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Introduction

It has been said that it is a host's obligation to be attentive to the needs of his or her guest, and a guest's obligation to be delightful.

This makes sense if you think about it. A guest must not make excessive demands or forget to be grateful, and a host must not frustrate the guest's need to be charming and agreeable. When this fragile balance is disturbed, there's always trouble. That is why it is so memorable when, for example, your spouse's relatives want to use your home, with you in it, as their vacation spot. You arrive at the home of your friend for the weekend and come down with the flu. Or your amiable dinner host has trapped you into listening to an evening-long sales pitch.

Hospitality stories in the Hebrew Bible take these humble realities to great heights. Simon Parker opens his discussion of homosexuality in the Hebrew Bible with a story of hospitality gone horribly awry. God destroys Sodom not because of the sexual orientation of its citizens, but because they treated resident aliens as social outcasts and visitors as prisoners of war. Throughout his essay, Parker challenges us to ask, what is the real purpose of this text? We all bring presuppositions to our reading of Scripture. This may be as simple as using the Psalms in a time of stress, or as complex as the Western worldview by which we judge other cultures. Tannehill and Campbell do not counsel us to rid ourselves of prior needs and convictions. Rather, we are to make ourselves aware of them. For Bob Tannehill, becoming conscious of the spiritual dimension of reading the Bible is paramount, so that the Holy Spirit works through us, and we can truly hear the message of salvation. Ted Campbell looks to the Apostolic age to provide us with norms for our reading. The contrast in these methods makes an interesting counterpoint.

Our series on globalization in theological education continues with three essays on ecumenism. Many of us think of the quest for theological unity as impractical and ideological. In truth, it takes more energy to defend our differences. There
is a story in Stephen Mitchell’s new book, *The Enlightened Mind* (Harper & Row), that illustrates this. In 1805, a Christian missionary from Massachusetts approached the Seneca Indians and informed them that their lives were filled with great error and darkness. After meeting with the council of chiefs for two hours, Sa-go-yet-wa-ha offered this reply, which is worth quoting from at length:

Friend and Brother: It was the will of the Great Spirit that we should meet today. He directs all things, and he has given us a fine day for our council. He has taken his garment from before the sun and has caused the bright circle to shine upon us. Our eyes are opened so that we see clearly. Our ears are unstopped so that we have clearly heard the words you have spoken. For all these favors we thank the Great Spirit and him only...

Brother: Continue to listen. You say that you have been sent to teach us how to worship the Great Spirit agreeably to his mind, and that if we do not take hold of the religion which you white people teach we will be unhappy hereafter. You say that you are right and that we are lost. How do you know that this is true? We understand that your religion is written in a book. If it was meant for us as well as for you, why hasn't the Great Spirit given it to us?...You say there is only one way to worship and serve the Great Spirit. If there is only one religion, why do you white people differ so much about it? Why don't you all agree, since you can all read the book?...

We do not worship the Great Spirit as the white men do, but we believe that forms of worship do not matter to the Great Spirit; what pleases him is the offering of a sincere heart, and this is how we worship him. We do not want to destroy your religion or to take it from you. We only want to enjoy our own...

Brother: You have heard our answer to your talk, and this is all we have to say now. Since we are going to part, we will come and take you by the hand, and hope that the Great Spirit will protect you on your journey and return you safe to your friends.

The tribal leaders then moved to shake the hand of the young minister as a parting gesture of friendship. He refused, saying that the religion of God could have nothing to do with the devil. They only smiled, and left.

This issue concludes with a lectionary study by Barbara Taylor. Preaching affects the preacher, she says, opening her eyes and ears to the gospel at ground level—heat, dust, and racket. In such a melee, she writes, the church itself was born. May your preaching and teaching be enlivened by a genuine encounter with the Word!
The Ongoing Discussion about the Status and role of homosexuals within the church will obviously have to take into account a wide range of fields of knowledge and kinds of judgment; e.g., biblical, historical, theological, ethical, sociological and psychological. Ministers and congregations studying the question will want to consult a wide range of sources covering these different aspects of the matter.

As a student of the Hebrew Bible I have been asked by several local churches to give a talk or lead a discussion on the treatment of the subject in the Hebrew canon. The following paper grows out of these talks. It presumes not to suggest a general policy for the church but merely to review the material in one area with a view to informing and promoting responsible discussion.

A few texts in the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible often figure prominently in arguments on this question and have been used as support for one position or another within the church. While these have been discussed in a variety of publications on homosexuality and the church, neither have they always been presented in their full context nor has full consideration always been given to the issues that arise as one thinks about their applicability to the church today. I have here undertaken to review what these texts actually say; to spell out what, in their

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literary and social contexts, they mean; and to suggest some considerations that should guide our use of them. It is my hope that this will assist the readers of this journal in their own reflections on the subject and in their role as educators in the local church.

The significant passages are few. There are two similar stories which refer to homosexual rape. There are two stories that depict a close relationship between two people of the same sex which has been interpreted by some as homosexual. And there are two similar legal texts which speak of homosexual acts. I shall discuss these pairs of texts in order.¹

Hospitality and Its Violation

THE TWO STORIES THAT REFER TO HOMOSEXUAL RAPE are found in Genesis 19 and Judges 19. In Genesis 19, representatives of God have come down to earth to see whether indeed Sodom and Gomorrah are as wicked as God has heard (Gen. 18:20-21). After enjoying exemplary hospitality with Abraham (Gen. 18:1-8), two of these divine emissaries arrive that evening at the gate of Sodom, where Lot is sitting. As strangers they readily face the prospect of spending the night in the open square, but Lot prevails upon them to accept his hospitality (Gen. 19:2-3). They proceed to enjoy a good meal with him.

But then, before they retire, a mob surrounds the housemen of all ages from every section of the city. They demand that Lot send out the two visitors to them so that they can "know" them. Lot himself slips out, closing the door behind him, and urges them not to do wrong. He offers them his two daughters "who have not known a man." "Let me bring them out to you; do with them whatever you want. But don't do anything with these men—that's why they came under my roof!" The mob is apparently incensed at Lot's judgmental attitude and threatens to treat him worse than the guests. But the guests manage to pull him inside and shut the door behind him; and then—being divine emissaries—they strike the men outside the door blind.
In the sequel they get Lot and his family out of the town, and God destroys it.

Probably the most shocking part of this story to us is Lot's terrible offer of his daughters to the mob outside. But it is precisely this offer that is crucial for our interpretation of the whole episode. First, Lot's offer of his daughters shows that the "knowledge" the mob demands is indeed sexual. The mob does not, as some have claimed, simply want to find out who these strange visitors are! If that were so, Lot's daughters would be in no conceivable sense a substitute.

Second, Lot's offer of his daughters shows that the men of the mob were not what we today call homosexuals. Had they been so, the offer of the two young women would have been pointless. The implication of the offer is rather that these men--"the whole town"--were out for a "wilding"; they were out to inflict their violence on any appropriate victims. These apparently vulnerable outsiders simply happened to be at hand. Lot was surely being realistic in thinking that they might be satisfied to make his daughters their victims.

Third, Lot's offer of his daughters shows that there is one thing more sacrosanct than the protection of one's own family, and that is the protection of guests in one's house. Family may be sacrificed in order to protect guests.

In short, this mob is no more homosexual than any street gang. On this occasion it sees an opportunity for violence and humiliation. But the enormity of the mob's offence is not just that they attempt rape, which is heinous enough, but that they attempt to rape guests in their own town and under Lot's roof. In other words, the ultimate offense here is the violation of hospitality. This is exactly what is implied in the Gospel when Jesus says that it will be more tolerable for Sodom than for the town that is inhospitable to his disciples (the twelve: Matt. 10:14-15; the seventy-two: Luke 10:10-12).²

Judges 19 presents us with the same motif associated with a different town. A Levite from Ephraim takes a Bethlehemite woman as his concubine. When she leaves him and returns to her father's house, the Levite comes to try to win her back. Her
father presses hospitality on him, as Abraham had done on the divine messengers to Sodom; but finally he leaves with his concubine.

As the day wanes they come to Jebus. The Levite's servant proposes that they spend the night there, but the Levite rejects the suggestion, on the grounds that Jebus is a foreign, non-Israelite city. So they continue and at nightfall come to Gibeah, a Benjaminite town. They enter the town and sit in the square, but nobody offers to take them in (contrast the reception of the two divine messengers in Sodom). Finally they are approached by an old man coming in from the fields, who happens also to be from Ephraim, though currently residing in Gibeah. The Levite tells him their situation, and the old man insists on taking them into his house and providing for them.

While they are enjoying themselves over dinner, some men of the town, characterized as ruffians (b'n-e-hiyya'al), surround the house, demanding that the old man send out to them the guest, so that they might "know" him. The old man himself comes out and tries to appease them: "Brothers, do not do wrong, since this man has come into my house (i.e. in view of his status as a guest). Do not commit this outrage (n'balta)." He then makes them an offer: "Look, here's my young daughter and his concubine. Let me bring them out—violate them, and do to them whatever you like. You shall not commit such an outrage to this man." But the gang will hear nothing of this. Finally, the Levite sends his concubine out to them. (She is obviously not treated as a guest either by her host or the Levite, since the former offers her to the gang along with his daughter, and the latter hands her over without looking to the host to protect both of them.) The mob abuses the concubine all night, abandoning her at dawn. When the Levite comes out in the morning, he finds her dead. In response to his account of this atrocity, the rest of Israel unites to wreak such vengeance on the whole tribe of Benjamin that the survival of the tribe becomes an issue (chs. 20-21).

This time we have a more limited group—perhaps a gang, rather than a mob. Once again, however, their intention is
Rape—violence and humiliation. Again, the host offers two women. Again, they refuse. Finally, where the more fantastic Genesis story has a miraculous escape and divine judgment from heaven on the offending city, this more naturalistic story has real suffering and mass vengeance on the offending community.

Judges 19 makes it even more clear than Genesis 19, first, that the initial proposal in both stories is a sexual one; and second, that the proposed homosexual rape is not an expression of homosexual identity—ultimately the gang will violate any object it can get its hands on. Finally, though the proposed atrocity and the actual atrocity are bad enough in themselves, they are rendered even worse by the fact that the victim is a guest. That the perpetrators are Israelites and that they actually carry out what the Sodomites were prevented from doing surely make their behavior more heinous and this episode more horrifying than the one involving Sodom.4

In both stories the rape of guests is the issue, and in both cases homosexual and heterosexual rape come into question. But rape is an act of violence and humiliation that is equally reprehensible regardless of the sex of its victim. Thus, the would-be homosexual rapists of Genesis 19 are blinded by the divine messengers, and the whole city is destroyed for the general wickedness of its inhabitants—of which this latest offence is just one final, confirming indicator. The actual heterosexual rapists of Judges 19 bring on the wholesale slaughter of their tribe. In conclusion, while both stories express extreme disapproval of rape, both are irrelevant to a discussion of sexual relationships (homosexual or heterosexual) between consenting adults.

The Nature of Friendship

I turn now to the two stories about close relationships between people of the same sex.5 Here the question is not whether particular historical individuals in Israel were
homosexuals or had homosexual relationships. On that subject we have no direct information. The issue is whether the narrators of these stories present the relationships between their characters as homosexual.

The first such pair is Naomi and Ruth. Ruth is one of two Moabite women who marry the two sons of the Israelite Naomi during her family's sojourn in Moab.

The sons and their father die, leaving the three women widows. Naomi sets out to return to Bethlehem; and one daughter-in-law, Ruth, insists on going with her mother-in-law. In famous lines, she declares her intention to go wherever Naomi goes, to identify herself with Naomi's people and Naomi's God, and to be buried with Naomi.

This is not, as we today tend to read it, a romantic declaration of undying love. Ruth's words are a formal declaration of transfer of allegiance—of abnegation of Ruth's own social and religious identity in Moab and of commitment to the society and religion of her in-laws. Her speech is in fact a response to the speech in which Naomi sets up Orpah as a model for Ruth: "Look, your sister has returned to her people and her god(s). Go back after your sister-in-law" (v. 15). Ruth counters this point for point by declaring that, instead of returning, she will go with her mother-in-law and adopt her people and her gods. The focus is not on Ruth's choice between Naomi and her own family but on the choice between two locations, two peoples, and two gods.

The narrator emphasizes this in Boaz's later account of what he has heard of her (2:11): "All that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband has been reported to me—how you left your father and mother and the land of your birth and came to a people you had not previously known." This is in fact reminiscent of what God told Abram to do in Gen. 12:1: "Get yourself out of your land and your birthplace and your father's family to the land I will show you." Abram abandons one identity for a new one. Ruth's loyalty to her adopted family is such that she too makes such a move.
Later, when Ruth has found a husband in Bethlehem and borne a son, the women of the town congratulate Naomi, referring to Ruth as "your daughter-in-law who has loved you..., who is better to you than seven sons" (4:15). This last quotation is a recognition of how valuable Ruth has been to Naomi. But again, it cannot be used to suggest the specific feelings of the two women toward each other. In this context it refers to Ruth's commitment and faithfulness to Naomi in returning to Bethlehem with her and contriving to marry another member of the family, so that now, to quote the women again, "a son has been born to Naomi" (4:17). Obviously, this last statement is not biologically true; but it is sociologically true, because this child will, quoting the same source, "revive you and sustain you in old age" (4:15)—that is, do for Naomi what a son of her own would have done. That is why Ruth has proved so valuable to her, and that is what Ruth's "love" has accomplished for her. There is nothing in the narrator's language or in the language of the characters that expresses the nature of the feelings Ruth and Naomi had for one another. That does not prevent readers of various cultural settings from reading into the story what they consider the appropriate feelings. But it does prevent us from then claiming that those feelings are disclosed by the story itself.

The second relationship that has been alleged to be homosexual is that between David and Jonathan. Here several passages are adduced. I shall consider only what appear to be the two strongest supports for this hypothesis. In 1 Sam. 18:1, 3, the narrator writes that "Jonathan's 'soul' was bound to David's 'soul'" and that Jonathan loved David as he loved himself. What is the biblical meaning of these two expressions? The one other place where we read that someone's "soul" was bound to someone else's is in Gen. 44:30, in which Judah tells the vizier of Egypt that Jacob's "soul" is bound to Benjamin's. Here the expression refers to a father's fondness for his youngest son. Further, to love someone else as oneself is, according to Lev. 19:18, the attitude that every member of the community should have toward every other member ("thou shalt love thy
neighbor as thyself'). Thus there is nothing in either expression that requires, or even implies, a homosexual relationship.

The second passage in question is in David's lament for Saul and Jonathan (2 Sam. 1:19-27). Here David says, "More extraordinary was your love for me than the love of women." Here the specific comparison with heterosexual love is more suggestive. On the other hand, we must take account of the fact that the poem, as is characteristic of laments for the dead, is full of hyperbole.

David and Jonathan are said to have been "faster than eagles and stronger than lions"; the women of Israel are called upon to weep for Saul, "who clothed you in scarlet and luxuries, who adorned your clothing with golden ornaments." (If that were literally true, it would suggest that all the women of Israel were Saul's mistresses!) Jonathan and David are clearly portrayed as having a powerful bond between them. There is nothing in the story about them that marks this as a specifically homosexual relationship. That is not to say that such relationships could not have been homosexual. It is simply to say that the language and literature to which we have access do not disclose homosexual relationships.

Here again, then, we must conclude that neither of these stories expresses anything bearing on the question of the evaluation of homosexuality in the scriptures.

**Law and Taboo in Ancient Israel**

Finally we come to the two passages that directly and explicitly refer to homosexual acts. These are two similar statements in two comparable contexts (Lev. 18:22; 20:13). These verses occur in that portion of the Book of Leviticus known in modern times as the Holiness Code (usually defined as Lev. 17-26). The priestly compilers of the book set the content of these chapters within speeches which God directs Moses to address to the Israelites.

The first speech (ch. 18) opens with a general instruction to the Israelites not to behave like the Egyptians (to whose land
God is bringing them). The following laws are then introduced more directly with the injunction to act according to God's laws. Verse 6 then introduces a list of family members with whom the Israelites may not have intimate relations. The laws begin at verse 7, with a shift from the second person plural address to the second person masculine singular prohibition in the form "thou shalt not." The first group of laws (7-16) prohibit sexual relations with (especially married) women of a man's immediate household and certain other female kin. Verses 17-23 then comprise a further list of prohibitions covering a miscellany of topics: marrying a woman and her daughter or granddaughter, marrying two sisters, having intercourse with a woman during her menstrual period, adultery, sacrificing one's children, homosexual acts, intercourse by a man or a woman with an animal. The first two of these, forbidding certain marriages, provide some continuity with the subject of the preceding list. Several of the behaviors in this second list are characterized as "profaning God's name," "making one unclean," or by one or another of various Hebrew terms for reprehensible behavior: zimma, to'eba, tebel. Lacking the conformity of the first list, these prohibitions read as a compilation of laws from different contexts.

The last but one is verse 22. It reads: "You shall not lie with a male as one lies with a woman; that is a taboo (to'eba)." Like all these laws, it is addressed to a male. It is clear, therefore, that it refers to a homosexual act between males. (There is no reference here or anywhere else in the Bible to homosexual acts between females.)

In an epilogue the Israelites are told that their predecessors in the land did all these things, so that the land became unclean and vomited out its inhabitants. Israel will be spared such a fate, however, because all who commit such offences will be cut off from their people. In other words, in their present setting the listed acts are designated the practices of other nations, from which Israel is to be distinguished by its observance of the practices Yahweh has instituted. But it will preserve its status as God's people only by eradicating any of its members who
compromise that status by engaging in non-Israelite practices. The rejection of these practices is used as a criterion for distinguishing and defining the in-group—Israel—from the surrounding societies that threaten to infiltrate or absorb them. There is a parallelism here between social distinctions (between Israel and other societies), cultic distinctions (clean and unclean), and theological distinctions (the laws of Yahweh and the laws of other peoples—their gods are not dignified by a reference). This parallelism is taken up and developed in the epilogue of chapter 20 (see below).

Chapter 20 is rather more complex. The prohibited acts this time include, besides a few that were not in chapter 18, a mixture of offences from both lists in chapter 18, (all but three from the first list and all of the second list) but in a quite different arrangement. The impression given here is of a much more mixed bag of offences. Whereas in chapter 18 the commands were all in the second person singular ("thou shalt not..."), here they are in the third person singular, beginning with an indefinite subject ("anyone who," "whoever"). In many cases the text characterizes the offence, pronounces the death penalty, and assigns to the culprits full responsibility for their own deaths. But beyond this the form of the proscriptions varies considerably. All this suggests that they are not directly related to the collection in chapter 18 (i.e., not composed by the same authors), but rather each collection has its own history. Ultimately, all of the laws common to the two collections probably go back to a common social setting.

Verse 13 reads: "Anyone who lies with a male as one lies with a woman—the two of them have broken a taboo. They shall be put to death—their blood shall be upon them" (that is, they, not the community that executes them, shall bear responsibility for their deaths). Like 18:22, this verse characterizes the act in question as the breaking of a taboo. This time, however, it spells out the penalty for committing the offence; and it clears the community of any liability for the deaths of the offenders.

The chapter ends with an epilogue (vv. 22-26) that reiterates some of the content of the epilogue to chapter 18, except that
here there is an additional emphasis on the distinctiveness of Israel: "I am Yahweh, your God, who made you distinct from the peoples. And you shall make a distinction between clean and unclean animals, and between clean and unclean birds. You shall not defile yourselves with any animal or bird or anything that crawls on the earth which I have made distinct, for you to regard as unclean. You shall be holy to me, for I, Yahweh, am holy, and I have made you distinct from the peoples, to be mine" (vv. 24b-26).5

Here the social, cultic and theological separation and distinctness of Israel is even more emphatically stated and correlated than in chapter 18. Moreover, it is further implicitly related to the distinctness of the created order as understood by the priestly writers—the distinctness of three great categories of animals: animals, birds and "crawling things." The word used here for "make distinct" or "make a distinction" (hibdil) is a favorite word of the authors. For example, they use it in Genesis 1 of the distinction made between light and darkness (4), between the waters above the earth and the waters beneath (6-7), and between day and night (14, 18). They also use it in Exodus 26:33 of the curtain that makes a distinction between the sanctuary and the holy of holies. Ezekiel (a priest) uses it of the distinction between sacred and profane (Ezek. 22:26; 42:20).8

It should be clear by now that these lists have an emblematic character for those priestly authors concerned with defining the cultic community of postexilic Israel. They are fitted into a view of the world that makes sharp distinctions between what is cultically clean and unclean and between "them" and "us."

I conclude with several observations and questions concerning the use of these verses in our present situation.

First, the proscriptions in these chapters are used to exemplify a priestly scheme for distinguishing insiders from outsiders, the people of God from other peoples. There is no reference to any discriminations among the people of God on the basis of these laws. Leviticus 21 lists a number of behaviors and characteristics that are inappropriate in priests. It does not
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refer to homosexual behavior. It does not need to, since the preceding chapter has proscribed this for the society as a whole. If the church is to invoke the values expressed in Leviticus 18 and 20, should it not raise questions about these practices, not just of some designated group within the church (those seeking ordination) but of all members (or all who apply for membership)?

Second, may we pick and choose among the verses in these two chapters? All the behaviors listed are equally condemned. All come within the framework that makes them the basis of a distinction between Israel and other peoples, between clean and unclean, between what is acceptable to Yahweh and what is not acceptable to Yahweh. If the verses on homosexual acts are cited as bearing on church policies, then the verses on adultery and intercourse during menstruation, for example, must surely also be cited as having the same impact on church policies.

On the other hand, if we find a significant distinction between homosexual acts, adultery, and intercourse during menstruation, should we not ask ourselves whether we really understand why these chapters condemn all three equally? And if we cannot understand why a couple who have had intercourse during her menstrual period should be cut off from the society, can we assume that we understand why they condemn to death those engaging in homosexual acts? If we cannot understand the common link between these various acts, can we arbitrarily select one of them as a guide for the church?

Third, can these two chapters in Leviticus be read without reference to the rest of the Bible (for the moment I am speaking only of the Hebrew Bible)? That is, can we ignore the fact that homosexual acts are proscribed only in these two verses in one law collection, while adultery is proscribed in all three major law collections (Exod. 20:22-23:19; Deut. 12-26; Lev. 17-26) and in the two lists of the Ten Commandments (Exod. 20:2-17; Deut. 5:6-21) and condemned numerous times in both the Prophets and the Writings? Whatever their significance for the writer of the Holiness Code, it is surely appropriate to say that
for the Bible as a whole, adultery is a matter of major concern, while the condemnation of homosexual acts is limited to one collection of laws. It is ironic that the church seems to be reversing these emphases.

Fourth, as we have seen, what the two chapters in Leviticus refer to is homosexual acts. How could it be otherwise, since homosexuality as a psychological disposition was only fully recognized and publicly described in the last century? But if that is the case, would not the biblical references to homosexual acts have envisaged homosexual activity by what we today call heterosexuals? None of this mitigates the priestly censure of such sexual activity. But what does it really mean in light of the distinction between sexual activity and sexual identity?

Fifth, as we have seen, the two chapters in Leviticus refer only to male homosexual acts. Why were not females also mentioned? The passage on bestiality explicitly mentions both men and women. A formally literal interpretation of the text would have to distinguish between sexual acts between males, which are forbidden, and those between females, which are not. Again, we have to ask whether the categories that the priestly authors were working with are appropriate for our understanding of these matters.¹⁰

Sixth, chapters 18 and 20 of Leviticus express the worldview, values and norms of a particular group in postexilic Israel. These are very different from those of the earlier law collections: the Laws of the Covenant in Exodus 20:22-23:19 and the Deuteronomic Laws in Deuteronomy 12-26 (in neither of which is there any reference to homosexual acts). They are also very different from the values and concerns of other biblical texts coming from other groups in Judean society of the period. On what basis do we invoke one of these sources and not others?

Finally, it seems to me that Christians have to ask another question, one which is of tremendous significance. Given the place of the Hebrew scriptures in the Christian Bible, how do we relate the definition of the people of God in these chapters to the gospel's definition of the people of God?
With these questions I have suggested some difficulties involved in any application of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 to our present situation. This does not in any way imply a judgment on the issue before the church. It does imply that the two chapters in which these verses appear, while unambiguous in their application to the community defined in Leviticus, demand extended and thoughtful reflection before they can be expected to yield guidance for us today. It implies that what guidance they do offer will be indirect rather than direct. Certainly the issue before the church will have to be settled on grounds other than the mere citation of these references.

Notes

1. There are also references in the Hebrew Bible to qedeshim (Deut. 23:17; 1 Kings 14:24; 15:12; 22:46; 2 Kings 23:7; Job 58:14), translated "(male) temple prostitutes" or something similar in most modern English versions. But the meaning of this term is in fact not as clear as the translations suggest. Phyllis Bird will argue in a forthcoming study that the term is probably there more for literary reasons than as a reflection of an actual social institution. In any case, prostitution—whether female or male, homosexual or heterosexual, sacred or profane—is beyond the scope of this paper. All translations that follow are the author's own.

2. It is striking that in modern English the various words we derive from the name of Sodom do not denote the violation of hospitality, or even rape. Sodomy, according to Webster's Third New International Dictionary, may refer to homosexual acts, to sexual intercourse with an animal, or to anal or oral intercourse in which the active partner is male. These meanings derive not from anything we are told about Sodom in the Hebrew Bible but from later misreadings and misinterpretations of Genesis 19.

In the Hebrew Bible itself the associations of the name "Sodom" are very different. Primarily Sodom is cited as a general model of a sinful city (Deut. 32:2; Isa. 1:10; 3:6; Jer. 25:14; Lam. 4:6), or of a city that was completely destroyed (Deut. 25:22; Isa. 1:9; 19:15; Jer. 46:18; 50:40; Amos 4:11; Zeph. 2:3; Lam. 4:6). Occasionally there are more specific associations. In Isa. 1:10ff. Judah is addressed as Sodom and Gomorra because of its general wrongdoing (v. 16), but more specifically because of its bloodshed (v. 15) and its failure to assure justice to the vulnerable and the oppressed (v. 17). In Ezck. 18:4ff., the prophet, charging that Sodom's behavior was not as bad as Jerusalem's (48), characterizes Sodom as proud and complacent in its enjoyment of the good life. It did nothing to support the disadvantaged and helpless. It broke social and religious taboos, to'eba (on this word see below).
In all these other references to the legendary Sodom it is compared with some contemporary city or people, usually Jerusalem but occasionally Babylon or Edom or Moab. In no case is there any reference to homosexuality, or, for that matter, to rape or inhospitality, either in Sodom itself or in Jerusalem or Babylon or Edom or Moab. Genesis 19 is unique in ascribing to Sodom the offence of (intended) violation of the custom of hospitality by rape of guests.


4. An allusion to similar circumstances may appear in Job 31:32, 34; cf. M. H. Pope, Job (The Anchor Bible, New York: Doubleday, 1965), 199, 206, and 209. The proposed rape of heavenly messengers—quasi-divine beings—in Genesis 19 may have recalled in the minds of early readers the tradition that once divine beings ("sons of the gods") married whomever they chose among human women ("daughters of humankind," (Gen. 6:2), a tradition better known from Greek myths.


6. For mishk'be as referring to coition cf. Gen. 49:4 addressed to Reuben: 'alita mishk'be abika, referring to Gen. 35:22 "Reuben went and lay with Bilhah, his father's concubine."

7. The epilogue uses repeatedly the terms "unclean" and "taboo acts." The word "taboo" (to'eba), which in the list appeared only with the prohibition of homosexual acts (v. 22), is here used by the compiler to classify all the preceding.

8. Verse 27 is an obvious later addition, stating that any medium of the spirits of the dead is to be put to death.

9. In Num. 8:14 and 16:9 it refers to God's (and Moses') distinguishing of the Levites from the general assembly of Israel. (It is also used four times in Leviticus outside this chapter, five times in Deuteronomy and eight times elsewhere.)

10. Another indication of a fundamental difference between the values of the priestly authors of Leviticus and our own—one which cautions against any easy transition from the values stated here to our own situation—is the lack of any reference to motivation in these proscriptions. This perhaps strikes us most sharply in the law against bestiality: the beast as well as the human offender is to be put to death. But the death penalty applies to both parties in all the listed offences. Thus a distinction that for us is crucial in moral and legal questions—the distinction between voluntary and involuntary acts—is here disregarded.

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The United Methodist Church has for some years been engaged in an internal debate about the authority of Scripture in relation to other authorities. The most recent statement approved by General Conference appears on pp. 80-86 of the 1988 Book of Discipline under the title "Theological Guidelines: Sources and Criteria." This statement affirms the primacy of Scripture but also acknowledges the importance of tradition, experience, and reason. The effort to coordinate these four factors produces some helpful guidance to the church. The following statement from p. 82 of the Discipline is an example:

While we acknowledge the primacy of Scripture in theological reflection, our attempts to grasp its meaning always involve tradition, experience, and reason. Like Scripture, these may become creative vehicles of the Holy Spirit as they function within the Church.

There is indeed a sense in which Scripture is primary, for it is the earliest record of faith and remains foundational. Scrip-
Scripture, however, cannot function as an effective norm for the church unless we face the issue of interpretation of Scripture. Every use of Scripture involves interpretation. The General Conference statement rightly recognizes that tradition, experience, and reason may have important roles in interpretation, if they are "creative vehicles of the Holy Spirit."

The reference to the Holy Spirit reminds us of another aspect of our Scripture and tradition that must not be ignored. Scripture itself neither leads to salvation nor provides divine guidance to the church apart from the present action of the Holy Spirit. This was recognized by our predecessors, as these words of Charles Wesley (no. 585 in the United Methodist Hymnal, 1989) indicate:

*Whether the Word be preached or read,
no saving benefit I gain
from empty sounds or letters dead;
unprofitable all and vain,
unless by faith thy word I hear
and see its heavenly character.*

*Unmixed with faith, the Scripture gives
no comfort, life, or light to see,
but me in darker darkness leaves,
implunged in deeper misery,
overwhelmed with nature's sorest ills.
The Spirit saves, the letter kills.*

The last line is, of course, a paraphrase of 2 Cor. 3:6. It is appropriate at this point to turn to the Pauline passage from which this line is taken because, in my experience, the testimony to Scripture's primacy comes from the fact that it frequently states things more radically than we do and therefore uncovers dimensions of the problem that we are inclined to ignore. I would note in passing that both 2 Cor. 3 and the experience of some modern renewal movements within the church (movements that have experienced Scripture as an oppressive force) justify lines of Charles Wesley that otherwise
may seem excessive. Apart from real faith and the saving Spirit, he says, Scripture not only gives no light "but me in darker darkness leaves/implunged in deeper misery." The full seriousness of the problem we face appears when we recognize that Scripture, apart from the saving Spirit, may be not simply neutral but an instrument of darkness.

Paul's main topic in 2 Corinthians 3 is his own ministry, but in the course of his discussion he makes the following statement:

Not that we are competent of ourselves to claim anything as coming from us; our competence is from God, who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of letter but of spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. (2 Cor. 3:5-6, NRSV)

Paul continues by contrasting the old "ministry of condemnation" with the new "ministry of justification" to which he has been called. Then he adds:

Since, then, we have such a hope, we act with great boldness, not like Moses, who put a veil over his face to keep the people of Israel from gazing at the end of the glory that was being set aside. But their minds were hardened. Indeed, to this very day, when they hear the reading of the old covenant, that same veil is still there, since only in Christ is it set aside. Indeed, to this very day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their minds; but when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit. (2 Cor. 3:12-18; NRSV)

Emphasis on the primacy of Scripture does not in itself provide life-giving nurture and a healthy norm for the church, nor does the General Conference statement, helpful as it is, recognize the full depth of the problem we face. The problem is that Scripture can be the letter that kills as well as the instrument of the life-giving Spirit. The result depends on how it is being heard and interpreted by us. In the one case a veil
lies over our minds as Scripture is read, and so the message of Scripture is not heard as Paul proclaims it, as the message of God's righteousness, i.e., God's saving justice for all people. A veil obscures our sight; our minds are hardened. Scripture functioning as part of a hardened religious system that excludes and condemns is the Scripture veiled. It does not free us from death for life.

The Veil of Ideology

The library of books that we call Scripture permits a variety of interpretations. That there is no understanding without interpretation is especially clear in the case of Scripture, for there is no mechanical way of determining what is central to the message of this library of books. We cannot, for instance, simply give equal weight to every biblical verse and expect a correct understanding of God's message for us to emerge. None of us does give equal weight to every biblical verse, and attempting to do so would be fruitless effort.

In the necessary process of interpretation, including necessary decisions about what is central and what is not, human sin has room to work. It can work among those who claim to be redeemed as well as among others. We come to Scripture with a set of presuppositions that guide our reading, some of them helpful and some not. We may compare, for instance, the way that most Christians respond to two similar dialogues in the New Testament. In Acts 16:30-31 the Philippian jailer asks Paul and Silas, "What must I do to be saved?" and they reply, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." Although this is directed only to one man in the story, it is generally taken as a requirement for people today also. In Luke 18:18-23 we have a similar dialogue. A man asks Jesus, "What shall I do to inherit eternal life?" and Jesus replies, "Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." This is generally not taken as a requirement for us today, either by
evangelicals or liberals. However, there is nothing in the stories themselves to indicate that one applies to us and the other not.  

Some interpretive map always guides us as we seek to make our way through Scripture and discover its meaning. To put it another way, we always read Scripture through a set of glasses. Sometimes these glasses are so dark and distorting as to hide Scripture’s life-giving message. Paul uses a further image to express the problem; borrowing from Exodus 34, he speaks of a veil that covers the reading of Scripture and lies on the human heart, hiding the divine glory and preventing people from hearing the life-giving word.

The veil may operate as an ideology. By an ideology I mean a belief system shared by a group and serving that group’s interests in competition with other groups. An ideology is some group’s way of telling itself that it has a superior place in the universe and therefore may rightfully claim all it wants of wealth, power, and prestige, which the rest of the world does not deserve. The sad truth is that we read Scripture through our ideologies and thereby make Scripture a prop for our claims to power and status. Paul was right when he wrote that a veil lies over the reading of Scripture.

We inherit this veil from our society and also actively weave it ourselves. Because the veil is already present when we come to Scripture, we need a liberating and illuminating force to show us the life-giving word. The Spirit—the active power of God in the midst of our lives—must take the veil away. This is what we can learn from Paul’s strong emphasis on the Spirit in 2 Corinthians 3. “The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.” “When one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. Now the Lord is the Spirit.” We are promised that the active power of God at work within our communities can penetrate our ideologies and remove the veil from Scripture.

The Spirit and Modern Renewal Groups

ARE THERE INDICATIONS THAT THIS IS HAPPENING in the modern church? Although the Spirit certainly works in the lives of
individuals, a claim to illumination by the Spirit from a single individual has yet to pass its first test. This claim must be plausible to a group that finds the message to illuminate their situation and speak to their need. We should look first, therefore, at what is happening in certain renewal groups that are currently challenging the church to be the church. Without intending to be exhaustive, I will mention the renewal groups associated with a) Latin American liberation theology, b) Black theology, c) feminist theology, and d) the Good News Movement.

To suggest, as I am, that the Spirit may be at work in these movements to unveil a life-giving word does not imply blanket approval of any one of them. The church must exercise discernment to discover what, in the claims of each group, is an authoritative word that must not be ignored. Nevertheless, consideration of these renewal movements can sharpen and clarify the issues the church faces concerning the authority of Scripture. Each of these groups has its own way of reading Scripture. The first three have also experienced Scripture as an oppressor, for Scripture can be and has been read as requiring docile acceptance of poverty, submission to the slave master, and subordination of women. When a renewal group learns to read Scripture in a new way, it is also protesting against an old way of reading Scripture that has been oppressive. In the case of feminist theology, this may involve a critique of widespread androcentrism in Scripture itself. Nevertheless, the firm rejection of certain aspects of Scripture may serve the full acceptance of another aspect of Scripture's message.

I wish to affirm explicitly that renewal may also come from the conservative side of the theological spectrum. United Methodist evangelicals also have something to say to us. In my view, they rightly call us to recognize that the transformation of people's lives is not an occasional byproduct of our work but a central task of the church and that the church is not carrying out this task unless it is actively engaged in evangelism.

Is the Spirit at work in these groups? Even an outsider must recognize signs of transformation, empowerment, and freedom
reminiscent of Paul's description of the Spirit at work in his churches. Their experience may not by itself guarantee that these groups have an authentic word from the Spirit, or necessarily clarify what that word is, but the signs are sufficient to require our attention.

None of these groups (even if it claims to believe in plenary inspiration) finds all parts of Scripture equally valuable. Each looks especially to certain parts where it finds the word it needs to hear. Furthermore, those experiencing new power and freedom may not read these texts in ways approved by historical scholars. They may even read some texts "against the grain," i.e., in a way that deliberately rejects what appears to be the obvious sense of a particular passage. In their defense one can point out that the early Christians, including Paul, did the same thing. Not only did they find the Christian Messiah sprinkled throughout Jewish Scripture but they also read the story of Israel as a constant echo of their own experience in a church that was no longer very Jewish. The transforming experience of empowerment and freedom in the early church led to an interpretive freedom seldom permitted in either liberal or conservative seminaries.

We know, of course, that renewal movements can become rigid sects that are oppressive in their turn. Conflict with the parent body can make them more and more judgmental, exclusive, and paranoid. The church, however, needs its renewal movements, and it may in turn contribute balance and breadth. Patience in continuing the often painful dialogue can benefit both the church and the renewal movement.

We also know that many in the long history of the church have claimed to have the Spirit, and all too often their message turned out to be a word of death and not a word of life. The one who claims to speak for the Spirit may simply be the mouthpiece of another death-dealing ideology. Doesn't reserving such a large role for the Spirit in the interpretation of Scripture leave the church without clear guidance?

To answer that question, we need to understand the Spirit as Paul does. The Spirit has some recognizable features, and
Paul reminds us of them. 1) Since “the Spirit gives life,” a message that inherently produces death is not the Spirit’s work. 2) The Spirit replaces the old ministry of condemnation with the ministry of justification, a ministry enlisted to serve God’s saving justice now powerfully at work in the whole world, according to Paul. When Scripture is read so as to hide God’s saving justice or to limit it to one kind of people, the Spirit is not there. 3) The Spirit means freedom. “The Lord is the Spirit,” Paul says, “and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.” When Scripture is used to hold some people in bondage, the Spirit is not there. 4) Paul says that when the veil is removed, we are able to see the glory of the Lord and are transformed into the Lord’s image. When Scripture is used to shape lives into a contrary image, the Spirit is not there.

Considerable spiritual discernment is still needed, but we do have some criteria for judging when the Spirit is truly at work, bringing God’s word to bear on our lives. When that word brings life, when it proclaims God’s saving justice for the whole world, when it transforms us after the pattern of our Lord, when it brings freedom, there the Spirit is removing the veil and enabling us to hear a saving message. The Spirit enables us to hear God’s word as a word of freedom. By freedom Paul does not mean acting on all one’s selfish desires, with no thought of the consequences. He means freedom from the death-dealing forces that operate in our ideologies, turning God into an idol who is always in support of our cause and turning group against group and creature against creature. For freedom from these ideologies Christ has set us free.

A Canon Within the Canon

I DO NOT MEAN TO IMPLY that a complete and changeless set of criteria, allowing us always to recognize the work of the Spirit, can be drawn from 2 Corinthians 3, or even from Paul’s writings as a whole. Many parts of Scripture can continue to instruct the church about God’s work in the world, and the church must
remain open to the possibility of learning from parts of Scripture that seem entirely antiquated. Nevertheless, if the library of books that we call Scripture is to produce something other than confusion, we must operate with a so-called canon within the canon, an understanding of the core of the biblical message for our world. Reference to a canon within the canon, however, does not in itself solve our problem of how Scripture can give guidance to the church. We must face the fact that different Christian groups operate with different canons within the canon, and there is no objective, historical way of deriving a single canon within the canon from Scripture itself (e.g., through appeal to the "apostolic witness"). We must allow for the work of the Spirit. We must acknowledge the church's experience that neglected parts of Scripture can take on new significance for a particular group and through them for the larger church, resulting in a shift in its operative canon within the canon.

If we have no single canon within the canon, why isn't the life of the church full of more conflict and chaos than is actually the case? In spite of differences, we are able to talk to each other and work together because there is still a fairly large area of overlap in our perspectives and some basic values that most of us affirm. What unites us is not exactly theology—discussions of the doctrine of Scripture and of Christology will highlight our differences, not our unity—but something like a shared sense of the world's need and the church's mission impressed upon us by our attempts at ministry.

The United Methodist Church may affirm the primacy of Scripture, but it actually makes its decisions in light of its basic values, which reflect its (perhaps flawed) reading of God's activity in its own life. Scripture has a role in this, but when the church decided that a woman should be elected bishop, I doubt that debate over 1 Timothy 2:11-15 was a major factor. I suspect that the church acted as it did because of a basic commitment to an inclusive church that arises from other biblical passages and from our own experience of freedom as old social barriers collapse. We are deciding what aspects of Scripture are
authoritative for us in light of our own experience of God at work in the world. We should not be ashamed of this. On the contrary, we should be more aware of what we are doing and why we must do it, for that will enable us to reach our decisions with less confusion.

Was Paul a Bible-believer? Did he believe in Scripture as God’s word for us? Yes and no. Through the Spirit Paul recognized in his Scripture the message of God’s saving justice for the world, but he also recognized that Scripture can become the letter that kills. There are, in fact, some parts of Scripture that very easily become this killing letter. Therefore, Paul can sometimes contrast one part of Scripture with another, affirming one and rejecting the other (see Gal. 3:11-12). Or he can give the old Scripture a new meaning, which rescues it from being the letter that kills (note what Paul does to Deut. 30:11-14 in Rom. 10:6-8). We, too, may have to say no to the plain meaning of some parts of Scripture. I mean that we do not accept these parts as guidance for today, even if we recognize their value—or at least their inevitability—in the ancient context. It may seem shocking and frightening that we should make such judgments about Scripture, but historic Christian readings of Scripture are the result of such judgments. There are large parts of Scripture that only orthodox Jews still take as authoritative guidance for today. I am asking that we be clearer about what we Christians have done and recognize its continuing necessity. We must continue to make decisions not because we are modern skeptics but for the same reason that Paul did, in order that the message of God’s saving justice for the world may be heard and we may witness to it with our lives.

When modern biblical criticism became known, people in our churches began to worry about attacks on the historical accuracy of the Bible. It will be small comfort to realize that this should no longer be the major worry. The chief danger today is no longer skepticism about the historicity of biblical stories but serious doubts about whether biblical stories and biblical teaching lead us toward justice and freedom. In place of the question, is what the Bible says true historically, people are beginning to
ask, is what the Bible says good? Does it advocate life, justice, and freedom? If we are to show that there is a message in the Bible that leads to life, justice, and freedom, we will have to be as bold as Paul in rejecting what will become the killing letter if it is allowed to control our present lives.

**Conclusion**

I HAVE ALREADY INDICATED THAT THE SPIRIT that must guide us in these decisions is not an indefinable force but is recognizable because it has a definite goal. According to Paul, it brings life; it creates freedom. Now I want to add that the Spirit does not operate in a vacuum as it removes the veil from Scripture and creates freedom. I think the General Conference was wise when it affirmed that tradition, experience, and reason "may become creative vehicles of the Holy Spirit as they function within the Church." They may become vehicles of the Spirit; they are not necessarily so. Tradition can be dead weight that holds us back from responding to the call to freedom, but tradition is also a cloud of witnesses that can still speak to us, it is a rich reservoir of corporate experience from which we can learn. What has been tested is not to be despised even if it does not meet all of our present needs. Furthermore, tradition can warn us about past mistakes. Church history may show that what has long been part of our tradition carries with it certain dangers. The Spirit, working with tradition, may put us on guard against these dangers.

My discussion of the Spirit has underlined the importance of experience. Without rejecting a broader understanding of experience, a particular kind of experience is especially important to the church: the experience of freedom and power in renewal movements that are calling the church to be truly the church. This experience is commonly accompanied by new insights into the gospel for our time and new understandings of Scripture. This kind of experience can help the larger church to read Scripture in a fresh and vital way.
Reason, also, has its important role. It is not simply an abstract and skeptical power. Paul included "the renewal of the mind" (Rom. 12:2) in the effects of the gospel, and this renewed mind is not an enemy of the Spirit. Indeed, the Spirit inspires new thought. The Spirit illuminates, but the implications must be thought out. Otherwise the effect is small, and we are stuck with inconsistencies that rob the gospel of its power. We must also remember the essential role of reason in disputes. A church, such as ours, that does not agree on everything cannot do without reason. Apart from reason we are reduced to shouting at each other; through reason we can learn from each other.

Tradition, experience, and reason can be the means of discovering links between the ancient Scripture and our modern world. The Spirit cannot be located in any one of them nor in the three together, but the free Spirit may work in the interaction of Scripture and tradition, Scripture and experience, Scripture and reason to unveil a life-giving word for our time.

Nevertheless, the General Conference statement affirming the primacy of Scripture while maintaining the importance of tradition, experience, and reason does not adequately address the concrete problem of recognizing God's guidance for the church today. I am not necessarily asking for another statement from General Conference. Rather, I am simply suggesting that factors emphasized in this essay— including our necessarily selective use of Scripture, the vital role of the Spirit in our appropriation of Scripture, and the work of the Spirit in renewal movements, with their experience of empowerment and distinctive readings of Scripture— will help to clarify more concretely how the church is receiving guidance today and the role of Scripture in that process.
Notes

1. This is a revised and expanded version of an address to a convocation of the Methodist Theological School in Ohio and the East and West Ohio Evangelical Fellowships.

2. The recent history of this debate is reviewed in the article by Ted Campbell in this issue of Quarterly Review.

3. This illustration was suggested to me by James Barr, Beyond Fundamentalism (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984) 112-13.


6. In the last chapter of his book, Richard Hays dares to suggest that Paul’s interpretation of Scripture can serve as a hermeneutical model for the church today. See Echoes of Scripture, pp. 178-92. This would mean reading Scripture metaphorically and risking considerable interpretive freedom. The following statements are particularly congenial to my own argument in this essay: “Scripture discloses its sense only as the text is brought into correlation with living communities where the Holy Spirit is at work....True interpretation is a retrospective activity of communities whose reading is shaped by the grace of God in their midst. Under the guidance of the Spirit, we discover the operation of God’s grace among us to be prefigured in Scripture, and we find the Scripture that we thought we knew transfigured by the grace at work among us” (p. 184).


8. The search for what is earliest and most widely acknowledged in the message about Jesus will not provide what we need, for 1) the early traditions are themselves diverse in the ways that they interpret Jesus’ significance; 2) this material may not include key passages (e.g., from the Old Testament) that should be part of our canon within the canon; and 3) even if we could agree on what is earliest and most widely acknowledged, the various Christian groups would interpret and apply this material differently.
I am pleased to have the opportunity to respond to the topic of "Scripture as an Authority in Relation to Other Authorities," reflecting specifically on the interpretive doctrinal statement adopted by the 1988 General Conference of the United Methodist Church. Although I have little heart for controversy, it seems to me that the enterprise of trying to understand the widely differing perspectives of contemporary Christians is critical in churches, such as The United Methodist Church, where theological pluralism (at least in a certain broad and positive sense) is a given fact. To survive, and hopefully to thrive, in such a pluralistic community requires careful consideration of seriously differing points of view; the only alternative that I can envision is stringent dissension leading to separation of one form or another -- a process that has repeated itself far too often in Protestant history.

There are two presuppositions I would note about my response. The first is that I am a historian, or at best a "historical theologian." That is to say, the contribution that I can best make to this discussion will be to understand historically the

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contemporary questions of the Bible's authority in relation to other authorities. I will reflect critically on these questions from that perspective.

Secondly, I offer what I have called "A Wesleyan-Evangelical Perspective." This is not meant to be the proud waving of a sectarian flag, but is (hopefully) an attempt to be honest about the presuppositions that have structured my own reflections on these matters. I am not a "generic" Evangelical (if there is such a thing), but I have been shaped by the specifically Wesleyan branch of the Evangelical movement, and this (as I shall suggest below) has some very concrete implications for the manner in which I would approach the authority of the Christian Scriptures in relation to other authorities.

With these presuppositions noted, there are two main points I want to make. The first is that very few Methodist Evangelicals (or, to speak somewhat more broadly, Wesleyan Evangelicals) are really "fundamentalists"; it follows that Methodist Evangelicals do not object in principle to the use of tradition, experience, and reason in interpreting Scripture. Of course, I cannot speak for all Evangelicals on this point, since there remains a strong current of real fundamentalism (on this issue, represented by Harold Lindsell and others) for whom there can be effectively no authority but that of the Bible (at least, that's the way they say it and seem to imagine it).

The doctrine of scriptura sola, however, was never understood to exclude the use of tradition, experience, and reason in interpreting the scriptures. It has been demonstrated that the Protestant Reformers were not Fundamentalists in this sense. More specifically, even if many North American Evangelicals have been attracted to this biblical monism in this century, Wesleyan Evangelicals have not. I cite as evidence the writings of the Nazarene theologian H. Orton Wiley who, writing in the 1930s (the same time as Princeton theologians were calling for a truly fundamentalist approach to Scripture), described what he called a "dictation theory" of biblical inspiration, and then cleanly rejected it in favor of the view that the inspiration of the Scriptures involves both divine and human agency.
Moreover, when United Methodist Evangelicals, responding to the 1972 doctrinal statement, had the opportunity to affirm scriptural "infallibility" or "inerrancy," they refused these terms, choosing to speak instead of the "accuracy" of God's work in inspiring the Scriptures. Most critically, any notion of biblical monism (the idea that the Bible is the only authority for Christian communities) simply fails to conform to what the Scriptures claim for themselves. For instance, the introduction to Luke's Gospel does not claim to be the result of a divine "seizure" of the writer, but rather the careful work of a historian who considered his sources and wrote the best account he could (Luke 1:1-4). After all, Scripture itself utilizes "tradition" in a certain sense, and also utilizes reflection on common experience.

But if Wesleyan Evangelicals are willing to utilize tradition, experience, and reason as doctrinal guidelines in some sense, the problem we perceive is that without some sense of the center of authority, the so-called "Wesleyan Quadrilateral" can be read as saying "Anything goes!" After all, there is nothing in the known universe that does not fall under one of the categories of Scripture, tradition, reason, or experience. It was altogether too easy, in their reaction against fundamentalism, for Methodists to jump to the conclusion that the "Quadrilateral" could justify any sincerely-held opinion.

In all fairness, it must be said that the problem lies not so much with the 1972 or 1988 doctrinal statements, since both drafting committees intended to make clear their commitment to the authority of Scripture over all other authorities. The problems were (a) that the wording of the 1972 statement was quite ambiguous (the famous "There is a primacy that goes with Scripture...however" sentence), and (b) the statement was interpreted (I think it would be right to say misinterpreted) as meaning that any theological opinion, when bolstered by some combination of Scripture, tradition, experience, and reason, was to be accepted.

In this respect, the 1988 doctrinal statement makes a considerable advance over the 1972 statement. No one could mistake
its commitment to the authority of Scripture over that of other authorities. "United Methodists share with other Christians the conviction that Scripture is the primary source and criterion for Christian doctrine." And again, "In theological reflection, the resources of tradition, experience, and reason are integral to our study of Scripture, without displacing Scripture's primacy for faith and practice." In making clear at least thus far the center of Christian authority, United Methodist Evangelicals have strongly favored the 1988 statement over the earlier one.

But there is a sense in which I believe that an Evangelical critique must also bear on the 1988 statement. Granted that Scripture in some sense has a "primacy" over tradition, experience, and reason, the question remains as to what it is in Scripture that constitutes its own "self-norming" authority. It seems to me that Methodists since 1972 (at least) have so focused on the question of Scripture as interpreted by tradition, experience, and reason (all external criteria), that they have almost forgotten the critical and "primary" sense in which Scripture itself must be the norm by which Scripture is to be interpreted (i.e., the internal criterion). Is there a "canon" by which the "canon" is to be interpreted? Yes -- but it is a canon within the canon, and not something external to the Scriptures themselves.

What I mean to suggest here is really no new idea. In a letter to her son John composed in 1725, Susanna Wesley wrote a sophisticated explanation of her understanding of predestination, then concluded, "This is the sum of what I believe concerning predestination, which I think is agreeable to the analogy of faith..." I mention this because the term "analogy of faith," from the Greek text of Rom. 12:6 (though never, to my knowledge, rendered by those precise words in English translations) was a kind of code word by which Susanna and then John Wesley (following many Christians before them) described a sense of the wholeness of Scripture as communicating God's authority. If a passage is difficult to understand, Wesley suggested, it is to be submitted in the first place not to
tradition, experience, or reason, but to Scripture itself. Wesley consistently referred Scripture to Scripture, and in this respect concurred with the Protestant Reformers in their insistence that Scripture is indeed "normed," but normed by Scripture. 19

I cite the Wesleys here to indicate that the problem of finding a sense of scriptural "wholeness" is an old problem, and one that no Christian community can avoid. 11 To take an example, if the Sermon on the Mount should hold more authority for Christian communities than the pentateuchal regulations concerning wayward children, then it seems to me that we are forced back to the question of what it is that constitutes the central, biblical message, how Scripture norms Scripture, or, how we read Scripture "according to the proportion (or analogy) of faith." Admittedly, this is no easy task, but it seems to me that our doctrinal statement blurs this critical issue in moving quickly from Scripture to other authorities without focusing on some sense of the overall meaning of the biblical witness.

And yet, there are hints scattered through the 1988 statement -- tantalizing hints whose import could have been made much clearer. Prior to speaking of the four authorities of Scripture, tradition, experience, and reason, the preamble to our doctrinal statements asserts that "Our forebears in the faith reaffirmed the ancient Christian message as found in the apostolic witness." 12 Again, in introducing the section on "Our Common Heritage as Christians," the 1988 statement claims that "This heritage is grounded in the apostolic witness to Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, which is the source and measure of all valid Christian teaching." 13 This appeal to an "apostolic faith" (perhaps echoing current discussions in the World Council of Churches Faith and Order Commission) is again referred to in the section on our common heritage, 14 but is not brought up in the later section in which the Quadrilateral is expounded.

This is unfortunate, I think, because this idea -- the idea of an apostolic witness to Christ underlying the biblical texts -- could serve as a critical means of interpreting Christian religious authority in our age. Why, after all, do we say that the Christian Scriptures have authority for the Christian com-
munity today? (The answer is not just because Athanasius gave us the list.) The reason, I think, must be that the Scriptures alone convey to us the primitive, apostolic testimony to the work of God in Christ. Though validated by tradition, only the Scriptures offer to the Christian community this basic and constitutive witness to Christ.

Understanding the apostolic witness as the center of biblical religion also helps to clarify the relationship between the authority of Scripture and other authorities. "Tradition," as the term is used in theological circles, does not denote Church history in general, but implies some normative content. But what is the norm? My suggestion is that the apostolic witness to Christ stands over all of Church history, judging and norming it, making clear to us the points at which women and men have, and have not, kept faith with that witness.

Apostolic faith, which the Scriptures convey to us, must stand over our contemporary community as well. I must confess my discomfort at our separation of "experience" and "reason." I am an empiricist enough to think that there is no reasoning without experience, and vice versa. I would prefer to think of our "reflection on experience" or better "reflection on common experience." Reflection on common experience sets the crucial context in which the Christian message has to be expounded in our day.

My experience as a Church historian is that when a community begins to rely on reflection on its own experience as a primary norm (i.e., not normed by the central authority of Scripture and its apostolic testimony), perversions are liable to occur. How, we might ask, could Christians butcher each other in the seventeenth century? How could Southern Methodists in the nineteenth century rewrite their own Discipline so as to avoid responsibility on the issue of slavery? How could "German Christians" of the 1930s understand themselves as Christians at all? In each case, a distortion of the biblical message followed upon an obsession with a community's own experience (the struggle of Protestants and Catholics in the Reformation, the cultural approval of slavery in the ethos of the Old South, the
peculiar distortion of nineteenth-century progressivism in the notion of the "master race").

But my reading of Church history also suggests that from time to time women and men arise who are able to confront the Church's preoccupation with the world, its compromises with culture, and call it back to the apostolic faith. The witness of Francis and Clare of Assisi, of John Wesley and Phoebe Palmer, of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Karl Barth, was in each case a witness given in a specific historical context (reflecting the experience of a specific community), and yet in each case the dynamism of their movements lay in the claim that that the witness of Christ stands over the Christian community and norms its life.

Here, I think, one must understand why Evangelicals want to insist on the "primacy" of Scripture in relation to other authorities. Evangelicals understand the essence of Christian faith to lie in adherence to Christ as the final, or ultimate allegiance. To put it in more traditionally Christian terms, the Christian faith is constituted by its worship of Jesus Christ. Given this ultimate commitment, it is inconceivable that the scriptural witness to Christ should be subjected to any other authority.

But of course, there is a critical implication in all of this for North American Evangelicals, too. Perhaps it is a banal observation that human beings consistently fail to accomplish their intentions, or to live according to their beliefs. For North American Evangelicals, it is too easy to conform to a theologically compromised, sometimes truly decadent, form of Evangelical faith. To be true to our faith, then, we must be open to hear the living Word of God in Scripture, standing over us in judgment, calling us to conformity to "Jesus Christ, and him crucified" (I Cor. 2:23).

Notes

1. Jack B. Rogers and Donald K. McKim, The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible: An Historical Approach (San Francisco: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1979), pp. 73-146; cf. their concluding statement, "In common with the
church fathers, Luther and Calvin held that the authority of Scripture resided in its function of bringing persons into a saving relationship with God in Jesus Christ. Christ was the center of Scripture for both Luther and Calvin. We should look for no other knowledge in the Bible than of Christ and his benefits towards us, according to them" (p. 120).


4. On "tradition," cf. 1 Cor 15:1ff., where Paul recounts the kerygma as "handed on" to him; on the use of reflection on common experience, Romans 1:20, where Paul claims that God's "eternal power and deity" have been perceived in the created order.


8. Ibid., p. 86.


10. Cf. Wesley's "Popery Calmly Considered" I,6, where he asserts, "In all cases, the Church is to be judged by the Scripture, not the Scripture by the Church. And Scripture is the best expounder of Scripture. The best way, therefore, to understand it, is carefully to compare Scripture with Scripture, and thereby learn the true meaning of it" (in Thomas Jackson, ed., The Works of the Reverend John Wesley, A.M. [14 vols., London: Wesleyan Conference Office, 1872], 10:142. I have reference in this section to an unpublished paper delivered to a Southwestern regional meeting of the American Academy of Religion by Scott J. Jones, entitled "Analogia Fidei: John Wesley on the Wholeness of Scripture." Cf. also Stanley B. Frost, Die Autoritatslehre in den Werken John Wesleys (Munich: Verlag Ernst Reinhardt, 1938), pp. 19-29, where Frost argues that the root of Wesley's doctrine of authority is his understanding of the authority of God, which is then expressed in Scripture.


13. Ibid., p. 41.


15. With the possible exception of ancient and extracanonical versions of the kerygma or regula fidei.
"We are becoming the Sancho Panza of the ecumenical movement," a United Methodist of my acquaintance remarked to me recently. I laughed until it began to sink in. Sancho Panza was the great realist who wept over Don Quixote's windmills; the eternal survivor who made sure there was a next meal, if not a believable future; the faithful follower, seldom the initiator; the man with an absolutely impenetrable tin ear, who lacked even a trace of his master's soaring imagination.

That ecumenical Sancho needs a vision of his own. Not a triumphal Quixote-like vision, but a realistic vision that suits him—a basic ecumenical policy that does for the United Methodist Church what sound basic foreign policy can do for the nation. This paper aims to provoke something like that by clarifying the importance of United Methodism's ecumenical commitment for its health as a church.

Its main affirmations are these:

First: Our ecumenical commitment is not an extra but is essential and constitutive for United Methodism as church.

Second: An adequate basic ecumenical policy for United Methodism will focus upon four points:

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1. The central ecumenical goal is an inclusive church unity as a witness to God's way of healing and renewing the broken human community.

2. The attainable sign of integrity in that witness is an inclusive visible fellowship around the table in Holy Communion—a fellowship presently not expressed by the divided churches.

3. The unavoidable immediate step toward that witness is the work toward a full inclusive and mutual recognition of members and ministers among the divided churches.

4. The historical embodiment of this attainable goal is best viewed as a future, truly ecumenical, conciliar event of witness.

United Methodism's Ecumenical Commitment and Principles

LET'S BEGIN CONSTITUTIONALLY. How much do United Methodists care about ecumenism? If ecumenism means church unity and its witness concerning the healing and wholeness of human community, then constitutionally United Methodists put that concern at the top of their self-understanding as a church.

Our constitution begins with church unity as a witness about human community. The preamble mentions the United Methodist denomination only after two substantial paragraphs in which it has already defined the church in ecumenical terms and put its finger on "dividedness" as a fundamental hindrance to that church's mission in the world (Discipline, p. 19). Turning to the Constitution proper, Division One, along with our three general articles about Name, Articles of Religion, and Title to Properties (Articles 2, 3, and 6), contains three more articles—all on ecumenism! (Articles 1, 4, and 5 on Church Union, Inclusiveness, and Ecumenical Relations).

When you consult our Articles of Religion and Confession of Faith to find how United Methodists understand this church, they answer with deep ecumenical insight: as "the one, holy,
apostolic and catholic...community of all true believers under the Lordship of Christ," gathered around the Word of God purely preached and the sacraments duly administered (Article XIII, of Confession V). And lest there remain any doubt about what "pure" preaching and "due administration" of sacraments imply, we can be reminded by that basic constitutional article about "Inclusiveness of the Church" that all persons without regard to race, color, national origin, or economic condition are eligible to attend, participate, and share membership in the life and koinonia of this worshiping and witnessing "congregation."

We need to repeat and nail down from the beginning this fundamental, thoroughly characteristic United Methodist emphasis about ecumenism. "Church unity," has to do not simply with lessening denominational divisions, but with overcoming whatever divides and alienates either Christian fellowship or human community—dogmatism and institutionalism, to be sure, but racism, classism, and sexism no less. The emphasis is on "inclusive" church unity. Indeed, the deeper emphasis is upon a church unity whose mission is to bear witness to and visibly demonstrate God's way of healing the broken human community. The first and basic division of our Constitution is utterly preoccupied with laying down this foundational United Methodist concept. Do not misread what follows, then, as pleading merely for a narrow interdenominational view of ecumenism; its aim is to make clear the United Methodist understanding that ecumenism is missionary through and through. It has to do with the integrity of our witness.

What is the basis of this emphasis on ecumenism as wholeness in church and community? First, it lies deep in the Wesleyan vision of sanctification as the wholeness of salvation, a personal wholeness which is inseparable from a vision of wholeness in church and society. God's gift is the vision and the power for a renewal of this wholeness, a renewal which God freely offers in all and to all without exception. We are committed to receiving this gift as God gives it, in its wholeness both personally and corporately, and to bearing witness to all, whatever their condition, concerning that gift's "pure, unbounded"
powers of reconciliation, liberation, and healing. There is a personal being made "perfect in love"; there is also a corporate perfection as God, in the inspired phrase of Charles Wesley, "perfects us in one" (The United Methodist Hymnal, no. 627). Church unity and church inclusiveness are not mere extras any more than sanctification is a mere extra in personal salvation. They are basic and essential, both as unity and inclusiveness. Wesley, as Albert Outler loved to say, was an "evangelical catholic." One of the most basic meanings of the ancient term catholicity is precisely that inclusiveness of the church about which our Constitution speaks. "Catholic Spirit" is Wesley's translation into corporate terms of our characteristic emphasis upon wholeness in personal salvation. There, at the very core of our Wesleyan conviction, lies the reason for our United Methodist ecumenical commitment. We are concerned about church unity because we believe the sanctification of the church belongs to and prepares it for its mission.

That invocation of the traditional Wesley can turn our attention to a crucial feature of our new disciplinary doctrinal statement (Discipline, Pars. 65-69). That statement leaves no doubt that our United Methodist doctrinal heritage consists of two parts: "Our common heritage as Christians" and "our distinctive heritage as United Methodists" (pp. 41, 44). "Our common heritage as United Methodists is the faith of the apostles and therefore of the scriptural canon, as it has been generally summarized in the ecumenical creeds (the Apostles, the Nicene, the Chalcedonian Definition) and interpreted in the developing tradition of the great Eastern and Western teachers (Athanasius and the Cappadocians, Augustine and Aquinas, the Continental and the English reformers)—all as passed on to us via that unresting editorial pencil of John Wesley in our Articles of Religion.

"Our distinctive heritage as United Methodists" consists of the distinctive Wesleyan sermon themes capable of being preached to coal miners at five in the morning: prevenient grace and repentance, justification and assurance, sanctifica-
tion and perfection, faith and good works, mission and service, and the nature and mission of the church.

What interests us here is how our church understands the relation of the "common" and the "distinctive." About that the Discipline is quite explicit and emphatic: "The core of Wesleyan doctrine that informed our past rightly belongs to our common heritage as Christians" (Discipline p. 50). "The heart of our task is to reclaim and renew the distinctive United Methodist doctrinal heritage, which rightly belongs to our common heritage as Christians, for the life and mission of the church today" (p. 56).

Something momentous is being said here about how to relate the common and the distinctive, something that few other churches have said so explicitly as yet. We are stewards of a distinctive tradition on behalf of the whole church, charged to renew and cherish it and to give it to the other churches as something which belongs to their and our common heritage. Our "distinctive" Wesleyan themes are truly ours only within that ecumenical commitment and stewardship. No "distinctives," no United Methodists—that's a truism. But no ecumenical commitment, no United Methodists either, and that's the point. We can truly have Wesley only by giving him to others in terms which they as well as we can understand. We can truly observe United Methodist services of Holy Communion only as celebrations of the whole church. We can truly have United Methodist ministers and bishops only as recognizable ministers and bishops of the whole church. We can be truly distinctive only as we are one.

Let me try to formulate that commitment into three ecumenical principles: First, the basic United Methodist commitment to the wholeness of God's grace and our salvation is at once personal, ecclesial, and social. The three unities personal, churchly, and social are inseparable.

Second, inclusive church unity is thus constitutive for United Methodism, as constitutive as personal sanctification is for Wesleyan salvation. United Methodism has its being, its integrity, only in relation to the whole church of Christ. We
cannot be ourselves without being ecumenical. That is what Wesley saw in his construal of the relation of the Methodists to the Church of England. It remains utterly clear in principle in the Constitution and Discipline of our denomination.

Third: United Methodism's distinctive heritage is constitutive of and—inasmuch as it expresses the apostolic faith—belongs by prior right to the whole church. Our "distinctives" are truly ours only in trust, insofar as we hold them as stewards actively engaged in making them understandable and sharing them with others. This does not deny our mission to the unchurched. But it does take seriously what Wesley knew very well and presupposed in his mission to them: that it is a mission to spread the faith of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church, or it is nothing. That requires dialogue with other churches as well as mission to the unchurched.

In a word, ecumenism is of the essence of United Methodism. There can be no more searching question to put to our church than, what is the health of your ecumenical commitment?

**United Methodism's Basic Ecumenical Policy**

WE TURN NOW TO POLICY, those middle points of strategy that link basic principles and quadrennial programs.

I do not have space here for a methodologically explicit derivation of policy from principle. I frankly ask you to follow my attempt simply to focus upon four basic points which belong to any adequate United Methodist ecumenical strategy today.

1. First, deceptively self-evident, yet most basic, is that the central goal of United Methodism's ecumenical policy is the quest for an inclusive church unity. The reason, as the previous section sought to make clear, is that church unity is central for our denominational identity and ecclesiology as such.

   This church unity focus in our ecumenism is contested by some. Church unity is a North Atlantic concern, it is said; it belongs to the past. The contemporary challenge lies in the broken human community itself, and our concern is not unity
but purposeful conflict and surgical use of power to bring about justice. The commanding theme today is not unity among the churches but justice in the human community. Some therefore call for a quite explicit new "secular ecumenism."

If this is posed as an alternative center, I believe that it is a mistake. Gustavo Gutierrez himself insists that the root problem in oppression is not simply unjust social structures but sin and that any truly radical liberation will begin by generating a new human being. John Wesley agrees: first God’s grace and our new birth, then human response in good works. Thus, there is no real sanctification without regeneration and no real regeneration without justification by faith and no true faith without prevenient grace.

We can translate that into ecclesiological and ecumenical terms. Before the renewal of mission there must be a new koinonia, and before the new koinonia there must be grace and receptive participation in the means by which that grace is "normally given," as Wesley puts it—through the apostolic witness in the Scriptures, through faithful contemporary proclamation of that witness today, and through initiation into the apostolic community of faith and participation in its communion and mission. The central theme in a United Methodist ecumenical policy, then, must be the quest for church unity as an ecclesial sanctification in which formerly separated churches are ready to receive together the fullness of the "ordinary" means of grace and are thus visibly capable of bearing witness, as the divided churches cannot be, about inclusiveness and justice in the human community as well. To make the quest for social justice alone the center of our ecumenical policy is to practice an ecumenism without foundations or credible visible signs and to offer a witness without "good news."

This focus on church unity does not imply a retreat into interdenominationalism. It asks, rather, that we discern the Body of Christ, as Paul asks, in our so-called ethical issues. Racism, sexism, classism are for United Methodists ecclesiological and ecumenical issues before they are ethical issues. They have to do with how we are the Christian koinonia.
That is what our constitutional linkage of church unity and inclusiveness is trying to tell us.

Only a quest for church unity, so understood, will have a message of hope for our post-Christendom contemporaries and a real future in the 21st century.

And so our first policy point is this: The central principle of our ecumenical policy is the quest for a credible, visible, and inclusive church unity.

2. What kind of attainable and visible sign of this church unity should our policy seek? The question is important, for if church unity is in any sense our task and not purely and simply a divine gift, then it must be attainable, and if attainable then it must be visibly embodied in signs that communicate it. My conviction is that the attainable sign of an adequate United Methodist ecumenical policy is a visible fellowship in Holy Communion. This fellowship must include not only United Methodists but of all persons, especially those whose liberation is at issue and those who are members and ministers of other divided churches.

Other concrete signs could of course be mentioned: various arrangements for common witness, schemes for organizational merger, specific declarations of mutual recognition of other churches’ baptisms or ordinations, covenanting together with other churches to “live our way toward unity,” or conciliar arrangements of various kinds. Section II of our Discipline makes it clear, however, that “sharing in Holy Communion with all God’s people” is what these many ways point to (p. 88). It is their acid test. The ultimate ecumenical goal, of course, is God’s kingdom. But the kingdom, too, generates “signs” of its presence, according to the Gospels, and visible, common Holy Communion belongs to these signs. Jesus himself asks us to do this “in remembrance” of him.

Eucharistic fellowship is attainable. As it has been threatened and mutilated in history, so it can also be recovered in history.

Is divided Holy Communion that important? Failing to discern the Body of Christ as we eat is that important according
to Paul (1 Cor. 11:29), and he regards that failure as a dangerous symptom in the church. I communicate sometimes in a joint "ecumenical" Catholic-Protestant service. We prepare together, repent together, pray together, hear the Word together--and then at the climax of the service turn our backs on each other as we go to our respective Catholic and Protestant ends of the sanctuary to have communion with our God (with our "gods"?) This is behavior I would not tolerate in a restaurant, yet it is the actual situation every day in every service of Holy Communion, including that of the United Methodist Church. It is wrong for churches to tolerate that symbol. It points to a sickness in the church. It is right for our Constitution to name that "dividedness...a hindrance to (our) mission".

We should acknowledge that United Methodist willingness to accept all others doesn't solve the problem. The solution is not that all become United Methodists, or that all become Roman Catholics. The solution has to be sought together, because we must also listen to the reasons others give for their refusal to accept our invitation. There is plenty of room for all to repent.

And so our second policy point is this: Our policy is committed to an inclusive visible fellowship in Holy Communion as a credible witness that the Christian gospel can indeed heal broken human community.

3. That point leads to another element in policy: the immediate step towards that goal is to work toward a full inclusive mutual recognition of members and ministers of the divided churches. We do not need total doctrinal consensus. We do not need massive new structures. Concretely, what we need is mutual recognition of baptisms and ordinations. In other words, we need that mutual understanding of each other which enables an authentic hospitality at the table of Holy Communion. The way to that unity is not uniformity but genuine mutual recognition in each other of the apostolic faith and fellowship--in that good diversity and plurality which belong to its essence.
I have three short remarks about this. First, United Methodists have been generous when asked officially to recognize the baptisms and ordinations of other churches and to seek visible eucharistic fellowship with them, as, for example, in the Consultation on Church Union (COCU). The question is, if that generosity is justified, are we actively pursuing and broadening it, or are we simply going along when others take the initiative? Where do we stand, for example, with our bilateral recommendation of 1984 "to take steps to declare and establish full fellowship of Word and sacrament" with the Lutherans? Is our ecumenical policy strong enough to generate not simply cooperation and compliance but initiative?

A second remark about mutual recognition: It is realized on all sides that the truly tough sticking point in mutual recognition is bishops. Here United Methodists have a problem. It's not simply that John Wesley couldn't recognize our General Superintendents as bishops. Neither can the majority of Christians (e.g., the two-thirds who are Orthodox or Roman Catholics, among others). The answer does not lie in some unilateral Methodist commission attempting to theologize about our episcopacy. Rather, it has to do with, as our UMC response to the World Council's Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry (BEM) text puts it, our participation with other churches in a succession of multilateral projects of reconciliation of ministries, in COCU for example. I can foresee no widespread mutual recognition of ministers, hence no widespread visible fellowship in Holy Communion, which does not involve, as BEM and COCU recommend, some version of the historic episcopate as "sign though not a guarantee" (as Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry puts it) of the apostolic (i.e., biblical) tradition as the basis of all ministry, lay and ordained. That is the transcending issue represented by the ecumenical discussion about our UMC bishops, namely, the question about the "apostolicity," or in our language, the biblical integrity, of witness in ministry of each church.

This recognizability of our bishops is very nearly the nub of our ecumenical problem concerning an inclusive and visible
church unity. The strategic point is certainly the question now being asked of the United Methodist Church by the Consultation on Church Union. Are we preparing our 1992—or our 1996—decision about COCU with sufficient prudence, care, energy, and initiative? Our response should be influential to many besides ourselves. We are not being asked merely for our consent. We have a responsibility for leadership.

A third remark about mutual recognition: It must include recognition of ordained women.

The United Methodist insistence on an inclusive church unity has vaulted the United Methodist Church way out front in its insistence upon the ordination of women. Mutual recognition of ministers as necessary for visible fellowship in Holy Communion will have to come to terms with this insistence upon inclusiveness.

Finally, some words of admonition here from one who profoundly believes that this United Methodist "distinctive" belongs to the whole church: (1) This question will not be quickly solved. Not in a quadrennium. Not in a decade. Not, possibly, in a century. Real love is patient, and it was John Wesley who defined ecumenical or "catholic" spirit as real love. (2) It won't help to assume that the right position is clearly known, and that it is our own position, and that the appropriate action for Orthodox and Catholics is repentance. However right we may be in seeing "non-theological factors" at work here, the discussion is theological, and our case needs to be put in theological terms that speak the language of the whole church. (3) To prevail, or even to be taken seriously, those theological arguments will have to show that ordination of women is an expression of the apostolic faith. It is hopeless to concede the apostolic tradition to those who oppose. (4) Likewise, it is insufficient to think that we are talking merely about securing recognition of women as ordained ministers of the United Methodist Church. Our basic ecumenical principles commit us to more. Just as there is no true denominational doctrine except as expression of the apostolic faith; just as there is no denominational bishop except as bishop of the whole church;
so there is no such thing as an ordained denominational minister except as a minister of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church—the church which our own Constitution puts first. It might be asked whether mutual recognition of ministers requires that other churches ordain women, although we might well work for that. What is clear is that for the United Methodist Church inclusive church unity must include seeking and asking for recognition of United Methodist Church ordained women as ministers of the only church there is—hence as valid co-celebrants in the practice of visible eucharistic hospitality and fellowship.

And so our third policy point is that the unavoidable immediate step towards the visible ecumenical sign is to work toward a full, inclusive, mutual recognition of members and ministers of the divided churches.

4. That brings us to a fourth element of policy. Granted that our ecumenical councils (WCC, NCCC) do not require full mutual recognition of ministers and members or, indeed, of churches as a requirement for membership, and are thus "pre-conciliar" in character in the technical sense of the term. What would be the basic policy of the United Methodist Church with respect to genuine conciliarity—the most likely form of ecumenical life in the century to come? The historical embodiment of our attainable goal is best viewed as a future truly ecumenical conciliar event, an event that could mean for all the churches what Vatican II meant for Roman Catholics.

We can remind ourselves of the function of an ecumenical council in the classical sense (e.g., the Jerusalem "council" of Acts 15, or the Council of Nicaea), namely, as an event called to confess the apostolic faith to the church’s religious and non-religious contemporaries. A truly ecumenical council means an event in which authorized representatives of all churches come together, when necessary, to exercise the church’s universal or ecumenical magisterium (authoritative teaching office). There is no lack of church attempts to confess the faith today. The tragedy is that the church has lost its capacity to speak authoritatively with one teaching voice. There is no ecumenical
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magisterium today, a major change from the days in which both Orthodox and Catholic developed rationales for a universal magisterium. There is no instrumentality for addressing the common Word of Christian faith and hope to our contemporaries in the name of the whole Christian community on issues of enormous import—abortion, birth control, racism, poverty, euthanasia, nuclear energy and weapons, not to mention such issues as baptism and mixed marriages. Although authoritative church teaching today must be rightly and creatively diversified, diversity cannot and should not rationalize the sheer contradiction in much church teaching. Those contradictory teachings are no small reason for what we call the authority crisis today. They cripple witness. Our resolutions end up in archives and footnotes. No particular church can speak for all, not even if its Pope addresses the United Nations. And no present group of churches can either. The WCC constitution, for its part, makes it utterly clear that the WCC has no authority to speak for its member churches any farther than they may ask it to do so. Who speaks for the church?

And yet the impression grows that the churches are increasingly wanting ecumenical organizations to speak and act on their behalf, especially on issues of high technical complexity, such as bio-medical research, for example. Is there a growing conciliar magisterium in our time, and what should United Methodist policy be toward that?

_Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry_ provides a highly interesting example of this problem, and perhaps a hint of the way ahead. Strictly speaking, the WCC is a house in which the churches can carry on an ecumenical conversation with each other. But in this case the churches asked the WCC to do more—to summarize their sixty-year-long conversation on baptism, eucharist, and ministry, and to submit the result to the churches.

You know the outcome: unprecedented interest. The Lima text on _Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry_ is the most widely translated, published, and used text in modern ecumenical history; six volumes of official responses from the churches
published already with a seventh in preparation; a hundred-page WCC analysis of the responses now in the hands of the churches; plans for a Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order in 1993 to help the churches assess the import of all this for their future relations with one another.

But the most interesting aspect is that the WCC, rather naturally and without much premeditation, did not simply summarize the discussion. It went on to ask the churches four basic questions about the BEM text and its possible role in the churches' lives and ecumenical policies. One church refused to respond, and their letter showed that they understood the point I am trying to make: the WCC has no constitutional authority, they said, to ask such questions of a member church. But the astonishing thing is that 189 churches (so far) did not raise that question but did respond, and moreover wished the project well—including the whole spectrum: the Vatican and the Ecumenical Patriarchate, the Salvation Army and the Quakers, the Pentecostals, the Anglicans, the Protestants, the free churches, and all the major member churches in the WCC. Moreover, they took seriously the invitation to respond to BEM from "the highest appropriate levels of authority," officially.

The WCC's constitution insists that the WCC is not an ecumenical magisterium. But as any teacher knows, questions teach. In these official responses the WCC has been accorded something like a de facto authority as a questioner in the ecumenical conversation among the churches. It is not a mere host or enabler in the ecumenical conversation house. Moreover, that de facto authority is further attested by the remarkable fact that a number of churches have found it advisable or even necessary to create their own more adequate magisterial instrument in order to produce a response on a level this fundamental.

Our own church is an example. As we all know, the General Conference is our highest doctrinal authority under our standards of doctrine. Our General Conference nevertheless saw fit to devise a special magisterial process in order to produce our official response to BEM. Our own ecumenical commission was

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given authority (and it carried out the task extremely well!) to create a many-sided process of consultation, of local study, of special commissions, of drafting and redrafting. It was then asked to submit the provisional draft to our Council of Bishops who, upon realizing the magnitude of the assignment, docketed it in two of their semiannual meetings before they were ready to approve it—unanimously, if I remember correctly—as the official United Methodist response to BEM from our “highest appropriate level of authority.”

Curious! The General Conference itself asked the bishops, who have by Constitution no voice or vote in the General Conference where our denominational magisterium is located, to participate in, indeed to consummate, the process of formulating our church’s most authoritative response on questions of basic authoritative church teaching. I submit that something more than an episcopacy of general superintendency was stirring in the instincts which created that process.

But our concern here is what occasioned this remarkable constitutional improvisation on our part, if not the presence of an ecumenical questioner whom we felt in our bones asked questions of us with real authority to do so, and required authoritative answers from us of corresponding weight.

What is happening here exceeds our vision, as yet, but it is going to require a United Methodist policy on conciliarity—or, in our own lingo, an ecumenical policy about “connection” and “conferencing.” Somewhere between 1990 and a future truly ecumenical conciliar event (say around 2050) will lie hard ecumenical work on developing the presuppositions which can surmount the difficulties preventing such an event today.

Our preparatory work will have to focus the task of such a conciliar event upon an act of common witness, for example, on expressing to our contemporaries the common apostolic faith and our hope about survival on this planet, and it must do so in convergent terms not yet within our grasp. Moreover, such an event would require that we be able to lay our concern before God in a common act of eucharistic worship, a fellowship in Holy Communion still beyond us.
Again, such an event would require mutual recognition of all bishops as ministers of the churches' unity in the apostolic faith, and at the same time bring into the event the inclusive representation of both laity and clergy, both male and female, old and young, which our UMC Constitution is so concerned about—an understanding of representation which neither we nor the Christian tradition yet possesses.

I think you see my point. A future truly ecumenical event will have to presuppose some solution to many of our present-day dilemmas. The power to focus is one thing that makes this vision so interesting. And the sharp point of such a vision's demand for United Methodists will be our need for a policy about conciliarity and the ecumenical magisterium.

That truly ecumenical conciliar event will happen only if the churches really want it. Does the United Methodist Church want such an event of ecumenical witness?

I believe that as a visible embodiment of a basic ecumenical policy rooted in our understanding of the gospel itself we should be leaders in asking for it. Like John Wesley, our church understands its own life to require participation in the wider ecumenical church. It believes in the sanctification of the church as well as in the sanctification of persons. It has a missional passion therefore to press for the growth of the ecumenical movement and the common, undivided, unhindered mission of the whole church. It believes that the sign of an inclusive visible fellowship in Holy Communion is not only realistic but attainable in the history of our time (cf. the UMC response to BEM in Churches Respond to BEM, Vol. II [Geneva: WCC, 1986] 177). And it believes that this process of church renewal is of decisive importance for the healing and renewal of our broken human community today.

And so our fourth policy point is this: The historical embodiment of our attainable policy goal is best viewed as a future truly ecumenical conciliar event.
Conclusion

I have tried to show that this ecumenical commitment, these ecumenical principles, and much if not most of these ecumenical policies are already implicit in United Methodism's understanding of its own essential constitution. My hope is for a basic ecumenical policy in our church which lets the implicit become very explicit—as explicit as the works of love which evidence real faith—as God "perfects us in one."
EARLY IN 1990, WESLEY THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY joined with Washington Theological Consortium to host a conference on youth ministry. Sponsored by the Lilly Foundation, the conference title was "Aflame for the Future: Youth and the Evangelization of American Culture." The keynote speaker's address was a sophisticated liberal theological critique of North American culture. Western culture, he said, has interpreted the concept of freedom in terms of freedom from limits and freedom for self-fulfillment. This creates a moral vacuum that can only be overcome, according to the speaker, by a "global moral obligation" and a "catholic vision of unity within the inclusiveness of a multi-cultural reality."

While most of the theological educators in attendance were still nodding affirmatively at this wisdom (which many of us take for granted), the pulpit was taken by an articulate spokesman for a counterculture evangelical position. His response was neither liberal nor polite. The future of the church did not lie within some glorious polyglot, pluralistic cultural environment.

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That was only a disguise for the cultural conspiracy, headed by technological interests and encouraged by the mass media, to create uniformity in everything from dress and music to politics and religion. The responder called youth to rally to a new Christian "party," one that would celebrate life against the grim effort to create sameness.

Fifty young persons attended the conference as "reality testers." One declared that he did not understand the vocabulary of the presenters. He didn't know exactly what a "catholic vision of unity within the inclusiveness of a multicultural reality" might be, or what was implied by a "Christ against culture" position. Nevertheless, he demanded to know why there were so many superficial differences that divided the members of the consultation into denominations, noting that the Roman Catholics at the conference had Mass at 7:30 every morning, and the Protestants had Holy Communion at 8:00.

The young delegate's question cut through the acrimonious academic discussion between a liberal and evangelical agenda for the church. During the four-day conference, the youth delegates at this event kept pestering adult delegates about church unity. These young people had a vision of a reconciling gospel, and it was one that they simply would not let go.

Despite their tenacity, however, no adult speaker and no responder presented them with any program for Christian unity. No one taught the young Christians that there is the present historic possibility of a new church framework called the "Church of Christ Uniting," at once fully "catholic, evangelical and reformed." No theologian at this consultation engaged the minds and hearts of either young or old with the current plan for a revolutionary covenanting framework now being dreamed into reality by nine Protestant churches (all represented at the consultation). No seminary professor at this conference even hinted that a historic theological agreement has been reached on the apostolic faith or that this consensus heralds "a new kind of ecclesial reality" engendered by covenantal communion in faith, sacraments, ministry, and mission.
The consultation leadership never adequately addressed the persistent yearnings of the young for church unity but proceeded to commission them to go forth into mission. Even the youngest delegates, however, seem to sense the difficulty of doing mission from a divided house. Their concern, I believe, is well stated in the Constitution of the United Methodist Church: "The Church of Jesus Christ exists in and for the world, and its very dividedness is a hindrance to its mission in the world."

**A Theological Agenda**
**Guided by Denominational Interests**

The dynamics at the Lilly Vision Conference are not unique; in fact, they offer a paradigm of what often occurs in mainline theological education and with denomination leadership at all levels. The designers of the consultation never heeded the questions of unity coming from the young because ecumenical convergencies are not a part of their everyday working life and thought.

Most church leaders operate from a denominational perspective that rarely includes the language or root metaphors of ecumenism. Church unity simply did not occur to these church leaders. They failed, therefore, to mention the new possibilities for unity contained in the Church of Christ Uniting or even to point out the exciting ongoing international youth work of the World Council of Churches.

My impression is that, in spite of a few examples of seminary faculty who use the ecumenical texts, Christian unity is seldom seriously engaged in the classroom or its possibilities preached from local United Methodist pulpits. Most laity are as yet unfamiliar with the work of the Consultation on Church Union and are only vaguely acquainted with its implications.
THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

The Church of Christ Uniting

UNITED METHODISTS AT ALL LEVELS OF CHURCH GOVERNANCE need to be informed about the twenty years of hard theological work that has resulted in the doctrinal agreements contained in the COCU Consensus. This historic agreement by the nine parent denominations on what constitutes the core of the apostolic faith has enabled a new vision of church unity. The principle document for the Church of Christ Uniting is "Churches in Covenant Communion: The Church of Christ Uniting."

COCU is a concept of unity in which member churches retain their own denominational names, identity, church governments, liturgy, and patterns of ministerial training and placement. Yet, COCU is a new ecclesial reality in which the partners in covenant will accept an irreducible minimum of eight "elements" which include a common apostolic faith, recognition of members in one baptism, and mutual recognition and reconciliation of the ordained ministry.

This is not a plan to build a new superchurch: COCU rejected a plan for institutional union in 1970. COCU is essentially not a political but a theological structure that will enable the nine members of this Protestant faith to join in visible table and pulpit fellowship. Through the acceptance of mutual ministries, the partner churches intend to build a more effective mission to the world.

The Importance of Immediate Education

ECUMENICAL EDUCATION IS CRITICAL AT THIS MOMENT in the history of the church. The nine participating denominations in COCU are called to take action within five years by the highest governing body of each church. The next General Conference meets in 1992. Five years is not a very long time to convince a large and diverse membership that the new ecclesial reality of a reconciled and reconciling household of faith is a better way
than the parochial interests of denominational self-preservation.  

A short timetable makes it urgent that seminary educators and denominational leaders immediately become intentional advocates for the Church Uniting. Neither laity nor clergy have yet discovered the implications for our common life that may be transformed by national, regional and local covenanting councils contained in the consensus.

If we wish to make a difference in this historic moment, there are at least four teaching initiatives that United Methodist seminaries (and conference leaders) could undertake to bridge the knowledge gap between the ecumenical representatives of the denomination and the general constituency of the church.

Four Initiatives

1. Sharing the Best-Kept Secret

The best-kept secret in the United Methodist Church is the theological consensus for covenanting approved by the Sixteenth Plenary of the Consultation on Church Union in 1984. The name given in 1988 to the nine churches seeking covenantal communion, the Church of Christ Uniting, is virtually unknown in the annual conferences. A totally unscientific and informal poll of students at my seminary produced disappointing but not unexpected results. "Is the Church of Christ Uniting the same as the United Church of Christ?" "Is the Church of Christ uniting with another denomination?" Most students had heard the acronym COCU but could not give the initials definition or content. Often I heard the common perception: "COCU? I thought it died earlier in this decade." Only one student knew about the Consensus and could name the partner churches. The Peninsula Conference had sent the documents to all pastors, including student pastors, and this very bright young man had paid careful attention.

The first initiative of the seminaries must be simply informational. Ways must be found to inform faculty, ad-
ministrators, staff and students about the Church Uniting. For many in the seminary community the ecclesiastical reality of a Church Uniting will be entirely new data. Some will immediately ask questions about "merger" and will need to read the basic documents for clarification. The eight elements of covenanting found in the document "Churches in Covenant Communion" are particularly important.

If United Methodist seminaries are to become centers of information on the Church Uniting, a good beginning would be to stock bookstores and libraries with the critical texts. Our careless stocking of an ecumenical library is a predictable indication of minimal scholarly interest. In addition, one of the valuable gifts seminary scholars give to the church is in the area of research and writing. Interpretive essays on the Church Uniting written for denominational publications would be welcome. Whether in the classroom, on the lecture circuit in annual conferences, or in research and writing, denominational leaders should enlist the talent in its seminary faculties to help the denomination answer questions of the sufficiency and claim of the two consenting documents.

2. Do "Others" Pass the Test?

Traditionally, questions around church unity involve issues of doctrine or polity. The question then becomes whether the questing partners are on the "orthodox" side of that issue or not. But it is rarely a simple yes or no proposition. In official ecumenical conversations, if the theological water is too acidic, delegates may literally take an Alka Seltzer and come back to the table after dinner. Faced with the same situation, church members who are unfamiliar with the issues may not know whether to return to the table for further discussion.

Litmus tests on membership, doctrine, liturgy and ministry are a temptation for those just entering the ecumenical process. Since the majority of the membership of the United Methodist Church will soon be joining into this multilateral conversation, partisan interest groups within the body should be encouraged to be restrained in lifting up one narrowly drawn
issue or another as a litmus test for unity. Most United Methodists will never be able to enter into the theological struggles that produced the covenanting document. However, the initiative of the seminaries to teach and interpret the basic documents in pastor’s schools, retreat settings, and local congregations would go a long way toward facilitating an understanding of the process of covenanting.

If the first task of the seminaries is disseminating correct information about the content of the Consensus and the process of covenanting, then the second initiative to follow is a conscious decision to be interpreters of the documents. The first responsibility, of course, is “in-house” education. How will the COCU documents find their way into the seminary curriculum? The history of the ecumenical movement, for example, is now considered by many scholars to be a teaching discipline with its own set of texts and traditions. Where is this history being taught in seminary courses? How does this current history become as “alive” in our seminary life as the Reformation or the Evangelical revival? Some church historians believe that we are living in a time of ecclesiastical formation as important, in its own way, as the early church councils were in their time.

The learners that we educate in the seminary environment become the teachers of the faith as they return to student pastorates on the weekend. The only information that many congregations will receive on the Church Uniting will come from student pastors. Surely, then, one key to unlocking the interpretive treasures of this emerging vision of the church in its wholeness is in the hands of United Methodist seminaries. The seminary communities can become centers of information and interpretation to help restore balance and discourage litmus testing, which artificially limits the ecumenical dialogue.

3. But Don’t We Celebrate Diversity? Then Why the Quest for Unity?

Can’t you hear it: “We were just getting used to the celebration of diversity!” Diversity is officially affirmed in United
Methodist seminaries. Uniformity is sought, however, by each interest group within the community. Feminists are determined to change exclusive language. African-American seminarians are committed to eliminating racism. Evangelicals fear that relativism and universalism are undermining the particularity of the gospel. Those influenced by liberation theology lobby the rich on behalf of "God's preferential option for the poor." Seminarians whose first language is not English advocate for their own history and culture in the classroom. Each interest group is dedicated to a just cause.

Sometimes, however, partisans openly denigrate Christians who advocate agendas they do not understand or deem worthy. It is not always easy to achieve harmony and neighborly love in a climate of diversity. What, then, is the true nature of diversity in a seminary environment? Is it a rich symbol of the Body of Christ or an uneasy reminder of a fragmented church that is "crippled in proclaiming a reconciling gospel to a broken and divided world"?

The affirmation of diversity in United Methodist seminaries is welcome. But an environment where "differences are affirmed, accepted, and celebrated" desperately needs a point of focus. Cultural relativism, with the proposition that all intellectual positions are equally worthy and all ethical standards are of equal value, has become an attractive option for North Americans, including many seminarians. This view threatens to break down the true foundation of diversity in the seminary.

The commitment of the nine partner denominations to seek visible unity with wholeness through the COCU Consensus is thus very timely. A church truly "catholic, evangelical and reformed" provides order and stability in faith, ministries, sacraments and mission. The watchword of the Church Uniting is "Unity without Uniformity." The Church Uniting document locates the question of the "diversity, equality, and dignity of all persons" in a powerful "Confession of Faith" (Consensus: V. 17, p. 32). Diversity does not depend on sociological trends or subjective feelings; instead, diversity is affirmed and inexorably
linked to thankful confession. The language is even stronger in the latest document.

Is it possible to have unity and differences? Yes, if unity is understood as it is in the COCU consensus as "a gift to be made visible." The time has come to set the justice agenda into an ecumenical framework. Annual conference cabinets might take the initiative to study and live out the model of unity proposed in Consensus II and III. Those seminary faculties that do their intellectual work in theological consortiums are ideally placed to live as ecumenical advocates and to initiate conversations on the Church Uniting with other schools.

5. Is it Wesleyan?

No one knows for sure how our spiritual progenitors would have regarded this plan. Scholars have written persuasively of the distinctly "catholic" nature of the Wesleys' thought. John Wesley utilized Anglican, Moravian, Reformed, Lutheran, and Eastern Orthodox ideas in his theology. We ecumenists suspect that he would be pleased with the Church Uniting and ask Charles to write a new hymn celebrating this time of covenanting. Methodist leaders certainly have made an enormous contribution to the ecumenical conversations through the years.

The nature of teaching authority is of critical importance for all denominations in the climate of relativism that dominates our society. The cultural diversity of the United States impinges on almost all the major decisions we make concerning ministry in our conference structure. The climate of extreme individualism in doctrinal matters fosters a lack of purpose and direction in the church. In response, some United Methodists urged the General Conference of 1988 to implement stronger doctrinal standards from the early Wesleyan tradition. In this present quadrennium, commissions have been mandated to study baptism, and same-sex relationships and to continue the process of trying to order our ministries. United Methodism has no clearly designated magisterium, or teaching office, to help us decide such matters. We are a conciliar church, and the
ultimate decisions in faith and order belong to the General Conference, whose rulings make their way into the Discipline.

As the nine denominations come to covenanting, each must face squarely the question of how much authority to accord their own history and traditions. How much weight should United Methodists in the closing years of the twentieth century give, for example, to John Wesley’s or Francis Asbury’s understanding of faith, sacraments and ministry? Wesleyan questions are internally useful within the denomination. The authority to become a member of the Church Uniting, however, probably does not rely so much on each partner’s traditional ancestors as on the ecumenical convergencies of this century.

Ecumenists would claim that the question, “Is it Wesleyan?” is not the most important query in the long view. The truth is that the major agendas of our denomination as well as the docket for the larger order in the body of Christ is being ordered by a new kind of magisterium. The teaching office to which we all attend is located somewhere in the structures of ecumenical dialogues. There is no one location and no one teacher. At one time, a teaching consensus emerges from the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches. At another time, a teaching consensus emanates from the many bilateral discussions that continue among the denominations.

The best example of the power of this ecumenical teaching office is in the content of the United Methodist Book of Worship. To be sure, the final product was a denominational labor of several years. Wesleyan theology has always been shaped by a sung liturgy, and this new hymnbook will form our self-identity for years to come. The amazing new form and feel of the sacramental liturgies, the rite of Christian Marriage and the service of Death and Resurrection, as well as the new Morning and Evening Prayer services are instantly recognizable and consistent with the liturgical forms found in equally new Episcopal, Lutheran, Presbyterian, and United Church of Christ hymnal and service books. A consensus on suitable hymnody for our time has grown across denominational lines during the last two decades. The agenda for our worship life in Christ has
been transformed by a spiritual power that seems beyond the scope of any one denomination.

In the same way, it is possible that the theological consensus of the COCU covenanting document will also drive the agenda as member denominations consider issues of the ordering of ministries. Inner-denominational commissions, as the one we have currently discussing baptism and confirmation, must carefully take into consideration the conclusions already forged in ecumenical consultations, or our denomination will lose credibility in the world of the universal church.

Make no mistake, however; our traditions and heritage are of vital importance not only to us as United Methodists but also as we contribute our unique vision of the gospel to the larger body of Christ. In the Uniting Church that identity is affirmed and maintained. The fact is, however, that something larger than individual traditions is driving the basic agenda of emerging church doctrine and policy. A case can be made, therefore, that the faith and order of the church is no longer shaped in the academic academy of the seminary, or in the local politics of individual denominations. When the churches began to pray for church unity several decades ago, we were unprepared for the fact that God does answer prayer. A new glimpse of church life is taking its shape in all kinds of interfaith discussions. Seminary faculties will need to play an ever more important role in the balancing act so essential to a Church Uniting; that is, continuing in the task of maintaining a living Wesleyan tradition (discouraging Wesleyan fundamentalism) while participating in and advocating for the current reformation of the church.

Conclusions

Five Initiatives await seminary action:

1. Share the secret of covenanting communion by becoming information centers for the Church of Christ Uniting.
2. Commit to interpret the ecumenical documents in a way that will provoke and stimulate but will discourage litmus testing.
3. Accept a formal or informal mandate to help the denomination answer questions of sufficiency and claim.
4. Model unity without uniformity in seminary and consortium life.
5. Encourage a balance between the Wesleyan heritage and the ecumenical convergencies which now consciously or unconsciously drive the agenda of the body of Christ.

Reformation is a living reality in the body of Christ. Prayerfully and quite seriously we may need a converting moment in our denomination—a moment when we consciously choose to become members of a new confessing family of faith. In this moment we purposefully move out of our self-identifiable turf and thrust ourselves into the yet unknown winds of the Holy Spirit.

This essay began with one event in the Lilly Foundation Consultation on Youth ministries. For many youth and young adults the church is on trial. They search for a meaning system and a commitment worthy of their lives. Again and again, persons of all ages ask why there is so much division and denominational self-absorption. The Church of Christ Uniting is a worthy vision for all generations.

Those of us in seminary education have the task of teaching and interpreting that vision. We need to recruit and recruit and recruit new leadership for the ecumenical future. The call for seminary educators to exercise a measure of the teaching office is abundant and clear. There is also the option, of course, that we may be the last to know.

Notes


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from the Consultation on Church Union, Research Park, 151 Wall Street, Princeton, N.J., 08540-1514.
2. "Churches in Covenant Communion: The Church of Christ Uniting," (Consultation on Church Union, 1985). Copies are available from the Consultation on Church Union (see note 1 for address).
3. Excellent study materials on the Church of Christ Uniting are available from the General Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns of the United Methodist Church (GCCUCIC), Room 1300, 475 Riverside Drive, New York, N.Y. 10115.
Dr. Jane Cary Peck, associate professor of religion and society, Andover Newton Theological School, was specifically invited to address the Yahara consultation from a personal perspective. Committed to ecumenism and its expressions in ecumenical agencies, Dr. Peck's teaching had been marked by the use of ecumenical issues, materials, leadership persons, and experiences. Her work—and indeed her life—exemplified the conference theme of "Christian unity and interreligious concerns in theological education."

Dr. Peck made the following presentation in Madison, Wisconsin, on March 23, 1990, having travelled from Nicaragua, where she and her husband were spending their sabbatical doing research and development work. Later that month she flew to Seoul, Korea, as a United Methodist delegate to the World Council of Churches Consultation on "Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation." From there she went directly to Uppsala, Sweden, for a meeting of the Life and Peace Institute, on which she served as a director. It was in early May, in Sweden, that she was hospitalized, and she returned immediately to the United States to begin treatment for a malignancy. Jane Cary Peck died on September 10, 1990, at age 58. Earlier this year, she was awarded posthumously the 1991 New England United Methodist Award for Excellence in Social Justice Actions by the Southern New England Annual Conference.

Because her presentation was written under difficult circumstances in Nicaragua, Dr. Peck intended to revise it substantially. Unfortunately, her deteriorating health prevented her from carrying out this work. Following her death, I prepared the manuscript for publication, without, of course, the additional material that Dr. Peck would have
Gleanings along an Ecumenical Journey

I HAVE BEEN ASKED TO SHARE WITH YOU the ways in which, as a United Methodist professor, I have found opportunities to incorporate an ecumenical perspective into my teaching of social ethics. I've also been asked to share ways in which I have familiarized my classes with national and international ecumenical agencies, resources, and persons of leadership in order that my students may use those sources in their future ministry. Finally, the planning committee asked me, "How did you get that way?" And that may be the hardest question of all!

The task, however, has given me a rich opportunity to reflect on how ecumenical elements have influenced my profession and brought me to this place. In that reflection on my own journey, I have become aware of how much ecumenical experience has blessed my life from the very beginning and in all its dimensions.

I have experienced the global community of believers in ecumenical worship, in study, and in action/reflection within the institutional and denominational church and in many forms of councils of churches.

I have been part of the one Body of Christ in its amazing many-splendored diversity-in-unity—and in its shameful, soul-wrenching, unfaithfulness and brokenness-in-disunity, along with its sometimes tedious plenaries, male-dominated small groups, and occasionally boring worship.

I have experienced the spiritual and political power of the global ecumenical community in prophetic actions, in solidarity, and in sharing with interreligious Third World task forces and special delegations—one to El Salvador in a time of grave threat to the church and another to the five
Central American presidents and National Commissions of Reconciliation on behalf of their Esquipulas Peace Plan.

I have experienced ecumenical vitality, challenge, and nourishment in faith-based communities of justice, peacemaking, and sisterhood, transcending all boundaries and barriers. In these communities our common calling, passion, and commitment are celebrated in and fed by shared Eucharist, prayer, and rich engagement with Scripture and each other's life experience.

Professor Janice Love, a United Methodist member of the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches (WCC), sees the world as a "necrophilic system," founded on "materialism, Machiavellianism, militarism, and patriarchy." It is ecumenical experience that has called me out of that system and into what Jose Miguez Bonino calls "the oikoumene of solidarity." This "oikoumene of solidarity" is an order of mutual support, common concern and suffering, and joint celebration and hope among solidarity organizations and churches of the North and South America and the world ecumenical movement. The radical faith of this movement is that "the reality of God is more decisive than the reality of the world as it is" and that the reality of God demands "transformation of understanding, repentance, and conversion." In this movement the poor and marginal--especially including, I would add, women and young people--are the human bearers of the miraculous possibility of change, their "hopeful suffering containing the possibility of a new and different oikoumene, of solidarity and life." The oikoumene of solidarity is the foundation for my teaching of social ethics. It is also the vision for my ecumenical work and for global justice and peace in the Church, the seminary, and the world.
IT WASN'T THE MOST AUSPICIOUS BEGINNING for an ecumenical journey. I grew up in a small Georgia town of Methodists and Baptists, where the few Presbyterians were regarded as a kind of strange sect! But I was nurtured by a mother strongly influenced by her college experience in the YWCA with its global, ecumenical, and rich theological perspectives; and I was formed by the local Methodist Youth Fellowship, the North Georgia Conference's Camp Glisson, and by high school "Y" experiences. My Christian faith and vocational direction were influenced by my leadership in the YWCA of Wesleyan College (Georgia), with its international and interracial speakers and its Student Christian Movement conferences, as well as publications such as motive and Concern. In 1954, I attended the Evanston Assembly of the WCC as a Wesley Foundation director at Georgia State College for Women and Georgia Military College. In 1966, while I was a student at Boston University School of Theology, I took a course in ethics from Dean Walter C. Muelder, who was preparing to participate in the 1966 WCC Church and Society Conference held in Geneva. As I studied its four volumes of materials, I was led to my vocation as an ecumenical ethicist in theological education.

I am a member of the faculty at Andover Newton Theological School, an American Baptist and United Church of Christ seminary. A highly ecumenical seminary itself, it belongs to the Boston Theological Institute Ecumenical seminary consortium. For the thirteen years that I have taught at Andover Newton, I have been a member of the United Methodist delegation on the NCC Governing Board, serving this year as vice-president. My extensive involvement in the WCC as a United Methodist representative includes the 1979 Church and Society Conference on "Faith, Science, and the Future," held at M.I.T.; a 1983 WCC pre-assembly delegation visitation to the churches in Cuba; the 1983 Sixth Assembly of the WCC held in Vancouver; plans to attend the upcoming 1991 Seventh Assembly of the WCC, to be held in Canberra,
Australia; two emergency delegations to Central America, composed of representatives of the WCC, NCCC, and the Latin American Council of Churches; and participation as a delegate to the 1990 WCC Convocation on "Justice, Peace, and the Integrity of Creation" in Seoul, Korea.

As a local church person serving on ecumenical bodies of the wider church, I am a lay member of my town's Ecumenical Association, composed of lay and clergy representatives from each church in Williamstown, Massachusetts. My ecumenical work has also included membership on the board of an international ecumenical peace research organization, the Life and Peace Institute, based in Uppsala, Sweden, and extensive work with Witness for Peace, a faith-based organization of U.S. citizens in solidarity with the people of Nicaragua.

United Methodist Faculty Leadership Involvement

I HAVE SHARED THIS WITH YOU, at the planning committee's request, to indicate to you the ways in which my teaching and my commitments have arisen out of the context of this intentional ecumenical and global involvement.

Of course, I am not unique in this regard. The ecumenical movement depends on many persons whose "home base" is the theological seminary. Through their own ecumenical experiences, these persons have drawn inspiration, insights, and knowledge for teaching ecumenics. In so doing, they are helping to create an ecumenical ethos and global perspective in our seminaries. United Methodist seminary faculty members have contributed, and been enriched by, ecumenical experiences in the following ways:

participation in WCC, NCCC, or the Consultation on Church Union (COCU) plenaries, meetings, and committees, as delegates, advisors, participant/observers, or stewards
as members of the Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns (CCUIC), at the annual conference or general church level

within a local ecumenical organization, such as a council of churches or a clergy association

as consultants to an ecumenical agency or its task forces, or as speakers for special events

as members of ecumenical peace and justice advocacy groups on any number of specialized issues, many within an international context

as researchers in ecumenical studies (on theological issues or on the work of scholars from across the ecclesiological spectrum)

as contributors to ecumenical publications, including: the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible; the Inclusive Language Lectionary; "Justice, Peace, and the Integrity of Creation" preparatory materials; NCCC studies of the Church and "Apostolic Faith," "Homosexuality," "The Community of Women and Men in the Church," and "Foundations for Ecumenical Commitment;" and Peace Research and Human Rights Advocacy;

utilizing WCC and NCCC study books and resource materials

bringing ecumenical leaders to the seminary as speakers or preachers; and being such a speaker, with an explicitly ecumenical, interreligious, or international focus

developing a Visiting Scholar Program across national, denominational, or religious boundaries

participating in ecumenical groups, contributing United Methodist faculty publications and research.

There are other numerous ways in which such opportunities present themselves to faculty who are intentional about their ecumenical involvement for the sake of the seminary and the students they teach.
Using Ecumenical Resources in Theological Education

In my classes we try to develop among ourselves a learning community of mutual resourcing and enrichment, including searching and questioning. In this environment, we can intentionally work on developing and practicing the values of an ecumenical community. Students are expected to learn their own denominations' positions and resources—people and publications—on social issues and ecumenism and use them in class presentations and discussions.

Class discussions focus on special events in the lives of churches, such as the reunification of the Presbyterian Church, the 200th anniversary of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, and the decisions by the American Baptist Churches and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to reaffirm their memberships in the NCCC and the WCC. Once we had the opportunity to discuss the election of one of our class members as moderator of the United Church of Christ! We put emphasis on events within ecumenical bodies themselves, such as the WCC's Faith and Order Commission's development of the Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry (BEM) document and its accompanying "Lima Liturgy," bilateral dialogues between churches. We also take up issues of conflict, such as the application for membership in the NCCC by the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches, the Reader's Digest "60 Minutes" furor, the WCC Programme to Combat Racism grants and program, the publication of the NCCC Inclusive Language Lectionary, among others. As a class, we struggle together on issues of unity and justice.

In any one of these issues, all the disciplines of theological study are present: Scripture, Church history, theology, ethics, communication, and so forth. Ecumenical issues, events, and resources provide superb content for an inductive method of teaching social ethics. A host of courses are possible with any combination of this subject matter. The World Council of Churches provides resources for and from major international...
gatherings, which often include media presentations, posters and packets, liturgies and prayers.

**Spiritual Enrichment**

**MANY ECUMENICAL RESOURCES CAN BE ADAPTED** for ongoing use. Let me give you a few examples:

Ecumenical worship resources have enriched the beginning of my classes. The worship book from the Sixth Assembly of the World Council, "Jesus Christ—the Life of the World," includes music, prayers, and litanies—all in at least four languages. Using a page that is multilingual reminds everyone that Christ is not captive to American church life and links us with the Christian communities in many cultures.

The Ecumenical Prayer Cycle, "With All God's People," is outlined into 52 sections for each week of the year. Each part of the world where Christian churches exist is lifted up with a simple map, a brief history of Christianity in that country or region, prayers from their churches' worship life, and a description of what issues Christians are struggling with there. These become part of each week's prayers. By the time students complete my class, they have an education in church life and devotion and an additional exposure to global Christian experience.

Each year the Consultation on Church Union, in cooperation with the three historic black Methodist churches, publishes a Lenten devotional booklet entitled, "Liberation and Unity." Students who use this booklet see Christian devotion from another perspective as they hear the salvation story expressed with a different cultural viewpoint.

These ecumenical resources have been used in student presentations and at times of celebration or sorrow in class. These materials integrate spirituality/worship, global and multiracial perspectives, Christian unity, and justice and peace concerns. Students who have been introduced to these
ecumenical and global resources will widen their own horizons, and take this wider vision of the church into the congregations they will serve.

Specific Courses

Both the National and the World Council of Churches are deeply involved in issues of social justice, and because of this many of their conferences and background materials provide analyses of political, economic, and human rights issues. Because the World Council reflects the world’s diversity, events and the preparatory materials frequently contain a unique, global perspective on such issues. This approach to questions of church in society can be quite different from anything students from the United States have seen before. The problems of hunger, militarism, family, war, and water (to mention just a few) sound new when they are formulated from another language base. Students may discover fresh areas of concern and sense the urgent need for solutions. Students who are exposed to different cultural patterns often find a totally different prism through which to see justice issues.

In the WCC area, phrases that have become important frequently represent major themes or emphases, and each of those have provided course titles: "Faith, Science, and the Future," "A Just, Participatory, Sustainable Society," "The Ecumenical Decade: Churches in Solidarity with Women," "Justice, Peace, and the Integrity of Creation," "Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry," and "Your Will Be Done: Mission in Christ's Way." An ample bibliography accompanies each class, and relevance continues long after the themes or conferences cease to be in the calendar. Midstream, The Ecumenical Review, and The International Review of Missions, for example, are journals that offer commentary, dialogue, and response to these themes. Frequently, an article will summarize a series of responses. (For example, the responses to BEM alone have provided six successive volumes!)
Continuing with the WCC, the work of some of its units frequently disclose issues of conflict, autonomy, and authority, as well as biblical or theological insights. The controversial Programme to Combat Racism raises questions regarding marginal and radical organizations. When those occur in the United States, the students are confronted with justice-seeking groups they did not even know existed. Some students have chosen to do research on such groups, such as the Association of Haitian Workers, the Black Consciousness Movement, the Gathering of the Peoples Group (with the Anishinabe people), the Training and Research Institute on Migration. Each of these organizations opens up an extensive set of issues of justice, which can awaken students to the needs in their own country.

In the arena of the NCCC, policy statements or resolutions on Latin American issues frequently provide data for a course I teach on Latin American Liberation Ethics. The "Middle East Policy Statement" (a booklet in itself) summarizes the history of both Palestinian and Israeli relationships with the land, the origin of the state of Israel, the role of the Christian church, the issues of security, and human rights. Students using these materials as texts have a foundation not only for a more intelligent reading of the daily newspapers but also for the role of the Church in seeking to provide counsel to the communions regarding problems in these "holy lands."

When the NCCC was reviewing the application of the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches for membership in the NCCC, the papers developed by each of the communions describing their present formal stance toward homosexual persons provided a basis for analyzing the sources of authority in each of the communions, to say nothing about the host of perspectives on homosexual issues by NCCC member communions.

The historical records of both the World Council and the National Council of Churches have been my primary source when I teach a course on "The Social Teachings of the Church." Each class in "ecumenical ethics" gets firsthand experience
with the organizations they have previously recognized only by name. A full day's field trip to the "God Box," as some of my students call 475 Riverside in New York City, includes a visit with top staff of the NCC and the U.S. Office of the World Council. Eight to ten persons either make presentations or are interviewed by students who have special interests in various elements of NCCC and WCC work. When issues and individuals are "personalized" in direct conversation, new learnings and new motivations become apparent in the final papers of the students.

The Seminary Bookstore and Library

As a faculty member, I review each year the new World Council and National Council materials with the head librarian and the manager of the seminary bookstore. Literature is extensive and the WCC publishes an annotated booklet to update its list. This booklet allows us to find useful supplementary material according to the courses being offered each school year.

The library subscribes to all WCC publications and buys almost all of the books. It frequently has special displays during major ecumenical events. The bookstore stocks ecumenical resources beyond those required for courses, and it reviews some in the school newsletter. As an interested ecumenical faculty member, I distribute copies of the WCC publications booklet to the faculty each year.

When I teach, I am committed to raising up a new generation of seminary graduates (of whatever age) who see themselves participating in both the "re-forming" of the church and the creating of a just society. When the work of the academy is united with the life of the Church, I believe that a living reality is evoked within the Body of Christ.
Ecumenical Formation

THE CHURCH URGENTLY NEEDS THE FORMATION and development of strong new ecumenical leadership for ecumenical bodies and our communions. With the changed age and experience composition of our seminary student bodies, those who need to be "evangelized" as new ecumenists will not be the usual "young people" (who might serve as stewards at international meetings) but rather second-or-third career women and men. In that sense, it also becomes the responsibility of the local congregation to provide a place for ecumenical formation.

The great student ecumenical movement and its organizations are no more, but attempts are being made to recover the spirit of the older Inter-Seminary Movement. Perhaps the Women's Inter-Seminary (students) Conference, held annually, provides the closest student ecumenical experience of earlier days. Some seminaries have made a particular effort to see that there is student representation at WCC Assemblies, such as at Vancouver or Canberra, either as accredited visitors or as part of a seminary study-travel seminar (Claremont School of Theology offered credit for students from a number of different seminaries at each of these assemblies). Some denominational ecumenical offices have provided scholarships for particular ecumenical events, such as the annual National Workshop on Christian Unity or the Auburn Theological Seminary sponsored "Ecumenical Moment," in 1989, a ten-day period of "living-learning" exposure to ecumenical issues and leadership at the Stony Point, N.Y. Conference Center. But these events seem few and far between, and therefore the major responsibility still lies with the seminaries.

It is not uncommon that students who have attended ecumenical events become frustrated when they return to find so few student (and also faculty) colleagues willing to share their new visions. One way to cope with this problem has been to urge that at least two representatives (either student or faculty) participate in such events so that momentum at the
seminary can be sustained. In some cases this has resulted in the formation of a student/faculty "Ecumenical Committee" and in applications for the Graduate Program in Ecumenical Studies at the Ecumenical Institute in Bossey, Switzerland. Students (and faculty who have accompanied them) have attended short courses or an exchange semester in the Third World, mostly Latin America or India, which has enriched our own community life on their return.

When I ask students to tell about their "ecumenical experience" at the beginning of some of my courses, the majority report only involvement in annual Thanksgiving or possibly World Day of Prayer ecumenical services. Very few can point to a great deal of involvement, knowledge, or interest in ecumenism by their home or field-education churches. Dr. Wesley Ariarajah, a Sri Lankan Methodist on the WCC staff, once told me a story that illustrates the difference local church involvement in ecumenical issues can make. His formation as an ecumenist, he said, took place because of the influence of his pastor, who reported to his congregation over the years on every ecumenical conference he prepared for and attended and informed them on the great ecumenical issues of the day. That pastor was Dr. D. T. Niles. At least two people who grew up in that church are on the Geneva WCC staff today, and I am sure that others from that congregation are making their ecumenical witness elsewhere. That is the kind of minister I passionately long for our seminaries to educate and nurture.

United Methodist Ecumenical Future

DESPITE OUR RICH DIVERSITY OF FACULTY AND STUDENTS (Protestant, Orthodox, Anglican, and Roman Catholic), we seldom intentionally tap that source in order to deepen the ecumenical movement. A faculty or student body that merely represents denominational loyalties does not an ecumenical seminary make! In most United Methodist seminaries there
are very few courses explicitly related to ecumenics. Ecumeni­
cal consortiums look good on paper, but the field of ecumenism
is rarely included in the crucial task of shaping a theological
curriculum.

Ecumenism is our United Methodist heritage and
commitment. Sometimes, because of our size and complex
organization, I believe we do not notice other members of the
Body of Christ. We expend our greatest time and energy on our
own multiple organizational components, requirements, and
resources. Seminary teaching, scholarship in our particular
disciplines, and committee work are so demanding that we do
not pay attention to the international ecumenical movement,
including our own communion's role and contribution to the
movement. Our seminaries may not take note of our
bishops'-or conference lay people's-ecumenical involvement
and leadership on vital ecumenical issues of the day. Seldom do
we seminary faculty look upon ecumenics as a focus for our next
research project or publication.

Here, therefore, is my "short list" of recommendations that
I, as a United Methodist committed to theological education
and to ecumenism, would make to our United Methodist
seminaries and to our students:

1. Inclusion of commitment to ecumenical and global
theological education in any seminary mission statements or
statements of purpose

2. Attention to ecumenical commitment in hiring regular
and adjunct faculty, in inviting visiting scholars and campus
speakers and preachers, and in designing and revising
curriculum

3. Encouragement of ecumenical research and publication,
with recognition and credit for ecumenical participation in
promotion and tenure consideration

4. A comprehensive library and bookstore provision of
ecumenical resources.

5. A closer relationship between Conference Commissions on
Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns and seminaries
within the conference
6. Specific invitations from seminaries to non-UM board members of NCCC or WCC units who live in the seminary area to speak or engage in informal conversations with students and faculty.

Conclusion

IN THE SUMMER OF 1986, THE ECUMENICAL INSTITUTE in Bossey, Switzerland, and the Programme on Theological Education of the WCC sponsored a ten-day event entitled, "The Teaching of Ecumenics." A superb publication of the same name, containing the papers and recommendations from that conference, should be required reading for professors in any area of seminary education. One of the organizers of this conference, Dr. Daniel F. Martensen, writes about the vital need to teach ecumenics today:

Ecumenics deals with a unique body of material and insight produced by the modern ecumenical movement. This insight and documentation impinges upon the classical theological disciplines but has its own integrity. More importantly, unless the question for Christian unity and common witness and service is addressed in concerted fashion and in self-consciously defined courses of study, the ecumenical memory, to say nothing of the ecumenical vision of the future, will be lost. 3 (emphasis added)

I believe that we who are seminary faculty have a unique opportunity to sustain that memory, articulate that vision, and participate in the shaping of a new ecumenical generation. May that be our common vocation.

Notes

TEACHING FOR ECUMENISM

FOR PREACHERS WHO FOLLOW THE COMMON lec
tionary, the church year is round. The first half springs out
of the ground with John the Baptist each Advent, arching up
through the high feasts of Christmas and Epiphany before
heading back down to earth through Lent and finally landing
back on the horizon with a thud on Good Friday. This half of
the year describes Christ's coming to the world, and with Easter
his journey is complete. For forty days after that unparalleled
event, the church celebrates its risen Lord, but it also con-
templates life without him.

With the feast of Pentecost, the second half of the year
begins. As part of his last will and testament, Jesus breathes
his Holy Spirit upon his disciples and, amid the heat and racket
of many tongues, the church is born. After that, time becomes
more ordinary. There are no great feasts or fasts, but instead
the lections take us on a long, attentive walk through one of
the synoptic Gospels to explore what Christ's life means for our
lives in community.

While the first half of the year describes Christ's coming to
the world, the second half describes the Holy Spirit coming to
the church. It is this part of the larger circle that will concern
us during the last twelve Sundays of the church year. Our guide
this year is Mark, whose short, breathless Gospel served as

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guide for Matthew and Luke as well. Like them, Mark was no reporter of bald facts or curator of interesting stories about Jesus. He was an evangelist whose chief concern was spreading the news that the Messiah had come in the person of Jesus and detailing for his hearers what being the Messiah meant.

Textual Considerations

SCHOLARS SUPPOSE THAT MARK WROTE his Gospel sometime between 64 and 75 A.D.—after Peter's death but before the formation of Matthew and Luke's Gospels—and that he wrote for a gentile Christian community somewhere in the Roman Empire. He seems to know very little about the geography of Palestine; he is harder on the twelve disciples than either of the other synoptic writers and harsher on Jewish customs as well. All of this suggests that he did not write from or for a Semitic culture but a Hellenistic one.

That gives us something in common with him. All of us who preach in a predominantly American culture know how difficult it can be to translate from one culture to another, from there-and-then to here-and-now. While the West appropriated the gospel long ago, we have inherited a tradition that is Middle Eastern at heart. Like Mark, we must work to honor that tradition's Semitic root and universal flower. When preaching from Mark—or from any primary text, for that matter—our interpretation has two parts: first we attend to Mark's own transposition of the gospel from one culture to another and then we make the move from his world to our own.

It is certainly possible to skip this intermediate step. Perfectly adequate preachers do it all the time, plucking a passage from the Bible for its face value and developing it as if it had been composed especially for their own situations. God's grace usually proves sufficient to cover such hubris, but if the integrity of the text is sacrificed the integrity of the sermon may also be lost.

For instance, to preach effectively on Mark 10:2-16—Jesus' teaching on marriage and divorce—we should remember that
we are at least three steps away from the source. At some moment in time, the Pharisees asked Jesus a question and he gave them his answer. But that answer did not survive verbatim; it passed into the oral tradition, where it circulated for a good thirty years before Mark got hold of it. When he incorporated it into his Gospel, he redirected it toward Roman Gentiles.

The clue to that shift in context is found in verse 12. In it, Jesus speaks of women who divorce their husbands and marry again: "...and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery." Jewish law permitted men to divorce their wives but did not grant women the same privilege. So the saying would have made no sense to a Jewish audience. But Roman law allowed a woman to file for divorce, and a Roman audience may have had some questions about that.

Chances are that Mark did what every good preacher does: he presented the tradition as he had received it and then amplified it to cover the circumstances of those to whom he spoke, which were different from those to whom Jesus spoke. Although we do the same thing, our sermons do not spring directly from the rich, primeval soil of Jesus’ own words. Our sermons grow from the sermons of our predecessors, and our yield is best when we take the time to understand how Mark’s sermon differed from Jesus’ sermon and how both sermons inform our own. Doing so, we take our places in the long line of those who struggle to hear and proclaim God’s will in very different times and places.

Another notable difference between Jesus’ listeners, Mark’s readers, and our own readers is their experience of persecution. Mark’s attentiveness to Jesus’ suffering and death suggests that he wrote for a church bloodied by opposition. Both Paul and Peter had been martyred by the time Mark wrote his Gospel, and it is likely that he also knew about Nero’s cruel campaign against Roman Christians from 64-68 A.D. The handwriting was on the wall, and Mark did his best to strengthen his church as they read it. Part of his intention was to remind them of their likeness to their Lord in that respect.
He takes for granted their recognition of Jesus as the Messiah—indeed, it is hard to read Mark's Gospel without sharing his conviction that the Son of man is also the Son of God—but he challenges their assumptions of what being the Messiah means. Over and over they learn that God's chosen one was not sent to win accolades or work magic or rise to temporal power but to take on the forces of evil in a battle to the death—his own death first, but through his death their own death as well, so that no one need fear death in the same way again.

Already by Mark's time there was widespread Jewish belief that the innocent did not suffer in vain, that their willingness to do so benefited all God's people. Still, the idea that the Messiah would appear only to suffer and die was not only repugnant but inconceivable. Consequently, perhaps, Jesus shushed those who witnessed his early miracles, ordering them to tell no one what they had seen or heard. None of them did very well at keeping his messianic secret, but the very request remains puzzling. Why did Jesus wish to avoid recognition? Was he wary of the stereotype of what a Messiah should be and do? Or did he sense the timing was not yet right? Whatever the answer, Mark's whole Gospel divides at 8:29, when Peter recognizes Jesus as the Christ. Jesus still charges his disciples (literally, rebukes them) to tell no one, but after that he begins to teach them what the title means and what it will require of him.

They are not willing students. Three times—in chapters 8, 9, and 10—he spells out his future for them: suffering, rejection, condemnation, death; and three times they fail utterly to comprehend his message. Mark may have sensed that this was not only a theological problem but a human one as well, because the disciples' reactions seem so shamefully familiar to us today. After the first prediction, Peter rejects the truth with enough venom for Jesus to identify him with Satan. Matthew's version of the same encounter (16:13-20) gives us more information. In that account, Peter's rebuke seems to issue from his love for Jesus. "God forbid, Lord! This shall never happen to you," he protests, failing to see that the wish to protect a loved one may
not help but hinder that person from living into the purposes of God.

In chapter nine, when Jesus repeats his hard lesson, the disciples still do not understand, but this time they do not even ask him what he means. Perhaps they are frightened that Jesus will rebuke them as he did Peter. Perhaps they are afraid that Jesus will answer their questions far too plainly. At any rate, fear shuts them up and shuts down their communication with Jesus.

Chapter 10 may offer the most embarrassing scenario of all. Jesus' third prediction of his passion evokes only his disciples' self-interest. First Peter reminds Jesus that he and the others have left everything to follow him (hinting that they could, therefore, slip through the eye of the needle?), and then James and John ask him for a promotion in the kingdom to come.

From our own privileged perspective they all sound like blockheads, but we ought to concede that the church does not seem to have changed very much. We are still unable or unwilling to accept the full magnitude of the powerlessness that we embrace when we follow Jesus Christ.

One interesting feature of all three predictions is that Jesus ends each one with the promise that after three days he will rise. Astonishingly, the disciples' reaction gives no indication that they heard that part of his teaching or questioned it at all. Were they so resistant to the first part of his message that they stopped listening before the end? Or was the end added later—after the fact—so that the readers of Mark's Gospel actually have more information than did the disciples in the original story.

This last question leads to one more about timing, because those of us who read the Bible in the twentieth century know something that Mark and the disciples did not, namely, that time did not come to an end as quickly as any of them believed it would. It is not possible to read Mark's Gospel without being caught up in the rush. One of his favorite words is immediately, but even without that adverb his urgency is palpable. When Jesus appears on earth, time is fulfilled and the kingdom is at
hand (1:15); in days to come, the whole earth will see the Son of man coming in clouds with great power and glory (13:26); the present generation will not pass away before all these things come to pass (13:30). But that generation did pass away, and the one after that, and almost two thousand years later we are still waiting for all these things to take place.

One question worth asking is why Mark wrote a Gospel at all if he believed the end was so near. Whatever his reason, he leaves us with two unsettling pronouncements (in 9:1 and 13:30) from Jesus' own lips about the imminent coming of the kingdom.

They are unsettling in at least two ways. First, because Jesus was, apparently, mistaken. And second, if he was wrong about that, what else is open to question? These were not problems for Mark, but they are decidedly problematic for those of us who read him today. If Jesus' (and Mark's) teachings about discipleship depended on the ripeness of the kingdom, do they really apply to us almost two millennia later? When Paul—whose theology Mark shared—wrote that everyone should remain in the state to which he or she was called, even if that state were slavery (1 Cor. 7:20), he had a short and not a long haul in mind. But what now? Would he have given the same advice if he had believed the slavery would go on, generation after generation after generation?

As preachers we do well to ponder these questions, both for our own soul's health and because our congregations are likely to do the same thing. Mark—or one of his later editors—is aware of the dilemma. Following right on the heels of Jesus' third pronouncement, he includes a disclaimer: "But of that day or that hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father" (13:32). As a solution it has problems, such as the incompleteness of Jesus' knowledge and his exclusion from the knowledge of his Father. On the other hand, it opens a number of homiletical doors, the true humanity of Jesus and the perfect freedom of God, among others. There is also a sermon to be preached about how the church deals (or fails to deal) with the apparent fallibility of Scripture.
These textual considerations are only a few of those prompted by Mark's Gospel. Throughout this section and in those to come, I have relied on D. E. Nineham's *Saint Mark* (The Pelican New Testament Commentaries) and Edward Schweizer's *The Good News according to Mark*. Both of these fine sources commend others, including:

- B. H. Branscomb *The Gospel according to Mark*
- Martin Dibelius *From Tradition to Gospel*
  *The Message of Jesus*
- R. H. Lightfoot *History and Interpretation in the Gospels*
  *The Gospel Message of Saint Mark*
- Willi Marxsen *Mark the Evangelist*
- C. G. Montefiore *The Synoptic Gospels* (volume 1)
- Vincent Taylor *The Gospel according to Saint Mark*

Four more contemporary sources are Paul Achtemeier's *Mark*, Fred Craddock's *The Gospels*, David Rhoads and Donald Michie's *Mark as Story* and Lamar Williamson's *Mark*. None of these commentaries can take the place of reading Mark's Gospel straight through to absorb all the energy and urgency that Mark's words contain. Several years ago, stage actor Alec McCowen gave audiences that experience in his dramatic reading of the Gospel according to Mark, a dizzying performance that he writes about in his book *Personal Mark*. However preachers manage it, they will be rewarded by spending some time with the entire Gospel—not studying it so much as entering into it—so that each week's lection emerges as a piece of the whole.

**The Shape of the Lections**

**Eleven of the Twelve Lections** for the last quarter of the church year are from Mark's Gospel. The twelfth is from John, a departure in honor of Christ the King Sunday, the last Sunday
of the season after Pentecost and the last Sunday before Ad
tvent. Apart from that exception, there is remarkable narrative
and thematic unity in the selections from Mark, which line up
as follows:

- Mark 7:31-37  The healing of the deaf mute
- Mark 8:27-38  Jesus' first prediction of his passion
- Mark 9:30-37  Jesus' second prediction of his passion
- Mark 9:38-50  Everyone will be salted with fire
- Mark 10:2-16  The teaching on marriage and divorce
- Mark 10:17-30  Riches bar the way to the kingdom
- Mark 10:35-45  Jesus' third prediction of his passion
- Mark 10:46-52  The healing of Bartimaeus
- Mark 12:28-34  The first commandment
- Mark 12:38-44  The widow's mite
- Mark 13:24-32  A vision of the end time

The lections have a definite shape. According to Mark, the
healing of the deaf mute is one of the last miracles Jesus works
before he discloses himself to his disciples at Caesarea Philippi,
an event that divides Mark's Gospel in half. Before that self-
disclosure, Mark's emphasis is on the miraculous works of
Jesus, which attract crowds. For someone so visible he is
strangely secretive, teaching in parables and asking those
whom he has healed to tell no one about him. After his self-dis-
closure, miracles become rare, and the crowds fade into the
background. Jesus spends more time alone with his disciples,
teaching them plainly what his future holds and dealing with
their failure to grasp the implications of their choice to follow
him.

While the Transfiguration is not among our lections this
season, it sits between propers 19 and 20 and exerts its powerful
influence there. This white-hot event takes place for the
benefit of Peter, James, and John, who witness the super-

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natural confirmation that Jesus is who Peter says he is. While that privilege does not prevent any of them from later betraying him, it is Mark's way of setting the stage for what happens next. Convinced by the vision that their teacher is indeed their Messiah, they are presumably better equipped to hear what, exactly, that will mean—both for him and for themselves.

Jesus' teaching on discipleship dominates the next section of Mark's Gospel (8:27-10:52). Seven of our twelve lections fall within this section, providing a clear focus for a series of sermons on what it means to follow Jesus on the way. Jesus himself addresses a wide variety of topics, describing what discipleship has to do with community, marriage, divorce, children, money, possessions and status. Mark clearly had his own interest in these subjects. Presenting Jesus' teaching on them in such a concentrated, orderly manner, he showed his readers that no part of their lives was exempt from the call to follow Christ. With the rigor of these teachings, he reinforced their knowledge that the way would never be easy.

Discipleship is a central concern throughout Mark's Gospel. Beginning with his crisp, uncluttered version of Jesus' call to the first four disciples—"Follow me"—he relishes that verb using it over and over as a kind of chorus. Every time he does so, he carries his readers back to the experience of that first call so that they do not forget it (1:16-20). While it does not fall among our assigned lections these twelve Sundays, the story of the first call will enrich the preacher's appreciation of discipleship in Mark as a whole.

It is a peculiar story because it lacks many of the details we latter-day disciples would expect. We tend to approach the subject of discipleship with gritted teeth, wondering if we have what it takes, if we too could have left our nets and followed. We talk about discipleship as if it were an act of great moral courage, as if Simon and Andrew and James and John were chosen because of their selflessness, or their proven record of commitment, or their alarming ability to walk away from anything that did not claim their total allegiance.
But there is no evidence in the story itself for any of that. The four are apparently chosen at random and there is no sign of struggle on their part—no angst, no counting the cost, no looking back. Jesus calls and they follow, obeying him as the unclean spirits and the sick and the stormy sea will obey him later on, conforming themselves to his word, surrendering themselves to his will.

The language of the story is not the language of human accomplishment but of divine miracle; it is not about the power of four fishermen to amend their lives but about the power of God to make something out of nothing—to create faith where there was no faith, to make disciples where there were none. To read the story in this way is to approach the whole matter of discipleship from a different angle. Is the ability to follow Jesus a result of our works or God's grace? Is it a matter of exercising our own wills or of giving ourselves over to the will of God? If faith is God's creation and not our own, then what becomes of all the things we tell ourselves we should, must, ought to do? "With men it is impossible," Jesus explains to his disciples, "but not with God; for all things are possible with God" (10:27).

This whole discussion finds its consummation in the story of blind Bartimaeus. He cannot heal himself; he cannot open his own eyes. All he can do is yell, crying out to Jesus and clamoring for mercy. It is up to Jesus to act and he does, "calling" Bartimaeus (in Mark this word is always loaded), who knows what he wants and who can give it to him. His sight is restored and while Jesus dismisses him to go his own way, he follows Jesus on "the way" instead, the road that leads to Jerusalem. He has, in short, become a disciple.

The next three lections all tell stories that take place in Jerusalem during the last act of Jesus' life. Against the backdrop of his fatal controversy with the religious authorities, his teaching becomes full of eerie allusions. "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength" (12:30), says the one who is about to prove his love by putting heart, soul, mind
and strength to the test. Summoning his disciples to witness the sacrificial giving of the poor widow in the temple, he praises her offering. "She out of her poverty has put in everything she had" (12:44), says the one who is about to withhold nothing of his own.

The penultimate lection is taken from the thirteenth chapter of Mark, a long farewell in which Jesus prepares his disciples for what will happen after he is gone. It is a spectacular prediction, full of wars and rumors of wars, earthquakes, famine, and persecution, but none of those is the point. The point is the coming of the Son of man with great power and glory; all the rest are road signs to that end. Here, as throughout his Gospel, Mark preaches Jesus' sermon as part of his own. To a community ringed around with threat and frightened for their lives, he offers a view of God's plan. Their task is to keep watch for the coming of their Lord, who will arrive one day like a master returning home to put his household in order.

The last Sunday of the season after Pentecost is Christ the King Sunday, a time to contemplate the majesty of Christ before the church year ends and the whole cycle begins all over again. It is always a Sunday full of paradox: Christ the king who reigns from a manger, or the prow of a fishing boat, or a cross; a king whose rule has already been established but whose kingdom has not yet come. The selection from John's Gospel captures that paradox, placing the discussion of Christ's kingship within the context of his trial for sedition, a trial he will ultimately win by losing, just as he will succeed by suffering and live by dying.

Two additional volumes preachers may wish to consult at this point are Thomas Long's *Biblical Forms of Preaching* and *Biblical Preaching on the Death of Jesus* by William Beardslee et al.

**Finding the Door**

Between these more or less academic reflections and the reflections on the individual lections to come, there is some-
thing to be said about how the preacher "gets into" the text in order to discover the sermon there—not Jesus' sermon, or Mark's sermon, but his or her own. After all the sources have been consulted and all the notes have been made, what is a preacher to do?

Whole books have been written to answer that question, but what seems most important for the sake of the sermon is that the preacher seek the translation of knowledge into experience: the experience of the text, experience of the gospel, experience of the Lord. If we who speak have no direct experience of these for ourselves, then there is little hope that we will be able to communicate them to others in any convincing way.

Traditional Christian disciplines of prayer, worship, and service are essential to any preacher's life of faith. So is belief in the incarnation, by which I mean the preacher's confidence that God is present in the stuff of the world—in everyday scenes and encounters, in newspaper headlines and recent films, in the simplest kindnesses and the most profound sorrows of ordinary people's lives. While this lectionary study focuses on the biblical text, there is as much or more to say about the human text. The canon of the Bible may be closed, but the canon of life on earth is wide open—the ongoing revelation of the Holy Spirit's activity in our midst. In order to make the connection between the two, there are several things preachers can do.

We can enter the text by using our five senses, searching the passage not only for sights and sounds but also for smells, tastes, and things to touch. Often these sensations are only suggested by the text, but that is what our imaginations are for. Filling in the missing details, we involve ourselves in the scene. Exploring the text is not just an intellectual exercise but also an embodied one with power to make us sweat, shiver, blush, or squirm. By learning to evoke these same sensations in our listeners, we invite them out of the audience and onto the stage, where they may participate in the drama of Mark's Gospel for themselves.
We can also spend some time plumbing the emotional depth of the passage. Sometimes the emotion is present in the text itself, as when the rich man goes away sorrowful (10:22) or when Bartimaeus throws off his mantle and springs up (10:50), but other times the emotion is our own as we respond to what we have read. It is difficult to think about plucking out our eyes or cutting off our hands without some consternation (9:43-47), nor are we likely to hear about the powers of heaven being shaken (13:25) without a ripple of fear running down our backs. To sink into such feelings and to let them remind us of other times we have felt that way is often to discover a visceral connection between the text at hand and the texts of our own lives.

One word of caution, however. While this exercise may help us find a way into the text, it is important to know the difference between our own concerns and the concerns of the text. Mark scrupulously avoids supplying us with anything like a motive for why Jesus or the disciples do what they do. Psychology was not a first-century affair; Mark was not interested in how his characters felt but in how they helped or hindered the coming of the kingdom. Recognizing that, we may still claim our own feelings and use them to heighten our involvement in the text.

A third way of finding a door into the text is to place it like a magnet in the center of our minds and allow our powers of association free rein. What other stories come to mind, either from the Bible or from our own lives? What books or movies does it bring to mind, what fairy tales or legends from other traditions? What is it like? That is the question to keep asking. A blind beggar shouting at Jesus from the side of the road: What is that like? It is like the homeless man who stands at the street corner every day, holding a sign that says, "Will work for food." It is like a page from the picture book about India, in which lepers haunt holy places in search of alms. It is like an obnoxious child who keeps pestering someone until he gets what he wants.

The chief thing to remember about free association is that it only works if it is truly free. There will be plenty of time later for the theologian in each of us to sort through the piles of
material and separate the wheat from the chaff. But first it is vital to give the artist in each of us some room to savor the language and image and nuance of the text and to respond to its craftsmanship with some of our own.

One final aid to imagination is to explore alternatives to the text as it stands. This exercise is pure fantasy, but it often yields interesting insights. What if the rich man had been able to obey Jesus and had auctioned off his estate on the spot? What if Jesus had granted James and John their request and made them crown princes in the kingdom? What if Bartimaeus had been a woman or the widow had only given half of what she had? How did Jesus know how much she gave anyway? Such speculation serves two useful purposes: first, it wakes us up to all the possible directions the passage might have taken; and second, it usually ends up teaching us why it is the way it is.

A browse through a good theological bookstore will turn up any number of resources for the imaginative preacher. Among the most recent are Paul Scott Wilson's Imagination of the Heart, Thomas Troeger's Imagining a Sermon, and Patricia Wilson-Kastner's Imagery for Preaching. While not directly applicable to the texts at hand, the work of Walter Brueggemann on the Old Testament and Robert Farrar Capon on the New Testament is welcome evidence that it is possible to communicate the ancient word of God in fresh, surprising ways.

Sunday by Sunday

THE PARAGRAPHS THAT FOLLOW ARE NEITHER SUMMARIES of critical or theological consensus on the assigned lections nor authorized interpretations of the texts at hand. There are plenty of good books available for that, including the Proclamation series, published by Fortress Press, and Homily Service, put out by the Liturgical Conference. Instead, these paragraphs reflect what went on in one preacher's head as she studied the lections and thought about turning them into sermons. My scholarship in this section, such as it is, was aided by the aforementioned Schweizer and by Fred Craddock's fine work.
Proper 18

Jesus returns from the region of Tyre and Sidon in today's passage. He has taken his ministry deep into gentile territory; he has carried it to the limit and he has had his own limits tested by the Syrophoenician woman. Now "they" bring him a deaf man with an impediment in his speech. Words will not work on someone who cannot hear, so Jesus uses body language instead, taking the man away from the crowd and working on him like a potter working his clay. He fingers the man's ears; he wets the man's tongue with his own spit; he handles him. Then he groans, making a sound like the man himself might have made, and orders him to be opened. It is a very physical miracle, but what is its relationship to faith? Does a miracle create faith or is it a response to faith? The man shows no evidence of faith, but afterwards he speaks plainly for the first time in his life. Jesus charges those present to tell no one, but it is folly. How can a man who has just been given his voice remain silent?

Proper 19

For Mark, geography is theology. Today's lection takes place "on the way" to Caesarea Philippi, which straddles the boundary between gentile territory and the Holy Land. Here Jesus quizzes his disciples about who he is; Peter answers rightly and it is as if he has produced the key that unlocks the secret door. For the first time, Jesus tells his disciples what his identity as the Son of man will cost. His self-revelation is the pivot around which Mark's whole Gospel turns; verse 31 divides everything into "before" and "after." The narrative is hot, not cool, with triple rebukes in it, an exclamation point, and a painful exorcism for Peter. Is this what it means to join Jesus "on the way"?
Proper 20

The pattern is becoming familiar: Jesus tells his disciples what is in store for him; they do not understand, and he uses their density as an occasion to expand his teaching. Today Jesus predicts his death for the second time. Afterwards, the disciples are "on the way" again, discussing who is the greatest among them as if they had not heard a word he said, or as if his life had nothing to do with theirs. He decides they need an object lesson and pulls a child onto his lap—a non-person with no status, literally good for nothing in the economy of the Middle East. "This is what God looks like," he says, in effect. "Receive this speck of humanity and you receive the one who made heaven and earth." Is God the most we can imagine or the least? Does God exceed our expectations or show them up for the hot air balloons they are?

Proper 21

This is John's big moment, his only solo lines in Mark's Gospel. Unfortunately, he gets them wrong. Jesus rejects his (and our) attempts to limit who is "in" and who is "out" of fellowship with him. Lenient beyond all reason, he suggests that the only people who are really out are those who exclude themselves. The rest of the passage is wonderfully gory and a good litmus test for fundamentalists: how many sport glass eyes and artificial limbs? The offensive verses beg to be argued with, since it is clearly not a hand or a foot or an eye that sins but the mind that gives each of them their orders. Hidden beneath the butcher shop imagery is Jesus' plea for unity and moral integrity among his disciples, whom he calls to season and preserve the world.

Proper 22

Jesus does not seem to mind that the Pharisees question him only because they hope to trap him. But he answers the question they have not asked instead of the one they have. They want to know whether they may or may not divorce a spouse,
but Jesus refuses to approach marriage from the end, where human liability is at stake. He approaches it from the beginning, where it is a matter of God's intention. He is less concerned with what law permits than with what God wills, and suggests that God's power to bind is stronger than our power to break—which is, all in all, very good news. The saying about children is a tricky one. If their chief virtue is their ability to enter the kingdom without thinking they have earned it, then we miss the point entirely when we try to earn our own entrance by acting like children.

Proper 23

It is difficult to know what to call this story, since the main character is "rich" only in this Gospel, "young" only in Matthew, and a "ruler" in Luke, but his story is familiar. There is something about him that Jesus responds to, something in him that Jesus loves. Is it that he seems to want an extraordinary life, exceeding the righteousness of the law? Jesus shows him the way—"follow me"—but the man will not. He has too many possessions, which up until that moment he (and the amazed disciples) had thought were evidence of God's blessing. Jesus' invitation sounds like an invitation to destitution. What we fail to understand is that Jesus does not call us to be poor; he calls us to be free.

Proper 24

Although this lection follows Jesus' third prediction of his passion, it is less about suffering than about hierarchy. Once again, the disciples have gotten it wrong: after the first prediction it was Peter; after the second, all twelve got in on the act; now, after the third, it is James and John who jockey for position. That list indicts three of Jesus' first four disciples, and it is some small comfort that even those who knew him in the flesh still failed to understand their Lord. Jesus is not indignant at James and John as their peers are; he simply uses their ignorance as another opportunity to teach them that God's rule defies all their notions of who is greatest, best, first. 'It shall
not be so among you," he says, reminding us that hierarchy has no place among those who follow him, not even in the church.

Proper 25

There is an echo in this passage. "What do you want me to do for you?" Jesus asks blind Bartimaeus. It is the very same thing he asked James and John in last week's lection, but there is a world of difference in their answers. The two disciples wanted to flank Jesus in his glory; this beggar wants to receive his sight. Although Jesus could not grant James and John their request, he declares that Bartimaeus' faith has made him well—that it literally has "saved" him. Except for the withering of the fig tree, this is the last miracle Jesus works before he enters into Jerusalem, where the disciples' eyes will be opened and where he who saved others will fail to save himself.

Proper 26

Those of us who were taught that these verses originated with Jesus were taught wrong. Answering the scribe's question about the first commandment, Jesus quotes from the Shema, the ancient distillation of Jewish law. It is his way of affirming the kinship between what he was taught and what he teaches, which is the love of God and neighbor. If he has made a change, it is to expand the notion of neighbor so that no human being is not one and to stress that love is about wanting to, not having to. But the beauty of the commandment to love is also its hitch, because it is never done. If we could hit the bull's-eye in loving then we could stop and move on to something else; but it is a law that keeps after us, drawing us farther and farther into the heart that beats at the center of the universe.

Proper 27

The story of the widow's mite has been sentimentalized almost beyond rescue, but its position in Mark's Gospel makes it worth saving. It takes place in the temple in Jerusalem at the end of Jesus' ministry, where he sees two kinds of people walking around: the religious leaders whose faith has drowned
in pretense and privilege, and the ordinary men and women who come to the temple to worship God. Calling his disciples over to learn from the widow, Jesus admires her simple Jewish piety. It is not the chosen people he has separated himself from but their leaders. The widow gives everything she has to God, which makes God the source of everything for her. Maybe Jesus notices her because he is about to do the same thing.

Proper 29

As I write, the war in Iraq bleeds on; both sun and moon are darkened by the black clouds of burning oil refineries. Elsewhere in the world the signs stack up: famine, earthquake, pestilence, persecution. All that is missing are the stars falling out of the sky all at once. Is the end near? Jesus teaches his disciples to watch and to endure but never to forget what all the signs announce—the Son of man coming in clouds with great power and glory. On the one hand that is just one more thing to fear, but on the other it is very good news to be reminded that God is still in charge and on the way, whether or not we approve of God’s means to that end. Parousia is worth playing with; it means “presence,” or “coming” and not necessarily “coming again.” How do we experience God’s coming while we await God’s coming?

Proper 28

Today is the New Year’s Eve service on the church calendar, when we pause to consider the kingship of Christ before staring all over again with God in diapers. After spending so many weeks with Mark’s earthy Messiah, John’s omniscient king comes as something of a shock. He knows where he has come from and where he is going; the interview with Pilate is a mere formality. Their dialogue is nonetheless intriguing, especially when it is read aloud. How does Jesus deliver his lines? What does Pilate hear in his voice? Sorrow? Defiance? Haughtiness? Fear? Reading them over and over again, we discover a dozen layers of meaning, but which is the truth? Jesus has come to bear witness to the truth, John says. In every situation, he holds
the compass; he is the one who points true north. He is God's arrow, shot through heaven and earth, piercing the hearts of both God and humankind and pinning them together on the cross.

Conclusion

Preaching the gospel is a privilege; it is also a spiritual discipline. Before the public proclamation of the word takes place, there is study and prayer and discernment to be practiced—the preacher's careful searching through the word of God, the life of the world, and his or her own humanity for the spark that will unite all three in the moment of the sermon.

It is a process that shapes who we are and how we work; it is a process that plants us squarely in the presence of our Maker, who allows us to assist in the mystery of the word that is always being made flesh. It is a process that deserves the best we have to offer and one that offers us the best blessings of God right back. There is never enough time, but there is always time for this.
Hebrew Bible and Home: Reflections on the 1988 General Conference
Simon B. Parker

Scripture and Spirit: Reflections on the 1988 General Conference
John Deschner

Theological Education in the United Methodist Church in Light of the Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization
Dietrich von Wanseele

The United Methodist Agenda for Ecumenism
Jeffrey H. Kidwell
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It has been said that it is a host's obligation to be attentive to the needs of his or her guest, and a guest's obligation to be delightful.

This makes sense if you think about it. A guest must not make excessive demands or forget to be grateful, and a host must not frustrate the guest's need to be charming and agreeable. When this fragile balance is disturbed, there's always trouble. That is why it is so memorable when, for example, your spouse's relatives want to use your home, with you in it, as their vacation spot. You arrive at the home of your friend for the weekend and come down with the flu. Or your amiable dinner host has trapped you into listening to an evening-long sales pitch.

Hospitality stories in the Hebrew Bible take these humble realities to great heights. Simon Parker opens his discussion of homosexuality in the Hebrew Bible with a story of hospitality gone horribly awry. God destroys Sodom not because of the sexual orientation of its citizens, but because they treated resident aliens as social outcasts and visitors as prisoners of war. Throughout his essay, Parker challenges us to ask, what is the real purpose of this text? We all bring presuppositions to our reading of Scripture. This may be as simple as using the Psalms in a time of stress, or as complex as the Western worldview by which we judge other cultures. Tannehill and Campbell do not counsel us to rid ourselves of prior needs and convictions. Rather, we are to make ourselves aware of them. For Bob Tannehill, becoming conscious of the spiritual dimension of reading the Bible is paramount, so that the Holy Spirit works through us, and we can truly hear the message of salvation. Ted Campbell looks to the Apostolic age to provide us with norms for our reading. The contrast in these methods makes an interesting counterpoint.

Our series on globalization in theological education continues with three essays on ecumenism. Many of us think of the quest for theological unity as impractical and ideological. In truth, it takes more energy to defend our differences. There
INTRODUCTION

is a story in Stephen Mitchell's new book, The Enlightened Mind (Harper & Row), that illustrates this. In 1805, a Christian missionary from Massachusetts approached the Seneca Indians and informed them that their lives were filled with great error and darkness. After meeting with the council of chiefs for two hours, Sa-go-ye-wat-ha offered this reply, which is worth quoting from at length:

Friend and Brother: It was the will of the Great Spirit that we should meet today. He directs all things, and he has given us a fine day for our council. He has taken his garment from before the sun and has caused the bright circle to shine upon us. Our eyes are opened so that we see clearly. Our ears are unstopped so that we have clearly heard the words you have spoken. For all these favors we thank the Great Spirit and him only...

Brother: Continue to listen. You say that you have been sent to teach us how to worship the Great Spirit agreeably to his mind, and that if we do not take hold of the religion which you white people teach we will be unhappy hereafter. You say that you are right and that we are lost. How do you know that this is true? We understand that your religion is written in a book. If it was meant for us as well as for you, why hasn't the Great Spirit given it to us? You say there is only one way to worship and serve the Great Spirit. If there is only one religion, why do you white people differ so much about it? Why don't you all agree, since you can all read the book?...

We do not worship the Great Spirit as the white men do, but we believe that forms of worship do not matter to the Great Spirit; what pleases him is the offering of a sincere heart, and this is how we worship him. We do not want to destroy your religion or to take it from you. We only want to enjoy our own...

Brother: You have heard our answer to your talk, and this is all we have to say now. Since we are going to part, we will come and take you by the hand, and hope that the Great Spirit will protect you on your journey and return you safe to your friends.

The tribal leaders then moved to shake the hand of the young minister as a parting gesture of friendship. He refused, saying that the religion of God could have nothing to do with the devil. They only smiled, and left.

This issue concludes with a lectionary study by Barbara Taylor. Preaching affects the preacher, she says, opening her eyes and ears to the gospel at ground level—heat, dust, and racket. In such a melee, she writes, the church itself was born. May your preaching and teaching be enlivened by a genuine encounter with the Word!
THE ONGOING DISCUSSION ABOUT THE STATUS and role of homosexuals within the church will obviously have to take into account a wide range of fields of knowledge and kinds of judgment; e.g., biblical, historical, theological, ethical, sociological and psychological. Ministers and congregations studying the question will want to consult a wide range of sources covering these different aspects of the matter.

As a student of the Hebrew Bible I have been asked by several local churches to give a talk or lead a discussion on the treatment of the subject in the Hebrew canon. The following paper grows out of these talks. It presumes not to suggest a general policy for the church but merely to review the material in one area with a view to informing and promoting responsible discussion.

A few texts in the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible often figure prominently in arguments on this question and have been used as support for one position or another within the church. While these have been discussed in a variety of publications on homosexuality and the church, neither have they always been presented in their full context nor has full consideration always been given to the issues that arise as one thinks about their applicability to the church today. I have here undertaken to review what these texts actually say; to spell out what, in their

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literary and social contexts, they mean; and to suggest some considerations that should guide our use of them. It is my hope that this will assist the readers of this journal in their own reflections on the subject and in their role as educators in the local church.

The significant passages are few. There are two similar stories which refer to homosexual rape. There are two stories that depict a close relationship between two people of the same sex which has been interpreted by some as homosexual. And there are two similar legal texts which speak of homosexual acts. I shall discuss these pairs of texts in order.¹

**Hospitality and Its Violation**

The two stories that refer to homosexual rape are found in Genesis 19 and Judges 19. In Genesis 19, representatives of God have come down to earth to see whether indeed Sodom and Gomorrah are as wicked as God has heard (Gen. 18:20-21). After enjoying exemplary hospitality with Abraham (Gen. 18:1-8), two of these divine emissaries arrive that evening at the gate of Sodom, where Lot is sitting. As strangers they readily face the prospect of spending the night in the open square, but Lot prevails upon them to accept his hospitality (Gen. 19:2-3). They proceed to enjoy a good meal with him.

But then, before they retire, a mob surrounds the house—men of all ages from every section of the city. They demand that Lot send out the two visitors to them so that they can "know" them. Lot himself slips out, closing the door behind him, and urges them not to do wrong. He offers them his two daughters "who have not known a man." "Let me bring them out to you; do with them whatever you want. But don't do anything with these men—that's why they came under my roof!" The mob is apparently incensed at Lot's judgmental attitude and threatens to treat him worse than the guests. But the guests manage to pull him inside and shut the door behind him; and then—being divine emissaries—they strike the men outside the door blind.
In the sequel they get Lot and his family out of the town, and God destroys it.

Probably the most shocking part of this story to us is Lot's terrible offer of his daughters to the mob outside. But it is precisely this offer that is crucial for our interpretation of the whole episode. First, Lot's offer of his daughters shows that the "knowledge" the mob demands is indeed sexual. The mob does not, as some have claimed, simply want to find out who these strange visitors are! If that were so, Lot's daughters would be in no conceivable sense a substitute.

Second, Lot's offer of his daughters shows that the men of the mob were not what we today call homosexuals. Had they been so, the offer of the two young women would have been pointless. The implication of the offer is rather that these men--"the whole town"--were out for a "wilding"; they were out to inflict their violence on any appropriate victims. These apparently vulnerable outsiders simply happened to be at hand. Lot was surely being realistic in thinking that they might be satisfied to make his daughters their victims.

Third, Lot's offer of his daughters shows that there is one thing more sacrosanct than the protection of one's own family, and that is the protection of guests in one's house. Family may be sacrificed in order to protect guests.

In short, this mob is no more homosexual than any street gang. On this occasion it sees an opportunity for violence and humiliation. But the enormity of the mob's offence is not just that they attempt rape, which is heinous enough, but that they attempt to rape guests in their own town and under Lot's roof. In other words, the ultimate offense here is the violation of hospitality. This is exactly what is implied in the Gospel when Jesus says that it will be more tolerable for Sodom than for the town that is inhospitable to his disciples (the twelve: Matt. 10:14-15; the seventy-two: Luke 10:10-12).

Judges 19 presents us with the same motif associated with a different town. A Levite from Ephraim takes a Bethlehemite woman as his concubine. When she leaves him and returns to her father's house, the Levite comes to try to win her back. Her
father presses hospitality on him, as Abraham had done on the divine messengers to Sodom; but finally he leaves with his concubine.

As the day wanes they come to Jebus. The Levite's servant proposes that they spend the night there, but the Levite rejects the suggestion, on the grounds that Jebus is a foreign, non-Israelite city. So they continue and at nightfall come to Gibeah, a Benjaminite town. They enter the town and sit in the square, but nobody offers to take them in (contrast the reception of the two divine messengers in Sodom). Finally they are approached by an old man coming in from the fields, who happens also to be from Ephraim, though currently residing in Gibeah. The Levite tells him their situation, and the old man insists on taking them into his house and providing for them.

While they are enjoying themselves over dinner, some men of the town, characterized as ruffians (b'ne-b'liyya'al), surround the house, demanding that the old man send out to them the guest, so that they might "know" him. The old man himself comes out and tries to appease them: "Brothers, do not do wrong, since this man has come into my house (i.e. in view of his status as a guest). Do not commit this outrage (n'balta)." He then makes them an offer: "Look, here's my young daughter and his concubine. Let me bring them out--violate them, and do to them whatever you like. You shall not commit such an outrage to this man." But the gang will hear nothing of this.

Finally, the Levite sends his concubine out to them. (She is obviously not treated as a guest either by her host or the Levite, since the former offers her to the gang along with his daughter, and the latter hands her over without looking to the host to protect both of them.) The mob abuses the concubine all night, abandoning her at dawn. When the Levite comes out in the morning, he finds her dead. In response to his account of this atrocity, the rest of Israel unites to wreak such vengeance on the whole tribe of Benjamin that the survival of the tribe becomes an issue (chs. 20-21).

This time we have a more limited group--perhaps a gang, rather than a mob. Once again, however, their intention is
rape—violence and humiliation. Again, the host offers two women. Again, they refuse. Finally, where the more fantastic Genesis story has a miraculous escape and divine judgment from heaven on the offending city, this more naturalistic story has real suffering and mass vengeance on the offending community.

Judges 19 makes it even more clear than Genesis 19, first, that the initial proposal in both stories is a sexual one; and second, that the proposed homosexual rape is not an expression of homosexual identity—ultimately the gang will violate any object it can get its hands on. Finally, though the proposed atrocity and the actual atrocity are bad enough in themselves, they are rendered even worse by the fact that the victim is a guest. That the perpetrators are Israelites and that they actually carry out what the Sodomites were prevented from doing surely make their behavior more heinous and this episode more horrifying than the one involving Sodom.

In both stories the rape of guests is the issue, and in both cases homosexual and heterosexual rape come into question. But rape is an act of violence and humiliation that is equally reprehensible regardless of the sex of its victim. Thus, the would-be homosexual rapists of Genesis 19 are blinded by the divine messengers, and the whole city is destroyed for the general wickedness of its inhabitants—of which this latest offence is just one final, confirming indicator. The actual heterosexual rapists of Judges 19 bring on the wholesale slaughter of their tribe. In conclusion, while both stories express extreme disapproval of rape, both are irrelevant to a discussion of sexual relationships (homosexual or heterosexual) between consenting adults.

The Nature of Friendship

I turn now to the two stories about close relationships between people of the same sex. Here the question is not whether particular historical individuals in Israel were
homosexuals or had homosexual relationships. On that subject we have no direct information. The issue is whether the narrators of these stories present the relationships between their characters as homosexual.

The first such pair is Naomi and Ruth. Ruth is one of two Moabitic women who marry the two sons of the Israelite Naomi during her family's sojourn in Moab.

The sons and their father die, leaving the three women widows. Naomi sets out to return to Bethlehem; and one daughter-in-law, Ruth, insistson going with her mother-in-law. In famous lines, she declares her intention to go wherever Naomi goes, to identify herself with Naomi's people and Naomi's God, and to be buried with Naomi.

This is not, as we today tend to read it, a romantic declaration of undying love. Ruth's words are a formal declaration of transfer of allegiance—of abnegation of Ruth's own social and religious identity in Moab and of commitment to the society and religion of her in-laws. Her speech is in fact a response to the speech in which Naomi sets up Orpah as a model for Ruth: "Look, your sister has returned to her people and her god(s). Go back after your sister-in-law" (v. 15). Ruth counters this point for point by declaring that, instead of returning, she will go with her mother-in-law and adopt her people and her gods. The focus is not on Ruth's choice between Naomi and her own family but on the choice between two locations, two peoples, and two gods.

The narrator emphasizes this in Boaz's later account of what he has heard of her (2:11): "All that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband has been reported to me—how you left your father and mother and the land of your birth and came to a people you had not previously known." This is in fact reminiscent of what God told Abram to do in Gen. 12:1: "Get yourself out of your land and your birthplace and your father's family to the land I will show you." Abram abandons one identity for a new one. Ruth's loyalty to her adopted family is such that she too makes such a move.
Later, when Ruth has found a husband in Bethlehem and borne a son, the women of the town congratulate Naomi, referring to Ruth as "your daughter-in-law who has loved you..., who is better to you than seven sons" (4:15). This last quotation is a recognition of how valuable Ruth has been to Naomi. But again, it cannot be used to suggest the specific feelings of the two women toward each other. In this context it refers to Ruth's commitment and faithfulness to Naomi in returning to Bethlehem with her and contriving to marry another member of the family, so that now, to quote the women again, "a son has been born to Naomi" (4:17). Obviously, this last statement is not biologically true; but it is sociologically true, because this child will, quoting the same source, "revive you and sustain you in old age" (4:15)—that is, do for Naomi what a son of her own would have done. That is why Ruth has proved so valuable to her, and that is what Ruth's "love" has accomplished for her. There is nothing in the narrator's language or in the language of the characters that expresses the nature of the feelings Ruth and Naomi had for one another. That does not prevent readers of various cultural settings from reading into the story what they consider the appropriate feelings. But it does prevent us from then claiming that those feelings are disclosed by the story itself.

The second relationship that has been alleged to be homosexual is that between David and Jonathan. Here several passages are adduced. I shall consider only what appear to be the two strongest supports for this hypothesis. In 1 Sam. 18:1, 3, the narrator writes that "Jonathan's 'soul' was bound to David's 'soul'" and that Jonathan loved David as he loved himself. What is the biblical meaning of these two expressions? The one other place where we read that someone's "soul" was bound to someone else's is in Gen. 44:30, in which Judah tells the vizier of Egypt that Jacob's "soul" is bound to Benjamin's. Here the expression refers to a father's fondness for his youngest son. Further, to love someone else as oneself is, according to Lev. 19:18, the attitude that every member of the community should have toward every other member ("thou shalt love thy
neighbor as thyself"). Thus there is nothing in either expression that requires, or even implies, a homosexual relationship.

The second passage in question is in David's lament for Saul and Jonathan (2 Sam. 1:19-27). Here David says, "More extraordinary was your love for me than the love of women." Here the specific comparison with heterosexual love is more suggestive. On the other hand, we must take account of the fact that the poem, as is characteristic of laments for the dead, is full of hyperbole.

David and Jonathan are said to have been "faster than eagles and stronger than lions"; the women of Israel are called upon to weep for Saul, "who clothed you in scarlet and luxuries, who adorned your clothing with golden ornaments." (If that were literally true, it would suggest that all the women of Israel were Saul's mistresses!) Jonathan and David are clearly portrayed as having a powerful bond between them. There is nothing in the story about them that marks this as a specifically homosexual relationship. That is not to say that such relationships could not have been homosexual. It is simply to say that the language and literature to which we have access do not disclose homosexual relationships.

Here again, then, we must conclude that neither of these stories expresses anything bearing on the question of the evaluation of homosexuality in the scriptures.

Law and Taboo in Ancient Israel

FINALLY WE COME TO THE TWO PASSAGES THAT DIRECTLY and explicitly refer to homosexual acts. These are two similar statements in two comparable contexts (Lev. 18:22; 20:13). These verses occur in that portion of the Book of Leviticus known in modern times as the Holiness Code (usually defined as Lev. 17-26). The priestly compilers of the book set the content of these chapters within speeches which God directs Moses to address to the Israelites.

The first speech (ch. 18) opens with a general instruction to the Israelites not to behave like the Egyptians (to whose land
God is bringing them). The following laws are then introduced more directly with the injunction to act according to God's laws. Verse 6 then introduces a list of family members with whom the Israelites may not have intimate relations. The laws begin at verse 7, with a shift from the second person plural address to the second person masculine singular prohibition in the form "thou shalt not." The first group of laws (7-16) prohibit sexual relations with (especially married) women of a man's immediate household and certain other female kin. Verses 17-23 then comprise a further list of prohibitions covering a miscellany of topics: marrying a woman and her daughter or granddaughter, marrying two sisters, having intercourse with a woman during her menstrual period, adultery, sacrificing one's children, homosexual acts, intercourse by a man or a woman with an animal. The first two of these, forbidding certain marriages, provide some continuity with the subject of the preceding list. Several of the behaviors in this second list are characterized as "profaning God's name," "making one unclean," or by one or another of various Hebrew terms for reprehensible behavior: zimma, to'eba, tebel. Lacking the conformity of the first list, these prohibitions read as a compilation of laws from different contexts.

The last but one is verse 22. It reads: "You shall not lie with a male as one lies with a woman; that is a taboo (to'eba)." Like all these laws, it is addressed to a male. It is clear, therefore, that it refers to a homosexual act between males. (There is no reference here or anywhere else in the Bible to homosexual acts between females.)

In an epilogue the Israelites are told that their predecessors in the land did all these things, so that the land became unclean and vomited out its inhabitants. Israel will be spared such a fate, however, because all who commit such offences will be cut off from their people. In other words, in their present setting the listed acts are designated the practices of other nations, from which Israel is to be distinguished by its observance of the practices Yahweh has instituted. But it will preserve its status as God's people only by eradicating any of its members who
compromise that status by engaging in non-Israelite practices. The rejection of these practices is used as a criterion for distinguishing and defining the in-group—Israel—from the surrounding societies that threaten to infiltrate or absorb them. There is a parallelism here between social distinctions (between Israel and other societies), cultic distinctions (clean and unclean), and theological distinctions (the laws of Yahweh and the laws of other peoples—their gods are not dignified by a reference). This parallelism is taken up and developed in the epilogue of chapter 20 (see below).

Chapter 20 is rather more complex. The prohibited acts this time include, besides a few that were not in chapter 18, a mixture of offences from both lists in chapter 18, (all but three from the first list and all of the second list) but in a quite different arrangement. The impression given here is of a much more mixed bag of offences. Whereas in chapter 18 the commands were all in the second person singular ("thou shalt not..."), here they are in the third person singular, beginning with an indefinite subject ("anyone who," "whoever"). In many cases the text characterizes the offence, pronounces the death penalty, and assigns to the culprits full responsibility for their own deaths. But beyond this the form of the proscriptions varies considerably. All this suggests that they are not directly related to the collection in chapter 18 (i.e., not composed by the same authors), but rather each collection has its own history. Ultimately, all of the laws common to the two collections probably go back to a common social setting.

Verse 13 reads: "Anyone who lies with a male as one lies with a woman—the two of them have broken a taboo. They shall be put to death—their blood shall be upon them" (that is, they, not the community that executes them, shall bear responsibility for their deaths). Like 18:22, this verse characterizes the act in question as the breaking of a taboo. This time, however, it spells out the penalty for committing the offence; and it clears the community of any liability for the deaths of the offenders.

The chapter ends with an epilogue (vv. 22-26) that reiterates some of the content of the epilogue to chapter 18, except that
here there is an additional emphasis on the distinctiveness of
Israel: 'I am Yahweh, your God, who made you distinct from the
peoples. And you shall make a distinction between clean and
unclean animals, and between clean and unclean birds. You
shall not defile yourselves with any animal or bird or anything
that crawls on the earth which I have made distinct, for you to
regard as unclean. You shall be holy to me, for I, Yahweh, am
holy, and I have made you distinct from the peoples, to be mine'
(vv. 24b-26). 8

Here the social, cultic and theological separation and dis­tinctness of Israel is even more emphatically stated and corre­lated than in chapter 18. Moreover, it is further implicitly
related to the distinctness of the created order as understood
by the priestly writers—the distinctness of three great
categories of animals: animals, birds and "crawling things." The
word used here for "make distinct" or "make a distinction"
(hibêlî) is a favorite word of the authors. For example, they use
it in Genesis 1 of the distinction made between light and
darkness (4), between the waters above the earth and the
waters beneath (6-7), and between day and night (14, 18). They
also use it in Exodus 26:33 of the curtain that makes a distinc­tion between the sanctuary and the holy of holies. Ezekiel (a
priest) uses it of the distinction between sacred and profane
(Ezek. 22:26; 42:20). 9

It should be clear by now that these lists have an emblematic
character for those priestly authors concerned with defining
the cultic community of postexilic Israel. They are fitted into a
view of the world that makes sharp distinctions between what
is cultically clean and unclean and between "them" and "us."

I conclude with several observations and questions concern­
ing the use of these verses in our present situation.

First, the proscriptions in these chapters are used to ex­emplify a priestly scheme for distinguishing insiders from out­siders, the people of God from other peoples. There is no
reference to any discriminations among the people of God on
the basis of these laws. Leviticus 21 lists a number of behaviors
and characteristics that are inappropriate in priests. It does not
refer to homosexual behavior. It does not need to, since the preceding chapter has proscribed this for the society as a whole. If the church is to invoke the values expressed in Leviticus 18 and 20, should it not raise questions about these practices, not just of some designated group within the church (those seeking ordination) but of all members (or all who apply for membership)?

Second, may we pick and choose among the verses in these two chapters? All the behaviors listed are equally condemned. All come within the framework that makes them the basis of a distinction between Israel and other peoples, between clean and unclean, between what is acceptable to Yahweh and what is not acceptable to Yahweh. If the verses on homosexual acts are cited as bearing on church policies, then the verses on adultery and intercourse during menstruation, for example, must surely also be cited as having the same impact on church policies.

On the other hand, if we find a significant distinction between homosexual acts, adultery, and intercourse during menstruation, should we not ask ourselves whether we really understand why these chapters condemn all three equally? And if we cannot understand why a couple who have had intercourse during her menstrual period should be cut off from the society, can we assume that we understand why they condemn to death those engaging in homosexual acts? If we cannot understand the common link between these various acts, can we arbitrarily select one of them as a guide for the church?

Third, can these two chapters in Leviticus be read without reference to the rest of the Bible (for the moment I am speaking only of the Hebrew Bible)? That is, can we ignore the fact that homosexual acts are proscribed only in these two verses in one law collection, while adultery is proscribed in all three major law collections (Exod. 20:22-23:19; Deut. 12-26; Lev. 17-26) and in the two lists of the Ten Commandments (Exod. 20:2-17; Deut. 5:6-21) and condemned numerous times in both the Prophets and the Writings? Whatever their significance for the writer of the Holiness Code, it is surely appropriate to say that
for the Bible as a whole, adultery is a matter of major concern, while the condemnation of homosexual acts is limited to one collection of laws. It is ironic that the church seems to be reversing these emphases.

Fourth, as we have seen, what the two chapters in Leviticus refer to is homosexual acts. How could it be otherwise, since homosexuality as a psychological disposition was only fully recognized and publicly described in the last century? But if that is the case, would not the biblical references to homosexual acts have envisaged homosexual activity by what we today call heterosexuals? None of this mitigates the priestly censure of such sexual activity. But what does it really mean in light of the distinction between sexual activity and sexual identity?

Fifth, as we have seen, the two chapters in Leviticus refer only to male homosexual acts. Why were not females also mentioned? The passage on bestiality explicitly mentions both men and women. A formally literal interpretation of the text would have to distinguish between sexual acts between males, which are forbidden, and those between females, which are not. Again, we have to ask whether the categories that the priestly authors were working with are appropriate for our understanding of these matters.

Sixth, chapters 18 and 20 of Leviticus express the worldview, values and norms of a particular group in postexilic Israel. These are very different from those of the earlier law collections: the Laws of the Covenant in Exodus 20:22-23:19 and the Deuteronomic Laws in Deuteronomy 12-26 (in neither of which is there any reference to homosexual acts). They are also very different from the values and concerns of other biblical texts coming from other groups in Judean society of the period. On what basis do we invoke one of these sources and not others?

Finally, it seems to me that Christians have to ask another question, one which is of tremendous significance. Given the place of the Hebrew scriptures in the Christian Bible, how do we relate the definition of the people of God in these chapters to the gospel's definition of the people of God?
The Hebrew Bible and Homosexuality

With these questions I have suggested some difficulties involved in any application of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 to our present situation. This does not in any way imply a judgment on the issue before the church. It does imply that the two chapters in which these verses appear, while unambiguous in their application to the community defined in Leviticus, demand extended and thoughtful reflection before they can be expected to yield guidance for us today. It implies that what guidance they do offer will be indirect rather than direct. Certainly the issue before the church will have to be settled on grounds other than the mere citation of these references.

Notes

1. There are also references in the Hebrew Bible to qe'deshim (Dut. 23:17; 1 Kings 14:24; 15:12; 22:46; 2 Kings 23:7; Job 36:14), translated “(male) temple prostitutes” or something similar in most modern English versions. But the meaning of this term is in fact not as clear as the translations suggest. Phyllis Bird will argue in a forthcoming study that the term is probably there more for literary reasons than as a reflection of an actual social institution. In any case, prostitution—whether female or male, homosexual or heterosexual, sacred or profane—is beyond the scope of this paper.

All translations that follow are the author’s own.

2. It is striking that in modern English the various words we derive from the name of Sodom do not denote the violation of hospitality, or even rape. Sodomy, according to Webster’s Third New International Dictionary, may refer to homosexual acts, to sexual intercourse with an animal, or to anal or oral intercourse in which the active partner is male. These meanings derive not from anything we are told about Sodom in the Hebrew Bible but from later misreadings and misinterpretations of Genesis 19.

In the Hebrew Bible itself the associations of the name “Sodom” are very different. Primarily Sodom is cited as a general model of a sinful city (Dut. 32:22; Isa. 1:10; 3:9; Jer. 23:14; Lam. 4:6), or of a city that was completely destroyed (Dut. 29:22; Isa. 1:1; 19:19; Jer. 46:18; 50:40; Amos 4:11; Zeph. 2:9; Lam. 4:6). Occasionally there are more specific associations. In Isa. 1:10ff. Judah is addressed as Sodom and Gomorrah because of its general wrongdoing (v. 16), but more specifically because of its bloodshed (v. 15) and its failure to assure justice to the vulnerable and the oppressed (v. 17). In Ezck. 18:4ff., the prophet, charging that Sodom’s behavior was not as bad as Jerusalem’s (48), characterizes Sodom as proud and complacent in its enjoyment of the good life. It did nothing to support the disadvantaged and helpless. It broke social and religious taboos, to’eba (48—on this word see below).
In all these other references to the legendary Sodom it is compared with some contemporary city or people, usually Jerusalem but occasionally Babylon or Edom or Moab. In no case is there any reference to homosexuality, or, for that matter, to rape or inhospitality, either in Sodom itself or in Jerusalem or Babylon or Edom or Moab. Genesis 19 is unique in ascribing to Sodom the offence of (intended) violation of the custom of hospitality by rape of guests.


6. For mishkē (as referring to coition cf. Gen. 49:4 addressed to Reuben: "alita mishkē abika," referring to Gen. 35:22 "Reuben went and lay with Bilhah, his father's concubine."

7. The epilogue uses repeatedly the terms "unclean" and "taboo acts." The word "taboo" (to'eba), which in the list appeared only with the prohibition of homosexual acts (v. 22), is here used by the compiler to classify all the preceding.

8. Verse 27 is an obvious later addition, stating that any medium of the spirits of the dead is to be put to death.

9. In Num. 8:14 and 16:9 it refers to God's (and Moses') distinguishing of the Levites from the general assembly of Israel. (It is also used four times in Leviticus outside this chapter, five times in Deuteronomy and eight times elsewhere.)

10. Another indication of a fundamental difference between the values of the priestly authors of Leviticus and our own—one which cautions against any easy transition from the values stated here to our own situation—is the lack of any reference to motivation in these proscriptions. This perhaps strikes us most sharply in the law against bestiality: the beast as well as the human offender is to be put to death. But the death penalty applies to both parties in all the listed offences. Thus a distinction that for us is crucial in moral and legal questions—the distinction between voluntary and involuntary acts—is here disregarded.

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Robert C. Tannehill

THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH has for some years been engaged in an internal debate about the authority of Scripture in relation to other authorities. The most recent statement approved by General Conference appears on pp. 80-86 of the 1988 Book of Discipline under the title "Theological Guidelines: Sources and Criteria." This statement affirms the primacy of Scripture but also acknowledges the importance of tradition, experience, and reason. The effort to coordinate these four factors produces some helpful guidance to the church. The following statement from p. 82 of the Discipline is an example:

While we acknowledge the primacy of Scripture in theological reflection, our attempts to grasp its meaning always involve tradition, experience, and reason. Like Scripture, these may become creative vehicles of the Holy Spirit as they function within the Church.

There is indeed a sense in which Scripture is primary, for it is the earliest record of faith and remains foundational. Scrip-

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Scripture, however, cannot function as an effective norm for the church unless we face the issue of interpretation of Scripture. Every use of Scripture involves interpretation. The General Conference statement rightly recognizes that tradition, experience, and reason may have important roles in interpretation, if they are "creative vehicles of the Holy Spirit."

The reference to the Holy Spirit reminds us of another aspect of our Scripture and tradition that must not be ignored. Scripture itself neither leads to salvation nor provides divine guidance to the church apart from the present action of the Holy Spirit. This was recognized by our predecessors, as these words of Charles Wesley (no. 595 in the United Methodist Hymnal, 1989) indicate:

Whether the Word be preached or read,
no saving benefit I gain
from empty sounds or letters dead;
unprofitable all and vain,
unless by faith thy word I hear
and see its heavenly character.

Unmixed with faith, the Scripture gives
no comfort, life, or light to see,
but me in darker darkness leaves,
implunged in deeper misery,
overwhelmed with nature's sorest ills.
The Spirit saves, the letter kills.

The last line is, of course, a paraphrase of 2 Cor. 3:6. It is appropriate at this point to turn to the Pauline passage from which this line is taken because, in my experience, the testimony to Scripture's primacy comes from the fact that it frequently states things more radically than we do and therefore uncovers dimensions of the problem that we are inclined to ignore. I would note in passing that both 2 Cor. 3 and the experience of some modern renewal movements within the church (movements that have experienced Scripture as an oppressive force) justify lines of Charles Wesley that otherwise
may seem excessive. Apart from real faith and the saving Spirit, he says, Scripture not only gives no light "but me in darker darkness leaves/plunged in deeper misery." The full seriousness of the problem we face appears when we recognize that Scripture, apart from the saving Spirit, may be not simply neutral but an instrument of darkness.

Paul's main topic in 2 Corinthians 3 is his own ministry, but in the course of his discussion he makes the following statement:

Not that we are competent of ourselves to claim anything as coming from us; our competence is from God, who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of letter but of spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. (2 Cor. 3:5-6, NRSV)

Paul continues by contrasting the old "ministry of condemnation" with the new "ministry of justification" to which he has been called. Then he adds:

Since, then, we have such a hope, we act with great boldness, not like Moses, who put a veil over his face to keep the people of Israel from gazing at the end of the glory that was being set aside. But their minds were hardened. Indeed, to this very day, when they hear the reading of the old covenant, that same veil is still there, since only in Christ is it set aside. Indeed, to this very day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their minds; but when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit. (2 Cor. 3:12-18; NRSV)

Emphasis on the primacy of Scripture does not in itself provide life-giving nurture and a healthy norm for the church, nor does the General Conference statement, helpful as it is, recognize the full depth of the problem we face. The problem is that Scripture can be the letter that kills as well as the instrument of the life-giving Spirit. The result depends on how it is being heard and interpreted by us. In the one case a veil
lies over our minds as Scripture is read, and so the message of Scripture is not heard as Paul proclaims it, as the message of God's righteousness, i.e., God's saving justice for all people. A veil obscures our sight; our minds are hardened. Scripture functioning as part of a hardened religious system that excludes and condemns is the Scripture veiled. It does not free us from death for life.

The Veil of Ideology

The library of books that we call Scripture permits a variety of interpretations. That there is no understanding without interpretation is especially clear in the case of Scripture, for there is no mechanical way of determining what is central to the message of this library of books. We cannot, for instance, simply give equal weight to every biblical verse and expect a correct understanding of God's message for us to emerge. None of us does give equal weight to every biblical verse, and attempting to do so would be fruitless effort.

In the necessary process of interpretation, including necessary decisions about what is central and what is not, human sin has room to work. It can work among those who claim to be redeemed as well as among others. We come to Scripture with a set of presuppositions that guide our reading, some of them helpful and some not. We may compare, for instance, the way that most Christians respond to two similar dialogues in the New Testament. In Acts 16:30-31 the Philippian jailer asks Paul and Silas, "What must I do to be saved?" and they reply, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." Although this is directed only to one man in the story, it is generally taken as a requirement for people today also. In Luke 18:18-23 we have a similar dialogue. A man asks Jesus, "What shall I do to inherit eternal life?" and Jesus replies, "Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." This is generally not taken as a requirement for us today, either by
evangelicals or liberals. However, there is nothing in the stories themselves to indicate that one applies to us and the other not.

Some interpretive map always guides us as we seek to make our way through Scripture and discover its meaning. To put it another way, we always read Scripture through a set of glasses. Sometimes these glasses are so dark and distorting as to hide Scripture’s life-giving message. Paul uses a further image to express the problem; borrowing from Exodus 34, he speaks of a veil that covers the reading of Scripture and lies on the human heart, hiding the divine glory and preventing people from hearing the life-giving word.

The veil may operate as an ideology. By an ideology I mean a belief system shared by a group and serving that group’s interests in competition with other groups. An ideology is some group’s way of telling itself that it has a superior place in the universe and therefore may rightfully claim all it wants of wealth, power, and prestige, which the rest of the world does not deserve. The sad truth is that we read Scripture through our ideologies and thereby make Scripture a prop for our claims to power and status. Paul was right when he wrote that a veil lies over the reading of Scripture.

We inherit this veil from our society and also actively weave it ourselves. Because the veil is already present when we come to Scripture, we need a liberating and illuminating force to show us the life-giving word. The Spirit—the active power of God in the midst of our lives—must take the veil away. This is what we can learn from Paul’s strong emphasis on the Spirit in 2 Corinthians 3. “The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.” “When one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. Now the Lord is the Spirit.” We are promised that the active power of God at work within our communities can penetrate our ideologies and remove the veil from Scripture.

The Spirit and Modern Renewal Groups

ARE THERE INDICATIONS THAT THIS IS HAPPENING in the modern church? Although the Spirit certainly works in the lives of
individuals, a claim to illumination by the Spirit from a single individual has yet to pass its first test. This claim must be plausible to a group that finds the message to illuminate their situation and speak to their need. We should look first, therefore, at what is happening in certain renewal groups that are currently challenging the church to be the church. Without intending to be exhaustive, I will mention the renewal groups associated with a) Latin American liberation theology, b) Black theology, c) feminist theology, and d) the Good News Movement.

To suggest, as I am, that the Spirit may be at work in these movements to unveil a life-giving word does not imply blanket approval of any one of them. The church must exercise discernment to discover what, in the claims of each group, is an authoritative word that must not be ignored. Nevertheless, consideration of these renewal movements can sharpen and clarify the issues the church faces concerning the authority of Scripture. Each of these groups has its own way of reading Scripture. The first three have also experienced Scripture as an oppressor, for Scripture can be and has been read as requiring docile acceptance of poverty, submission to the slave master, and subordination of women. When a renewal group learns to read Scripture in a new way, it is also protesting against an old way of reading Scripture that has been oppressive. In the case of feminist theology, this may involve a critique of widespread androcentrism in Scripture itself. Nevertheless, the firm rejection of certain aspects of Scripture may serve the full acceptance of another aspect of Scripture's message.

I wish to affirm explicitly that renewal may also come from the conservative side of the theological spectrum. United Methodist evangelicals also have something to say to us. In my view, they rightly call us to recognize that the transformation of people's lives is not an occasional byproduct of our work but a central task of the church and that the church is not carrying out this task unless it is actively engaged in evangelism.

Is the Spirit at work in these groups? Even an outsider must recognize signs of transformation, empowerment, and freedom.
reminiscent of Paul’s description of the Spirit at work in his churches. Their experience may not by itself guarantee that these groups have an authentic word from the Spirit, or necessarily clarify what that word is, but the signs are sufficient to require our attention.

None of these groups (even if it claims to believe in plenary inspiration) finds all parts of Scripture equally valuable. Each looks especially to certain parts where it finds the word it needs to hear. Furthermore, those experiencing new power and freedom may not read these texts in ways approved by historical scholars. They may even read some texts “against the grain,” i.e., in a way that deliberately rejects what appears to be the obvious sense of a particular passage. In their defense one can point out that the early Christians, including Paul, did the same thing. Not only did they find the Christian Messiah sprinkled throughout Jewish Scripture but they also read the story of Israel as a constant echo of their own experience in a church that was no longer very Jewish. The transforming experience of empowerment and freedom in the early church led to an interpretive freedom seldom permitted in either liberal or conservative seminaries.

We know, of course, that renewal movements can become rigid sects that are oppressive in their turn. Conflict with the parent body can make them more and more judgmental, exclusive, and paranoid. The church, however, needs its renewal movements, and it may in turn contribute balance and breadth. Patience in continuing the often painful dialogue can benefit both the church and the renewal movement.

We also know that many in the long history of the church have claimed to have the Spirit, and all too often their message turned out to be a word of death and not a word of life. The one who claims to speak for the Spirit may simply be the mouthpiece of another death-dealing ideology. Doesn’t reserving such a large role for the Spirit in the interpretation of Scripture leave the church without clear guidance?

To answer that question, we need to understand the Spirit as Paul does. The Spirit has some recognizable features, and
Paul reminds us of them. 1) Since “the Spirit gives life,” a message that inherently produces death is not the Spirit’s work. 2) The Spirit replaces the old ministry of condemnation with the ministry of justification, a ministry enlisted to serve God’s saving justice now powerfully at work in the whole world, according to Paul. When Scripture is read so as to hide God’s saving justice or to limit it to one kind of people, the Spirit is not there. 3) The Spirit means freedom. “The Lord is the Spirit,” Paul says, “and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.” When Scripture is used to hold some people in bondage, the Spirit is not there. 4) Paul says that when the veil is removed, we are able to see the glory of the Lord and are transformed into the Lord’s image. When Scripture is used to shape lives into a contrary image, the Spirit is not there. Considerable spiritual discernment is still needed, but we do have some criteria for judging when the Spirit is truly at work, bringing God’s word to bear on our lives. When that word brings life, when it proclaims God’s saving justice for the whole world, when it transforms us after the pattern of our Lord, when it brings freedom, there the Spirit is removing the veil and enabling us to hear a saving message.

The Spirit enables us to hear God’s word as a word of freedom. By freedom Paul does not mean acting on all one’s selfish desires, with no thought of the consequences. He means freedom from the death-dealing forces that operate in our ideologies, turning God into an idol who is always in support of our cause and turning group against group and creature against creature. For freedom from these ideologies Christ has set us free.

A Canon Within the Canon

I do not mean to imply that a complete and changeless set of criteria, allowing us always to recognize the work of the Spirit, can be drawn from 2 Corinthians 3, or even from Paul’s writings as a whole. Many parts of Scripture can continue to instruct the church about God’s work in the world, and the church must
remain open to the possibility of learning from parts of Scripture that seem entirely antiquated. Nevertheless, if the library of books that we call Scripture is to produce something other than confusion, we must operate with a so-called canon within the canon, an understanding of the core of the biblical message for our world. Reference to a canon within the canon, however, does not in itself solve our problem of how Scripture can give guidance to the church. We must face the fact that different Christian groups operate with different canons within the canon, and there is no objective, historical way of deriving a single canon within the canon from Scripture itself (e.g., through appeal to the “apostolic witness”).

We must allow for the work of the Spirit. We must acknowledge the church’s experience that neglected parts of Scripture can take on new significance for a particular group and through them for the larger church, resulting in a shift in its operative canon within the canon.

If we have no single canon within the canon, why isn’t the life of the church full of more conflict and chaos than is actually the case? In spite of differences, we are able to talk to each other and work together because there is still a fairly large area of overlap in our perspectives and some basic values that most of us affirm. What unites us is not exactly theology--discussions of the doctrine of Scripture and of Christology will highlight our differences, not our unity--but something like a shared sense of the world’s need and the church’s mission impressed upon us by our attempts at ministry.

The United Methodist Church may affirm the primacy of Scripture, but it actually makes its decisions in light of its basic values, which reflect its (perhaps flawed) reading of God’s activity in its own life. Scripture has a role in this, but when the church decided that a woman should be elected bishop, I doubt that debate over 1 Timothy 2:11-15 was a major factor. I suspect that the church acted as it did because of a basic commitment to an inclusive church that arises from other biblical passages and from our own experience of freedom as old social barriers collapse. We are deciding what aspects of Scripture are
authoritative for us in light of our own experience of God at work in the world. We should not be ashamed of this. On the contrary, we should be more aware of what we are doing and why we must do it, for that will enable us to reach our decisions with less confusion.

Was Paul a Bible-believer? Did he believe in Scripture as God's word for us? Yes and no. Through the Spirit Paul recognized in his Scripture the message of God's saving justice for the world, but he also recognized that Scripture can become the letter that kills. There are, in fact, some parts of Scripture that very easily become this killing letter. Therefore, Paul can sometimes contrast one part of Scripture with another, affirming one and rejecting the other (see Gal. 3:11-12). Or he can give the old Scripture a new meaning, which rescues it from being the letter that kills (note what Paul does to Deut. 30:11-14 in Rom. 10:6-8). We, too, may have to say no to the plain meaning of some parts of Scripture. I mean that we do not accept these parts as guidance for today, even if we recognize their value—or at least their inevitability—in the ancient context. It may seem shocking and frightening that we should make such judgments about Scripture, but historic Christian readings of Scripture are the result of such judgments. There are large parts of Scripture that only orthodox Jews still take as authoritative guidance for today. I am asking that we be clearer about what we Christians have done and recognize its continuing necessity. We must continue to make decisions not because we are modern skeptics but for the same reason that Paul did, in order that the message of God's saving justice for the world may be heard and we may witness to it with our lives.

When modern biblical criticism became known, people in our churches began to worry about attacks on the historical accuracy of the Bible. It will be small comfort to realize that this should no longer be the major worry. The chief danger today is no longer skepticism about the historicity of biblical stories but serious doubts about whether biblical stories and biblical teaching lead us toward justice and freedom. In place of the question, is what the Bible says true historically, people are beginning to
ask, is what the Bible says good? Does it advocate life, justice, and freedom? If we are to show that there is a message in the Bible that leads to life, justice, and freedom, we will have to be as bold as Paul in rejecting what will become the killing letter if it is allowed to control our present lives.

Conclusion

I HAVE ALREADY INDICATED THAT THE SPIRIT that must guide us in these decisions is not an indefinable force but is recognizable because it has a definite goal. According to Paul, it brings life; it creates freedom. Now I want to add that the Spirit does not operate in a vacuum as it removes the veil from Scripture and creates freedom. I think the General Conference was wise when it affirmed that tradition, experience, and reason “may become creative vehicles of the Holy Spirit as they function within the Church.” They may become vehicles of the Spirit; they are not necessarily so. Tradition can be dead weight that holds us back from responding to the call to freedom, but tradition is also a cloud of witnesses that can still speak to us, it is a rich reservoir of corporate experience from which we can learn. What has been tested is not to be despised even if it does not meet all of our present needs. Furthermore, tradition can warn us about past mistakes. Church history may show that what has long been part of our tradition carries with it certain dangers. The Spirit, working with tradition, may put us on guard against these dangers.

My discussion of the Spirit has underlined the importance of experience. Without rejecting a broader understanding of experience, a particular kind of experience is especially important to the church: the experience of freedom and power in renewal movements that are calling the church to be truly the church. This experience is commonly accompanied by new insights into the gospel for our time and new understandings of Scripture. This kind of experience can help the larger church to read Scripture in a fresh and vital way.
Reason, also, has its important role. It is not simply an abstract and skeptical power. Paul included "the renewal of the mind" (Rom. 12:2) in the effects of the gospel, and this renewed mind is not an enemy of the Spirit. Indeed, the Spirit inspires new thought. The Spirit illuminates, but the implications must be thought out. Otherwise the effect is small, and we are stuck with inconsistencies that rob the gospel of its power. We must also remember the essential role of reason in disputes. A church, such as ours, that does not agree on everything cannot do without reason. Apart from reason we are reduced to shouting at each other; through reason we can learn from each other.

Tradition, experience, and reason can be the means of discovering links between the ancient Scripture and our modern world. The Spirit cannot be located in any one of them nor in the three together, but the free Spirit may work in the interaction of Scripture and tradition, Scripture and experience, Scripture and reason to unveil a life-giving word for our time.

Nevertheless, the General Conference statement affirming the primacy of Scripture while maintaining the importance of tradition, experience, and reason does not adequately address the concrete problem of recognizing God’s guidance for the church today. I am not necessarily asking for another statement from General Conference. Rather, I am simply suggesting that factors emphasized in this essay--including our necessarily selective use of Scripture, the vital role of the Spirit in our appropriation of Scripture, and the work of the Spirit in renewal movements, with their experience of empowerment and distinctive readings of Scripture--will help to clarify more concretely how the church is receiving guidance today and the role of Scripture in that process.
Notes

1. This is a revised and expanded version of an address to a convocation of the Methodist Theological School in Ohio and the East and West Ohio Evangelical Fellowships.

2. The recent history of this debate is reviewed in the article by Ted Campbell in this issue of Quarterly Review.

3. This illustration was suggested to me by James Barr, Beyond Fundamentalism (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984) 112-13.


6. In the last chapter of his book, Richard Hays dares to suggest that Paul’s interpretation of Scripture can serve as a hermeneutical model for the church today. See Echoes of Scripture, pp. 178-92. This would mean reading Scripture metaphorically and risking considerable interpretive freedom. The following statements are particularly congenial to my own argument in this essay: “Scripture discloses its sense only as the text is brought into correlation with living communities where the Holy Spirit is at work....True interpretation is a retrospective activity of communities whose reading is shaped by the grace of God in their midst. Under the guidance of the Spirit, we discover the operation of God’s grace among us to be prefigured in Scripture, and we find the Scripture that we thought we knew transfigured by the grace at work among us” (p. 184).


8. The search for what is earliest and most widely acknowledged in the message about Jesus will not provide what we need, for 1) the early traditions are themselves diverse in the ways that they interpret Jesus’ significance; 2) this material may not include key passages (e.g., from the Old Testament) that should be part of our canon within the canon; and 3) even if we could agree on what is earliest and most widely acknowledged, the various Christian groups would interpret and apply this material differently.
Scripture as an Authority in Relation to Other Authorities: A Wesleyan Evangelical Perspective

Ted A. Campbell

I am pleased to have the opportunity to respond to the topic of "Scripture as an Authority in Relation to Other Authorities," reflecting specifically on the interpretive doctrinal statement adopted by the 1988 General Conference of the United Methodist Church. Although I have little heart for controversy, it seems to me that the enterprise of trying to understand the widely differing perspectives of contemporary Christians is critical in churches, such as The United Methodist Church, where theological pluralism (at least in a certain broad and positive sense) is a given fact. To survive, and hopefully to thrive, in such a pluralistic community requires careful consideration of seriously differing points of view; the only alternative that I can envision is strident dissension leading to separation of one form or another -- a process that has repeated itself far too often in Protestant history.

There are two presuppositions I would note about my response. The first is that I am a historian, or at best a "historical theologian." That is to say, the contribution that I can best make to this discussion will be to understand historically the

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contemporary questions of the Bible's authority in relation to other authorities. I will reflect critically on these questions from that perspective.

Secondly, I offer what I have called "A Wesleyan-Evangelical Perspective." This is not meant to be the proud waving of a sectarian flag, but is (hopefully) an attempt to be honest about the presuppositions that have structured my own reflections on these matters. I am not a "generic" Evangelical (if there is such a thing), but I have been shaped by the specifically Wesleyan branch of the Evangelical movement, and this (as I shall suggest below) has some very concrete implications for the manner in which I would approach the authority of the Christian Scriptures in relation to other authorities.

With these presuppositions noted, there are two main points I want to make. The first is that very few Methodist Evangelicals (or, to speak somewhat more broadly, Wesleyan Evangelicals) are really "fundamentalists"; it follows that Methodist Evangelicals do not object in principal to the use of tradition, experience, and reason in interpreting Scripture. Of course, I cannot speak for all Evangelicals on this point, since there remains a strong current of real fundamentalism (on this issue, represented by Harold Lindsell and others) for whom there can be effectively no authority but that of the Bible (at least, that's the way they say it and seem to imagine it).

The doctrine of scriptura sola, however, was never understood to exclude the use of tradition, experience, and reason in interpreting the scriptures. It has been demonstrated that the Protestant Reformers were not Fundamentalists in this sense. More specifically, even if many North American Evangelicals have been attracted to this biblical monism in this century, Wesleyan Evangelicals have not. I cite as evidence the writings of the Nazarene theologian H. Orton Wiley who, writing in the 1930s (the same time as Princeton theologians were calling for a truly fundamentalist approach to Scripture), described what he called a "dictation theory" of biblical inspiration, and then cleanly rejected it in favor of the view that the inspiration of the Scriptures involves both divine and human agency.
Moreover, when United Methodist Evangelicals, responding to the 1972 doctrinal statement, had the opportunity to affirm scriptural "infallibility" or "inerrancy," they refused those terms, choosing to speak instead of the "accuracy" of God's work in inspiring the Scriptures. Most critically, any notion of biblical monism (the idea that the Bible is the only authority for Christian communities) simply fails to conform to what the Scriptures claim for themselves. For instance, the introduction to Luke's Gospel does not claim to be the result of a divine "seizure" of the writer, but rather the careful work of a historian who considered his sources and wrote the best account he could (Luke 1:1-4). After all, Scripture itself utilizes "tradition" in a certain sense, and also utilizes reflection on common experience.

But if Wesleyan Evangelicals are willing to utilize tradition, experience, and reason as doctrinal guidelines in some sense, the problem we perceive is that without some sense of the center of authority, the so-called "Wesleyan Quadrilateral" can be read as saying "Anything goes!" After all, there is nothing in the known universe that does not fall under one of the categories of Scripture, tradition, reason, or experience. It was altogether too easy, in their reaction against fundamentalism, for Methodists to jump to the conclusion that the "Quadrilateral" could justify any sincerely-held opinion.

In all fairness, it must be said that the problem lies not so much with the 1972 or 1988 doctrinal statements, since both drafting committees intended to make clear their commitment to the authority of Scripture over all other authorities. The problems were (a) that the wording of the 1972 statement was quite ambiguous (the famous "There is a primacy that goes with Scripture...however" sentence), and (b) the statement was interpreted (I think it would be right to say misinterpreted) as meaning that any theological opinion, when bolstered by some combination of Scripture, tradition, experience, and reason, was to be accepted.

In this respect, the 1988 doctrinal statement makes a considerable advance over the 1972 statement. No one could mistake
its commitment to the authority of Scripture over that of other authorities. "United Methodists share with other Christians the conviction that Scripture is the primary source and criterion for Christian doctrine." And again, "In theological reflection, the resources of tradition, experience, and reason are integral to our study of Scripture, without displacing Scripture's primacy for faith and practice." In making clear at least thus far the center of Christian authority, United Methodist Evangelicals have strongly favored the 1988 statement over the earlier one.

But there is a sense in which I believe that an Evangelical critique must also bear on the 1988 statement. Granted that Scripture in some sense has a "primacy" over tradition, experience, and reason, the question remains as to what it is in Scripture that constitutes its own "self-norming" authority. It seems to me that Methodists since 1972 (at least) have so focused on the question of Scripture as interpreted by tradition, experience, and reason (all external criteria), that they have almost forgotten the critical and "primary" sense in which Scripture itself must be the norm by which Scripture is to be interpreted (i.e., the internal criterion). Is there a "canon" by which the "canon" is to be interpreted? Yes -- but it is a canon within the canon, and not something external to the Scriptures themselves.

What I mean to suggest here is really no new idea. In a letter to her son John composed in 1725, Susanna Wesley wrote a sophisticated explanation of her understanding of predestination, then concluded, "This is the sum of what I believe concerning predestination, which I think is agreeable to the analogy of faith..." I mention this because the term "analogy of faith," from the Greek text of Rom. 12:6 (though never, to my knowledge, rendered by those precise words in English translations) was a kind of code word by which Susanna and then John Wesley (following many Christians before them) described a sense of the wholeness of Scripture as communicating God's authority. If a passage is difficult to understand, Wesley suggested, it is to be submitted in the first place not to
tradition, experience, or reason, but to Scripture itself. Wesley consistently referred Scripture to Scripture, and in this respect concurred with the Protestant Reformers in their insistence that Scripture is indeed "normed," but normed by Scripture.\textsuperscript{10}

I cite the Wesleys here to indicate that the problem of finding a sense of scriptural "wholeness" is an old problem, and one that no Christian community can avoid.\textsuperscript{11} To take an example, if the Sermon on the Mount should hold more authority for Christian communities than the pentateuchal regulations concerning wayward children, then it seems to me that we are forced back to the question of what it is that constitutes the central, biblical message, how Scripture norms Scripture, or, how we read Scripture "according to the proportion (or analogy) of faith." Admittedly, this is no easy task, but it seems to me that our doctrinal statement blurs this critical issue in moving quickly from Scripture to other authorities without focusing on some sense of the overall meaning of the biblical witness.

And yet, there are hints scattered through the 1988 statement - tantalizing hints whose import could have been made much clearer. Prior to speaking of the four authorities of Scripture, tradition, experience, and reason, the preamble to our doctrinal statements asserts that "Our forebears in the faith reaffirmed the ancient Christian message as found in the apostolic witness."\textsuperscript{12} Again, in introducing the section on "Our Common Heritage as Christians," the 1988 statement claims that "This heritage is grounded in the apostolic witness to Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, which is the source and measure of all valid Christian teaching."\textsuperscript{13} This appeal to an "apostolic faith" (perhaps echoing current discussions in the World Council of Churches Faith and Order Commission) is again referred to in the section on our common heritage,\textsuperscript{14} but is not brought up in the later section in which the Quadrilateral is expounded.

This is unfortunate, I think, because this idea -- the idea of an apostolic witness to Christ underlying the biblical texts -- could serve as a critical means of interpreting Christian religious authority in our age. Why, after all, do we say that the Christian Scriptures have authority for the Christian com-
munity today? (The answer is not just because Athanasius gave us the list.) The reason, I think, must be that the Scriptures alone convey to us the primitive, apostolic testimony to the work of God in Christ. Though validated by tradition, only the Scriptures offer to the Christian community this basic and constitutive witness to Christ.

Understanding the apostolic witness as the center of biblical religion also helps to clarify the relationship between the authority of Scripture and other authorities. "Tradition," as the term is used in theological circles, does not denote Church history in general, but implies some normative content. But what is the norm? My suggestion is that the apostolic witness to Christ stands over all of Church history, judging and norming it, making clear to us the points at which women and men have, and have not, kept faith with that witness.

Apostolic faith, which the Scriptures convey to us, must stand over our contemporary community as well. I must confess my discomfort at our separation of "experience" and "reason." I am an empiricist enough to think that there is no reasoning without experience, and vice versa. I would prefer to think of our "reflection on experience" or better "reflection on common experience." Reflection on common experience sets the crucial context in which the Christian message has to be expounded in our day.

My experience as a Church historian is that when a community begins to rely on reflection on its own experience as a primary norm (i.e., not normed by the central authority of Scripture and its apostolic testimony), perversions are liable to occur. How, we might ask, could Christians butcher each other in the seventeenth century? How could Southern Methodists in the nineteenth century rewrite their own Discipline so as to avoid responsibility on the issue of slavery? How could "German Christians" of the 1930s understand themselves as Christians at all? In each case, a distortion of the biblical message followed upon an obsession with a community's own experience (the struggle of Protestants and Catholics in the Reformation, the cultural approval of slavery in the ethos of the Old South, the
peculiar distortion of nineteenth-century progressivism in the notion of the "master race").

But my reading of Church history also suggests that from time to time women and men arise who are able to confront the Church's preoccupation with the world, its compromises with culture, and call it back to the apostolic faith. The witness of Francis and Clare of Assisi, of John Wesley and Phoebe Palmer, of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Karl Barth, was in each case a witness given in a specific historical context (reflecting the experience of a specific community), and yet in each case the dynamism of their movements lay in the claim that that the witness of Christ stands over the Christian community and norms its life.

Here, I think, one must understand why Evangelicals want to insist on the "primacy" of Scripture in relation to other authorities. Evangelicals understand the essence of Christian faith to lie in adherence to Christ as the final, or ultimate allegiance. To put it in more traditionally Christian terms, the Christian faith is constituted by its worship of Jesus Christ. Given this ultimate commitment, it is inconceivable that the scriptural witness to Christ should be subjected to any other authority.

But of course, there is a critical implication in all of this for North American Evangelicals, too. Perhaps it is a banal observation that human beings consistently fail to accomplish their intentions, or to live according to their beliefs. For North American Evangelicals, it is too easy to conform to a theologically compromised, sometimes truly decadent, form of Evangelical faith. To be true to our faith, then, we must be open to hear the living Word of God in Scripture, standing over us in judgment, calling us to conformity to "Jesus Christ, and him crucified" (I Cor. 2:2).
church fathers, Luther and Calvin held that the authority of Scripture resided in its function of bringing persons into a saving relationship with God in Jesus Christ. Christ was the center of Scripture for both Luther and Calvin. We should look for no other knowledge in the Bible than of Christ and his benefits towards us, according to them" (p. 126).


4. On "tradition," cf. 1 Cor 15:1ff., where Paul recounts the kerygma as "handed on" to him; on the use of reflection on common experience, Romans 1:20, where Paul claims that God's "eternal power and deity" have been perceived in the created order.


8. Ibid., p. 80.


10. Cf. Wesley's "Popery Calmly Considered" I.6, where he asserts, "In all cases, the Church is to be judged by the Scripture, not the Scripture by the Church. And Scripture is the best expounder of Scripture. The best way, therefore, to understand it, is carefully to compare Scripture with Scripture, and thereby learn the true meaning of it" (in Thomas Jackson, ed., _The Works of the Reverend John Wesley, A.M._ [14 vols., London: Wesleyan Conference Office, 1872], 10:142.


13. Ibid., p. 41.


15. With the possible exception of ancient and extracanonical versions of the kerygma or _regula fidei_.

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"We are becoming the Sancho Panza of the ecumenical movement," a United Methodist of my acquaintance remarked to me recently. I laughed until it began to sink in. Sancho Panza was the great realist who wept over Don Quixote's windmills; the eternal survivor who made sure there was a next meal, if not a believable future; the faithful follower, seldom the initiator; the man with an absolutely impenetrable tin ear, who lacked even a trace of his master's soaring imagination.

That ecumenical Sancho needs a vision of his own. Not a triumphal Quixote-like vision, but a realistic vision that suits him—a basic ecumenical policy that does for the United Methodist Church what sound basic foreign policy can do for the nation. This paper aims to provoke something like that by clarifying the importance of United Methodism's ecumenical commitment for its health as a church.

Its main affirmations are these:

First: Our ecumenical commitment is not an extra but is essential and constitutive for United Methodism as church.

Second: An adequate basic ecumenical policy for United Methodism will focus upon four points:

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1. The central ecumenical goal is an inclusive church unity as a witness to God's way of healing and renewing the broken human community.

2. The attainable sign of integrity in that witness is an inclusive visible fellowship around the table in Holy Communion—a fellowship presently not expressed by the divided churches.

3. The unavoidable immediate step toward that witness is the work toward a full inclusive and mutual recognition of members and ministers among the divided churches.

4. The historical embodiment of this attainable goal is best viewed as a future, truly ecumenical, conciliar event of witness.

United Methodism's Ecumenical Commitment and Principles

Let's begin constitutionally. How much do United Methodists care about ecumenism? If ecumenism means church unity and its witness concerning the healing and wholeness of human community, then constitutionally United Methodists put that concern at the top of their self-understanding as a church.

Our constitution begins with church unity as a witness about human community. The preamble mentions the United Methodist denomination only after two substantial paragraphs in which it has already defined the church in ecumenical terms and put its finger on "dividedness" as a fundamental hindrance to that church's mission in the world (Discipline, p. 19). Turning to the Constitution proper, Division One, along with our three general articles about Name, Articles of Religion, and Title to Properties (Articles 2, 3, and 6), contains three more articles—all on ecumenism! (Articles 1, 4, and 5 on Church Union, Inclusiveness, and Ecumenical Relations)

When you consult our Articles of Religion and Confession of Faith to find how United Methodists understand this church, they answer with deep ecumenical insight: as "the one, holy,
apostolic and catholic... the Lordship of Christ," gathered around the Word of God purely preached and the sacraments duly administered (Article XIII, of Confession V). And lest there remain any doubt about what "pure" preaching and "due administration" of sacraments imply, we can be reminded by that basic constitutional article about "Inclusiveness of the Church" that all persons without regard to race, color, national origin, or economic condition are eligible to attend, participate, and share membership in the life and koinonia of this worshiping and witnessing "congregation."

We need to repeat and nail down from the beginning this fundamental, thoroughly characteristic United Methodist emphasis about ecumenism. "Church unity," has to do not simply with lessening denominational divisions, but with overcoming whatever divides and alienates either Christian fellowship or human community—dogmatism and institutionalism, to be sure, but racism, classism, and sexism no less. The emphasis is on "inclusive" church unity. Indeed, the deeper emphasis is upon a church unity whose mission is to bear witness to and visibly demonstrate God's way of healing the broken human community. The first and basic division of our Constitution is utterly preoccupied with laying down this foundational United Methodist concept. Do not misread what follows, then, as pleading merely for a narrow interdenominational view of ecumenism; its aim is to make clear the United Methodist understanding that ecumenism is missionary through and through. It has to do with the integrity of our witness.

What is the basis of this emphasis on ecumenism as wholeness in church and community? First, it lies deep in the Wesleyan vision of sanctification as the wholeness of salvation, a personal wholeness which is inseparable from a vision of wholeness in church and society. God's gift is the vision and the power for a renewal of this wholeness, a renewal which God freely offers in all and to all without exception. We are committed to receiving this gift as God gives it, in its wholeness both personally and corporately, and to bearing witness to all, whatever their condition, concerning that gift's "pure, unbounded"
powers of reconciliation, liberation, and healing. There is a personal being made "perfect in love"; there is also a corporate perfection as God, in the inspired phrase of Charles Wesley, "perfects us in one" (*The United Methodist Hymnal*, no. 627). Church unity and church inclusiveness are not mere extras any more than sanctification is a mere extra in personal salvation. They are basic and essential, both as unity and inclusiveness. Wesley, as Albert Outler loved to say, was an "evangelical catholic." One of the most basic meanings of the ancient term *catholicity* is precisely that inclusiveness of the church about which our Constitution speaks. "Catholic Spirit" is Wesley's translation into corporate terms of our characteristic emphasis upon wholeness in personal salvation. There, at the very core of our Wesleyan conviction, lies the reason for our United Methodist ecumenical commitment. We are concerned about church unity because we believe the sanctification of the church belongs to and prepares it for its mission.

That invocation of the traditional Wesley can turn our attention to a crucial feature of our new disciplinary doctrinal statement (*Discipline*, Pars. 65-69). That statement leaves no doubt that our United Methodist doctrinal heritage consists of two parts: "Our common heritage as Christians" and "our distinctive heritage as United Methodists" (pp. 41, 44). "Our common heritage" as United Methodists is the faith of the apostles and therefore of the scriptural canon, as it has been generally summarized in the ecumenical creeds (the Apostles, the Nicean, the Chalcedonian Definition) and interpreted in the developing tradition of the great Eastern and Western teachers (Athanasius and the Cappadocians, Augustine and Aquinas, the Continental and the English reformers)—all as passed on to us via that unresting editorial pencil of John Wesley in our Articles of Religion.

"Our distinctive heritage as United Methodists" consists of the distinctive Wesleyan sermon themes capable of being preached to coal miners at five in the morning: prevenient grace and repentance, justification and assurance, sanctifica-
tion and perfection, faith and good works, mission and service, and the nature and mission of the church.

What interests us here is how our church understands the relation of the "common" and the "distinctive." About that the Discipline is quite explicit and emphatic: "The core of Wesleyan doctrine that informed our past rightly belongs to our common heritage as Christians" (Discipline p. 50). "The heart of our task is to reclaim and renew the distinctive United Methodist doctrinal heritage, which rightly belongs to our common heritage as Christians, for the life and mission of the church today" (p. 56).

Something momentous is being said here about how to relate the common and the distinctive, something that few other churches have said so explicitly as yet. We are stewards of a distinctive tradition on behalf of the whole church, charged to renew and cherish it and to give it to the other churches as something which belongs to their and our common heritage. Our "distinctive" Wesleyan themes are truly ours only within that ecumenical commitment and stewardship. No "distinctives," no United Methodists—that's a truism. But no ecumenical commitment, no United Methodists either, and that's the point. We can truly have Wesley only by giving him to others in terms which they as well as we can understand. We can truly observe United Methodist services of Holy Communion only as celebrations of the whole church. We can truly have United Methodist ministers and bishops only as recognizable ministers and bishops of the whole church. We can be truly distinctive only as we are one.

Let me try to formulate that commitment into three ecumenical principles: First, the basic United Methodist commitment to the wholeness of God's grace and our salvation is at once personal, ecclesial, and social. The three unities personal, churchly, and social are inseparable.

Second, inclusive church unity is thus constitutive for United Methodism, as constitutive as personal sanctification is for Wesleyan salvation. United Methodism has its being, its integrity, only in relation to the whole church of Christ. We
cannot be ourselves without being ecumenical. That is what Wesley saw in his construal of the relation of the Methodists to the Church of England. It remains utterly clear in principle in the Constitution and Discipline of our denomination.

Third: United Methodism’s distinctive heritage is constitutive of and—inasmuch as it expresses the apostolic faith—belongs by prior right to the whole church. Our "distinctives" are truly ours only in trust, insofar as we hold them as stewards actively engaged in making them understandable and sharing them with others. This does not deny our mission to the unchurched. But it does take seriously what Wesley knew very well and presupposed in his mission to them: that it is a mission to spread the faith of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church, or it is nothing. That requires dialogue with other churches as well as mission to the unchurched.

In a word, ecumenism is of the essence of United Methodism. There can be no more searching question to put to our church than, what is the health of your ecumenical commitment?

**United Methodism’s Basic Ecumenical Policy**

We turn now to policy, those middle points of strategy that link basic principles and quadrennial programs.

I do not have space here for a methodologically explicit derivation of policy from principle. I frankly ask you to follow my attempt simply to focus upon four basic points which belong to any adequate United Methodist ecumenical strategy today.

1. First, deceptively self-evident, yet most basic, is that the central goal of United Methodism’s ecumenical policy is the quest for an inclusive church unity. The reason, as the previous section sought to make clear, is that church unity is central for our denominational identity and ecclesiology as such.

This church unity focus in our ecumenism is contested by some. Church unity is a North Atlantic concern, it is said; it belongs to the past. The contemporary challenge lies in the broken human community itself, and our concern is not unity
but purposeful conflict and surgical use of power to bring about justice. The commanding theme today is not unity among the churches but justice in the human community. Some therefore call for a quite explicit new "secular ecumenism."

If this is posed as an alternative center, I believe that it is a mistake. Gustavo Gutierrez himself insists that the root problem in oppression is not simply unjust social structures but sin and that any truly radical liberation will begin by generating a new human being. John Wesley agrees: first God's grace and our new birth, then human response in good works. Thus, there is no real sanctification without regeneration and no real regeneration without justification by faith and no true faith without prevenient grace.

We can translate that into ecclesiological and ecumenical terms. Before the renewal of mission there must be a new koinonia, and before the new koinonia there must be grace and receptive participation in the means by which that grace is "normally given," as Wesley puts it—through the apostolic witness in the Scriptures, through faithful contemporary proclamation of that witness today, and through initiation into the apostolic community of faith and participation in its communion and mission. The central theme in a United Methodist ecumenical policy, then, must be the quest for church unity as an ecclesial sanctification in which formerly separated churches are ready to receive together the fullness of the "ordinary" means of grace and are thus visibly capable of bearing witness, as the divided churches cannot be, about inclusiveness and justice in the human community as well. To make the quest for social justice alone the center of our ecumenical policy is to practice an ecumenism without foundations or credible visible signs and to offer a witness without "good news."

This focus on church unity does not imply a retreat into interdenominationalism. It asks, rather, that we discern the Body of Christ, as Paul asks, in our so-called ethical issues. Racism, sexism, classism are for United Methodists ecclesiological and ecumenical issues before they are ethical issues. They have to do with how we are the Christian koinonia.
That is what our constitutional linkage of church unity and inclusiveness is trying to tell us.

Only a quest for church unity, so understood, will have a message of hope for our post-Christendom contemporaries and a real future in the 21st century.

And so our first policy point is this: The central principle of our ecumenical policy is the quest for a credible, visible, and inclusive church unity.

2. What kind of attainable and visible sign of this church unity should our policy seek? The question is important, for if church unity is in any sense our task and not purely and simply a divine gift, then it must be attainable, and if attainable then it must be visibly embodied in signs that communicate it. My conviction is that the attainable sign of an adequate United Methodist ecumenical policy is a visible fellowship in Holy Communion. This fellowship must include not only United Methodists but of all persons, especially those whose liberation is at issue and those who are members and ministers of other divided churches.

Other concrete signs could of course be mentioned: various arrangements for common witness, schemes for organizational merger, specific declarations of mutual recognition of other churches' baptisms or ordinations, covenanting together with other churches to "live our way toward unity," or conciliar arrangements of various kinds. Section II of our Discipline makes it clear, however, that "sharing in Holy Communion with all God's people" is what these many ways point to (p. 88). It is their acid test. The ultimate ecumenical goal, of course, is God's kingdom. But the kingdom, too, generates "signs" of its presence, according to the Gospels, and visible, common Holy Communion belongs to these signs. Jesus himself asks us to do this "in remembrance" of him.

Eucharistic fellowship is attainable. As it has been threatened and mutilated in history, so it can also be recovered in history.

Is divided Holy Communion that important? Failing to discern the Body of Christ as we eat is that important according
to Paul (1 Cor. 11:29), and he regards that failure as a dangerous symptom in the church. I communicate sometimes in a joint "ecumenical" Catholic-Protestant service. We prepare together, repent together, pray together, hear the Word together—and then at the climax of the service turn our backs on each other as we go to our respective Catholic and Protestant ends of the sanctuary to have communion with our God (with our "gods"?) This is behavior I would not tolerate in a restaurant, yet it is the actual situation every day in every service of Holy Communion, including that of the United Methodist Church. It is wrong for churches to tolerate that symbol. It points to a sickness in the church. It is right for our Constitution to name that "dividedness...a hindrance to (our) mission".

We should acknowledge that United Methodist willingness to accept all others doesn't solve the problem. The solution is not that all become United Methodists, or that all become Roman Catholics. The solution has to be sought together, because we must also listen to the reasons others give for their refusal to accept our invitation. There is plenty of room for all to repent.

And so our second policy point is this: Our policy is committed to an inclusive visible fellowship in Holy Communion as a credible witness that the Christian gospel can indeed heal broken human community.

3. That point leads to another element in policy: the immediate step towards that goal is to work toward a full inclusive mutual recognition of members and ministers of the divided churches. We do not need total doctrinal consensus. We do not need massive new structures. Concretely, what we need is mutual recognition of baptisms and ordinations. In other words, we need that mutual understanding of each other which enables an authentic hospitality at the table of Holy Communion. The way to that unity is not uniformity but genuine mutual recognition in each other of the apostolic faith and fellowship—in that good diversity and plurality which belong to its essence.
I have three short remarks about this. First, United Methodists have been generous when asked officially to recognize the baptisms and ordinations of other churches and to seek visible eucharistic fellowship with them, as, for example, in the Consultation on Church Union (COCU). The question is, if that generosity is justified, are we actively pursuing and broadening it, or are we simply going along when others take the initiative? Where do we stand, for example, with our bilateral recommendation of 1984 "to take steps to declare and establish full fellowship of Word and sacrament" with the Lutherans? Is our ecumenical policy strong enough to generate not simply cooperation and compliance but initiative?

A second remark about mutual recognition: It is realized on all sides that the truly tough sticking point in mutual recognition is bishops. Here United Methodists have a problem. It's not simply that John Wesley couldn't recognize our General Superintendents as bishops. Neither can the majority of Christians (e.g., the two-thirds who are Orthodox or Roman Catholics, among others). The answer does not lie in some unilateral Methodist commission attempting to theologize about our episcopacy. Rather, it has to do with, as our UMC response to the World Council's Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry (BEM) text puts it, our participation with other churches in a succession of multilateral projects of reconciliation of ministries, in COCU for example. I can foresee no widespread mutual recognition of ministers, hence no widespread visible fellowship in Holy Communion, which does not involve, as BEM and COCU recommend, some version of the historic episcopate as "sign though not a guarantee" (as Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry puts it) of the apostolic (i.e., biblical) tradition as the basis of all ministry, lay and ordained. That is the transcending issue represented by the ecumenical discussion about our UMC bishops, namely, the question about the "apostolicity," or in our language, the biblical integrity, of witness in ministry of each church.

This recognizability of our bishops is very nearly the nub of our ecumenical problem concerning an inclusive and visible
church unity. The strategic point is certainly the question now being asked of the United Methodist Church by the Consultation on Church Union. Are we preparing our 1992—or our 1996—decision about COCU with sufficient prudence, care, energy, and initiative? Our response should be influential to many besides ourselves. We are not being asked merely for our consent. We have a responsibility for leadership.

A third remark about mutual recognition: It must include recognition of ordained women.

The United Methodist insistence on an inclusive church unity has vaulted the United Methodist Church way out front in its insistence upon the ordination of women. Mutual recognition of ministers as necessary for visible fellowship in Holy Communion will have to come to terms with this insistence upon inclusiveness.

Finally, some words of admonition here from one who profoundly believes that this United Methodist "distinctive" belongs to the whole church: (1) This question will not be quickly solved. Not in a quadrennium. Not in a decade. Not, possibly, in a century. Real love is patient, and it was John Wesley who defined ecumenical or "catholic" spirit as real love. (2) It won't help to assume that the right position is clearly known, and that it is our own position, and that the appropriate action for Orthodox and Catholics is repentance. However right we may be in seeing "non-theological factors" at work here, the discussion is theological, and our case needs to be put in theological terms that speak the language of the whole church. (3) To prevail, or even to be taken seriously, those theological arguments will have to show that ordination of women is an expression of the apostolic faith. It is hopeless to concede the apostolic tradition to those who oppose. (4) Likewise, it is insufficient to think that we are talking merely about securing recognition of women as ordained ministers of the United Methodist Church. Our basic ecumenical principles commit us to more. Just as there is no true denominational doctrine except as expression of the apostolic faith; just as there is no denominational bishop except as bishop of the whole church;
so there is no such thing as an ordained denominational minister except as a minister of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church—the church which our own Constitution puts first. It might be asked whether mutual recognition of ministers requires that other churches ordain women, although we might well work for that. What is clear is that for the United Methodist Church inclusive church unity must include seeking and asking for recognition of United Methodist Church ordained women as ministers of the only church there is—hence as valid con-celebrants in the practice of visible eucharistic hospitality and fellowship.

And so our third policy point is that the unavoidable immediate step towards the visible ecumenical sign is to work toward a full, inclusive, mutual recognition of members and ministers of the divided churches.

4. That brings us to a fourth element of policy. Granted that our ecumenical councils (WCC, NCCC) do not require full mutual recognition of ministers and members or, indeed, of churches as a requirement for membership, and are thus “pre-conciliar” in character in the technical sense of the term. What would be the basic policy of the United Methodist Church with respect to genuine conciliarity—the most likely form of ecumenical life in the century to come? The historical embodiment of our attainable goal is best viewed as a future truly ecumenical conciliar event, an event that could mean for all the churches what Vatican II meant for Roman Catholics.

We can remind ourselves of the function of an ecumenical council in the classical sense (e.g., the Jerusalem “council” of Acts 15, or the Council of Nicea), namely, as an event called to confess the apostolic faith to the church’s religious and non-religious contemporaries. A truly ecumenical council means an event in which authorized representatives of all churches come together, when necessary, to exercise the church’s universal or ecumenical magisterium (authoritative teaching office). There is no lack of church attempts to confess the faith today. The tragedy is that the church has lost its capacity to speak authoritatively with one teaching voice. There is no ecumenical
magisterium today, a major change from the days in which both Orthodox and Catholic developed rationales for a universal magisterium. There is no instrumentality for addressing the common Word of Christian faith and hope to our contemporaries in the name of the whole Christian community on issues of enormous import—abortion, birth control, racism, poverty, euthanasia, nuclear energy and weapons, not to mention such issues as baptism and mixed marriages. Although authoritative church teaching today must be rightly and creatively diversified, diversity cannot and should not rationalize the sheer contradiction in much church teaching. Those contradictory teachings are no small reason for what we call the authority crisis today. They cripple witness. Our resolutions end up in archives and footnotes. No particular church can speak for all, not even if its Pope addresses the United Nations. And no present group of churches can either. The WCC constitution, for its part, makes it utterly clear that the WCC has no authority to speak for its member churches any farther than they may ask it to do so. Who speaks for the church?

And yet the impression grows that the churches are increasingly wanting ecumenical organizations to speak and act on their behalf, especially on issues of high technical complexity, such as bio-medical research, for example. Is there a growing conciliar magisterium in our time, and what should United Methodist policy be toward that?

Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry provides a highly interesting example of this problem, and perhaps a hint of the way ahead. Strictly speaking, the WCC is a house in which the churches can carry on an ecumenical conversation with each other. But in this case the churches asked the WCC to do more—to summarize their sixty-year-long conversation on baptism, eucharist, and ministry, and to submit the result to the churches.

You know the outcome: unprecedented interest. The Lima text on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry is the most widely translated, published, and used text in modern ecumenical history; six volumes of official responses from the churches
published already with a seventh in preparation; a hundred-page WCC analysis of the responses now in the hands of the churches; plans for a Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order in 1993 to help the churches assess the import of all this for their future relations with one another.

But the most interesting aspect is that the WCC, rather naturally and without much premeditation, did not simply summarize the discussion. It went on to ask the churches four basic questions about the BEM text and its possible role in the churches' lives and ecumenical policies. One church refused to respond, and their letter showed that they understood the point I am trying to make: the WCC has no constitutional authority, they said, to ask such questions of a member church. But the astonishing thing is that 189 churches (so far) did not raise that question but did respond, and moreover wished the project well—including the whole spectrum: the Vatican and the Ecumenical Patriarchate, the Salvation Army and the Quakers, the Pentecostals, the Anglicans, the Protestants, the free churches, and all the major member churches in the WCC. Moreover, they took seriously the invitation to respond to BEM from "the highest appropriate levels of authority," officially.

The WCC's constitution insists that the WCC is not an ecumenical magisterium. But as any teacher knows, questions teach. In these official responses the WCC has been accorded something like a de facto authority as a questioner in the ecumenical conversation among the churches. It is not a mere host or enabler in the ecumenical conversation house. Moreover, that de facto authority is further attested by the remarkable fact that a number of churches have found it advisable or even necessary to create their own more adequate magisterial instrument in order to produce a response on a level this fundamental.

Our own church is an example. As we all know, the General Conference is our highest doctrinal authority under our standards of doctrine. Our General Conference nevertheless saw fit to devise a special magisterial process in order to produce our official response to BEM. Our own ecumenical commission was
given authority (and it carried out the task extremely well!) to create a many-sided process of consultation, of local study, of special commissions, of drafting and redrafting. It was then asked to submit the provisional draft to our Council of Bishops who, upon realizing the magnitude of the assignment, docketed it in two of their semiannual meetings before they were ready to approve it—unanimously, if I remember correctly—as the official United Methodist response to BEM from our "highest appropriate level of authority."

Curious! The General Conference itself asked the bishops, who have by Constitution no voice or vote in the General Conference where our denominational magisterium is located, to participate in, indeed to consummate, the process of formulating our church's most authoritative response on questions of basic authoritative church teaching. I submit that something more than an episcopacy of general superintendency was stirring in the instincts which created that process.

But our concern here is what occasioned this remarkable constitutional improvisation on our part, if not the presence of an ecumenical questioner whom we felt in our bones asked questions of us with real authority to do so, and required authoritative answers from us of corresponding weight.

What is happening here exceeds our vision, as yet, but it is going to require a United Methodist policy on conciliarity—or, in our own lingo, an ecumenical policy about "connection" and "conferencing." Somewhere between 1990 and a future truly ecumenical conciliar event (say around 2050) will lie hard ecumenical work on developing the presuppositions which can surmount the difficulties preventing such an event today.

Our preparatory work will have to focus the task of such a conciliar event upon an act of common witness, for example, on expressing to our contemporaries the common apostolic faith and our hope about survival on this planet, and it must do so in convergent terms not yet within our grasp. Moreover, such an event would require that we be able to lay our concern before God in a common act of eucharistic worship, a fellowship in Holy Communion still beyond us.
Again, such an event would require mutual recognition of all bishops as ministers of the churches' unity in the apostolic faith, and at the same time bring into the event the inclusive representation of both laity and clergy, both male and female, old and young, which our UMC Constitution is so concerned about—an understanding of representation which neither we nor the Christian tradition yet possesses.

I think you see my point. A future truly ecumenical event will have to presuppose some solution to many of our present-day dilemmas. The power to focus is one thing that makes this vision so interesting. And the sharp point of such a vision's demand for United Methodists will be our need for a policy about conciliarity and the ecumenical magisterium.

That truly ecumenical conciliar event will happen only if the churches really want it. Does the United Methodist Church want such an event of ecumenical witness?

I believe that as a visible embodiment of a basic ecumenical policy rooted in our understanding of the gospel itself we should be leaders in asking for it. Like John Wesley, our church understands its own life to require participation in the wider ecumenical church. It believes in the sanctification of the church as well as in the sanctification of persons. It has a missional passion therefore to press for the growth of the ecumenical movement and the common, undivided, unhindered mission of the whole church. It believes that the sign of an inclusive visible fellowship in Holy Communion is not only realistic but attainable in the history of our time (cf. the UMC response to BEM in Churches Respond to BEM, Vol. II [Geneva: WCC, 1986] 177). And it believes that this process of church renewal is of decisive importance for the healing and renewal of our broken human community today.

And so our fourth policy point is this: The historical embodiment of our attainable policy goal is best viewed as a future truly ecumenical conciliar event.
Conclusion

I have tried to show that this ecumenical commitment, these ecumenical principles, and much if not most of these ecumenical policies are already implicit in United Methodism's understanding of its own essential constitution. My hope is for a basic ecumenical policy in our church which lets the implicit become very explicit—as explicit as the works of love which evidence real faith—as God "perfects us in one."
Early in 1990, Wesley Theological Seminary joined with Washington Theological Consortium to host a conference on youth ministry. Sponsored by the Lilly Foundation, the conference title was "Aflame for the Future: Youth and the Evangelization of American Culture." The keynote speaker's address was a sophisticated liberal theological critique of North American culture. Western culture, he said, has interpreted the concept of freedom in terms of freedom from limits and freedom for self-fulfillment. This creates a moral vacuum that can only be overcome, according to the speaker, by a "global moral obligation" and a "catholic vision of unity within the inclusiveness of a multi-cultural reality."

While most of the theological educators in attendance were still nodding affirmatively at this wisdom (which many of us take for granted), the pulpit was taken by an articulate spokesman for a counterculture evangelical position. His response was neither liberal nor polite. The future of the church did not lie within some glorious polyglot, pluralistic cultural environment.

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That was only a disguise for the cultural conspiracy, headed by technological interests and encouraged by the mass media, to create uniformity in everything from dress and music to politics and religion. The responder called youth to rally to a new Christian "party," one that would celebrate life against the grim effort to create sameness.

Fifty young persons attended the conference as "reality testers." One declared that he did not understand the vocabulary of the presenters. He didn't know exactly what a "catholic vision of unity within the inclusiveness of a multi-cultural reality" might be, or what was implied by a "Christ against culture" position. Nevertheless, he demanded to know why there were so many superficial differences that divided the members of the consultation into denominations, noting that the Roman Catholics at the conference had Mass at 7:30 every morning, and the Protestants had Holy Communion at 8:00.

The young delegate's question cut through the acrimonious academic discussion between a liberal and evangelical agenda for the church. During the four-day conference, the youth delegates at this event kept pestering adult delegates about church unity. These young people had a vision of a reconciling gospel, and it was one that they simply would not let go.

Despite their tenacity, however, no adult speaker and no responder presented them with any program for Christian unity. No one taught the young Christians that there is the present historic possibility of a new church framework called the "Church of Christ Uniting," at once fully "catholic, evangelical and reformed." No theologian at this consultation engaged the minds and hearts of either young or old with the current plan for a revolutionary covenanting framework now being dreamed into reality by nine Protestant churches (all represented at the consultation). No seminary professor at this conference even hinted that a historic theological agreement has been reached on the apostolic faith or that this consensus heralds "a new kind of ecclesial reality" engendered by covenantal communion in faith, sacraments, ministry, and mission.
The consultation leadership never adequately addressed the persistent yearnings of the young for church unity but proceeded to commission them to go forth into mission. Even the youngest delegates, however, seem to sense the difficulty of doing mission from a divided house. Their concern, I believe, is well stated in the Constitution of the United Methodist Church: "The Church of Jesus Christ exists in and for the world, and its very dividedness is a hindrance to its mission in the world."

A Theological Agenda
Guided by Denominational Interests

The dynamics at the Lilly Vision Conference are not unique; in fact, they offer a paradigm of what often occurs in mainline theological education and with denomination leadership at all levels. The designers of the consultation never heeded the questions of unity coming from the young because ecumenical convergencies are not a part of their everyday working life and thought.

Most church leaders operate from a denominational perspective that rarely includes the language or root metaphors of ecumenism. Church unity simply did not occur to these church leaders. They failed, therefore, to mention the new possibilities for unity contained in the Church of Christ Uniting or even to point out the exciting ongoing international youth work of the World Council of Churches.

My impression is that, in spite of a few examples of seminary faculty who use the ecumenical texts, Christian unity is seldom seriously engaged in the classroom or its possibilities preached from local United Methodist pulpits. Most laity are as yet unfamiliar with the work of the Consultation on Church Union and are only vaguely acquainted with its implications.
The Church of Christ Uniting

United Methodists at all levels of church governance need to be informed about the twenty years of hard theological work that has resulted in the doctrinal agreements contained in the COCU Consensus. This historic agreement by the nine parent denominations on what constitutes the core of the apostolic faith has enabled a new vision of church unity. The principle document for the Church of Christ Uniting is "Churches in Covenant Communion: The Church of Christ Uniting."

COCU is a concept of unity in which member churches retain their own denominational names, identity, church governments, liturgy, and patterns of ministerial training and placement. Yet, COCU is a new ecclesial reality in which the partners in covenant will accept an irreducible minimum of eight "elements" which include a common apostolic faith, recognition of members in one baptism, and mutual recognition and reconciliation of the ordained ministry.

This is not a plan to build a new superchurch: COCU rejected a plan for institutional union in 1970. COCU is essentially not a political but a theological structure that will enable the nine members of this Protestant faith to join in visible table and pulpit fellowship. Through the acceptance of mutual ministries, the partner churches intend to build a more effective mission to the world.

The Importance of Immediate Education

Ecumenical education is critical at this moment in the history of the church. The nine participating denominations in COCU are called to take action within five years by the highest governing body of each church. The next General Conference meets in 1992. Five years is not a very long time to convince a large and diverse membership that the new ecclesial reality of a reconciled and reconciling household of faith is a better way
than the parochial interests of denominational self-preservation.\textsuperscript{3}

A short timetable makes it urgent that seminary educators and denominational leaders immediately become intentional advocates for the Church Uniting. Neither laity nor clergy have yet discovered the implications for our common life that may be transformed by national, regional and local covenanting councils contained in the consensus.

If we wish to make a difference in this historic moment, there are at least four teaching initiatives that United Methodist seminaries (and conference leaders) could undertake to bridge the knowledge gap between the ecumenical representatives of the denomination and the general constituency of the church.

Four Initiatives

1. Sharing the Best-Kept Secret

The best-kept secret in the United Methodist Church is the theological consensus for covenanting approved by the Sixteenth Plenary of the Consultation on Church Union in 1984. The name given in 1988 to the nine churches seeking covenantal communion, the Church of Christ Uniting, is virtually unknown in the annual conferences. A totally unscientific and informal poll of students at my seminary produced disappointing but not unexpected results. "Is the Church of Christ Uniting the same as the United Church of Christ?" "Is the Church of Christ uniting with another denomination?" Most students had heard the acronym COCU but could not give the initials definition or content. Often I heard the common perception: "COCU? I thought it died earlier in this decade." Only one student knew about the Consensus and could name the partner churches. The Peninsula Conference had sent the documents to all pastors, including student pastors, and this very bright young man had paid careful attention.

The first initiative of the seminaries must be simply informational. Ways must be found to inform faculty, ad-
ministrators, staff and students about the Church Uniting. For many in the seminary community the ecclesiastical reality of a Church Uniting will be entirely new data. Some will immediately ask questions about "merger" and will need to read the basic documents for clarification. The eight elements of covenanting found in the document "Churches in Covenant Communion" are particularly important.

If United Methodist seminaries are to become centers of information on the Church Uniting, a good beginning would be to stock bookstores and libraries with the critical texts. Our careless stocking of an ecumenical library is a predictable indication of minimal scholarly interest. In addition, one of the valuable gifts seminary scholars give to the church is in the area of research and writing. Interpretive essays on the Church Uniting written for denominational publications would be welcome. Whether in the classroom, on the lecture circuit in annual conferences, or in research and writing, denominational leaders should enlist the talent in its seminary faculties to help the denomination answer questions of the sufficiency and claim of the two consenting documents.

2. Do "Others" Pass the Test?

Traditionally, questions around church unity involve issues of doctrine or polity. The question then becomes whether the questing partners are on the "orthodox" side of that issue or not. But it is rarely a simple yes or no proposition. In official ecumenical conversations, if the theological water is too acidic, delegates may literally take an Alka Seltzer and come back to the table after dinner. Faced with the same situation, church members who are unfamiliar with the issues may not know whether to return to the table for further discussion.

Litmus tests on membership, doctrine, liturgy and ministry are a temptation for those just entering the ecumenical process. Since the majority of the membership of the United Methodist Church will soon be joining into this multilateral conversation, partisan interest groups within the body should be encouraged to be restrained in lifting up one narrowly drawn
issue or another as a litmus test for unity. Most United Meth­odists will never be able to enter into the theological struggles that produced the covenanting document. However, the initia­tive of the seminaries to teach and interpret the basic docu­ments in pastor's schools, retreat settings, and local congregations would go a long way toward facilitating an under­standing of the process of covenanting.

If the first task of the seminaries is disseminating correct information about the content of the Consensus and the pro­cess of covenanting, then the second initiative to follow is a conscious decision to be interpreters of the documents. The first responsibility, of course, is "in-house" education. How will the COCU documents find their way into the seminary cur­riculum? The history of the ecumenical movement, for ex­ample, is now considered by many scholars to be a teaching discipline with its own set of texts and traditions. Where is this history being taught in seminary courses? How does this current history become as "alive" in our seminary life as the Reformation or the Evangelical revival? Some church histo­rians believe that we are living in a time of ecclesiastical forma­tion as important, in its own way, as the early church councils were in their time.

The learners that we educate in the seminary environment become the teachers of the faith as they return to student pastorates on the weekend. The only information that many congregations will receive on the Church Uniting will come from student pastors. Surely, then, one key to unlocking the interpretive treasures of this emerging vision of the church in its wholeness is in the hands of United Methodist seminaries. The seminary communities can become centers of information and interpretation to help restore balance and discourage lit­mus testing, which artificially limits the ecumenical dialogue.

3. But Don't We Celebrate Diversity? Then Why the Quest for Unity?

Can't you hear it: "We were just getting used to the celebra­tion of diversity!" Diversity is officially affirmed in United
Methodist seminaries. Uniformity is sought, however, by each interest group within the community. Feminists are determined to change exclusive language. African-American seminarians are committed to eliminating racism. Evangelicals fear that relativism and universalism are undermining the particularity of the gospel. Those influenced by liberation theology lobby the rich on behalf of "God's preferential option for the poor." Seminarians whose first language is not English advocate for their own history and culture in the classroom. Each interest group is dedicated to a just cause.

Sometimes, however, partisans openly denigrate Christians who advocate agendas they do not understand or deem worthy. It is not always easy to achieve harmony and neighborly love in a climate of diversity. What, then, is the true nature of diversity in a seminary environment? Is it a rich symbol of the Body of Christ or an uneasy reminder of a fragmented church that is "crippled in proclaiming a reconciling gospel to a broken and divided world"?

The affirmation of diversity in United Methodist seminaries is welcome. But an environment where "differences are affirmed, accepted, and celebrated" desperately needs a point of focus. Cultural relativism, with the proposition that all intellectual positions are equally worthy and all ethical standards are of equal value, has become an attractive option for North Americans, including many seminarians. This view threatens to break down the true foundation of diversity in the seminary.

The commitment of the nine partner denominations to seek visible unity with wholeness through the COCU Consensus is thus very timely. A church truly "catholic, evangelical and reformed" provides order and stability in faith, ministries, sacraments and mission. The watchword of the Church Uniting is "Unity without Uniformity." The Church Uniting document locates the question of the "diversity, equality, and dignity of all persons" in a powerful "Confession of Faith" (Consensus: V. 17, p. 32). Diversity does not depend on sociological trends or subjective feelings; instead, diversity is affirmed and inexorably
linked to thankful confession. The language is even stronger in the latest document.

Is it possible to have unity and differences? Yes, if unity is understood as it is in the COCU consensus as "a gift to be made visible." The time has come to set the justice agenda into an ecumenical framework. Annual conference cabinets might take the initiative to study and live out the model of unity proposed in Consensus II and III. Those seminary faculties that do their intellectual work in theological consortiums are ideally placed to live as ecumenical advocates and to initiate conversations on the Church Uniting with other schools.

5. Is it Wesleyan?

No one knows for sure how our spiritual progenitors would have regarded this plan. Scholars have written persuasively of the distinctly "catholic" nature of the Wesley's thought. John Wesley utilized Anglican, Moravian, Reformed, Lutheran, and Eastern Orthodox ideas in his theology. We ecumenists suspect that he would be pleased with the Church Uniting and ask Charles to write a new hymn celebrating this time of covenanting. Methodist leaders certainly have made an enormous contribution to the ecumenical conversations through the years.

The nature of teaching authority is of critical importance for all denominations in the climate of relativism that dominates our society. The cultural diversity of the United States impinges on almost all the major decisions we make concerning ministry in our conference structure. The climate of extreme individualism in doctrinal matters fosters a lack of purpose and direction in the church. In response, some United Methodists urged the General Conference of 1988 to implement stronger doctrinal standards from the early Wesleyan tradition. In this present quadrennium, commissions have been mandated to study baptism, and same-sex relationships and to continue the process of trying to order our ministries. United Methodism has no clearly designated magisterium, or teaching office, to help us decide such matters. We are a conciliar church, and the
ultimate decisions in faith and order belong to the General Conference, whose rulings make their way into the Discipline. As the nine denominations come to covenanting, each must face squarely the question of how much authority to accord their own history and traditions. How much weight should United Methodists in the closing years of the twentieth century give, for example, to John Wesley’s or Francis Asbury’s understanding of faith, sacraments and ministry? Wesleyan questions are internally useful within the denomination. The authority to become a member of the Church Uniting, however, probably does not rely so much on each partner’s traditional ancestors as on the ecumenical convergencies of this century.

Ecumenists would claim that the question, “Is it Wesleyan?” is not the most important query in the long view. The truth is that the major agendas of our denomination as well as the docket for the larger order in the body of Christ is being ordered by a new kind of magisterium. The teaching office to which we all attend is located somewhere in the structures of ecumenical dialogues. There is no one location and no one teacher. At one time, a teaching consensus emerges from the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches. At another time, a teaching consensus emanates from the many bilateral discussions that continue among the denominations.

The best example of the power of this ecumenical teaching office is in the content of the United Methodist Book of Worship. To be sure, the final product was a denominational labor of several years. Wesleyan theology has always been shaped by a sung liturgy, and this new hymnbook will form our self-identity for years to come. The amazing new form and feel of the sacramental liturgies, the rite of Christian Marriage and the service of Death and Resurrection, as well as the new Morning and Evening Prayer services are instantly recognizable and consistent with the liturgical forms found in equally new Episcopal, Lutheran, Presbyterian, and United Church of Christ hymnal and service books. A consensus on suitable hymnody for our time has grown across denominational lines during the last two decades. The agenda for our worship life in Christ has
been transformed by a spiritual power that seems beyond the scope of any one denomination.

In the same way, it is possible that the theological consensus of the COCU covenanting document will also drive the agenda as member denominations consider issues of the ordering of ministries. Inner-denominational commissions, as the one we have currently discussing baptism and confirmation, must carefully take into consideration the conclusions already forged in ecumenical consultations, or our denomination will lose credibility in the world of the universal church.

Make no mistake, however; our traditions and heritage are of vital importance not only to us as United Methodists but also as we contribute our unique vision of the gospel to the larger body of Christ. In the Uniting Church that identity is affirmed and maintained. The fact is, however, that something larger than individual traditions is driving the basic agenda of emerging church doctrine and policy. A case can be made, therefore, that the faith and order of the church is no longer shaped in the academic academy of the seminary, or in the local politics of individual denominations. When the churches began to pray for church unity several decades ago, we were unprepared for the fact that God does answer prayer. A new glimpse of church life is taking its shape in all kinds of interfaith discussions. Seminary faculties will need to play an ever more important role in the balancing act so essential to a Church Uniting; that is, continuing in the task of maintaining a living Wesleyan tradition (discouraging Wesleyan fundamentalism) while participating in and advocating for the current reformation of the church.

Conclusions

Five Initiatives await seminary action:

1. Share the secret of covenanting communion by becoming information centers for the Church of Christ Uniting.
2. Commit to interpret the ecumenical documents in a way that will provoke and stimulate but will discourage litmus testing.

3. Accept a formal or informal mandate to help the denomination answer questions of sufficiency and claim.

4. Model unity without uniformity in seminary and consortium life.

5. Encourage a balance between the Wesleyan heritage and the ecumenical convergencies which now consciously or unconsciously drive the agenda of the body of Christ.

Reformation is a living reality in the body of Christ. Prayerfully and quite seriously we may need a converting moment in our denomination—a moment when we consciously choose to become members of a new confessing family of faith. In this moment we purposefully move out of our self-identifiable turf and thrust ourselves into the yet unknown winds of the Holy Spirit.

This essay began with one event in the Lilly Foundation Consultation on Youth ministries. For many youth and young adults the church is on trial. They search for a meaning system and a commitment worthy of their lives. Again and again, persons of all ages ask why there is so much division and denominational self-absorption. The Church of Christ Uniting is a worthy vision for all generations.

Those of us in seminary education have the task of teaching and interpreting that vision. We need to recruit and recruit and recruit new leadership for the ecumenical future. The call for seminary educators to exercise a measure of the teaching office is abundant and clear. There is also the option, of course, that we may be the last to know.

Notes

from the Consultation on Church Union, Research Park, 151 Wall Street, Princeton, N.J., 08540-1514.

2. "Churches in Covenant Communion: The Church of Christ Uniting," (Consultation on Church Union, 1985). Copies are available from the Consultation on Church Union (see note 1 for address).

3. Excellent study materials on the Church of Christ Uniting are available from the General Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns of the United Methodist Church (GCCUIC), Room 1300, 475 Riverside Drive, New York, N.Y. 10115.

The United Methodist Agenda: Teaching for Ecumenism

Jane Cary Chapman Peck

Dr. Jane Cary Peck, associate professor of religion and society, Andover Newton Theological School, was specifically invited to address the Yahara consultation from a personal perspective. Committed to ecumenism and its expressions in ecumenical agencies, Dr. Peck's teaching had been marked by the use of ecumenical issues, materials, leadership persons, and experiences. Her work—and indeed her life—exemplified the conference theme of "Christian unity and interreligious concerns in theological education."

Dr. Peck made the following presentation in Madison, Wisconsin, on March 23, 1990, having traveled from Nicaragua, where she and her husband were spending their sabbatical doing research and development work. Later that month she flew to Seoul, Korea, as a United Methodist delegate to the World Council of Churches Consultation on "Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation." From there she went directly to Uppsala, Sweden, for a meeting of the Life and Peace Institute, on which she served as a director. It was in early May, in Sweden, that she was hospitalized, and she returned immediately to the United States to begin treatment for a malignancy. Jane Cary Peck died on September 10, 1990, at age 58. Earlier this year, she was awarded posthumously the 1991 New England United Methodist Award for Excellence in Social Justice Actions by the Southern New England Annual Conference.

Because her presentation was written under difficult circumstances in Nicaragua, Dr. Peck intended to revise it substantially. Unfortunately, her deteriorating health prevented her from carrying out this work. Following her death, I prepared the manuscript for publication, without, of course, the additional material that Dr. Peck would have.
I have been asked to share with you the ways in which, as a United Methodist professor, I have found opportunities to incorporate an ecumenical perspective into my teaching of social ethics. I've also been asked to share ways in which I have familiarized my classes with national and international ecumenical agencies, resources, and persons of leadership in order that my students may use those sources in their future ministry. Finally, the planning committee asked me, "How did you get that way?" And that may be the hardest question of all!

The task, however, has given me a rich opportunity to reflect on how ecumenical elements have influenced my profession and brought me to this place. In that reflection on my own journey, I have become aware of how much ecumenical experience has blessed my life from the very beginning and in all its dimensions.

I have experienced the global community of believers in ecumenical worship, in study, and in action/reflection within the institutional and denominational church and in many forms of councils of churches.

I have been part of the one Body of Christ in its amazing many-splendored diversity-in-unity—and in its shameful, soul-wrenching, unfaithfulness and brokenness-in-disunity, along with its sometimes tedious plenaries, male-dominated small groups, and occasionally boring worship.

I have experienced the spiritual and political power of the global ecumenical community in prophetic actions, in solidarity, and in sharing with interreligious Third World task forces and special delegations—one to El Salvador in a time of grave threat to the church and another to the five...
Central American presidents and National Commissions of Reconciliation on behalf of their Esquipulas Peace Plan.

I have experienced ecumenical vitality, challenge, and nourishment in faith-based communities of justice, peacemaking, and sisterhood, transcending all boundaries and barriers. In these communities our common calling, passion, and commitment are celebrated in and fed by shared Eucharist, prayer, and rich engagement with Scripture and each other's life experience.

Professor Janice Love, a United Methodist member of the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches (WCC), sees the world as a "necrophilic system," founded on "materialism, Machiavellianism, militarism, and patriarchy." It is ecumenical experience that has called me out of that system and into what Jose Miguez Bonino calls "the oikoumene of solidarity." This "oikoumene of solidarity" is an order of mutual support, common concern and suffering, and joint celebration and hope among solidarity organizations and churches of the North and South America and the world ecumenical movement. The radical faith of this movement is that "the reality of God is more decisive than the reality of the world as it is" and that the reality of God demands "transformation of understanding, repentance, and conversion." In this movement the poor and marginal--especially including, I would add, women and young people--are the human bearers of the miraculous possibility of change, their "hopeful suffering containing the possibility of a new and different oikoumene, of solidarity and life." The oikoumene of solidarity is the foundation for my teaching of social ethics. It is also the vision for my ecumenical work and for global justice and peace in the Church, the seminary, and the world.
TEACHING FOR ECUMENISM

Personal Ecumenical Journey

IT WASN'T THE MOST AUSPICIOUS BEGINNING for an ecumenical journey. I grew up in a small Georgia town of Methodists and Baptists, where the few Presbyterians were regarded as a kind of strange sect! But I was nurtured by a mother strongly influenced by her college experience in the YWCA with its global, ecumenical, and rich theological perspectives; and I was formed by the local Methodist Youth Fellowship, the North Georgia Conference's Camp Glisson, and by high school "Y" experiences. My Christian faith and vocational direction were influenced by my leadership in the YWCA of Wesleyan College (Georgia), with its international and interracial speakers and its Student Christian Movement conferences, as well as publications such as motive and Concern. In 1954, I attended the Evanston Assembly of the WCC as a Wesley Foundation director at Georgia State College for Women and Georgia Military College. In 1966, while I was a student at Boston University School of Theology, I took a course in ethics from Dean Walter C. Muelder, who was preparing to participate in the 1966 WCC Church and Society Conference held in Geneva. As I studied its four volumes of materials, I was led to my vocation as an ecumenical ethicist in theological education.

I am a member of the faculty at Andover Newton Theological School, an American Baptist and United Church of Christ seminary. A highly ecumenical seminary itself, it belongs to the Boston Theological Institute Ecumenical seminary consortium. For the thirteen years that I have taught at Andover Newton, I have been a member of the United Methodist delegation on the NCC Governing Board, serving this year as vice-president. My extensive involvement in the WCC as a United Methodist representative includes the 1979 Church and Society Conference on "Faith, Science, and the Future," held at M.I.T.; a 1983 WCC pre-assembly delegation visitation to the churches in Cuba; the 1983 Sixth Assembly of the WCC held in Vancouver; plans to attend the upcoming 1991 Seventh Assembly of the WCC, to be held in Canberra,

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Australia; two emergency delegations to Central America, composed of representatives of the WCC, NCCC, and the Latin American Council of Churches; and participation as a delegate to the 1990 WCC Convocation on "Justice, Peace, and the Integrity of Creation" in Seoul, Korea.

As a local church person serving on ecumenical bodies of the wider church, I am a lay member of my town's Ecumenical Association, composed of lay and clergy representatives from each church in Williamstown, Massachusetts. My ecumenical work has also included membership on the board of an international ecumenical peace research organization, the Life and Peace Institute, based in Uppsala, Sweden, and extensive work with Witness for Peace, a faith-based organization of U.S. citizens in solidarity with the people of Nicaragua.

**United Methodist Faculty**

**Leadership Involvement**

I HAVE SHARED THIS WITH YOU, at the planning committee's request, to indicate to you the ways in which my teaching and my commitments have arisen out of the context of this intentional ecumenical and global involvement.

Of course, I am not unique in this regard. The ecumenical movement depends on many persons whose "home base" is the theological seminary. Through their own ecumenical experiences, these persons have drawn inspiration, insights, and knowledge for teaching ecumenics. In so doing, they are helping to create an ecumenical ethos and global perspective in our seminaries. United Methodist seminary faculty members have contributed, and been enriched by, ecumenical experiences in the following ways:

- participation in WCC, NCCC, or the Consultation on Church Union (COCU) plenaries, meetings, and committees, as delegates, advisors, participant/observers, or stewards
as members of the Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns (CCUIC), at the annual conference or general church level

within a local ecumenical organization, such as a council of churches or a clergy association

as consultants to an ecumenical agency or its task forces, or as speakers for special events

as members of ecumenical peace and justice advocacy groups on any number of specialized issues, many within an international context

as researchers in ecumenical studies (on theological issues or on the work of scholars from across the ecclesiological spectrum)

as contributors to ecumenical publications, including: the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible; the Inclusive Language Lectionary; "Justice, Peace, and the Integrity of Creation" preparatory materials; NCCC studies of the Church and "Apostolic Faith," "Homosexuality," "The Community of Women and Men in the Church," and "Foundations for Ecumenical Commitment;" and Peace Research and Human Rights Advocacy;

utilizing WCC and NCCC study books and resource materials

bringing ecumenical leaders to the seminary as speakers or preachers; and being such a speaker, with an explicitly ecumenical, interreligious, or international focus

developing a Visiting Scholar Program across national, denominational, or religious boundaries

participating in ecumenical groups, contributing United Methodist faculty publications and research.

There are other numerous ways in which such opportunities present themselves to faculty who are intentional about their ecumenical involvement for the sake of the seminary and the students they teach.
Using Ecumenical Resources in Theological Education

IN MY CLASSES WE TRY TO DEVELOP AMONG OURSELVES a learning community of mutual resourcing and enrichment, including searching and questioning. In this environment, we can intentionally work on developing and practicing the values of an ecumenical community. Students are expected to learn their own denominations' positions and resources—people and publications—on social issues and ecumenism and use them in class presentations and discussions.

Class discussions focus on special events in the lives of churches, such as the reunification of the Presbyterian Church, the 200th anniversary of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, and the decisions by the American Baptist Churches and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to reaffirm their memberships in the NCCC and the WCC. Once we had the opportunity to discuss the election of one of our class members as moderator of the United Church of Christ! We put emphasis on events within ecumenical bodies themselves, such as the WCC's Faith and Order Commission's development of the *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (BEM) document and its accompanying "Lima Liturgy," bilateral dialogues between churches. We also take up issues of conflict, such as the application for membership in the NCCC by the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches, the Reader's Digest--"60 Minutes" furor, the WCC Programme to Combat Racism grants and program, the publication of the NCCC Inclusive Language Lectionary, among others. As a class, we struggle together on issues of unity and justice.

In any one of these issues, all the disciplines of theological study are present: Scripture, Church history, theology, ethics, communication, and so forth. Ecumenical issues, events, and resources provide superb content for an inductive method of teaching social ethics. A host of courses are possible with any combination of this subject matter. The World Council of Churches provides resources for and from major international...
gatherings, which often include media presentations, posters and packets, liturgies and prayers.

**Spiritual Enrichment**

*MANY ECUMENICAL RESOURCES CAN BE ADAPTED* for ongoing use. Let me give you a few examples:

Ecumenical worship resources have enriched the beginning of my classes. The worship book from the Sixth Assembly of the World Council, "Jesus Christ—the Life of the World," includes music, prayers, and litanies—all in at least four languages. Using a page that is multilingual reminds everyone that Christ is not captive to American church life and links us with the Christian communities in many cultures.

The Ecumenical Prayer Cycle, "With All God's People," is outlined into 52 sections for each week of the year. Each part of the world where Christian churches exist is lifted up with a simple map, a brief history of Christianity in that country or region, prayers from their churches' worship life, and a description of what issues Christians are struggling with there. These become a part of each week's prayers. By the time students complete my class, they have an education in church life and devotion and an additional exposure to global Christian experience.

Each year the Consultation on Church Union, in cooperation with the three historic black Methodist churches, publishes a Lenten devotional booklet entitled, "Liberation and Unity." Students who use this booklet see Christian devotion from another perspective as they hear the salvation story expressed with a different cultural viewpoint.

These ecumenical resources have been used in student presentations and at times of celebration or sorrow in class. These materials integrate spirituality/worship, global and multiracial perspectives, Christian unity, and justice and peace concerns. Students who have been introduced to these
ecumenical and global resources will widen their own horizons, and take this wider vision of the church into the congregations they will serve.

Specific Courses

Both the National and the World Council of Churches are deeply involved in issues of social justice, and because of this many of their conferences and background materials provide analyses of political, economic, and human rights issues. Because the World Council reflects the world's diversity, events and the preparatory materials frequently contain a unique, global perspective on such issues. This approach to questions of church in society can be quite different from anything students from the United States have seen before. The problems of hunger, militarism, family, war, and water (to mention just a few) sound new when they are formulated from another language base. Students may discover fresh areas of concern and sense the urgent need for solutions. Students who are exposed to different cultural patterns often find a totally different prism through which to see justice issues.

In the WCC area, phrases that have become important frequently represent major themes or emphases, and each of those have provided course titles: "Faith, Science, and the Future," "A Just, Participatory, Sustainable Society," "The Ecumenical Decade: Churches in Solidarity with Women," "Justice, Peace, and the Integrity of Creation," "Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry," and "Your Will Be Done: Mission in Christ's Way." An ample bibliography accompanies each class, and relevance continues long after the themes or conferences cease to be in the calendar. Midstream, The Ecumenical Review, and The International Review of Missions, for example, are journals that offer commentary, dialogue, and response to these themes. Frequently, an article will summarize a series of responses. (For example, the responses to BEM alone have provided six successive volumes!)
Continuing with the WCC, the work of some of its units frequently disclose issues of conflict, autonomy, and authority, as well as biblical or theological insights. The controversial Programme to Combat Racism raises questions regarding marginal and radical organizations. When those occur in the United States, the students are confronted with justice-seeking groups they did not even know existed. Some students have chosen to do research on such groups, such as the Association of Haitian Workers, the Black Consciousness Movement, the Gathering of the Peoples Group (with the Anishinabe people), the Training and Research Institute on Migration. Each of these organizations opens up an extensive set of issues of justice, which can awaken students to the needs in their own country.

In the arena of the NCCC, policy statements or resolutions on Latin American issues frequently provide data for a course I teach on Latin American Liberation Ethics. The "Middle East Policy Statement" (a booklet in itself) summarizes the history of both Palestinian and Israeli relationships with the land, the origin of the state of Israel, the role of the Christian church, the issues of security, and human rights. Students using these materials as texts have a foundation not only for a more intelligent reading of the daily newspapers but also for the role of the Church in seeking to provide counsel to the communions regarding problems in these "holy lands."

When the NCCC was reviewing the application of the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches for membership in the NCCC, the papers developed by each of the communions describing their present formal stance toward homosexual persons provided a basis for analyzing the sources of authority in each of the communions, to say nothing about the host of perspectives on homosexual issues by NCCC member communions.

The historical records of both the World Council and the National Council of Churches have been my primary source when I teach a course on "The Social Teachings of the Church." Each class in "ecumenical ethics" gets firsthand experience...
with the organizations they have previously recognized only by
name. A full day’s field trip to the "God Box," as some of my
students call 475 Riverside in New York City, includes a visit
with top staff of the NCC and the U.S. Office of the World
Council. Eight to ten persons either make presentations or are
interviewed by students who have special interests in various
elements of NCCC and WCC work. When issues and individuals
are "personalized" in direct conversation, new learnings and
new motivations become apparent in the final papers of the
students.

The Seminary Bookstore and Library

AS A FACULTY MEMBER, I REVIEW EACH YEAR the new World
Council and National Council materials with the head librarian
and the manager of the seminary bookstore. Literature is
extensive and the WCC publishes an annotated booklet to
update its list. This booklet allows us to find useful supplemen­
tary material according to the courses being offered each school
year.

The library subscribes to all WCC publications and buys
almost all of the books. It frequently has special displays during
major ecumenical events. The bookstore stocks ecumenical
resources beyond those required for courses, and it reviews
some in the school newsletter. As an interested ecumenical
faculty member, I distribute copies of the WCC publications
booklet to the faculty each year.

When I teach, I am committed to raising up a new generation
of seminary graduates (of whatever age) who see themselves
participating in both the "re-forming" of the church and the
creating of a just society. When the work of the academy is
united with the life of the Church, I believe that a living reality
is evoked within the Body of Christ.

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Ecumenical Formation

THE CHURCH URGENTLY NEEDS THE FORMATION and development of strong new ecumenical leadership for ecumenical bodies and our communions. With the changed age and experience composition of our seminary student bodies, those who need to be "evangelized" as new ecumenists will not be the usual "young people" (who might serve as stewards at international meetings) but rather second- or third-career women and men. In that sense, it also becomes the responsibility of the local congregation to provide a place for ecumenical formation.

The great student ecumenical movement and its organizations are no more, but attempts are being made to recover the spirit of the older Inter-Seminary Movement. Perhaps the Women's Inter-Seminary (students) Conference, held annually, provides the closest student ecumenical experience of earlier days. Some seminaries have made a particular effort to see that there is student representation at WCC Assemblies, such as at Vancouver or Canberra, either as accredited visitors or as part of a seminary study-travel seminar (Claremont School of Theology offered credit for students from a number of different seminaries at each of these assemblies). Some denominational ecumenical offices have provided scholarships for particular ecumenical events, such as the annual National Workshop on Christian Unity or the Auburn Theological Seminary sponsored "Ecumenical Moment," in 1989, a ten-day period of "living-learning" exposure to ecumenical issues and leadership at the Stony Point, N.Y. Conference Center. But these events seem few and far between, and therefore the major responsibility still lies with the seminaries.

It is not uncommon that students who have attended ecumenical events become frustrated when they return to find so few student (and also faculty) colleagues willing to share their new visions. One way to cope with this problem has been to urge that at least two representatives (either student or faculty) participate in such events so that momentum at the
seminary can be sustained. In some cases this has resulted in the formation of a student/faculty "Ecumenical Committee" and in applications for the Graduate Program in Ecumenical Studies at the Ecumenical Institute in Bossey, Switzerland. Students (and faculty who have accompanied them) have attended short courses or an exchange semester in the Third World, mostly Latin America or India, which has enriched our own community life on their return.

When I ask students to tell about their "ecumenical experience" at the beginning of some of my courses, the majority report only involvement in annual Thanksgiving or possibly World Day of Prayer ecumenical services. Very few can point to a great deal of involvement, knowledge, or interest in ecumenism by their home or field-education churches. Dr. Wesley Ariarajah, a Sri Lankan Methodist on the WCC staff, once told me a story that illustrates the difference local church involvement in ecumenical issues can make. His formation as an ecumenist, he said, took place because of the influence of his pastor, who reported to his congregation over the years on every ecumenical conference he prepared for and attended and informed them on the great ecumenical issues of the day. That pastor was Dr. D. T. Niles. At least two people who grew up in that church are on the Geneva WCC staff today, and I am sure that others from that congregation are making their ecumenical witness elsewhere. That is the kind of minister I passionately long for our seminaries to educate and nurture.

United Methodist Ecumenical Future

DESPITE OUR RICH DIVERSITY OF FACULTY AND STUDENTS (Protestant, Orthodox, Anglican, and Roman Catholic), we seldom intentionally tap that source in order to deepen the ecumenical movement. A faculty or student body that merely represents denominational loyalties does not an ecumenical seminary make! In most United Methodist seminaries there

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are very few courses explicitly related to ecumenics. Ecumenical consortiums look good on paper, but the field of ecumenism is rarely included in the crucial task of shaping a theological curriculum.

Ecumenism is our United Methodist heritage and commitment. Sometimes, because of our size and complex organization, I believe we do not notice other members of the Body of Christ. We expend our greatest time and energy on our own multiple organizational components, requirements, and resources. Seminary teaching, scholarship in our particular disciplines, and committee work are so demanding that we do not pay attention to the international ecumenical movement, including our own communion's role and contribution to the movement. Our seminaries may not take note of our bishops'--or conference lay people's--ecumenical involvement and leadership on vital ecumenical issues of the day. Seldom do we seminary faculty look upon ecumenics as a focus for our next research project or publication.

Here, therefore, is my "short list" of recommendations that I, as a United Methodist committed to theological education and to ecumenism, would make to our United Methodist seminaries and to our students:

1. Inclusion of commitment to ecumenical and global theological education in any seminary mission statements or statements of purpose
2. Attention to ecumenical commitment in hiring regular and adjunct faculty, in inviting visiting scholars and campus speakers and preachers, and in designing and revising curriculum
3. Encouragement of ecumenical research and publication, with recognition and credit for ecumenical participation in promotion and tenure consideration
4. A comprehensive library and bookstore provision of ecumenical resources.
5. A closer relationship between Conference Commissions on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns and seminaries within the conference
6. Specific invitations from seminaries to non-UM board members of NCCC or WCC units who live in the seminary area to speak or engage in informal conversations with students and faculty.

Conclusion

IN THE SUMMER OF 1986, THE ECUMENICAL INSTITUTE in Bossey, Switzerland, and the Programme on Theological Education of the WCC sponsored a ten-day event entitled, "The Teaching of Ecumenics." A superb publication of the same name, containing the papers and recommendations from that conference, should be required reading for professors in any area of seminary education. One of the organizers of this conference, Dr. Daniel F. Martensen, writes about the vital need to teach ecumenics today:

Ecumenics deals with a unique body of material and insight produced by the modern ecumenical movement. This insight and documentation impinges upon the classical theological disciplines but has its own integrity. More importantly, unless the question for Christian unity and common witness and service is addressed in concerted fashion and in self-consciously defined courses of study, the ecumenical memory, to say nothing of the ecumenical vision of the future, will be lost. 3 (emphasis added)

I believe that we who are seminary faculty have a unique opportunity to sustain that memory, articulate that vision, and participate in the shaping of a new ecumenical generation. May that be our common vocation.

Notes

FOR PREACHERS WHO FOLLOW THE COMMON lectionary, the church year is round. The first half springs out of the ground with John the Baptist, each Advent, arching up through the high feasts of Christmas and Epiphany before heading back down to earth through Lent and finally landing back on the horizon with a thud on Good Friday. This half of the year describes Christ’s coming to the world, and with Easter his journey is complete. For forty days after that unparalleled event, the church celebrates its risen Lord, but it also contemplates life without him.

With the feast of Pentecost, the second half of the year begins. As part of his last will and testament, Jesus breathes his Holy Spirit upon his disciples and, amid the heat and racket of many tongues, the church is born. After that, time becomes more ordinary. There are no great feasts or fasts, but instead the lections take us on a long, attentive walk through one of the synoptic Gospels to explore what Christ’s life means for our lives in community.

While the first half of the year describes Christ’s coming to the world, the second half describes the Holy Spirit coming to the church. It is this part of the larger circle that will concern us during the last twelve Sundays of the church year. Our guide this year is Mark, whose short, breathless Gospel served as

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guide for Matthew and Luke as well. Like them, Mark was no reporter of bald facts or curator of interesting stories about Jesus. He was an evangelist whose chief concern was spreading the news that the Messiah had come in the person of Jesus and detailing for his hearers what being the Messiah meant.

Textual Considerations

Scholars suppose that Mark wrote his Gospel sometime between 64 and 75 A.D.—after Peter’s death but before the formation of Matthew and Luke's Gospels—and that he wrote for a gentile Christian community somewhere in the Roman Empire. He seems to know very little about the geography of Palestine; he is harder on the twelve disciples than either of the other synoptic writers and harsher on Jewish customs as well. All of this suggests that he did not write from or for a Semitic culture but a Hellenistic one.

That gives us something in common with him. All of us who preach in a predominantly American culture know how difficult it can be to translate from one culture to another, from there-and-then to here-and-now. While the West appropriated the gospel long ago, we have inherited a tradition that is Middle Eastern at heart. Like Mark, we must work to honor that tradition’s Semitic root and universal flower. When preaching from Mark—or from any primary text, for that matter—our interpretation has two parts: first we attend to Mark’s own transposition of the gospel from one culture to another and then we make the move from his world to our own.

It is certainly possible to skip this intermediate step. Perfectly adequate preachers do it all the time, plucking a passage from the Bible for its face value and developing it as if it had been composed especially for their own situations. God’s grace usually proves sufficient to cover such hubris, but if the integrity of the text is sacrificed the integrity of the sermon may also be lost.

For instance, to preach effectively on Mark 10:2-16—Jesus’ teaching on marriage and divorce—we should remember that
we are at least three steps away from the source. At some moment in time, the Pharisees asked Jesus a question and he gave them his answer. But that answer did not survive verbatim; it passed into the oral tradition, where it circulated for a good thirty years before Mark got hold of it. When he incorporated it into his Gospel, he redirected it toward Roman Gentiles.

The clue to that shift in context is found in verse 12. In it, Jesus speaks of women who divorce their husbands and marry again: "...and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery." Jewish law permitted men to divorce their wives but did not grant women the same privilege. So the saying would have made no sense to a Jewish audience. But Roman law allowed a woman to file for divorce, and a Roman audience may have had some questions about that.

Chances are that Mark did what every good preacher does: he presented the tradition as he had received it and then amplified it to cover the circumstances of those to whom he spoke, which were different from those to whom Jesus spoke. Although we do the same thing, our sermons do not spring directly from the rich, primeval soil of Jesus' own words. Our sermons grow from the sermons of our predecessors, and our yield is best when we take the time to understand how Mark's sermon differed from Jesus' sermon and how both sermons inform our own. Doing so, we take our places in the long line of those who struggle to hear and proclaim God's will in very different times and places.

Another notable difference between Jesus' listeners, Mark's readers, and our own readers is their experience of persecution. Mark's attentiveness to Jesus' suffering and death suggests that he wrote for a church bloodied by opposition. Both Paul and Peter had been martyred by the time Mark wrote his Gospel, and it is likely that he also knew about Nero's cruel campaign against Roman Christians from 64-68 A.D. The handwriting was on the wall, and Mark did his best to strengthen his church as they read it. Part of his intention was to remind them of their likeness to their Lord in that respect.
He takes for granted their recognition of Jesus as the Messiah—indeed, it is hard to read Mark’s Gospel without sharing his conviction that the Son of man is also the Son of God—but he challenges their assumptions of what being the Messiah means. Over and over they learn that God’s chosen one was not sent to win accolades or work magic or rise to temporal power but to take on the forces of evil in a battle to the death—his own death first, but through his death their own death as well, so that no one need fear death in the same way again.

Already by Mark’s time there was widespread Jewish belief that the innocent did not suffer in vain, that their willingness to do so benefited all God’s people. Still, the idea that the Messiah would appear only to suffer and die was not only repugnant but inconceivable. Consequently, perhaps, Jesus shushed those who witnessed his early miracles, ordering them to tell no one what they had seen or heard. None of them did very well at keeping his messianic secret, but the very request remains puzzling. Why did Jesus wish to avoid recognition? Was he wary of the stereotype of what a Messiah should be and do? Or did he sense the timing was not yet right? Whatever the answer, Mark’s whole Gospel divides at 8:29, when Peter recognizes Jesus as the Christ. Jesus still charges his disciples (literally, rebukes them) to tell no one, but after that he begins to teach them what the title means and what it will require of him.

They are not willing students. Three times—in chapters 8, 9, and 10—he spells out his future for them: suffering, rejection, condemnation, death; and three times they fail utterly to comprehend his message. Mark may have sensed that this was not only a theological problem but a human one as well, because the disciples’ reactions seem so shamefully familiar to us today. After the first prediction, Peter rejects the truth with enough venom for Jesus to identify him with Satan. Matthew’s version of the same encounter (16:13-20) gives us more information. In that account, Peter’s rebuke seems to issue from his love for Jesus. “God forbid, Lord! This shall never happen to you,” he protests, failing to see that the wish to protect a loved one may
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not help but hinder that person from living into the purposes of God.

In chapter nine, when Jesus repeats his hard lesson, the disciples still do not understand, but this time they do not even ask him what he means. Perhaps they are frightened that Jesus will rebuke them as he did Peter. Perhaps they are afraid that Jesus will answer their questions far too plainly. At any rate, fear shuts them up and shuts down their communication with Jesus.

Chapter 10 may offer the most embarrassing scenario of all. Jesus' third prediction of his passion evokes only his disciples' self-interest. First Peter reminds Jesus that he and the others have left everything to follow him (hinting that they could, therefore, slip through the eye of the needle?), and then James and John ask him for a promotion in the kingdom to come.

From our own privileged perspective they all sound like blockheads, but we ought to concede that the church does not seem to have changed very much. We are still unable or unwilling to accept the full magnitude of the powerlessness that we embrace when we follow Jesus Christ.

One interesting feature of all three predictions is that Jesus ends each one with the promise that after three days he will rise. Astonishingly, the disciples' reaction gives no indication that they heard that part of his teaching or questioned it at all. Were they so resistant to the first part of his message that they stopped listening before the end? Or was the end added later--after the fact--so that the readers of Mark's Gospel actually have more information than did the disciples in the original story.

This last question leads to one more about timing, because those of us who read the Bible in the twentieth century know something that Mark and the disciples did not, namely, that time did not come to an end as quickly as any of them believed it would. It is not possible to read Mark's Gospel without being caught up in the rush. One of his favorite words is immediately, but even without that adverb his urgency is palpable. When Jesus appears on earth, time is fulfilled and the kingdom is at
hand (1:15); in days to come, the whole earth will see the Son of man coming in clouds with great power and glory (13:26); the present generation will not pass away before all these things come to pass (13:30). But that generation did pass away, and the one after that, and almost two thousand years later we are still waiting for all these things to take place.

One question worth asking is why Mark wrote a Gospel at all if he believed the end was so near. Whatever his reason, he leaves us with two unsettling pronouncements (in 9:1 and 13:30) from Jesus’ own lips about the imminent coming of the kingdom.

They are unsettling in at least two ways. First, because Jesus was, apparently, mistaken. And second, if he was wrong about that, what else is open to question? These were not problems for Mark, but they are decidedly problematic for those of us who read him today. If Jesus’ (and Mark’s) teachings about discipleship depended on the ripeness of the kingdom, do they really apply to us almost two millennia later? When Paul—whose theology Mark shared—wrote that everyone should remain in the state to which he or she was called, even if that state were slavery (1 Cor. 7:20), he had a short and not a long haul in mind. But what now? Would he have given the same advice if he had believed the slavery would go on, generation after generation after generation?

As preachers we do well to ponder these questions, both for our own soul’s health and because our congregations are likely to do the same thing. Mark—or one of his later editors—is aware of the dilemma. Following right on the heels of Jesus’ third pronouncement, he includes a disclaimer: “But of that day or that hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father” (13:32). As a solution it has problems, such as the incompleteness of Jesus’ knowledge and his exclusion from the knowledge of his Father. On the other hand, it opens a number of homiletical doors, the true humanity of Jesus and the perfect freedom of God, among others. There is also a sermon to be preached about how the church deals (or fails to deal) with the apparent fallibility of Scripture.
These textual considerations are only a few of those prompted by Mark's Gospel. Throughout this section and in those to come, I have relied on D. E. Nineham's *Saint Mark* (The Pelican New Testament Commentaries) and Edward Schweizer's *The Good News according to Mark*. Both of these fine sources commend others, including:

- B. H. Branscomb *The Gospel according to Mark*
- Martin Dibelius *From Tradition to Gospel*
  *The Message of Jesus*
- R. H. Lightfoot *History and Interpretation in the Gospels*
  *The Gospel Message of Saint Mark*
- Willi Marxsen *Mark the Evangelist*
- C. G. Montefiore *The Synoptic Gospels* (volume 1)
- Vincent Taylor *The Gospel according to Saint Mark*

Four more contemporary sources are Paul Achtemeier's *Mark*, Fred Craddock's *The Gospels*, David Rhoads and Donald Michie's *Mark as Story* and Lamar Williamson's *Mark*. None of these commentaries can take the place of reading Mark's Gospel straight through to absorb all the energy and urgency that Mark's words contain. Several years ago, stage actor Alec McCowen gave audiences that experience in his dramatic reading of the Gospel according to Mark, a dizzying performance that he writes about in his book *Personal Mark*. However preachers manage it, they will be rewarded by spending some time with the entire Gospel—not studying it so much as entering into it—so that each week's lection emerges as a piece of the whole.

**The Shape of the Lections**

**Eleven of the Twelve Lections** for the last quarter of the church year are from Mark's Gospel. The twelfth is from John, a departure in honor of Christ the King Sunday, the last Sunday
of the season after Pentecost and the last Sunday before Advent. Apart from that exception, there is remarkable narrative and thematic unity in the selections from Mark, which line up as follows:

- Mark 7:31-37  The healing of the deaf mute
- Mark 8:27-38  Jesus' first prediction of his passion
- Mark 9:30-37  Jesus' second prediction of his passion
- Mark 9:38-50  Everyone will be salted with fire
- Mark 10:2-16  The teaching on marriage and divorce
- Mark 10:17-30  Riches bar the way to the kingdom
- Mark 10:35-45  Jesus' third prediction of his passion
- Mark 10:46-52  The healing of Bartimaeus
- Mark 12:28-34  The first commandment
- Mark 12:38-44  The widow's mite
- Mark 13:24-32  A vision of the end time

The lections have a definite shape. According to Mark, the healing of the deaf mute is one of the last miracles Jesus works before he discloses himself to his disciples at Caesarea Philippi, an event that divides Mark's Gospel in half. Before that self-disclosure, Mark's emphasis is on the miraculous works of Jesus, which attract crowds. For someone so visible he is strangely secretive, teaching in parables and asking those whom he has healed to tell no one about him. After his self-disclosure, miracles become rare, and the crowds fade into the background. Jesus spends more time alone with his disciples, teaching them plainly what his future holds and dealing with their failure to grasp the implications of their choice to follow him.

While the Transfiguration is not among our lections this season, it sits between propers 19 and 20 and exerts its powerful influence there. This white-hot event takes place for the benefit of Peter, James, and John, who witness the super-
natural confirmation that Jesus is who Peter says he is. While that privilege does not prevent any of them from later betraying him, it is Mark's way of setting the stage for what happens next. Convinced by the vision that their teacher is indeed their Messiah, they are presumably better equipped to hear what, exactly, that will mean—both for him and for themselves.

Jesus' teaching on discipleship dominates the next section of Mark's Gospel (8:27-10:52). Seven of our twelve lections fall within this section, providing a clear focus for a series of sermons on what it means to follow Jesus on the way. Jesus himself addresses a wide variety of topics, describing what discipleship has to do with community, marriage, divorce, children, money, possessions and status. Mark clearly had his own interest in these subjects. Presenting Jesus' teaching on them in such a concentrated, orderly manner, he showed his readers that no part of their lives was exempt from the call to follow Christ. With the rigor of these teachings, he reinforced their knowledge that the way would never be easy.

Discipleship is a central concern throughout Mark's Gospel. Beginning with his crisp, uncluttered version of Jesus' call to the first four disciples—"Follow me"—he relishes that verb using it over and over as a kind of chorus. Every time he does so, he carries his readers back to the experience of that first call so that they do not forget it (1:16-20). While it does not fall among our assigned lections these twelve Sundays, the story of the first call will enrich the preacher's appreciation of discipleship in Mark as a whole.

It is a peculiar story because it lacks many of the details we latter-day disciples would expect. We tend to approach the subject of discipleship with gritted teeth, wondering if we have what it takes, if we too could have left our nets and followed. We talk about discipleship as if it were an act of great moral courage, as if Simon and Andrew and James and John were chosen because of their selflessness, or their proven record of commitment, or their alarming ability to walk away from anything that did not claim their total allegiance.

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But there is no evidence in the story itself for any of that. The four are apparently chosen at random and there is no sign of struggle on their part—no angst, no counting the cost, no looking back. Jesus calls and they follow, obeying him as the unclean spirits and the sick and the stormy sea will obey him later on, conforming themselves to his word, surrendering themselves to his will.

The language of the story is not the language of human accomplishment but of divine miracle; it is not about the power of four fishermen to amend their lives but about the power of God to make something out of nothing—to create faith where there was no faith, to make disciples where there were none. To read the story in this way is to approach the whole matter of discipleship from a different angle. Is the ability to follow Jesus a result of our works or God’s grace? Is it a matter of exercising our own wills or of giving ourselves over to the will of God? If faith is God’s creation and not our own, then what becomes of all the things we tell ourselves we should, must, ought to do? "With men it is impossible," Jesus explains to his disciples, "but not with God; for all things are possible with God" (10:27).

This whole discussion finds its consummation in the story of blind Bartimaeus. He cannot heal himself; he cannot open his own eyes. All he can do is yell, crying out to Jesus and clamoring for mercy. It is up to Jesus to act and he does, "calling" Bartimaeus (in Mark this word is always loaded), who knows what he wants and who can give it to him. His sight is restored and while Jesus dismisses him to go his own way, he follows Jesus on "the way" instead, the road that leads to Jerusalem. He has, in short, become a disciple.

The next three lections all tell stories that take place in Jerusalem during the last act of Jesus’ life. Against the backdrop of his fatal controversy with the religious authorities, his teaching becomes full of eerie allusions. "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength" (12:30), says the one who is about to prove his love by putting heart, soul, mind
and strength to the test. Summoning his disciples to witness the sacrificial giving of the poor widow in the temple, he praises her offering. "She out of her poverty has put in everything she had" (12:44), says the one who is about to withhold nothing of his own.

The penultimate lection is taken from the thirteenth chapter of Mark, a long farewell in which Jesus prepares his disciples for what will happen after he is gone. It is a spectacular prediction, full of wars and rumors of wars, earthquakes, famine, and persecution, but none of those is the point. The point is the coming of the Son of man with great power and glory; all the rest are road signs to that end. Here, as throughout his Gospel, Mark preaches Jesus' sermon as part of his own. To a community ringed around with threat and frightened for their lives, he offers a view of God's plan. Their task is to keep watch for the coming of their Lord, who will arrive one day like a master returning home to put his household in order.

The last Sunday of the season after Pentecost is Christ the King Sunday, a time to contemplate the majesty of Christ before the church year ends and the whole cycle begins all over again. It is always a Sunday full of paradox: Christ the king who reigns from a manger, or the prow of a fishing boat, or a cross; a king whose rule has already been established but whose kingdom has not yet come. The selection from John's Gospel captures that paradox, placing the discussion of Christ's kingship within the context of his trial for sedition, a trial he will ultimately win by losing, just as he will succeed by suffering and live by dying.

Finding the Door

Between these more or less academic reflections and the reflections on the individual lections to come, there is some-
thing to be said about how the preacher "gets into" the text in order to discover the sermon there—not Jesus’ sermon, or Mark’s sermon, but his or her own. After all the sources have been consulted and all the notes have been made, what is a preacher to do?

Whole books have been written to answer that question, but what seems most important for the sake of the sermon is that the preacher seek the translation of knowledge into experience: the experience of the text, experience of the gospel, experience of the Lord. If we who speak have no direct experience of these for ourselves, then there is little hope that we will be able to communicate them to others in any convincing way.

Traditional Christian disciplines of prayer, worship, and service are essential to any preacher’s life of faith. So is belief in the incarnation, by which I mean the preacher’s confidence that God is present in the stuff of the world—in everyday scenes and encounters, in newspaper headlines and recent films, in the simplest kindnesses and the most profound sorrows of ordinary people’s lives. While this lectionary study focuses on the biblical text, there is as much or more to say about the human text. The canon of the Bible may be closed, but the canon of life on earth is wide open—the ongoing revelation of the Holy Spirit’s activity in our midst. In order to make the connection between the two, there are several things preachers can do.

We can enter the text by using our five senses, searching the passage not only for sights and sounds but also for smells, tastes, and things to touch. Often these sensations are only suggested by the text, but that is what our imaginations are for. Filling in the missing details, we involve ourselves in the scene. Exploring the text is not just an intellectual exercise but also an embodied one with power to make us sweat, shiver, blush, or squirm. By learning to evoke these same sensations in our listeners, we invite them out of the audience and onto the stage, where they may participate in the drama of Mark’s Gospel for themselves.
We can also spend some time plumbing the emotional depth of the passage. Sometimes the emotion is present in the text itself, as when the rich man goes away sorrowful (10:22) or when Bartimaeus throws off his mantle and springs up (10:50), but other times the emotion is our own as we respond to what we have read. It is difficult to think about plucking out our eyes or cutting off our hands without some consternation (9:43-47), nor are we likely to hear about the powers of heaven being shaken (13:25) without a ripple of fear running down our backs. To sink into such feelings and to let them remind us of other times we have felt that way is often to discover a visceral connection between the text at hand and the texts of our own lives.

One word of caution, however. While this exercise may help us find a way into the text, it is important to know the difference between our own concerns and the concerns of the text. Mark scrupulously avoids supplying us with anything like a motive for why Jesus or the disciples do what they do. Psychology was not a first-century affair; Mark was not interested in how his characters felt but in how they helped or hindered the coming of the kingdom. Recognizing that, we may still claim our own feelings and use them to heighten our involvement in the text.

A third way of finding a door into the text is to place it like a magnet in the center of our minds and allow our powers of association free rein. What other stories come to mind, either from the Bible or from our own lives? What books or movies does it bring to mind, what fairy tales or legends from other traditions? What is it like? That is the question to keep asking. A blind beggar shouting at Jesus from the side of the road: What is that like? It is like the homeless man who stands at the street corner every day, holding a sign that says, “Will work for food.” It is like a page from the picture book about India, in which lepers haunt holy places in search of alms. It is like an obnoxious child who keeps pestering someone until he gets what he wants.

The chief thing to remember about free association is that it only works if it is truly free. There will be plenty of time later for the theologian in each of us to sort through the piles of
material and separate the wheat from the chaff. But first it is vital to give the artist in each of us some room to savor the language and image and nuance of the text and to respond to its craftsmanship with some of our own.

One final aid to imagination is to explore alternatives to the text as it stands. This exercise is pure fantasy, but it often yields interesting insights. What if the rich man had been able to obey Jesus and had auctioned off his estate on the spot? What if Jesus had granted James and John their request and made them crown princes in the kingdom? What if Bartimaeus had been a woman or the widow had only given half of what she had? How did Jesus know how much she gave anyway? Such speculation serves two useful purposes: first, it wakes us up to all the possible directions the passage might have taken; and second, it usually ends up teaching us why it is the way it is.

A browse through a good theological bookstore will turn up any number of resources for the imaginative preacher. Among the most recent are Paul Scott Wilson's Imagination of the Heart, Thomas Troeger's Imagining a Sermon, and Patricia Wilson-Kastner's Imagery for Preaching. While not directly applicable to the texts at hand, the work of Walter Brueggemann on the Old Testament and Robert Farrar Capon on the New Testament is welcome evidence that it is possible to communicate the ancient word of God in fresh, surprising ways.

Sunday by Sunday

The paragraphs that follow are neither summaries of critical or theological consensus on the assigned lections nor authorized interpretations of the texts at hand. There are plenty of good books available for that, including the Proclamation series, published by Fortress Press, and Homily Service, put out by the Liturgical Conference. Instead, these paragraphs reflect what went on in one preacher's head as she studied the lections and thought about turning them into sermons. My scholarship in this section, such as it is, was aided by the aforementioned Schweizer and by Fred Craddock's fine work.
Proper 18

Jesus returns from the region of Tyre and Sidon in today's passage. He has taken his ministry deep into gentile territory; he has carried it to the limit and he has had his own limits tested by the Syrophoenician woman. Now "they" bring him a deaf man with an impediment in his speech. Words will not work on someone who cannot hear, so Jesus uses body language instead, taking the man away from the crowd and working on him like a potter working his clay. He fingers the man's ears; he wets the man's tongue with his own spit; he handles him. Then he groans, making a sound like the man himself might have made, and orders him to be opened. It is a very physical miracle, but what is its relationship to faith? Does a miracle create faith or is it a response to faith? The man shows no evidence of faith, but afterwards he speaks plainly for the first time in his life. Jesus charges those present to tell no one, but it is folly. How can a man who has just been given his voice remain silent?

Proper 19

For Mark, geography is theology. Today's lection takes place "on the way" to Caesarea Philippi, which straddles the boundary between gentile territory and the Holy Land. Here Jesus quizzes his disciples about who he is; Peter answers rightly and it is as if he has produced the key that unlocks the secret door. For the first time, Jesus tells his disciples what his identity as the Son of man will cost. His self-revelation is the pivot around which Mark's whole Gospel turns; verse 31 divides everything into "before" and "after." The narrative is hot, not cool, with triple rebukes in it, an exclamation point, and a painful exorcism for Peter. Is this what it means to join Jesus "on the way"?
Proper 20

The pattern is becoming familiar: Jesus tells his disciples what is in store for him; they do not understand, and he uses their density as an occasion to expand his teaching. Today Jesus predicts his death for the second time. Afterwards, the disciples are “on the way” again, discussing who is the greatest among them as if they had not heard a word he said, or as if his life had nothing to do with theirs. He decides they need an object lesson and pulls a child onto his lap—a non-person with no status, literally good for nothing in the economy of the Middle East. “This is what God looks like,” he says, in effect. “Receive this speck of humanity and you receive the one who made heaven and earth.” Is God the most we can imagine or the least? Does God exceed our expectations or show them up for the hot air balloons they are?

Proper 21

This is John’s big moment, his only solo lines in Mark’s Gospel. Unfortunately, he gets them wrong. Jesus rejects his (and our) attempts to limit who is “in” and who is “out” of fellowship with him. Lenient beyond all reason, he suggests that the only people who are really out are those who exclude themselves. The rest of the passage is wonderfully gory and a good litmus test for fundamentalists: how many sport glass eyes and artificial limbs? The offensive verses beg to be argued with, since it is clearly not a hand or a foot or an eye that sins but the mind that gives each of them their orders. Hidden beneath the butcher shop imagery is Jesus’ plea for unity and moral integrity among his disciples, whom he calls to season and preserve the world.

Proper 22

Jesus does not seem to mind that the Pharisees question him only because they hope to trap him. But he answers the question they have not asked instead of the one they have. They want to know whether they may or may not divorce a spouse,
but Jesus refuses to approach marriage from the end, where human liability is at stake. He approaches it from the beginning, where it is a matter of God's intention. He is less concerned with what law permits than with what God wills, and suggests that God's power to bind is stronger than our power to break—which is, all in all, very good news. The saying about children is a tricky one. If their chief virtue is their ability to enter the kingdom without thinking they have earned it, then we miss the point entirely when we try to earn our own entrance by acting like children.

Proper 23

It is difficult to know what to call this story, since the main character is "rich" only in this Gospel, "young" only in Matthew, and a "ruler" in Luke, but his story is familiar. There is something about him that Jesus responds to, something in him that Jesus loves. Is it that he seems to want an extraordinary life, exceeding the righteousness of the law? Jesus shows him the way—"follow me"—but the man will not. He has too many possessions, which up until that moment he (and the amazed disciples) had thought were evidence of God's blessing. Jesus' invitation sounds like an invitation to destitution. What we fail to understand is that Jesus does not call us to be poor; he calls us to be free.

Proper 24

Although this lection follows Jesus' third prediction of his passion, it is less about suffering than about hierarchy. Once again, the disciples have gotten it wrong: after the first prediction it was Peter; after the second, all twelve got in on the act; now, after the third, it is James and John who jockey for position. That list indicts three of Jesus' first four disciples, and it is some small comfort that even those who knew him in the flesh still failed to understand their Lord. Jesus is not indignant at James and John as their peers are; he simply uses their ignorance as another opportunity to teach them that God's rule defies all their notions of who is greatest, best, first. 'It shall
not be so among you," he says, reminding us that hierarchy has no place among those who follow him, not even in the church.

Proper 25

There is an echo in this passage. "What do you want me to do for you?" Jesus asks blind Bartimaeus. It is the very same thing he asked James and John in last week's lection, but there is a world of difference in their answers. The two disciples wanted to flank Jesus in his glory; this beggar wants to receive his sight. Although Jesus could not grant James and John their request, he declares that Bartimaeus' faith has made him well—that it literally has "saved" him. Except for the withering of the fig tree, this is the last miracle Jesus works before he enters into Jerusalem, where the disciples' eyes will be opened and where he who saved others will fail to save himself.

Proper 26

Those of us who were taught that these verses originated with Jesus were taught wrong. Answering the scribe's question about the first commandment, Jesus quotes from the Shema, the ancient distillation of Jewish law. It is his way of affirming the kinship between what he was taught and what he teaches, which is the love of God and neighbor. If he has made a change, it is to expand the notion of neighbor so that no human being is not one and to stress that love is about wanting to, not having to. But the beauty of the commandment to love is also its hitch, because it is never done. If we could hit the bull's-eye in loving then we could stop and move on to something else; but it is a law that keeps after us, drawing us farther and farther into the heart that beats at the center of the universe.

Proper 27

The story of the widow's mite has been sentimentalized almost beyond rescue, but its position in Mark's Gospel makes it worth saving. It takes place in the temple in Jerusalem at the end of Jesus' ministry, where he sees two kinds of people walking around: the religious leaders whose faith has drowned
in pretense and privilege, and the ordinary men and women who come to the temple to worship God. Calling his disciples over to learn from the widow, Jesus admires her simple Jewish piety. It is not the chosen people he has separated himself from but their leaders. The widow gives everything she has to God, which makes God the source of everything for her. Maybe Jesus notices her because he is about to do the same thing.

Proper 28

As I write, the war in Iraq bleeds on; both sun and moon are darkened by the black clouds of burning oil refineries. Elsewhere in the world the signs stack up: famine, earthquake, pestilence, persecution. All that is missing are the stars falling out of the sky all at once. Is the end near? Jesus teaches his disciples to watch and to endure but never to forget what all the signs announce—the Son of man coming in clouds with great power and glory. On the one hand that is just one more thing to fear, but on the other it is very good news to be reminded that God is still in charge and on the way, whether or not we approve of God’s means to that end. Parousia is worth playing with; it means “presence,” or “coming” and not necessarily “coming again.” How do we experience God’s coming while we await God’s coming?

Proper 29

Today is the New Year’s Eve service on the church calendar, when we pause to consider the kingship of Christ before staring all over again with God in diapers. After spending so many weeks with Mark’s earthy Messiah, John’s omniscient king comes as something of a shock. He knows where he has come from and where he is going; the interview with Pilate is a mere formality. Their dialogue is nonetheless intriguing, especially when it is read aloud. How does Jesus deliver his lines? What does Pilate hear in his voice? Sorrow? Defiance? Haughtiness? Fear? Reading them over and over again, we discover a dozen layers of meaning, but which is the truth? Jesus has come to bear witness to the truth, John says. In every situation, he holds
the compass; he is the one who points true north. He is God's arrow, shot through heaven and earth, piercing the hearts of both God and humankind and pinning them together on the cross.

Conclusion

Preaching the gospel is a privilege; it is also a spiritual discipline. Before the public proclamation of the word takes place, there is study and prayer and discernment to be practiced—the preacher's careful searching through the word of God, the life of the world, and his or her own humanity for the spark that will unite all three in the moment of the sermon.

It is a process that shapes who we are and how we work; it is a process that plants us squarely in the presence of our Maker, who allows us to assist in the mystery of the word that is always being made flesh. It is a process that deserves the best we have to offer and one that offers us the best blessings of God right back. There is never enough time, but there is always time for this.