first part and concluding in the third part with "The Morals of Christianity." In contrast to this approach, Miley begins with extended consideration of theological method and what is appropriately included in theology. As a result of his analysis, Miley draws two conclusions worth notice that are quite different from Watson's. First, "There is nothing in theology determinative of a oneness of method in the systemization of its doctrines. Hence variations of method naturally arise from different casts of mind."³¹ While Miley still argues strenuously for particular interpretations of specific doctrines as distinctly "Arminian" or Methodist, this statement opens accepting space for difference, at least difference in the form of presentation of Methodist doctrine. Watson's approach to argumentation does not provide such a space; rather, it moves always to showing the singular, best articulation. Explicit acceptance of difference within a unity of faith emerges in Miley.

Second, Miley frames the content of the moral law as the subject for ethics, not for doctrine. And, in his view, ethics is "not of the nature of a Christian doctrine. It is true that the grounds and motives of Christian duty lie in Christian doctrine. The requirements of such duty should not be omitted, nor can they, in any proper treatment of soteriology. But it is not a requirement of systematic theology that ethics should form a distinct part."³² What apparently *justifies* attention to Christian faith for Watson is *not even included* within a systematic theology for Miley. Whether or not Watson intended the form of his argument to imply that the purpose of Christian faith is to gain better adherence to moral law in society, the organization of his argument has that implication. Miley is not dismissive of moral law, but he locates it so that it is not the frame for, or implied purpose of, Christian faith. In Miley's account, a particular understanding of the moral government of God provides the interpretive key to the atoning work of Christ on the cross. Since that atoning work is central in his understanding of Christian faith, Miley has not dismissed a concept of the moral law, but he has located it wholly within the frame of distinctively Christian faith.

In addition to these two differences from Watson in method and organization, Miley moves another degree of separation away from the Catechisms of the 1850s, which expressly identified the law of God with the Ten Commandments and Jesus' commentary on them, particularly in the Beatitudes. Watson moved the first degree of separation by identifying observance of the law of God as a duty and then grouped the commandments under broader themes of internal and external duties to God and duties to neighbor. This allowed him to ally additional obligations to the commandments and Jesus's teaching. Miley adds an additional step away from the univocal voice of the Catechisms when he says:

Within the moral realm subjects may differ: possibly, in some facts of their personal constitution; certainly, in their moral state and tendencies. A wise government must vary its provisions in adjustment to the requirement of such differences. In some facts the divine law must be the same for all. It must require the obedience of all; for such is the right of the divine Ruler and the common obligation of his subjects. It must guard the rights and interests of all. Beyond such facts, yet for the reason of them, the provisions of law, as means to the great ends of moral government, should vary as subjects differ. The same principles which imperatively require a moral government for moral beings also require its economy in adjustment to any considerable peculiarities of moral condition and tendency.³³

Miley is not rejecting divine moral government in any sense. But he is openly acknowledging the possibility of different rules in different locations or for different populations, still under a consistent divine purpose in government. This approach is almost inconceivable in the thought world of the Catechisms. It was unreflectively possible in Watson's thematic enlargement of the category of duty, though not explored by him. In Miley, divine moral government is still vital for his theological account, particularly of atonement and of the nature of human beings, but it now explicitly includes difference under that unifying divine government. Perhaps for that very reason, ethics (description of appropriate Christian action under the divine moral government) cannot be included in a systematic doctrine. Perhaps, though Miley does not say this, ethics must be determined in relation to more particularity in cultural location or personal capacity. Miley's argument opens this line of thought, even though he does not explore it. His argument, not Watson's, was required reading for traveling preachers in the MEC for the next sixteen years.³⁴

There are at least two significant similarities between Watson and Miley that bear on how one knows a sin when one sees it. First, Miley continues the use of "duty" as the umbrella concept for appropriate action in relation to God and neighbor, relating duty to revealed law:

And God has made known his will to us. This is chiefly done through revelation, though we have some light through the moral reason and the direct agency of the Holy Spirit. . . . And Christ summed up the law of Christian duty in the two great commandments. It is not requisite that every particular duty should be given in a special statute. . . . We have the law of duty, in a far better form, in the great moral principles given in the gospels. And thus we have the divine will revealed to us as the law of our duty.³⁵

As was clear in discussion of Watson, the concept of duty almost explicitly invites the introduction of cultural values concerning what are one's duties into the theological realm. Miley continues this tradition.

Second, the actual definition of *sin* articulated by Miley is not significantly different from Watson or the Catechisms: "Sin offends [God's] justice and law, incurs his righteous displeasure, and constitutes in [humans] punitive desert. Such are the facts which Scriptures so fully recognize."³⁶ Yet in his discussion of the relation of public justice to divine government,

determination of sin is placed beyond the competence of human government, and presumably church government as well. The distinction he makes depends on the importance of motive, a concept neither introduced in the Catechisms nor explored by Watson. Miley says, “We may infer the guilt from the apparent motive, but we cannot search the heart. . . . God searches the heart, and knows all the secret springs and motives of human action. He knows all the sinfulness of such action.”³⁷ With this understanding, sin is clearly distinguished from observable actions. In this specific understanding, humans could not possibly know an actual sin when we see it—except in our own hearts.

Conclusion

The factors influencing late, nineteenth-century American Methodist identification of sin created the possibility of diverse conclusions about how one knows a sin when one sees it. These factors began with the simple multiplication of interpretations of Wesley’s thought that were required reading for different segments of the Methodist movement, depending upon region and language and specific denomination. The factors also include specific theological ideas, including reliance on concepts of duty that could easily be elided with cultural assumptions about civic duties, as well as an absence of demonstration of or even recognition of the role of mediating principles in moving from God’s law as revealed in scripture to its application to situations not explicit in or imagined by scripture. The differences among the catechisms read by laity and fledgling preachers, and the primary theological works studied by traveling preachers in the MEC, MECS, and MPC, introduced diversity in theological arguments and conclusions. Furthermore, the most widely read theological texts allowed cultural definitions of sin to be adopted without reflection, through concepts of duty and the absence of explicit mediating principles. These factors created a situation in which diverse theological understandings of what constitutes a sin were likely, if not unavoidable, between regions. That is clear in the period 1880–1908, a period of growth for American Methodism.³⁸

As the curious think forward in time, a question quickly arises: as the MEC, MECS, and MPC approached merger in 1939, why didn’t the theological diversity that had emerged between 1880 and 1896 in the MEC trouble and provide caution to MECS and MPC leaders? What led them to think that significant diversity would not challenge them theologically in future years, as has, in fact, occurred? How was their hope in the 1939 merger misdirected, or was it? Most important for going forward together, why has the current disagreement undermined the 1939 expectation that theological diversity could be sustained? While those questions are beyond the time scope of this chapter, this account makes them unavoidable.

Morris Davis’s body of work analyzing the Joint Commission, which led eventually to the 1939 merger, begins to answer these questions.³⁹ Davis says in summary, “the Joint Commission leadership purposefully steered the negotiations away from arguments that used theology, doctrine, or ‘Christian ethics.’ . . .”⁴⁰ The theological diversity of the late nineteenth century was *not* embraced; through the steering of conversations, substantive discussion of theological differences was *suppressed* in official venues such as the Joint Commission. It does not appear that the 1968 merger changed this situation. The unity of The United Methodist Church might well depend on avoiding engagement with real theological difference.

Davis also points toward a move made in the Joint Commission that observers of United Methodism today might recognize as a trend in our own time. MEC Bishop Earl Cranston, in supporting the direction the Joint Commission took, indicated that “they had to look to the

communities in which the church found itself and model themselves after these.”⁴¹ This move is consistent with the embrace of cultural values in the doctrine of sin that this chapter has made visible in late nineteenth-century Methodist theological texts. It is also consistent with the trend in twenty-first-century, American United Methodism to emphasize local churches and their contexts, though Bishop Cranston more likely had regional cultural communities, such as the American South and its peculiar institutions, in mind.

Why would unity seem to be of such value that theological engagement among Methodists could be suppressed for the sake of unity? Davis’s analysis points toward a spiritual ideal “of a large, powerful, internationally influential church that would lead the world’s greatest Christian civilization.”⁴² He summarizes the view of American Methodists, particularly those on the Joint Commission:

America and the principles they understood it to stand for were at one with the Methodist spirit. They felt as if Methodism, and especially a united church that did not waste its energies in inefficient division, offered the nation unique capabilities. Methodists had a central role to play and had been given abundant resources to carry the torch of American (Protestant) Christian civilization to the world.⁴³

Apparently, for the sake of that goal, the regional differences in how Methodists might recognize a sin when they saw it could be elided—until the differences could not be elided any longer. By the time conversations about human sexuality and the identity of children of God emerged in the last third of the twentieth century, American United Methodists were multiple generations removed from the experience of holding substantive conversations across theological difference and the cultural values embedded in those theological differences.

This chapter has allowed difficult questions to surface, questions that shed alternate light on current conflicts over what constitutes Christian teaching about certain situations identified as sin. When the mergers in 1939 and 1968 that created the current United Methodist Church were being planned, diversity of theological argument concerning what constitutes sin had already been a difference between geographic regions for generations. What has been lost in the last century is not unity of a single theological view of what constitutes sin; there never was one view.⁴⁴ What has been lost is the public capacity to substantively disagree, based on local cultures, while sharing a larger vision as big as the human community.

How Do United Methodists Know a Sin When We See It?—Catherine L. Kelsey

¹ This insight is explored so extensively in one of the many threads of argument over Kant’s philosophy that a footnote here cannot begin to address it.

² The earliest listing of texts for study occurred well before a standard course of study list was adopted. Nathan Bangs provided one of the first published lists in 1822–1823, published in *Methodist Magazine* 5 and 6. Each of the predecessor denominations to The United Methodist Church had Disciplinary lists by 1884. As the categories of clergy relationship to the annual conferences multiplied, these lists came to have different reading expectations for the different categories.

³ The 2016 *Discipline*, continuing tradition since 1972, lists these as The Standard Sermons of John Wesley, the Articles of Religion of the Methodist Church and the Confession of the Evangelical United Brethren Church, Wesley’s General Rules, and Wesley’s Notes on the New Testament.

⁴ Richard Watson (1781–1833), *Theological Institutes: or, A View of the Evidences, Doctrines, Morals, and Institutions of Christianity*, 3 vols. (New York: N. Bangs and J. Emory for the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1825–1828. The British publication of the work began in 1823).

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- ⁵ Earlier lists for reading (but not direct examination) had included North Americans, so this is a relative rather than an absolute change. John Miley, *The Atonement in Christ* (New York: Phillips & Hunt; Cincinnati: Hitchcock & Walden, 1879).
- ⁶ Samuel Wakefield, *A Complete System of Christian Theology* (New York: Phillips & Hunt, 1869).
- ⁷ William Burt Pope, *A Compendium of Christian Theology*, 3 vols., 2nd rev. ed. (New York and Cincinnati, MEC Book Concern, 1881).
- ⁸ Arnold Sulzberger, *Erklärung der Glaubensartikel und Hauptlehren der Methodistenkirche*, Bremen: Verlag des Tractathauses, 1880. Arnold Sulzberger, *Christliche Glaubenslehre*, 2. Aufl., Bremen: Verlag des Tractathauses, 1886.
- ⁹ Ralston, Thomas N., *Elements of Divinity* (Louisville, KY: E. Stevenson for the MEC, South, 1851).
- ¹⁰ Amos Binney (1802–1878) authored *The Theological Compend: Containing a System of Divinity* in 1840, published by the New York Methodist Book Concern under Carlton and Porter. This 128-page, pocket-sized volume was reprinted numerous times, including an edition corrected by Thomas Summers and released by the Southern Methodist Publishing House in 1857. In 1875, his son-in-law Daniel Steele revised and enlarged the text to 195 pages, and that edition was also reprinted through at least 1902. “Binney’s Compend” or “Binney” was originally written especially for use by youth and Sunday school classes, but its size and brevity made it a text that was sometimes required reading in the earliest stages of courses of study for preachers as well.
- ¹¹ Miner Raymond, *Systematic Theology* (Cincinnati: Cranston and Stowe, 1877).
- ¹² John Fletcher, *Christian Perfection Being an Extract from the Rev. Mr. Fletcher’s polemical essay: containing his definition of perfection . . . To which is added, on the same subject, the copy of a letter, by Thomas Rutherford*, (Blackburn: Hemingway & Nuttall, 1797). This combination of texts was reprinted multiple times in North America, usually with the title shortened to *Christian Perfection*. John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* (Bristol: William Pine, 1766).
- ¹³ John Miley, *Systematic Theology*, 2 vols. in Library of Biblical and Theological Literature, eds. George R. Crooks and John F. Hurst (New York: Hunt and Eaton; Cincinnati: Cranston & Curts, 1893).
- ¹⁴ George R. Crooks and John F. Hurst, *Theological Encyclopedia and Methodology on the Basis of Hagenbach*, in Library of Biblical and Theological Literature, eds. Crooks and Hurst (New York: Phillips & Hunt, 1884).
- ¹⁵ For a fuller account of American Methodism’s encounter with Schleiermacher see my four chapters in *Schleiermacher’s Influences on American Thought and Religious Life, 1835–1920*, eds. Jeffrey A. Wilcox, Terrence N. Tice, and Catherine L. Kelsey, 3 vols. (Princeton Theological Seminary, 2014), 1:17–156.
- ¹⁶ John Wesley taught the Methodist movement through short theological works and his published “standard” sermons. He spoke to the theological issues of the moment in this body of work, and while it had significant consistency across the decades, it also shows some changes in his thinking. As a result, systematic works that seek to interpret Wesley play an important role in the shared self-understanding of Methodists, in our own time as well as in the first two centuries of American Methodism.
- ¹⁷ One can find both English and German versions for sale online fairly readily.
- ¹⁸ *Catechism of the Methodist Episcopal Church No. 1* (New York: Carlton & Lanahan, 1852), 20–21. *Catechism No. 2* was also published in New York in 1852.
- ¹⁹ *Catechism of the Methodist Episcopal Church No. 3* (New York: Carlton & Lanahan, 1852), 63–64.
- ²⁰ Wilhelm Nast, *Der Grössere Katechismus für die deutschen Gemeinden der Bisch. Methodisten-Kirche* (Cincinnati: Hitchcock & Walden, 1868).
- ²¹ See the Larger German Catechism, questions 90 and 91, 46.
- ²² *The Standard Catechism of the Methodist Episcopal Church and the Methodist Episcopal Church, South* (New York: The Methodist Book Concern, 1905).
- ²³ The MECS required Catechism 3 for admission as a traveling preacher in some Disciplines.
- ²⁴ If the delays that many preachers experience in progressing through Course of Study today are any indication, it is unlikely that nineteenth-century preachers all completed their studies on the timeline indicated in the Disciplines.
- ²⁵ Watson, *Theological Institutes*, 1:9–25.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, 1:6–74.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, 2:246–50.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 3:205.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, 3:207.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, 3:305–306.
- ³¹ Miley, *Systematic Theology*, 1:51.
- ³² *Ibid.*, 1:54.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, 2:90–91.

³⁴ It is worth pondering whether the separation of ethics from doctrine contributed to the move in 1908 in the MEC to adopt a form of ethics through General Conference legislation, there being no other clear mechanism for agreeing upon ethics for particular circumstances. The adoption of Social Principles could be viewed as having this impetus, at least in part.

³⁵ Miley, *Systematic Theology*, 2:91.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 2:96.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 2:171.

³⁸ Near the close of the period, the trial of Borden Parker Bowne for heresy might be seen as a seal of acceptance of diverse theologies within American Methodism. Bowne was acquitted by a jury in the New York Annual Conference. See Francis John McConnell's account of the trial in *Borden Parker Bowne: His Life and Philosophy* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1929).

³⁹ Morris Davis, *The Methodist Unification: Christianity and the Politics of Race in the Jim Crow Era* (New York: New York University Press, 2008), and Davis's chapter in this book.

⁴⁰ Davis, *The Methodist Unification*, 20.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 129.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ One could attempt to argue for the period of Francis Asbury's leadership, but the differing responses to slavery even during Asbury's lifetime make this argument difficult to sustain.