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A journal of Theological Resources for Ministry

Eric J. Sharpe
Christianity among the Cultures

W. Paul Jones
In Wait for My Life: Aging and Desert Spirituality

Three Studies on Cross-Cultural Ministry
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John B. Cobb, Jr.
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Summer, 1992

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Contents

Introduction
Sharon J. Hels ................................................................. 1

Articles

Christianity among the Cultures
Eric J. Sharpe ........................................................................ 3

In Wait for My Life: Aging and Desert Spirituality
W. Paul Jones ......................................................................... 17

Cultural Pluralism and the Teaching Office: Where Do We Go from Here?
Linda J. Vogel and Douglas E. Wingeier ................................. 29

Emptying-for-Filling: An Approach to Cross-Cultural Ministry
Douglas E. Wingeier ............................................................. 33

The Church and an Economic Vision for Cultural Pluralism
John B. Cobb, Jr. .................................................................. 57

A Wrestling Church: Cultural Pluralism in the Wesleyan Tradition
Mary Elizabeth Mullino Moore ................................................ 75

Letter to a Young Seminarian
David Mosser ......................................................................... 95

QR Lectionary Study

Doctrinal/Theological Themes for Preaching: John Wesley and the Galatian
and Colossian Letters
Kenneth L. Carder ............................................................... 103
Introduction

There is not a better book in the world for imagining the experience of difference than Alice in Wonderland. Every time Alice eats, her size changes. But this extreme flexibility does not confer good relations with the neighbors. At ten inches tall, she can talk with a mouse, but offends him with praise for her cat, the expert mouse-catcher. After a swig from another bottle labelled DRINK ME, she fills an entire room, so that one of her arms hangs out the window and one foot is wedged up the chimney. Threatened by her size, the White Rabbit sends his lackey, a lizard named Bill, into combat. Alice is determined to fight back.

She drew her foot as far down the chimney as she could, and waited till she heard a little animal scratching and scrambling about in the chimney close above her; then, saying to herself, "This is Bill," she gave one sharp kick, and waited to see what would happen next.

The first thing she heard was a general chorus of "There goes Bill!" then the Rabbit's voice alone--"Catch him, you by the hedge!" then silence and then another confusion of voices... "How was it old fellow? What happened to you? Tell us all about it!"

In our everyday contact with those who differ from us in cultural background, we may think we have stumbled into Wonderland. Like Alice, we are continually stepping on toes or defending ourselves against absurd attacks. The solution is not simply to blend in (or to hold out). We know that choosing to enter these new relationships will make us develop new skills. A measure of honesty is required,
and the ability to reexamine or call off these interactions that fall short of the demands of our conscience.

What of the church in these same circumstances? Shall we adapt to, confront, or ignore the cultural differences among us? Have we done well to offer our money, schools, jobs, and religious faith to others as an improvement on their own (or is the last item different in kind from the others)? Just who is we, anyway?

Eric Sharpe reaches into his own past, in the aftermath of World War II, to address some of these concerns. This noted English scholar of comparative religion recalls his own movement from alienation to relationship with post-war Germans, which he discovered in the fledgling ecumenical movement. His story highlights his seasoned reflections on the culture that separates us from fellow Christians and fellow human beings—and the worship and good faith that can, if we are willing, draw us together.

The "ages and stages" approach to religious thought offers us a unique perspective on spirituality, as Paul Jones shows us. We efficient middle-aged types might pause to acknowledge that our spiritual growth cannot be finished up ahead of time while we still have the energy! The desert spirituality of loss and detachment prepares us to stand before God. There are indeed gifts reserved for old age.

The core of this issue is devoted to papers that were delivered to the United Methodist Association of Professors of Christian Education (UMAPCE) on the theme of "Cultural Pluralism and the Teaching Office." Linda Vogel and Douglas Wingeier, both at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, organized the meeting that produced the three papers presented in this issue and three in the fall issue. A hint of the wealth of ideas there: Douglas Wingeier's paper draws on his rich experience as an educator on three continents and his insights into the Christian vision that unites teacher and student, congregation and pastor. John Cobb writes clearly and with great force about the political and economic forces that shape the world and call for responsible Christian response. And Mary Elizabeth Mullino Moore takes us back to Africa in the early part of this century to watch United Methodists in action, carefully weighing their choices about policies which will have a lasting effect on Christian life there. The news from that front, praise God, is not all bad.

We hope your summer months are mild and filled with the grace of all green and growing things! —Sharon Hels
In the summer of 1956, a young Methodist theological student ventured out of England for the first time, bound for Scandinavia. Until then, practically all he knew of the Christian world was that tiny corner of it where he had grown up and another slightly larger corner where he had completed his two years' military service.

A Personal Journey

In the summer of 1956 the name of the President of the United States of America was Dwight D. Eisenhower, and that of the Vice-President, Richard M. Nixon. The Suez Canal had just been nationalized, and a little to the west, the French were fighting a war in Algeria. Later in the year Russian tanks would take advantage of the Western powers being distracted by the foolishness of the Suez War to crush a popular uprising in Hungary. In the United States, the worst excesses of Senator Joseph McCarthy's anti-Communist crusade were almost over; the Senator himself had less than a year to live. Looked at as a whole, the Western world was, however, still frightened and still deeply divided by past memories, recent sufferings and present tensions.

As far as my own memories of that summer are concerned (for this is, of course, a fragment of my own autobiography), I recall setting foot in Germany for the first time—excited and nervous at the same time, just in case someone had forgotten to tell the Germans that the war had ended eleven years earlier. I remember bursting
into foolish laughter at the sight of a German police band—they looked to me like Gestapo officers—and I almost fell over when they actually started playing. I did not laugh, however, as I stood at the top of the church tower and looked out over the ruins of Hamburg: this was the reality which we as kids in England had treated like a game.

But Hamburg was too huge to comprehend, lying there in its ruins. The violence of the recent past hit home in another north German city—Lübeck. There in the Marienkirche, in the course of a British air raid, a huge church bell had been dislodged from its place high in the church tower and had fallen a couple of hundred feet to the stone floor below. It lay there shattered, a grotesque mass of twisted metal. What sound had it made in its last seconds? The church authorities had decided to leave it where it had fallen as a reminder of past violence. Quite possibly the finger that had pressed the button to release the bombs that had struck the church tower had been one of a young Christian. The bomber was almost certainly one named after my home town—Lancaster. It might even have been serviced by my brother. At such moments one grows suddenly older.

A couple of weeks before this venture into Germany, I had attended a Church of Sweden youth conference in the old Swedish copper-mining town of Falun. There were three of us from England. There were also present thirty or forty young people from Germany, and it was in their company that I first discovered the ecumenical movement. It is hard not to be a trifle sentimental about the experiences of that summer and that conference. I do not really remember many of the individuals. I do, on the other hand, recall the music and the worship. Every one of the young Germans seemed to be either a singer or an instrumentalist. Together they formed themselves into an excellent choir and performed at a level way beyond anything I had ever experienced before. (The level of music in Lancashire Methodism was more enthusiastic than refined.) I was permitted to join in, to play my flute with their harpsichordist, to discover Bach and Buxtehude and to catch a glimpse of the meaning of the AMDG Bach wrote on his scores: Ad majorem Dei gloriam, "To the greater glory of God."

I said just now that this was my discovery of the ecumenical movement: of a Christian fellowship transcending the kind of division, suspicion, fear, enmity that the recent war had represented. The summer of 1956 was the first day of the rest of my Christian life, such as it is: a life that might perhaps be called international or mul-


Cultural, all of it under the canopy of the Christian faith and usually within earshot of the Church's music. I have been privileged to have been able to cross a few frontiers and open a few windows, to share a few insights and shake a few hands, to read a few books, sing a few anthems and deliver a few lectures. I am perhaps not quite the ecumenical enthusiast I became in the early 1960s, though I hope I am not quite the cynic a few people suspect me of being. Let me elaborate a little.

Differences in the Human Family

The domestic arrangements of the human race must be a constant source of amazement and sorrow, if not outright despair, to the angels. Although in theory we may be prepared to allow that one God has created us and made of one blood all the nations of the earth, in practice we are never more ingenious than when we devise ways to persuade ourselves that we are, in fact, different from all the others. The need for somewhere to live for yourself and your people is basic, and the impulse to define and defend that "somewhere" is entirely understandable. Networks of signs and symbols to enable the members of different branches of the human family to recognize one another are again basic: ask any anthropologist (though you may not be able to understand the answer, since anthropologists, like the best computer experts and the worst theologians, tend to communicate with one another in code). But so much is at any rate clear: that the larger human family has what one German theologian of long ago called a "fissiparous tendency"; that is to say, it splits apart on the slightest provocation.

That, though, is by no means the whole of the human story. Human society, it seems, is subject to what I am tempted to call the concertina effect: expanding and contracting, absorbing and expelling, uniting and dividing. Whether there be any rhythm to this, I do not know. Perhaps there is. Perhaps the sequence that starts with the family, the extended family and the clan and ends with the nation, the commonwealth and the empire, is one expansive phase, while its disintegration is the opposite. What we have seen happening in recent months in the USSR and Eastern Europe has surprised everyone by its suddenness. But it is very much like what happened to the British Empire between 1945 and the mid-1960s—and brought about by the same cause, namely bankruptcy, though that is another story. Concerning the net effect, it can be summed up in one word—or rather, one of two words, depending on where
you happen to be: from the horizons of London in 1947 or Moscow in 1991, disintegration; from New Delhi in 1947 or Riga in 1991, liberation.

Culture and Belonging

What, though, do we see of world affairs from the horizons of the industrial West, whether the United States, Europe or Australia, or even Japan, Hong Kong or Korea (industrial Asia)? What we see is the Syndicate in operation. It is held together by a web of airlines, telecommunications satellites, financial institutions, five-star hotels, media outlets and stock exchanges. Its only religion is the religion of pragmatic expediency.

But here and there in the world we find little pockets of resistance to the cosmo-culture and to the regime of marriages of convenience. Often the efforts of these resistance groups will strike the outside world as brave but foolish, the pointless defiance of growling chickens. Sometimes their efforts are more—far more—than that. If you have forgotten all the rest, I trust that you will not have forgotten the example of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. The example of Northern Ireland, Sri Lanka, the Basque country, and all those other parts of the world where people reach for the bomb just as soon as words fail them is a different ball game, though the causes may be similar.

They all say, "Give us back our independence!"
They all say, "Give us back our culture!"

What, though, is this "culture" which seems so powerful as an idea and so fragile as a commodity? Which is so hard-won and so easily lost? (It is one of the oddities of today's debate that while so much is said about "culture," so little time is spent establishing the precise meaning of the word.) Of course, we all know that we belong to one, even when we might live in a different one. I, for instance, have lived in Australia for the better part of fifteen years without ever coming to feel that I fully belong there. Birth, then, is perhaps the most important single cultural factor. Added to that are all the things that one learns to use and to value; of these, language is the first, followed by all the things that one can do with language as well as speak it and listen to it.

It is not by accident that cultural identity is bound up so strongly with being able to speak and read and write one's own language, or that the Christian missionary enterprise is so deeply involved in the work of translation. My old professor of missiology, Bengt Sundkler,
made a rule of this: mission is translation; translation is a risk; but the risk has to be taken, for otherwise the message will never get across. But mission aside, cultural units are very largely linguistic units, and most people feel that they belong to the culture whose language they speak. Then it is a matter of what you do with it: writing history to keep your own past alive, telling stories about its proudest and best and sometimes its worst episodes, composing poems for the telling and songs for the singing—not forgetting, either, the jokes that bring relief from too much seriousness.

The stories and songs and tall tales and jokes of a people are that people's cultural key, and if you do not know them, mere geography will not save you. Then there are the vital trivia: dress codes, table manners, recipes and the rest. There are the taboos: who is free to say what to whom and to touch whom, who may marry whom, what may and may not be eaten and drunk, what animals are regarded as clean and unclean, and why. It is almost certain that the great Sepoy Rebellion in India in 1857 was precipitated when the British army issued its Hindu and Muslim soldiers cartridges that had been greased with a disgusting mixture of cow's and pig's fat, the cow being sacred to the Hindus and the pig unclean to the Muslims. The offending cartridges were withdrawn almost at once and may never have been used at all. But by then it was too late, and the damage had been done.

Culture and Religious Values

You will notice that I have not so far mentioned one corner of culture, though I came very close to it when I said that the cow was (and indeed is) sacred to Hindus. That is the position occupied in the cultural scheme of things by religion—how, in slightly different terms, we relate what we call culture to what we call religion? Is religion (including Christianity) part of culture, related to culture, elevated high above culture, imprisoned by culture, a hair shirt for culture to wear when it has been misbehaving? Or what? And if we were able to decide these questions, would it turn out that Christianity was subject to the same cultural rules as all the other religious traditions, or might it be an exception?

The story is told of the Englishman who happened one Saturday afternoon to be in Belfast, Northern Ireland. Being a soccer fan, he decided to go watch a match, which just happened to be between a "Catholic" and a "Protestant" team (an arrangement which also applies in Liverpool and Glasgow). A couple of locals standing nearby
noticed that the visitor wasn't cheering and asked him which team he supported. He replied that he supported neither but had only come to watch the match. "Did ye hear that, Patrick?" said the one to the other. "This man's a bloody atheist!"

We smile. But cultural identity is often like that: total, uncompromising, all-embracing, non-negotiable. This is a side of human life and experience which many people are reluctant to discuss nowadays; that identity in fact does mean separateness, and that if you "belong" in one place, you cannot at the same time belong in another. In Australia, for instance, there is much talk of "mateship" as a typically Australian and wholly desirable value. Desirable it may be, for those on the inside: the platoon (where no doubt it originated), the team, the pub, and everywhere men forgather. It imposes high standards of reliability, courage, strength, resourcefulness and honor on those on the inside; it expects nothing at all of those on the outside.

Australian? A Viking long-ship captained by Erik the Red (or for that matter Hagar the Horrible) functioned in precisely the same way. So too, incidentally, does the Mafia. And the more one thinks about it, the more it becomes clear that we are dealing here with a type of human behavior which is in all likelihood as old as human experience itself: the tendency to set one's own boundaries, defend one's own territory, guard one's own values and make one's own laws. Laws, incidentally, which to begin with you would not dream of expecting anyone else to observe. Eventually, however, human families and tribes spread out across the face of the earth, meet one another and discover that they do, in fact, hold values in common.

Religion: Absolute and Relative

The time has come, I think, to draw what I believe to be a very important distinction, which can be illustrated from the Gulf War, from Northern Ireland, from India and Pakistan, indeed from everywhere there is that kind of conflict which some call sectarian and others communal. At the time of the Gulf War I expressed it in the form of a paradox: that the religion that is part of the problem is not the same religion that is part (or perchance even the whole) of the solution. There is, in short, capital-R Religion and small-r religion, Religion A and religion B, Religion absolute and religion relative—or however else you care to label what I shall try to describe.
Small-\( r \) religion is woven into the fabric of every known human society and is practically indistinguishable from the mechanism of culture and its values. It is small-\( r \) religion that tells you how and where to worship, at what time of the day, and on what day of the week, whether or not to cover your head and feet, what you may wear and eat and drink. Often the scriptures of small-\( r \) religion are law books, and many of its functionaries lawyers and administrators. Often small-\( r \) religion is so enclosed within its own little world of uncontested values that it will have little time to spare for the values of others, which, indeed, it has very little chance of understanding, other than from its own oblique angle and through its own prisms. At times, worshippers of other deities may be sufficiently impressed by the certainties, the rituals, and sometimes the prosperity of the small-\( r \) religions to adopt their ways. At other times and under other skies, one set of values comes into head-on collision with another, no less self-assured; then windows are broken and homes are burned, sacred places are defiled and blood is shed.

Capital-\( R \) Religion at times appears to be hidden within small-\( r \) religion, while at others being extended above it like a bright and distant canopy.

In the world of capital-\( R \) Religion, there is less of law than of love, less of habit than of holiness, less of performance than of passion, less of friction than of fellowship. It does not seek for either absolute perfection or absolute certainty here on earth, being content with the attainable. Always such a devotee will be a little of an agnostic, mainly out of fear of affirming too much: how, after all, do you play the music of the spheres on a penny whistle? But what is known, is known: "They who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint" (Isa. 40:31).

The Role of Christian Mission

Back in New Haven, Connecticut, I have been working in the Day Missionary Library of Yale Divinity School, sacred to the memory of the historian Kenneth Scott Latourette. It is hard to credit that half a century has passed since Latourette first published his seven-volume *History of the Expansion of Christianity*. This was the story of the gospel on its way from Jerusalem, by way of Rome, Wittenberg, Geneva, Canterbury, and Boston to Nashville, Tennessee—and then on to Calcutta, Bombay and Madras, Beijing, Seoul, Tokyo, Brazzaville, Harare, Canberra, Sydney, and all points in all direc-
tions. The Great Commission that concludes the Gospel of Matthew—
"Go . . . make disciples . . . baptizing them . . . teaching them . . . "
(28:19fT.)—has been obeyed many thousands of times over.

Latourette's massive study, like many another jumbo work, is sel­
dom read today. But what a remarkable story it has to tell! And how
odd it is to hear those who do not know the story, sniffing that Chris­
tianity has all along been culturally captive, bound up with the com­
cmercial and political interests of the West, from Spain and Portugal
to Britain and America, and therefore ought to have stayed at home.
Missionaries, according to these same people, have been a particular­
ly culpable breed, being mostly intolerant fanatics who have
rampaged around the world committing acts of cultural vandalism,
defacing works of art, leaving dirty fingermarks on the sacred books
of the East and imposing burdens of (mainly sexual) guilt on in­
ocent children of a benevolent Nature. It is perhaps unfair to
single out one critic over all the rest; but I am disposed all the same
to mention the name of the American anthropologist Margaret
Mead and her 1920s classic Coming of Age in Samoa as having done
much to establish the habit. (No matter that Margaret Mead was
very young, very inexperienced, knew practically no Samoan, and
would seem to have been systematically misinformed by her teenage
informants: her book answered so perfectly to what the 1920s
wanted to believe about itself, about the real or imagined impact of
Christianity on the young and innocent, and about missions in
general, that it quickly became canonical.)

It was, as it happens, only a few years ago that I read for the first
time another South Sea Islands story, by a Swedish novelist, Eric
Lundqvist, and entitled No Tobacco, No Halleluja! It told much the
same story: of a young Swedish missionary, a mass of mainly sexual
neuroses, landing in Papua, New Guinea, and bribing his way to
some slight success by means of pants, sarongs and tobacco, falling
into the most grievous sin after drinking the local fire-water but
then redeeming himself by (more or less) throwing away his Bible
and teaching the Papuans farming instead. The message, though,
was one which Margaret Mead would have recognized: that of the
harmful influence of a dogmatic and moralistic Christianity upon a
well-balanced people whose real need was to be taught a little about
hygiene and nutrition.

Of course, it is not only the Christian mission that gets blamed
for this. Often it is Western civilization in general: big business, the
medical profession, the pharmaceutical industry and purveyors of
dried milk and cornflakes. A recent issue of Time (September 23,
1991) highlighted "Lost Tribes, Lost Knowledge," declaring that "When native cultures disappear, so does a trove of scientific and medical wisdom." The New Age firmly and fondly believes this process to have been going on from time immemorial, and that the builders of Stonehenge were wiser in their generation than the builders of the space shuttle in ours: wiser, equally scientific and less harmful to "the planet." Perhaps they were. We shall, alas, never know.

Honor Culture; Worship God. From cultural vandalism to political oppression is not a very long step. What do you do, after all, if you want to deprive someone of their independence and don't care simply to exterminate them? Imprisonment often just doesn't work. The Nelson Mandela who came out of jail a couple of years ago was pretty much the same Nelson Mandela who had gone in all those years before, only older and wiser. Sixty-five years ago, a Gandhi in jail was in some ways more influential than a Gandhi on the loose, since a free Gandhi could be in only one place at once. No. What you must do to keep people in subjection is to imprison people's souls. You must, if you can, eliminate their identity.

And that means: Make them lose their memories. Make them forget. People who have no memories are easily controlled, because not knowing where they have been, they do not know where they are pointed, either. It also means that they do not know who they are and are ready to be told ... not necessarily anything, but anything that will break open the shell of loneliness that otherwise surrounds them.

The fifth commandment says: "Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you" (Ex. 20:12). Try a few variants. Honor your ancestors. Honor your roots. Honor your role models (that one doesn't sound quite right, but it means a lot). Honor your culture! Honor the larger, as well as the smaller, family into which you were born—which is not to say that it has stalked through history, incapable of doing wrong, merely that there is a historical version of the Golden Rule that decrees respect for people's intentions and not merely criticism of their errors and eccentricities.

But as the Christian church decided long, long ago, to honor is not necessarily to worship. A century ago in China and Korea, honest missionaries were unreasonably worried about the amount of attention young Christians continued to pay to their ancestors. "Ancestor worship," they thundered, "is a sin in the eyes of almighty
God!” Get rid of it! Remove the memory! Is it not enough that the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God?

But what collapsed in the process was the larger family. Cut off from the past, the Chinese Christian ran the risk of becoming something other than wholly Chinese.

What ancestor worship was to China, caste observance was to India. Caste is, as I am sure you know, the social framework on which traditional Hindu India is constructed. A caste is a mixture of an extended family, a tribe, a trades union and a social service organization. Castes, however, are related to one another by rank, from the highest of the high to the lowest of the low. And so it was that 150 or so years ago the infant Protestant church in India, with the Anglican Bishop of Calcutta leading the charge, declared that Christians in India must renounce caste, totally and publicly, as a condition of becoming Christian in the first place, with fresh tests imposed on ordination candidates. The best one could say was that an artificially classless society of sorts was created here and there but that whatever its advantages, it was not Indian. And that the time would come when some at least of India’s Christians would come to resent those church leaders whose decisions deprived them of their cultural memory—whether or not that was their intention.

You know, I am sure, the line of Robert Burns, “The best laid schemes o’ mice and men/gang aft a-gley.” We call this the principle of irony: setting out to do one thing and actually achieving something quite different. Not just achieving nothing at all—that is plain failure. Irony means achieving a result totally different from one’s intentions, much like amateur cooking.

**Western Christian Hegemony.** Irony has accompanied the Christian message around the world. One is almost tempted to say from the very beginning that each culture has expressed the Christian message in its own language and through its own symbols, and that expression is normal and natural and not anything for any of us to get upset about. What ought to worry us is the extent to which we have tried and often still try to impose our standards—our language, our symbols, our pictures, our values on other cultures—as a condition of their joining our Christian team. Wear clothes and we will look at you. Speak English and we will talk to you. It seems only yesterday—it was only the day before yesterday—that we tended to add something or other about not fraternizing with the Communists as a further condition of our benevolence.
On some such basis, Christendom came to resemble a political map of the world, divided up by alliances. The other day I was looking at the 1929 directory of Protestant missions in India. If I counted correctly, there were 171 separate agencies! (Not including the Roman Catholics, remember.) That was one of the reasons why the ecumenical movement was necessary: to overcome centuries of failure to distinguish between the body and soul of Christianity and to try to persuade the non-Christian world that there was such a thing as common purpose in the Christian world.

The other major reason was to bridge the gulf of mistrust and misunderstanding and suspicion—totally human qualities—which have perhaps always existed among the nations, but which in our part of the world first became desperate at the time of the 1914-1918 war and still are not wholly resolved.

I fear that Christians, too, shared in these misgivings, and some even did their best to wrap them up in what they pretended was theological language. The trouble was that God tended to come out of these exercises either speaking German, singing Wagner and wearing a horned helmet, or speaking English, singing "Land of Hope and Glory" and carrying an umbrella. That there might also be a God crouched under a eucalyptus tree by a dried-up water hole in the outback of Australia, abandoned and crying for Calvary; or a God with hollow, burning eyes, dreaming of the long-ago coffeehouses and string quartets of Vienna, while waiting for the summons to the gas chamber—occurred to a few, but not to enough.

If you turn Christianity loose in the world, you are doing two things at the same time. You are releasing into the world a soul, a spirit, a _ruach_, an _atman_, a high-velocity power, which will not be imprisoned in the narrow categories of culture. But you are also, inevitably, clothing that soul in flesh and blood. And when that happens, you have a new cultural expression. Depending on the impression your culture makes on the outside world, that may work to your advantage (as on the whole it has done in Korea since the 1950s); or the opposite may happen, as in India, where negative cultural images long formed a terrible barrier to the effective communication of the Christian message.

I do not have a ready-made formula to help overcome this difficulty. After all, we can as little transmit a wholly culture-free message as we can speak without using a specific language.

I will say this much though: that when you have recognized the problem you have begun to overcome it. And vice versa: that to fail (or still worse, to refuse) to recognize it is to store up trouble all
around. Others may see what is culture-bound in our version of the gospel far more clearly than we can; so that time spent in listening to what representatives of other cultures (whether Christian or not) have to say about our culture, and about the sort of images it conjures up, is never going to be time wasted. Make no mistake. What we hear is not going to be all praise. Nor is it always going to be just. If we as Christians want to go through the world being liked, we are going to meet with many disappointments. But we do not have to cringe, either, or accept the "cultural vandalism" version of Christian history merely because we can't bear to (or have forgotten how to) argue our own case.

A Critique of "Multiculturalism." Nor, it seems to me, ought we to go along uncritically with the currently fashionable theory that hides behind the popular word *multiculturalism*, namely, that cultures can never be understood and interpreted other than from the inside. There is enough truth in this theory to make it plausible: remaining firmly in my own backyard, I would have to say that the best books about England and the English have obviously been produced by fiercely patriotic English writers like Winston Churchill or Arthur Bryant, just as the best books about Methodism have been produced by Methodists. But there is no necessary link between ethnicity and excellence. By the same token, the worst writing about England and the English of which I am aware, including the greatest nonsense about English history, has likewise been perpetrated by English writers. Who has written the worst books about Methodism, on the other hand, I am happy to say that I have not the faintest idea.

In any case, are we going to congratulate the Church on the past record of the ecumenical movement in bringing together Methodists and Lutherans and Anglicans and Catholics, American and British and Germans and Swedes, and Africans and Asians, only to have to watch the hard-won unity dissolving and hardening afresh into jagged-edged parties and factions and caucuses? The past record of our denominations, like that of our missions, was not as bad as some would have us believe: they knew how to confer and cooperate and resolve differences, and did so far more often than they tend to be given credit for. Parties and factions and caucuses, on the other hand, cooperate seldom, and then only when it suits their own interests to do so.
Seeking A Broader Vision

In 1956, when I began this story, Christianity had so far overcome the age-old divisions of humanity into nations and empires, races and cultures, as to make youngsters like myself into ecumenical enthusiasts. In the mid-1960s I was shouting the ecumenical message in a slightly doubtful mid-West. I even published a piece on "We intend to stay together" in a journal that had not previously, I think, ventured far beyond Anabaptism. (Those words, incidentally, were part of the first World Council message from 1947.) And so we did. We intended to stay together.

Perhaps it was culture that got in the way. Perhaps it was old-fashioned human nature. Almost certainly it was a fresh elevation of small-r religion over capital-R Religion. Beyond any doubt it was a lack of trust in one another's credentials and in one another's good faith.

But I do not want to end in such a minor key.

Let me instead share with you one more memory of that golden summer of 1956—one more discovery. It was the discovery of worship as the key to the cultural riddle of Christendom. Not merely "going to church." Worship in the sense of total absorption in and a total concentration of all our human faculties on the glory and love and above all the holiness of God, and away from our own smallness. Much, much later I was to discover that without this element of worship, there would, humanly speaking, have been no ecumenical movement. For in 1925, the old enemies of the 1914-1918 war (Germany on the one side, Britain and America on the other) still suspected one another with a suspicion greater than even that of the 700 Club for the Communists. The first great conference of the post-war period, in Stockholm in 1925, almost fell apart. So, too, did the second, at Lausanne in 1927. That the ecumenical impulse survived was because, in the end, delegates found in the sanctuary what they were unable to find around a conference table: a purpose and a goal greater than the impulses and resentments of the moment and the strategies of the arena. For this, one leader was responsible: Nathan Söderblom, Archbishop of Uppsala. Never was a Nobel Peace Prize more deeply deserved than that which he received in 1930.

It is in the nature of cultures to define and divide; there is nothing that you or I or anyone else can do about that (not least because "culture" is the term we have invented to account for the machinery of our human divisions). Harness Christianity to one or another culture, and the inevitable result will be more division, more groups of...
Christians who scarcely know how to communicate with one another—or in extreme cases, do not even want to communicate with one another.

That the mystery of disunity can be resolved has to be more a matter of faith than of knowledge and has to contain more of insight than sight. Conferences and consultations and committees will play their part. Agreed statements will come and go. Projects will be taken up and laid down. The language of faith will pass from fashion to fashion, and so will the jargon of small-r religion. Paul reminded us that the shelf-life of prophecies, tongues and knowledge is limited. Love, he told us, never ends, along with faith and hope. To have caught even the smallest glimpse of the glory of God is to have been made a free citizen of that country whose language is not English, French or German, neither Hebrew nor Greek, but whatever language the angels actually used when they sang in John’s hearing, “Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God for ever and ever! Amen” (Rev. 7:12).
In Wait for My Life: 
Aging and Desert Spirituality

Let me disclose the gifts reserved for age  
To set a crown upon our lifetime’s effort...  
The end is where we start from.

--T. S. Eliot, "Little Gidding," Four Quartets

I remember being impressed years ago by Confucianism. Hardly any content remains to that memory—only the idea that life is composed of distinct periods which together make a person whole. No, there was a second idea. Life’s crown is the final stage of spirituality, long formed by the maturing process of aging. It makes sense. One cannot expect from adolescent energy the quiet depth held in trust for later years, nor is childhood innocence to be ridiculed from the lofty heights of middle-age efficiency. "For everything there is a season" (Eccles. 3:1). Thus each segment is to be drunk to its fullness, for its own sake, with none esteemed as higher than another. A person should savor one course, as it were, before going on to the next. Life so imaged becomes a pilgrimage, for in being shaped by a beginning and an end, living becomes imbued with plot.

The present Christian interest in story is a rediscovery of this narrative nature of life. "We know who we are only when we can place ourselves—locate our stories—within God’s

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story.” Because “our lives are narrative dependent,” “we are pilgrims on a journey.” Yet this truth discloses a basic dilemma: in modern society, such spiritual pilgrimaging is seriously undercut; for life’s beginning and end as unique stages are tyrannized by the middle—the years often called “productive.”

Competitive Formation

Although our concern in this article is with the final years, the dilemma of both beginning and end is of a piece. Further back than children can remember, they are socialized to compete. My mother claimed that my father hung a ball glove above my crib. The child’s hints of recognition, crawling, words—each are parentally monitored for precociousness, endlessly compared with the offspring of neighbors and friends. Preschools institutionalize this dynamic, setting firmly in place the competitive dynamic of winner and loser as the foundation of modern education and life. Grades, assembly awards, making the varsity team, earning first chair. We are tracked early into positive or negative self-worth as established by “achievement.”

So deep is this identification of “doing” with “meaning” that childhood as a distinct season of living is as threatened with extinction as an endangered species. The child’s intrinsic awe and joy over life is devoured, rendered instrumental, as parents are pressured to provide a “head start” in their child’s competition over others. Related is the institutionalization of childhood sports, as play for its own sake is poisoned, rendering it a “spring training” for life’s deadly seriousness of winning by doing. Hovering over our class society is the “curve” of inevitable winners and losers. Once competition is burned into our motivational processes, the natural need for approval couples with the fear of being nothing until our innate aggressiveness is forged into an unquestioned, lifelong definition of “meaning.”

Capitalism is the economic name for a society so conceived; individualism is the fate of the self so defined. When the Japanese House Speaker declared that Americans are...
"lazy," and their Prime Minister charged that we "lack a work ethic," they were attacking our very worth by faulting our performance according to those definitions of value by which we have always measured ourselves. Our knee-jerk defensiveness over these remarks is understandable.

However one may evaluate the wisdom of permitting such an understanding to characterize any period of life, there is solid reason for the Christian to question its centrality as model for the whole of life. Is such a measure of "success" compatible with a Christianity that insists that the first will be last, the rich will be sent empty away, the powerful will be pulled down, and the meek shall inherit the earth? The New Testament abounds with such "subversive" warnings, with implications ranging from economics to foreign policy: "Woe to you that are rich . . . that are full now . . . that laugh now . . . Woe to you, when all speak well of you" (Luke 6:24-26).

The gravitational pull of such environment upon the church is strong, justifying religion's value as means for acquiring the status and possessions most valued by our culture. Thus the race well run merges into the church's present obsession with growth as the religious "gross national product."

The Desert Spirituality

Throughout church history, this assimilation of Christianity into a culture's values has provoked, in time, prophetic reaction. One of the earliest and most profound of these reactions, called "desert spirituality," has served ever since as a potent model. It began under Constantine (312 C.E.), when accommodation of Christianity and culture became the policy of both state and church. Serious Christians entered the desert not to escape but to purify Christianity--by doing battle in the wilderness which the powers and principalities called home.

My thesis is that society's aversion to the elderly is pushing them into a "desert." And while such rejection is often destructive, when viewed from the perspective of spirituality,
aging can be restored to its unique integrity as the final stage of living. In so doing, the prophetic nature of Christianity can be modeled for all of us. The goal of such spirituality centers in the purifying of motive. If a person is religious in order to gain a larger reward in heaven than one could get by being irreligious on earth, Christians are little different from the Mafia. Both are trying to "make it" big—the only real difference being the stadium chosen for competing.

The desert ascesis, then, is indispensable for the conversion of motive. Put bluntly, to become a Christian, a person must become a failure—intentionally so. Christianity is for losers, so much so that "winners" must undergo "failure" in order to become Christian. This desert image of failure provides the framework for scripture, from Adam and Eve's exile into the penitential desert "east of Eden" to John's visionary desert isle of Patmos. It is a major theme within the Old Testament itself, where Israel's forty years in the desert are repeated as exile each time Israel becomes successful. Moses' forty desert days preparing to receive the Law and Elijah's forty days in the desert as preparation to hear God's voice are paralleled in the New Testament by Jesus' forty wilderness days as gateway for his own ministry. And since "in every respect" he was "tempted as we are" (Heb. 4:15), his basic temptations expose ours: power, status, and security (Matt. 4:1-11).

With this revelation, our dilemma becomes clear. These temptations are precisely those which our society identifies as the marks of success, in the pursuit of which we have been socialized from near birth. In contrast, Jesus never once promised his disciples a suburban split-level. Instead, he called for them to leave their houses, wives, parents, children; to be mocked, shamefully treated, spit upon, scourged and killed. (Luke 18:24-34). In other words, to fail—purged of both ambition and profit.
Aging: A Symbolization-Avoidance Theory

Our hope, ironically, is that these three marks of "success" are what the aging process progressively threatens to take from us: our power, status and security. Such "failure" is not simply the natural result of aging but is focused by the rejective attitude of our society toward the elderly. Gerontologists recognize up to eight basic theories as to what happens to persons in modern society as they age. Yet they all miss one central factor. I call it "symbolization-avoidance." The aging person, ailing and pitiful, becomes a symbol for our common fate: death. To avoid the reality of our own death, we simply corral and avoid the elderly. While in Puritan days death was viewed as a glorious reunion, a birthing into eternity, it is the denial of death that marks heavily our society.

In Appalachia, where I was raised, when someone showed signs of aging, we said that "Charlie is failing." To age meant to fail. Therefore, I should not have been surprised that when my father was diagnosed as having cancer, my mother hid that "failure" from everyone, including me. By the time I found out, by accident, the crisis was severe. My mother had identified herself so completely with my father's success that as he "failed," she too became a failure. Day after day she starved herself, afraid to outlast him. Although she was a faithful Christian, her intentional self-destruction witnesses that the church never taught her the kind of intentional failure that makes all things new, even when alone.

Society, too, had failed her—as it does all of us. Death has become a symbol of our precarious societal condition. It reminds us that we are fallible and fragile within a society built upon "expendableness," throwaway resources built by disposable workers. Coupled with the idea that death is proof of our ontic contingency, death takes on an uncanny power that makes it "socially unacceptable." By compartmenalization, we seek to avoid it, hospitalizing the ill, institutionalizing the aging, and pretending death away as a medical failure. In all of this, the aged person becomes imaged as the primary herald and omen of death, Cooley's "looking-glass self," eye to eye, skull to skull.
"People don't want the elderly around to remind them of their finitude. There is a centrifugal force at work, hurling older people to the circumference of life." In becoming "socially non-functioning," they are quarantined so as not to be "emotionally threatening," placed in a state of "premature social extinction" so that the rest of us "can go on" with our lives. That which society attempts to distance is what William May calls the "inner sense of bankruptcy." Death forces on us the fact that we are contingent, nonabsolute beings and with it exposes the mortality of the myth with which our society feeds us. Such avoidance has its price, however, giving to many "no alternative but to cling to life and avoid direct confrontation with the unknown." Such "false consciousness" is difficult to maintain. And so it is that the "experience of one's mortality is at the core of the midlife crisis."

Retirement as Conversion

Because of this societal attitude, the "desert" for many of us has a gateway marked with a sign: "retirement." First a gold watch, then polite applause--and life is over. Whatever we and our spouse may have done has been reduced to grist for a fading memory. The reality sinks in quickly that we are no longer needed. The word desert comes from de ("to separate") and serere ("to knit"). Here desert means "being torn from society's normal fabric." Little wonder that retirement is so traumatic, for we have been socialized to be workaholics. With self-worth defined by doing, having nothing to do threatens us to the core. With identity defined by job, retirement stamps us as useless, unneeded, and unwanted. In being "nobody," we stand on the desert's sandy edge.

Erik Erikson puts the situation well. Life's final stage begins at the juncture between despair and the struggle for integrity. The road most traveled is the one paved with despair. And we who do ministry with the aging are poor tour guides, for we betray the gospel with shuffleboard. That is, we make it our goal to keep the elderly so active that they...
cannot experience their failure (as defined by society). Thomas Merton pushes us to accountability, however. Spirituality, he insists, begins when a person is able to do nothing and feel no guilt. But such spirituality seems unavailable to us, for we have been programmed to the contrary: to do nothing is to feel worthless. Thus the road well traveled is not into the integrity of Christian spirituality but into the despair of "more of the same." Addicted to the process as we are, it hardly matters what we do, as long as we "stay active." "DO, DO, DO" is the chant, as we hobble up the "down" stairs.

Thus it is crucial for the church to awaken to the aging process as the desert that can bring the spiritual conversion which our whole society needs. It begins by facing "retirement" head-on—not calling it "redeployment" or some other euphemism. It must become what the word means, which is to pull back, take stock, and reconsider the whole with new eyes. In so doing, the despair of unrolling one's final end of string can be transformed into a new state. It is as if the best has been kept for last.

When Jesus was asked about the kingdom of God, he placed a child in their midst: "Unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 18:3). Today he might have called an older person into our midst: "Unless you go through the desert experience which society is thrusting upon these persons, you will die without having lived." The desert experience, like aging, is what our society fears and hides from like the plague. The Christian failure which transforms begins with one fact: aging is a disease for which there is no cure. Our obsession with "youth" is simply a gaudy cover for our best-kept secret—that each of us will fail, totally, and that the unraveling will stretch well over half a lifetime.

The real question for Christians is not whether we will fail, but whether we will live our failure intentionally, choosing it before the end. Crucial, then, is the conversion of motivation, for the gauge of Christian spirituality is giving without expectation of return, turning gladly one's other cheek when struck, and embracing our enemy as friend. The story is told of the desert father who ran after the robbers who had pil-
laged his cell to give them something they had overlooked. The desert experience illustrated here teaches us that we cannot be Christian by our own efforts. Such spirituality dare not be the "sour grapes" of not wanting power, status, and security because one is not able to get them. Instead there must be that redemptive process through which the very craving for culture's "values" is broken. Life blossoms when "we find ourselves willing to be last, not because the last may become first, but because the game of 'firsts' and 'lasts' is no longer of interest." 12

"Where," asked T. S. Eliot, "is the Life we have lost in living?" True Life is not at center a matter of doing at all, but of being. Here the God-intended affinity between children and the elderly is touched—in the simple and thankful joy of being alive. But how can one relearn to savor each moment for its own intrinsic sake? It begins with retirement's "ontic shock" that society can get along much better without me. 13 Then the other side is born: the discovery that I can get along much better without those societal values on the basis of which I have been rendered dispensable.

As ministers to the aging, we have the incredible responsibility as spiritual directors to do what the church should have been doing all along. After sixty-plus years of driveness, what needs to happen is nothing short of conversion. For perhaps the first time, one must be opened to glory in being—simply in being alive—without need to do or act or succeed or justify in any way one's life. The name for such living is grace.

Aging evokes this desert spirituality when sometime, somewhere, everything is "up for grabs." 14 This point of no return is most likely to occur when one's life string feels very short. "Is this all there is?" With this question, the desire for power, status, and security—whose craving has pushed us for a lifetime—takes on a hollow ache. With the end in sight, "more and more" takes on the feeling of "less and less." Why? Way down deep we know what we have spent a lifetime hiding, because we have not, nor can we ever, justify our being by our doing. Whatever sense of competence or achievement we might have gained as downpayment on ac-
ceptibility, the aging process turns to mush, day by day, until retirement or death, whichever comes first. Naked we come into the world, and naked we will leave, no matter how many possessions are piled around us on our bed. Real meaning resides neither in doing nor having, but in the integrity of life drunk deeply, intrinsically, thankfully.

Sin as Taking for Granted

At its core, sin is the arrogance of taking things for granted. To see one moon is to see them all. Each day is like every day, _ad infinitum, ad absurdum_. "All things are weariness... [for] what has been done is what will be done; and there is nothing new under the sun" (Eccles. 1:8-9). The desert conversion begins when, in running out of time, one is brought face to face with the foundational truth about every moment of life. Each second I am one heartbeat away from oblivion—one breath away, one anything away, from death. And in living fully that truth, one's life can be transformed by living each moment _as if it were the final one_. Resurrection becomes the ongoing gift of one new day at a time.

This can be illustrated. Picture yourself on death row. After years of appeals, the judge has ruled: today you will die. Everything from this point on will be the last time. The last bite of roast beef, the final sip of coffee ever. Sixteen paces to the electric chair. Step by step. Until the final one ever. The cold leather straps. Swallowing for a last time. The final look of color, the green shade. Counting breaths—five, four, three.

The telephone rings. The Governor. Let him go! Reprieve! Free, my God; I'm free at last! Through the huge metal doors—out into the sunlight, down the front steps, three at a time. Never has blue sky been bluer! Wet green grass against warm bare feet. Smiles and waves, to everyone, up and down the street. Eyes. Beautiful. Straight to McDonald's for the largest orange juice ever poured. And there to drink as libation to the whole of creation. _AH—THE BLOOD OF CHRIST!_
We have reached the mysterious heart of desert spirituality. To live every moment as if it were the last is to savor each part of life as though it were the first. Here it is. The last and the first merge, the beginning restored as the end—and "the end is where we start from." Pablo Picasso was right: It takes a long, long time to become young. One becomes flooded with the taste of "first times": when first one fell in love, or made a July snowball in the Rocky Mountains, or tasted with surprise the salty surf. James Fowler identifies this stage, occurring after the "sacrament of defeat," as a "second naivety." Sam Keen calls it the lifestyle of the "foolish lover." All depends on the paradox of contingency—where in facing the finality of aging one receives back each speck of life as gift.

One day at a time, one hour at a time, thankful for quaffing each moment for its own dear sake. Resurrection has meaning, Barth insisted, only for those so in love with creation that they grieve at the thought of leaving. Ironic though it sounds, aging can bring this ecstasy over the commonplace—a whippoorwill in spring, wind through fall willows, vibrant color adorning one’s bedspread, the twitch of energy to an arthritic finger. On the night before his execution, Camus’s hero heard the evening sounds coming through a crack in his prison wall. Almost too late he learned. It is possible to live in one moment more than most persons live in a lifetime.

Jesus rooted this mystery of desert spirituality in the forfeiting of anxiety, in taking no thought of the morrow but living each new day as sufficient unto itself (Luke 12:22ff.). Most of us squander our days, permitting the future to play havoc with each present. In kindergarten, I could not wait to be old enough for knickers, then long pants, to get a license to drive; life would begin when I graduated; or is it with my first job? Perhaps when I get married, or will it be with the first child, or when the last one finally leaves home? Certainly when I retire, or at least by the time...I die? I do not want to get to the end, said Thoreau, and find that I have never lived. Yet nothing seems able to stop us from living life as means rather than as end—except being shaken profoundly by the nearness of an end whereby there will be no later.
There is a sundial in front of my hermitage. On it the words are old, the writing worn, the meaning clear.

Grow old along with me.
The best is yet to be.

Notes

2. Ibid., 68.
In a world of diversity and intolerance, can we as Christians overcome our fear of persons, ideas, and practices that seem strange to us? Can we teach and preach a new vision of inclusiveness? Despite our differences, can we truly be one body in Christ? In the summer of 1990, a group of over thirty United Methodist college and seminary professors of Christian education gathered at Estes Park, Colorado, to pose these questions and find ways to answer them affirmatively. We began, in the words of the litany of our opening worship celebration, with the prayer to open ourselves to new possibilities:

*People:* In the community of faith we offer a generous welcome to strangers, visitors, competitors, and ideological opponents, to share in the intimacy of community; we give priority to personal relations over ethnic or national uniformity and ideological conformity.

*People:* In welcoming persons of varied backgrounds and viewpoints, we do not allow these differences to
dampen our spiritual enthusiasm for our faith and convictions; rather, we seek to give full expression to our experience of the Spirit and our faith in Christ, in honest dialogue with one another.

People: In relation to those who differ from or are hostile to us, we still strive to participate with God in restoring the goodness of the created order.

People: In gratitude for the freedom to grow toward maturity which God's mercy affords, we are released from the need to conform and to enforce conformity upon others, and humbly offer ourselves for use in Christ's ministry of justice and reconciliation.

All: We thank you, O God, for your grace in creating us as one body. We celebrate that in our diversity we are one in the Spirit—Jew and Gentile, male and female, rich and poor, liberal and conservative, from the four corners of the earth—yet all members one of another; different in language, culture, and viewpoint, but one in You. We thank you for the gifts this diversity brings and pray for the wisdom and grace to employ them for the upbuilding of the whole body, the spread of the gospel, the reconciliation of all peoples, the redemption of the world, and justice, peace, and the integrity of all creation. Amen.

The theme of this biennial consultation of the United Methodist Association of Professors of Christian Education (UMAPCE) was "Cultural Pluralism and the Teaching Office." The participants had several goals: first, to discover what cultural pluralism is telling us about United Methodist identity and the implications of this for the teaching office; to explore various models of how to deal with and utilize cultural pluralism in the church; to develop recommendations on this to the seminaries and colleges, boards and agencies, UMAPCE and its research committee, and ourselves as individuals; and finally to publish our findings and recommen-
dations so as to make them available to a wider audience. In the next issue, Charles Foster of Candler School of Theology addresses the question, "What functions authoritatively in the church's education when cultural diversity is taken seriously?" Taylor McConnell, emeritus professor at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, with his wife and co-researcher June McConnell, present their suggestions for "Strategies of Christian Education in Multi-Cultural Situations," based on more than a decade of cross-cultural research in Northern New Mexico. Joseph Crockett, assistant professor of Christian Education and Black Church Studies at Colgate Rochester Divinity School, describes a model for Christian education that joins the struggle against the oppression of African Americans.

The symposium of articles being published in this and the forthcoming fall issue of Quarterly Review represents our desire to share these new ways of looking at Christian education. We hope the church will use them to respond creatively to what God is doing in our time through increased cultural diversity.
Emptying-for-Filling:
An Approach
to Cross-Cultural Ministry

For roughly the first half of my 18-year sojourn in Evanston, Illinois, the population makeup appeared to be stable. Aside from our 10 to 15 percent black constituency, the rest of our population of approximately 80,000 was lily-white—and more or less oblivious to the fact that the vast majority of our world was made up of people of color. Naturally there was a small number of international students at Northwestern University and the other educational institutions in our city, but they came and went and made little impact on our lives or community.

One day in the mid-1980s, as I was driving through town, I began to notice a number of darker-skinned pedestrians. Out of curiosity I began to count and was astonished to discover that of the first 25 people I passed, 17 were other-than-white. Increasing numbers of Asians, Hispanics, and people from the Caribbean have joined European- and African-Americans as residents here. The racial and ethnic makeup of our community had changed, and I had suddenly become aware of it!

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What was even more shocking to me than the change itself was the fact that I had not been aware of it until that moment. All my life I have had cross-cultural interests and commitments. My mother, the child of missionary parents, raised me with a global awareness. For nearly ten years I had been a missionary in Singapore, dubbed "Instant Asia," because it was—and is—the crossroads of Asian cultures and religions. There at Trinity Theological College my students were Chinese, Indian, African, Filipino, Indonesian, and Malaysian; and I served on a faculty made up of persons from ten different countries. Since coming to Garrett-Evangelical, I have taken sabbatical sojourns for teaching and research in Haiti, Israel and the West Bank, Western Samoa, the South Pacific, Australia and New Zealand, and South Korea and have traveled extensively in Asia and Europe. I speak Chinese fluently and have made efforts at learning a half-dozen other languages. Of all people, I should have been conscious of the increasing cultural and ethnic diversity of our community!

Since that day, I have realized increasingly that the multicultural world that I experienced in other lands has become the normative context of more and more North Americans. Not only Singapore, but also Evanston, IL—or Knoxville, TN, or Harrisburg, PA, or Tulsa, OK, or Bozeman, MT—has now become "Instant Asia"—or Africa, or Latin America.

Cases in point: on the north side of Chicago, not three miles from my home, there is an elementary school where children speak more than forty first languages, but try to study in English. A little farther away, at Senn High School in Uptown, bilingual classes are offered in four languages: Cantonese, Assyrian, Spanish, and Vietnamese.

In December 1982, when a New York Times reporter interviewed residents of the sixth floor of an apartment building in Queens, he found that forty persons from eleven countries were all neighbors on that one floor.

Elsewhere in this neighborhood:

A Japanese fast-food restaurant also includes a Chinese menu. Two restaurants each offer both
Spanish and Chinese cuisine. A copy of the Chinese menu is printed in Spanish. A branch of the Bank of Ponce (Puerto Rico) is in sight of a variety of Asian-owned businesses. An Indian doctor's shingle hangs near that of a Hispanic physician. A grocery store in the same neighborhood advertises both kosher and nonkosher foods.

Today, Washington, D.C., is 70 percent Black. Miami is two-thirds Hispanic. San Francisco is one-third Asian. Detroit is 63 percent Black. There are 8,000 Laotian Hmong in St. Paul. English will be the second language for the majority in California by the year 2000. And whites will be a minority in the United States, only 48 percent of the population, by 2010—just 18 years from now.

The Asian percentage of student populations in church-related colleges and seminaries is rapidly growing, representing an increase in both Asian-American and international students. Korean and Hispanic churches are prominent among the most rapidly growing congregations in United Methodism. And in my own seminary, Garrett-Evangelical, the number of Asian—predominantly Korean—students has increased from three to over sixty in the seven years since we began a Center for Asian-American Ministries. The inauguration of a similar Hispanic Center has resulted in the doubling of our Hispanic student population in just one year.

This increased cultural and ethnic diversity demands that we attend to and respect the gifts of the various groups now represented in our society, church, and institutions. It also requires us to develop intercultural sensitivity and skill. Most importantly, it asks us to reexamine our understanding of ministry, which can be seen as a way of bridging different "cultures." Using this analogy, then, effective ministry requires three basic attitudes or skills: sensitivity to the implicit assumptions and behavior patterns of one's own culture, growing understanding of the customs and thought forms of one's adopted culture (i.e., the congregation), and the ability to translate meanings embodied in the biblical life-
world through one's own filters into the experience of another people.

The truth is that all ministry is essentially cross-cultural communication. A cross-cultural model for ministry is based on a theological foundation, a theoretical understanding of culture, and some skills in communication.

Theological Foundation: Emptying-for-filling

Paul's doctrine of the *kenosis* points the direction for a theology of cross-cultural communication. Christians are called to "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness" (Phil. 2:5-7).

In order to communicate God's love for all people, Christ put off his heavenly trappings and took on the form of those to whom he was going. To bring new meaning into the human realm he had to replace familiar patterns with those which would communicate his true nature and intention. The fullness of communication required an emptying of previously held expectations and a naked entering into a different world. He was prepared to project himself through the forms of a culturally defined people, even though he knew that such limitations might suffocate and kill him. "He humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross" (v. 8), because he knew that only by accepting confinement in the particular could he give expression to the universal. Only through willingness to be defined and judged by one people could he give expression to the Life which defines and judges all people.

Cross-cultural communication means divesting oneself of familiar cultural forms in order to enter fully into the life of another people. The pastor or educator adopts the lifestyle and ways of expression of a people in order to share with and through them a universal, transcendent Word. Like Paul we
seek to "become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some" (1 Cor. 9:22).

At first glance, this may sound undesirable if not impossible. Our identity is too closely tied up with our own cultural roots to be put off for the sake of identifying with a new people. We cannot easily replace our spending patterns, ethical standards, or ways of perceiving reality with those of another culture. This would be a profound compromise of our integrity which we are unwilling to make.

But Jesus and Paul did not forsake their integrity. Jesus told the people to whom he went, "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times,... But I say to you,... (Matt. 5:21-22f.) His identity was grounded in a Higher Source. He was able to discriminate between the aspects of the culture he had entered which were congruent with that identity and those that were not. He became a Jew without submerging his identity in Jewish culture. And likewise Paul became one with both Jew and Gentile "for the sake of the gospel" (1 Cor. 9:23), that is, in order to communicate a Word and win them to an identity and a loyalty higher than either of their present cultures.

We cannot deny or disguise our cultural origins and identity. The signs of who we are will be plain to see—skin color, speech patterns, mannerisms, lifestyles, values. But these need not be a block to communication; they need not be the occasion for resentment or unfavorable comparison—provided that we do not bring with them the attitudes of arrogance, disdain, or cultural imperialism. We must not assume that our culture is superior to that of the persons among whom we minister; instead we must recognize that there are rich gifts in all cultures. Like Paul, we understand that to have credibility in another culture we must enter into it fully so that persons can say, "She is one of us." But also like Paul, we will "not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God..." (Rom. 12:2). We will remember who and whose we are.

Both Jesus and Paul—and many others before and after them—suffered for their willingness to enter fully into the
life-world of other people. Their motivation for emptying was viewed with suspicion and their aim of filling was seen as a threat. The ambivalent tendency of peoples to feel both attracted by and fearful of the new and different leads them to want to destroy that which asks them to change. The pastor or educator who enters a new culture, no matter how hard he or she tries to identify with the people, must expect to suffer, both out of longing for what is left behind and because of resistance to what the people are being called to accept or become.

Glimpses of this emptying-for-filling style of communication are seen throughout the Bible and church history. Abram, called by God to "go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you" (Gen. 12:1), left the comfort and familiarity of a stable culture to embark on a nomadic way of life. Moses left the relative simplicity and ease of a shepherd’s existence to identify with slaves and bring to them the Word of liberation. The Hebrew exiles learned to live by the waters of Babylon and to "sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land" (Ps. 137:4). Ruth, the Moabitess, promised her Hebrew mother-in-law, "Where you go, I will go, where you lodge I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God" (1:16). The disciples left their nets to follow Jesus. Patrick went from Britain to Ireland, and Boniface from England to Germany.

In more recent times, Englishmen William Carey and David Livingston identified themselves with the cultures of India and Africa in order to share with them the good news of Jesus Christ. The Japanese Kagawa went to live in the Kobe slums, and the Korean woman pastor Cho Wha Soon worked as a common laborer in an Inchon factory. The Japanese-American missionary Ron Fujiiyoshi refused to be fingerprinted and went on a hunger strike to dramatize the plight of the discriminated-against Korean minority in Osaka, Japan. And four women religious, six Jesuit priests, and Archbishop Oscar Romero—all coming from privileged circumstances—were martyred in El Salvador for identifying with the struggle of the poor of that tiny country for justice and dignity.
The kenosis of Jesus, the Word made flesh, then, provides a theological model for ministry as cross-cultural communication. One who seeks to communicate the gospel to a people must eschew attitudes of superiority and enter fully into the life of one's adopted people, clothing the Word in culturally familiar garb. At the same time, one preserves one's identity and avoids becoming a chameleon by grounding oneself in the Word and in a relationship with God and continuing the never-ending task of distinguishing the kerygma from the cultural forms in which it, of necessity, is expressed.

Theoretical Construct: Three Cultures In Interaction

Although it is possible to function acceptably in a cross-cultural situation through reliance on intuition and common sense, it is helpful to have some understanding of why one is ministering in a certain way (theology), and what makes ministry most effective (theory).

First, we must define what we mean by culture. Edward Sapir understands this corporate context of human life to embrace "those general attitudes views of life, and specific manifestations of civilization that give a particular people its distinctive place in the world." Ruth Benedict treats culture as a social organism, emphasizing that, although it is made up of and influenced by individuals and individual behavior, it is an integration of customs, language, beliefs, and attitudes, which is greater than the sum of its parts.

Perhaps most relevant to the focus of this essay is Edward T. Hall's definition of culture as "the way of life of a people,...the sum of their lumped behavior patterns, attitudes, and material things." Hall's statement that "culture is communication and communication is culture" points up the powerful, if not determinative, influence of culture over individual patterns of belief and behavior. Since the church itself is a culture, and all ministry takes place within or between cultures, it is essential that we understand and utilize...
the several dimensions of culture in communicating the Christian faith and way.

We now look at a theoretical model of cross-cultural communication. The communication event in ministry involves relationship among at least three cultures—the biblical, the pastor's or educator's, and that of the congregation or group. A diagram may help to identify the various factors involved.
Culture I: Scripture

The Word which is communicated in ministry originates from the Bible. The activity of God in the life of the Hebrews and early Christians was experienced, described, and recorded by these people through their cultural filters. They may not have been aware of the influence of culture on their interpretation of events, but it was operating nevertheless; and we must keep this in mind as we sort out the intentionality of the text, or its kernel of meaning, from its cultural overlay. In interpreting Scripture, we must look at the biblical life-world, the literary context, and its predominant theological themes in order to get at the intentionality of a particular text.

The biblical life-world was made up of people's customary ways of thinking and acting. Their attitudes toward nature, human freedom, divine intervention, moral behavior, and all other dimensions of their experience, all influenced their interpretations of God's expectations and dealings with them. We need to learn as much as possible about these cultural forms in order to know how these have affected the biblical expressions of faith and thus to get behind them to apprehend God's Word for us today.

The literary context of a particular text includes the message and purpose of the book within which it is found, the verses or chapters which precede and follow it, the original meaning of the words, the type of literature used, and the message of the Bible as a whole.

The theological themes provide the Bible with its unity and coherence. It is a great, pluralistic tapestry composed of major and minor threads woven together with masterful beauty and design. Any single passage is seen against the whole tapestry, and its apparent meaning is tested against the major themes that run throughout. Some of these may be identified as: divine initiative and human response, sin and salvation, death and resurrection, the covenant, the suffering servant, freedom and responsibility, and the Christian hope. If the intentionality of a particular text does not give
expression to one of these themes, it needs to be weighed in their light.

The above are all standard guidelines for interpreting Scripture but also help us perceive the influence of its cultural context on the way God's message is communicated through the Bible. We need continually to ask, "What is the cultural overlay which shapes the way this text is formed?" and "What is the intended message which it seeks to communicate?" To combine these questions, we are asking, "What is the Word (revelation) which God is speaking to us through the words (culture) of the Bible?" And then we need to listen very carefully to the Scripture in order to distinguish and apprehend these two aspects.

The final step is to witness to the meaning that this Word (revelation) has for us in our time and place. To do this we must translate the core meaning of the text, distinguished as carefully as possible from its cultural garments, into a message that has meaning in our own cultural context. That is, we must re-state, re-clothe, or re-formulate the original meaning in the forms or garments of our own culture. Through our translation efforts, the Word becomes flesh again in the sermons, teachings, music, architecture, liturgy, stories, values, lifestyles, and affirmations of faith—the cultural forms—of our specific people in our specific time and place. This is our witness of faith, what we have seen and heard (witnessed), that we declare (witness) to those about us in the cultural life-world within which we have chosen or been set to minister.

The first culture involved in the communication event which is ministry, then, is Scripture. It is the Word of God addressing us and our situation through the Hebrew and first-century cultures. We must ask of Scripture what is cultural and what is revelation, even though we recognize in advance that there is no sure way of making this distinction. Then we must listen and learn from the Bible at both these levels, assimilating its meanings and making them our own. And finally, we must witness to what this Word means to us and how it has transformed our lives in the cultural words and forms of our chosen people.
Cultures II and III: Pastor/Educator and Congregation/Community

While pastor/educator and people/group are questioning and listening to Scripture, they are also encountering each other's intentionality. This involves the same skills of asking, listening, and witnessing to one another about who we are and how we experience God in life. To engage in this dialogue requires a serious effort at understanding each other's cultural life-worlds. These are made up of the worldview, conscience, and self-image which we first inherit from our surroundings and then make our own in the crucible of experience.

Our worldview is the way we look at life and is shaped initially by the way things were introduced to us as children. As we mature, our worldview changes and expands. We become less submissive to what others tell us and better able to select among competing ideas from various cultures. But it is difficult for us to escape completely the conditioning of our culture and adopt a view from outside. Because of contrasting backgrounds and experiences, pastor/educator and congregation/community will likely have somewhat different world-views. The same experience may mean quite different things to us because we perceive it through different filters. This need not be a barrier to communication but can actually enrich us, if we are willing to listen and learn rather than categorize and condemn one another.

The content of our conscience also comes initially from our culture by way of parents and teachers through the conditioning of reward and punishment and the imitation of their example. Again, we have some freedom to revise our values and attitudes as we grow older and begin to choose the models we emulate and the moral precepts we follow. But our choice is limited by what is presented to us and approved by our culture. Because the cultural orientations of pastor/educator and congregation/community very likely have been different, the standards of right and wrong, truth and error, which they bring into the dialogue inevitably will vary. The important thing is not that they agree but that they...
strive to understand one another's values and viewpoints and to accept each other as persons whose conflicting stances come out of different cultural backgrounds. "By this all persons will know that you are my disciples," said Jesus, not that you all agree, but "if you have love for one another" (John 13:35).

A third cultural factor which shapes the way we perceive things is our **self-image**. We think of ourselves as suburbanites, jocks, Presbyterians, or has-beens. Past treatment, present achievement, and future opportunity lead us to believe that we are clumsy, brainy, articulate, or introverted; and this affects the way we view life and its possibilities. Of course, our self-understanding is not totally determined by our surroundings. We can take an inner attitude toward our circumstances and believe that we are different from what people and events tell us we are. We can accept the biblical affirmation that as children of God we have infinite worth. This will change the perspective we bring to the communication event. For the way we understand and accept ourselves will influence our capacity to understand and accept the other. If we see ourselves as inferior, we will try to build ourselves up by treating the other as inferior. If we feel "okay" about ourselves, it will be easier for us to help others feel self-confident and capable, too.

Pastor/educator and people/community need to give attention to their self-images. To make the effort to understand how another views him/herself from within will help correct misperceptions and bridge gaps created by the games we play to keep people from knowing who we really are.

Out of this culturally formed filter made up of world-view, conscience, and self-image comes an **intentionality** for speaking and acting in encounter with other persons. We intend to give expression to who we are and to influence others to accept our way of thinking. Just as the intentionality of a biblical text is God's word to us, so our intentionality is our statement to others and the world. But our statement may not be heard, appreciated, or accepted, if we lack the attitudes and skills to participate effectively in the communica-
tion event. These attitudes and skills fall into three categories: asking, listening, and witnessing.

Asking

The asking involves a willingness to let the other person speak first. We ask how they feel, what they believe, and who they are. We want to know other persons in other cultures and accept them, their values and beliefs for who and what they are. We ask to hear their story and enter their life-world, and specific asking attitudes and skills will help us to do so.

Follow the conventions for courtesy. When entering another culture we are careful to observe the way they do things and try to do things their way. We ask what is proper with our eyes and ears, as well as our lips. If they take off their shoes upon entering a home, we are careful to do likewise. If a congregation is in the habit of using individual cups for communion, we do not start off by insisting on practicing intinction. If formal attire, language, and behavior are the norm for Sunday morning, we respect these conventions. If the custom is to address pastor and teacher with Mr. or Ms., we do not demand that folks call us by our first names. We inquire about the conventions of the local culture, then observe and practice them.

Take an interest in history. The people to whom we are sent have a past. History does not begin with the moment we enter the door. Who they are as a people has been shaped by all the critical events, influential persons, highs and lows, times and places that have led up to the present moment. As the pastor or educator entering this culture, we are wise to seek out opportunities to listen and learn their history. Stories from the old-timers, records and scrapbooks, observance of rituals and symbols, intentional questions during pastoral calls, and planned homecomings and celebrations of anniversaries, festivals, and significant events, all become
Discover and affirm their gifts. In the presence of a new people we can ask (again with our eyes and ears as well as our lips) what their gifts are. How do they present themselves? What about them stands out? What do they do well? From what about them can we learn? Are they caring? responsible? friendly? socially concerned? Do they look after their building? follow through on details? face conflict openly? take leadership in the local community? One pastor I know writes a column in his church's monthly newsletter entitled "Some Good Things Happened in Our Church This Month." A junior high teacher recognizes budding ability by having students serve as "assistant teachers" for a Sunday. Speak the language, eat the foods, wear the clothes, buy the products, adopt the folkways of the local culture. Positive reinforcement does wonders in demonstrating our appreciation for the gifts of the local culture.

Invite and be open to suggestions and criticism. We are bound to make mistakes in our new culture. We will not notice some conventions; we will not be aware of some history; we will overlook some gifts. And so we will give offense, we will step on toes, we will commit grievous faux pas. But these need not be catastrophic or destroy our relationship and effectiveness, provided we ask for guidance and feedback and receive it graciously. We may inadvertently pucker up at a strange taste, criticize a sacred custom, violate a treasured norm, or stir up ghosts of a past long forgotten or gone unmentioned. But if we have begun our ministry there with an acknowledgement that we do not speak the language well, have never lived in this part of the world before, will take awhile to get acculturated, want to learn local customs and folklore, and welcome suggestions and criticism, then people will take pleasure in initiating us into (often an honored) place in their community.
Listening

The asking is accompanied by attentive listening. Recognizing that we are hearing not just words but the pouring out of a life and a way of life, we focus our attention on the person or persons who are revealing to us who they are, where they have been, what they stand for, and what they hope to become. Listening also requires several specific skills and attitudes:

Learn to Wait. People do not open themselves up to a newcomer right away. With some it takes months, with others years. We must be patient to wait until they are ready to disclose themselves to us. Short-term appointments are not conducive to effective cross-cultural ministry. Listening requires time. Even more, it requires a caring, responsive, receptive, attentive attitude while waiting. Twiddling our thumbs or tapping our foot or preoccupation with busy-ness will not be perceived as patient waiting or respectful interaction.

Phases of relationship. Persons of different cultures establish rapport in different ways. Some get right down to business, letting the relationship develop in the process of "talking turkey." Others have a long history together and can dispense with preliminary niceties. But others cannot trust one another until appropriate conventions are observed—being introduced by a third party, bowing and using deferential honorifics, asking about each other's welfare and that of families, observing one another at a distance, meeting first on a formal occasion, having a meal together. Class members will put a teacher to a variety of tests before really opening themselves to learn from him or her. A congregation will likewise test a pastor—with a problem, conflict, difficult task, theological conundrum, or simply by observing him or her carry out the routine duties of preaching, visiting, and administration—before sharing their deep struggles and concerns.

We must listen with the third ear to the subtle signs of transition that signal a passage from one phase to another in this relationship. A tear in the eye, an invitation to dinner,
expression of an honest difference, a long inactive family showing up at church, an irate phone call--these are the signs that we are entering a new--and deeper--phase.

**Show respect.** We may find what we encounter in the new culture to be unfamiliar, strange, refreshing, distasteful, or downright contrary to cherished values and beliefs. We may be able to tolerate it; we may hope to change it someday; we may be delighted by its novelty; we may be captivated or seduced by it; we may find it takes a lot of getting used to. But whatever our emotional response, we must respect it. It is *their way.* To reject it or disdain it or patronize it or trivialize it or make fun of it or even adopt it too readily is to convey a lack of respect for the culture and the persons in it with whom we have come to minister and whose identity and sense of worth and dignity is closely tied up with the practices to which we are reacting. We can show respect by inquiring about what is behind the practice, by observing carefully those who participate in it and the feeling tone of their response, by participating ourselves when we can do so with integrity (inauthentic participation is readily perceived--and usually resented), and by voicing our appreciation for the value of the custom and how it has broadened our understanding and sensitivity. After trust becomes deeper, respect is also shown by expressing our concern about or difference with the practice in a climate of honest dialogue.

**Honor time and space.** In different cultures and communities, time and times are observed differently. In some, meetings start on time; in some they do not. Some holidays are celebrated; some are not. Some want a thirty-minute sermon; some get restless after ten. For some 11:00 on Sunday morning is God-ordained as the time for worship; for some even a Saturday night service would be easy to institute. In some churches people are willing for the pastor to run over the hour on Communion Sunday, but in others the sermon had better be shortened so the elements can be distributed and the service still ended right on the dot. The summer ice-cream social, the hanging of the greens, the Easter breakfast served by the youth, the choir concert on the church lawn,
the all-church retreat—these are annual events that had better not be forgotten!

Likewise, spaces are sometimes seen as sacred. In Samoa, do not stand on a grave. In Korea, build your church on a hill. In Palestine, grieve over the ancestral home and the thousand-year-old olive grove that have been bulldozed by the military occupation. A woman once told me the history of her church by literally walking me from one place to another in the building, describing when and under which pastorate an addition had been built, new choir robes bought, a memorial window installed, and the steeple blown down and replaced.

As a newcomer in a culture we do well to listen to these stories, be attentive to these usages of time, and observe these attitudes toward space—and thereby show honor to the culture in which time and space have taken on these central meanings.

Empathize with feelings and values. Empathy, or as David Augsburger calls it in speaking of ways of relating between cultures, "interpathy," is the capacity to enter into another's world and see life from their vantage point. Listening, then, involves crossing over emotionally into the culture we have entered physically, walking in their moccasins, looking through their eyeglasses, hearing through their ears, feeling with their hearts. Of course, to do this fully and continuously is impossible, but, with effort, there can be moments (and the longer we stay and try, the more frequent they become) when we really do take on their perspective and make their values our own. There are advantages to kneeling and taking communion as the tray is passed. It does make sense to telephone ahead before making a pastoral call. Kimchee, or chitlins, or German potato salad, or yogurt, or falafel, or rice and beans, or cajun chicken does taste good. It is nice sometimes to just sit and listen to a Sunday school teacher lecture rather than having to engage in discussion. There are two sides to the abortion issue. God does have motherly as well as fatherly qualities. There is value in singing both old and new hymns. When we empathize/inter-
pathize with people in another culture, we both honor them and their ways and thereby build bridges of understanding and respect. At the same time we expand and grow in our own tastes, appreciations, tolerance, range of feelings and values, identity, and capacity to see and experience life from a variety of perspectives.

**Empower others.** When people feel listened to, cared about, valued, trusted, and respected, their sense of worth and dignity is cultivated, and they are empowered selves to better ask, listen, and witness. They become fuller human beings, actualize what God intends them to be, are open to accepting and respecting us and our culture, and even become ready to listen and learn from us in a dialogue that may bring about change or conversion in one or both of us. They discover that there are advantages to unannounced drop-in calls, roast beef, the discussion method, inclusive language, the pro-life or pro-choice position, and our kind of music and our point of view. Respect fosters respect; honor breeds honor; listening cultivates listening; empathy leads to interpathy. Sharing power empowers others.

**Witnessing**

Persons-in-culture with whom we have been interacting in respectful, trusting, interpathic, and empowering ways will be ready to really hear our word of witness. When we tell our story, share our faith, speak of our values and convictions, preach the Word from the first, or biblical, culture, there will be a receptive audience. But to insure that our witness is communicated effectively, certain attitudes and skills are also required:

**Simplicity.** We need to state our case in words that have meaning in the culture where we minister. To speak simply is not to talk down to people or soften our critique or neglect important aspects of our truth. The Chinese say that any idea known to human consciousness can be communicated in four Chinese characters. Educational psychologist Jerome
Bruner says that there is no concept in higher learning that cannot be communicated to a kindergarten child. There is a way to say things that can be both simple and profound. Our task is to learn the language of our host culture and then learn how to make our witness in words and ideas that connect with their experience. In Japan I found resistance to the images of servanthood and discipleship among university students reacting to their feudal past. They preferred to speak of the Christian life in terms of faithfulness. Shepherds and sheep may not be the best way to talk about leadership in a congregation of empowered laity. Servant leadership or mutual ministry might say it better. Words like ecclesiogenesis, soteriology, and parousia are best replaced with church development, salvation, and the Second Coming in settings where faith and dedication are valued above theological sophistication.

Candor. Cultures differ in the value they attach to direct, honest communication. Some prefer to employ more finesse, ambiguity, imagery, and intuition than do we brash Americans with our penchant for facts, brevity, and objectivity. We must be sensitive to these differences in style, of course, and not come in with a bulldozer when a feather or a wand is the appropriate tool. With adaptability, however, must also come integrity. We must witness to our truth. We must tell the story as we have experienced it. We must offer statements of what has happened to us, how we have responded, how we feel, what are our convictions and traditions, what are our world-view, conscience, and self-image.

Jesus Christ is my Savior; the Bible is our book; baptism is my initiation into the church and my ordination to ministry; my sexual orientation is lesbian; I believe in liberation theology; I pray on my knees; I serve Christ by blowing the whistle at my workplace. The witness is personal and comes from deep within—it is sharing our story, it is telling who we are and what we stand for—with both sensitivity and candor.

Dialogue. As firmly and forcefully as I state my convictions, I must remain open to receiving the same from persons in the host culture. Aspects of this have already been men-
tioned in the sections on asking and listening. Taken together, the attitudes and skills of asking and listening and those of witnessing create a climate of dialogue. We open ourselves to one another, ready to listen, learn, grow, be changed, be convinced, be converted. The truth of the other has played as great a role in forming him/her as mine has in shaping me. I want to hear it and be impacted by it as much as I want him/her to hear and be influenced by mine. I want to be in dialogue.

**Embodyment.** Not only do I state my truth, I live my truth, I am my truth. In relating to another culture, I not only offer my words, I give myself. I seek to embody the message I wish to share. And the embodiment communicates whether the words do or not. What I am speaks louder than what I say. Let us pray that the two messages are congruent.

I do not just show courtesy; I am courteous. I do not just appear interested in their history; I am interested. I do not just recognize gifts and contributions as a management technique; I am affirming. I do not just invite criticism as a means to an end; I am open. I do not just employ the attitudes and skills of waiting, phasing, respecting, honoring, empathizing, and empowering because I know they work; I am patient, respectful, empathetic, and willing to share my power. I do not just express myself simply, honestly, and dialogically as a ploy to soften people up so I can convert them to my way of thinking; I really love and accept them as they are.

"If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels,...have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge,...have all faith so as to remove mountains,...give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing" (1 Cor. 11:1-3).

**Vision.** Finally, in bearing witness to who I am and what I stand for I speak and act out of a vision of what the human community, the community of faith, and ministry are meant by God to be. I share my faith, not only with reference to the present moment, issue, or situation, but out of a long-range
comprehension of what my witness may contribute to God's shalom.

In the days to come, the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. Many peoples shall come and say, 'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.' For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. (Isa. 2:2-4)

This is God's vision. This is my vision. I bear witness to this vision.

About noon the next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. He became hungry and wanted something to eat; and while it was being prepared, he fell into a trance. He saw the heaven opened and something like a large sheet coming down being lowered to the ground by its four corners. In it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air. Then he heard a voice saying, "Get up, Peter; kill and eat." But Peter said, "By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean." The voice said to him again, a second time, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." This happened three times, and the thing was suddenly taken up to heaven. (Acts 10:9-16)

This is God's vision. This is my vision. I bear witness to this vision.

AN APPROACH TO CROSS-CULTURAL MINISTRY
"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." (Matt. 11:28-30)

This is God's vision. This is my vision. I bear witness to this vision.

I am the good shepherd;...And I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there shall be one flock, one shepherd. (John 10:14-16)

This is God's vision. This is my vision. I bear witness to this vision.

For as in one body we have many members, and not all members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members of one another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us.... (Rom. 12:4-6)

This is God's vision. This is my vision. I bear witness to this vision.

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.... (Isa. 61:1-2).

This is God's vision. This is my vision. I bear witness to this vision.

The aim of (cross-cultural) ministry is to empower persons-in-community to grow in faith and discipleship and to actualize the image of God in which...
they are being created. This is my vision; I trust it is consistent with God’s vision. I seek to bear witness to this vision as well—in this essay, in my leadership of UMAPCE, in my teaching and administering at Garrett-Evangelical, in my part-time pastoring of a local church, in my relationships with family, friends, staff and colleagues, and persons of other cultures—in my words and in my being.

Notes

2. Ibid., 1.
4. This idea was first developed by me in an article entitled “The Ministry as Cross-Cultural Communication,” The Circuit Rider (March 1979), 3-5.
5. This construct was first presented in my article, “Education for Kenosis-Style Ministry,” The Theological Exchange (Vol. 3, No. 2, 1979), 9-18.
9. Ibid., 217.
10. This is already oversimplified, for there are several biblical cultures (Hebrew, Hellenic, Egyptian, Babylonian, Galilean, Judaic, etc.) in several different eras. Further, our perception of biblical ideas and values is filtered through twenty centuries and many systems of theological interpretation, each of which is rooted in a particular cultural orientation. Similarly, the congregation and community are composed of persons from several different cultures. And the pastor or educator is also the product of more than one culture. The situation is thus more complex than the diagram represents, but no matter how many other cultures are involved, these same factors will be present in each of them.
11. Since the factors affecting communication in these two cultures are the same, we will treat them together.
13. In Pastoral Counseling Across Cultures (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1988), Augsburger defines interpathy as a skill that “enables one to enter a second culture cognitively and affectively, to perceive and conceptualize the internal coherence that links the elements of the culture into a dynamic
interrelatedness, and to respect that culture (with its strengths and weaknesses) as equally as valid as one's own. This interpathic respect, understanding, and appreciation makes possible the transcendence, for a moment in a particular case, of cultural limitations," p. 14. See also pp. 27, 19-32, 41, 83, 303, 372.
John B. Cobb, Jr.

The Church and an Economic Vision for Cultural Pluralism

Globally, cultural pluralism is a truly critical issue. Under its impact the nation state is giving way. At the same time we in the United States have committed ourselves to building a nation state on the basis of cultural pluralism. Is this possible? We Christians have committed ourselves to making it work within the church. If we succeed, perhaps this will be the greatest contribution of the church to the wider society in this generation.

In this essay I want first to look at the global situation with all its testimonies to the divisive character of cultural diversity. I will then turn to the U.S. experiment—the forms it has taken thus far. In the third section I will offer two more promising models that we can now envisage. After that I will come to the church’s contribution and our responsibility.
National Boundaries and Cultural Loyalty

The word nation has had a double use. My dictionary gives as the first meaning "a people, usually the inhabitants of a specific territory, who share common customs, origins, history, and frequently language or related languages." The second meaning is "an aggregation of people organized under a single government, a country."

Many of us have not been especially sensitive to the difference between the two meanings because in European history, nations in the second sense came into being largely to express the aspirations of nations in the first sense. That is, the French people, defined by common customs, origins, history, and language, created the nation state that is France. Nationalist sentiment has supported the French government against other governments. France is thus a nation in both senses.

But the fit between national boundaries in the second sense and nations in the first sense is rarely perfect. Even in France there are Basques who do not identify themselves culturally as French. Their national feelings bind them to the Basques in Spain. Also there are French-speaking people in Switzerland, Belgium, and Canada who do not identify with France.

As I grew up I assumed that the primary determinants of national feeling were the boundaries of nation states. I assumed that French Basques were primarily French, whereas French-speaking Swiss, Belgians, and Canadians were primarily Swiss, Belgians, and Canadians. Today we know that the situation in each case is different and that cultural-linguistic differences are extremely important.

Switzerland remains the great success story of a pluralistic society. There the political boundaries largely correspond with the personal loyalties of its people despite cultural-linguistic diversity. Belgium has survived an acute internal struggle between its French and Flemish populations by giving equal status to the latter after centuries of subordination. For example, the great University of Louvain has divided into two. The old campus has now become Flemish,
called the University of Leeuwen. A new campus was built a few miles away for French-speaking Belgians. At present the effort to hold together in one country two quite distinct cultural and linguistic communities seems to be succeeding. Only time will tell.

Canada is currently in the news because of separatist feeling in the predominantly French province of Quebec. The French minority seem more committed to their Frenchness than to the nation-state of Canada. On the other side, much of English Canada has been unwilling to yield its cultural dominance so that Canada could become a truly bicultural country.

I have chosen mild examples. It is easy to find more violent ones. There are the division of the Indian subcontinent between India and Pakistan and the long-protracted struggle in Northern Ireland. There are the independence movements of various cultural groups in the Soviet Union. There is the ongoing struggle of the Kurds in Turkey, Iraq, and Iran. There are the rebellion of the Tamils in Sri Lanka, the bloody disintegration of Lebanon, and the near-hopeless frustration in Israel. There are the endless tribal conflicts in Africa as the people there try to adapt to the boundaries imposed upon them by colonial rulers. There is the millennia-long "Jewish problem" in Europe, as the national feeling of the majority again and again led to the persecution of the Jewish minority in its midst, culminating in our own time in the "Final Solution." It seems in general that governmental boundaries are not as determinative of personal loyalty as we once thought, and that cultural and linguistic loyalties are more intractable.

The Process of Assimilation in America

Let us consider the American experiment against this background. It is a remarkable one, and it has been remarkably successful. A high percentage of people from many cultural backgrounds have transferred their primary loyalty to this country. This has often happened soon after their arrival,
and after several generations, intermarriage and cultural assimilation are often so advanced that national origin becomes quite minor in one's self-definition. Against the background of European nationalism, all of this is to be celebrated as realizing something of the meaning of the motto *e pluribus unum*.

Today we are all aware of the limits of this accomplishment. The many who became one were all European. Even that requires more careful formulation. The Irish, the Italians, and Eastern Europeans found themselves on the periphery of a Protestant culture. As late as World War I, even persons of German descent were viewed with suspicion. Still, in fact, the unifying process had gone a long way. While there has been a serious movement for the autonomy of ethnic groups of European origin, all have been in fact loyal to the government of the United States. And today Irish, Italian, or Eastern European origin is no barrier to public acceptance.

For non-Europeans the story has been very different. Against the Native Americans, genocide has been practiced on a large scale. Africans came as slaves and were denied any opportunity to become part of the society even after emancipation. Asians and Hispanics were accepted as laborers but not as real participants.

It was only after World War II that we began to face up to the severe limitations of the unity we had sought. We had assimilated Europeans with many ethnic backgrounds into an English-speaking and primarily Protestant-secular culture. But within our national borders were large numbers of Africans and Hispanics, and smaller numbers of Asians and indigenous people, who were marginalized. In spite of their exclusion from political and economic power, most of these groups identified themselves as American and wanted to be more accepted as part of the unity. Hence the first response, especially under pressure from Black leadership, was to extend to these groups the methods by which others had been assimilated.

The most important instrument of the assimilation of the many European ethnic groups was public education. Most
Blacks had been segregated into very inferior schools. We inte-
grated the schools as well as other public facilities. The goal was to assimilate all minority groups into the majority culture and ethos.

For one group this experiment has worked brilliantly--the Asians. Once legal restrictions were removed and racial bar-
riers lowered, Asians entered the mainstream of American life. The only problem in the public schools is the dramatic way in which they have outperformed other groups. It would be easy to imagine that within a few generations, the question of ethnic origin would become no more important for Americans of Asian descent than it is now for Americans of European descent.

But just this possibility raises questions about the ideal. Is the unity we want that of assimilation into the dominant Anglo culture? The question is asked on both sides. Anglos have become more aware of the limitations of their own culture and more interested in the cultures of the East. To eradicate that culture from persons of Asian descent no longer appears as an unqualified gain. From the side of the Asians, the culture into which they are asked to assimilate appears decadent. They do not want to give up the values and spirit that enable them to succeed so brilliantly in American society.

When Assimilation Gives Way to Pluralism. For Blacks and Hispanics the issue appears somewhat different. Access to public schools and to other institutions from which they had previously been largely excluded turns out to be less beneficial than they had expected. For some of their number, it works; they can rise through these institutions, internalize the Anglo ethos, and succeed in the public competition so central to that ethos. But for many others, a majority, it does not work. Their cultural heritage and the ethos it has produced have not emphasized those values that lead to success in Anglo culture. To whatever extent self-esteem depends on that kind of success, public openness to their participation in the competition lowers their self-esteem. They can continue, with some legitimacy, to blame public
prejudice and discrimination against them, but the truth is that others, with differing cultural values, including members of their own ethnic groups, have been able to succeed despite the obstacles. To whatever extent success in competition in the Anglo culture is a measure of the excellence of a culture, their cultures are inferior.

This raises acutely the question of whether the hegemony of one culture in the unity that is to emerge out of the many is justified. Perhaps African, Latin American, and Native American cultures have values that are radically different from European and Asian ones, values that lead to different measures of human well-being and success. Perhaps the effort to replace those values with others that will lead to success in Anglo culture is a mistake.

The community that has been struggling longest and most self-consciously with this question is the Native American. For centuries now, when the U.S. government has not promoted or at least allowed genocide, it has worked to eradicate the difference between Native American cultures and the Anglo one. Native American culture has certainly suffered under this assault, but it has not been destroyed. The consciousness of its value and the willingness to sacrifice for its preservation have been part of the experience of Native Americans for many generations.

For reasons such as this the ideal of assimilation of all to Anglo culture has given way to the ideal of pluralism. The Black Power movement was a crucial expression of this shift. Blacks learned to be proud of their Blackness and of all that meant culturally. In theology we were forced—painfully—to recognize that our heritage in Christian thinking was white, and that other racial groups had an equal right to determine what Christianity truly is. Instead of emphasizing the "one" that the nation was to become, we emphasized the multiplicity of cultures that could enrich the whole.

The High Cost of Failed Assimilation. But clearly there is a problem here for both church and state. No community or institution can exist without some commonality or unity of purpose and values. If each ethnic community within it

62 QUARTERLY REVIEW/SUMMER 1992
defines the end for the whole in different terms, terms expressive of its distinctive perspective, decisions at the inclusive level will have to be made purely in terms of power. Indeed, the more radical expressions of Black Power were suppressed by force, and the more radical proposals to the churches were simply voted down.

Most public discourse and public action in the United States moves between assimilationism, called integration, and pluralism. It is often assumed that there are no other choices. For those who are able to succeed in public competition within Anglo society, assimilation dominates public behavior, while privately, or in conjunction with others of their ethnic group, they may cultivate their distinctive cultural values. Generally, despite the rhetoric, the assimilative process is primary and advances with successive generations.

Meanwhile, the situation for those who do not succeed in the competition established by dominant Anglo values becomes more desperate all the time. They do not have institutional embodiments of the values of their cultures which provide different contexts for measuring success. Above all there is no economy expressive of their values where they could succeed without betraying their heritage. To fail in the dominant competition is to be reduced to squalor. Only the Native Americans have been able to maintain some semblance of a distinctive economy in which their values can be expressed, and this is quite minimal and unsatisfactory.

The Black Muslims offer another model of a successful pluralism. They have carried their separation from the dominant society into the economic realm. Although the basis of their successful businesses does not, so far as I can tell you, have any special connection to African or Afro-American culture, its separateness allows them to maintain their separatist identity in other ways.

The Ecology Model

The question now is whether there are other models for thinking of our national goal of e pluribus unum. Can there
be sufficient unity without eradication of the diversity of cultures? Are there other ways to deal with cultural pluralism than assimilation and separateness? A Black professor at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, Henry Young, recently published a book dealing with this question: *Hope in Process: A Theology of Social Pluralism*, and my reflection on this topic owes much to him.

One way to think of this matter is to distinguish two levels. One can say that to be a participant in any society one must accept a minimum core of values. To be a full participant in the life of the United States, for example, you must be loyal to the nation state and you must internalize those values that enable you to be effective in its economic life. Beyond that, pluralism can prevail. You can continue in the religion of your choice. You can celebrate the art and literature of your people. You can maintain cultural connections with the land of your ancestors. You can raise your children as you see fit, so long as that does not prevent them from assimilating the core values of the society.

To a large extent this expresses the present situation. Assimilation is required in matters that are essential for national unity and economic order. Beyond that, pluralism is welcomed. We have freedom of religion. We all enjoy the multiplicity of cuisines that are available, as well as contacts with the arts of many countries. But this compromise trivializes culture. Fundamentally, it is a continuation of the assimilationist program.

Young proposes that we employ an ecological model in thinking of a pluralistic society. Here the unity of all the diverse species does not consist in an homogenization. Each retains its real difference from all the others. But each contributes to the richness of a whole that is very different from any one of them.

The ecological model is extremely suggestive. Members of any one of the species making up the ecosystem have some relations primarily with other members of their own species, but they are also intimately interrelated with members of other species. This balance of separateness and interaction is one of the strengths of the model.
Obviously, such a model is an analogy, not to be pressed in every direction. In an ecosystem, many of the relations between species are those of predator and prey. The food chain is a kind of hierarchy that we have had too much of in human society. There is a ruthlessness in relation to the survival of individuals that we do not want to carry over. Also ecosystems do not related to other ecosystems in ways analogous to relations among countries.

The most important contribution of the ecological model is that it provides a vision of unity that does not involve assimilation of all to the norms and values of one culture. It suggests that each ethnic community can be itself with integrity and pride and contribute its distinctiveness to the whole without derogation of the contributions of others and without divisiveness. Its acceptance would set before us a complex agenda that would reverse many of the major trends in today's world.

World Economics and the Ecological Model

Because I believe this model is, indeed, the appropriate one for the present, I want to explore what would be required to move in this direction. I am especially concerned with its economic implications. Since I do not believe that the present economic order is compatible with any ideal other than assimilation, leaving the unassimilable aside as mere liabilities, I believe the economic implications are radical.

The main reason that the present economic order is incompatible with the ecological model, or any other genuinely pluralistic one, is that it is based on homogenization. This is built into its theory. All people are understood in terms of the traditional Homo economicus, a rational self-interested individualist who sells labor and buys goods in the market. This is in real tension with Western Christianity, but it is in more drastic violation of all the other religious and cultural traditions. For the sake of economic development, accordingly, the goal is the rationalization or modernization of all societies, and this involves breaking up established com-
munities and overturning deep-seated cultural perceptions. In short, it requires cultural homogenization.

An equally central part of economic theory and practice is the emphasis on specialization. It is by specialization that productivity is increased; and economic growth depends on productivity, that is, the amount produced per hour of labor. At first, this meant specialization within a community, but the specialization was rapidly extended to communities as a whole. In the United States, instead of producing on a single farm all the food needed to sustain a family, whole states specialize in producing one particular crop. In the Third World whole countries become mono-cultures oriented to export, depending for their food on imports from other countries specializing in other crops. If each specializes in what it can produce most efficiently, there will be more food for all.

Some celebrate this as "interdependence," and they may even use the ecological model in thinking of it. It is true that fewer and fewer peoples can feed and clothe themselves without importing what they need from others. In that sense we are more and more dependent on one another for our survival. But this means that global interdependence is achieved at the price of making all peoples dependent on those who control international trade. The ecological model, in contrast, pictures local communities as self-sufficient. The interdependence is with those with whom one lives day by day. The ecological model personalizes these relationships. The dominant economic model makes everyone dependent on impersonal forces, the rational effort at profit maximization on the part of the great transnational corporations.

The dominant economic model works toward centralization of economic power and homogenization of culture. The ecological model can be implemented only by drastic decentralization of the economy. There are some encouraging forces moving in that direction today, but the overwhelmingly dominant forces are still governed by the long-established economic model.

Revisions of Global Trade Agreements. I speak with a sense of urgency because of what is happening just now in
trade relations at the global level. Global trade, and therefore the global economy, is governed by a set of rules known as GATT, that is, General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs. The present rules were developed as compromises between the advocates of complete "free trade," the idea that follows from dominant economic theory, and those who felt that nations should have some control over their own economies. These present rules have already given the advantage to the former, so that global interdependence has grown at the expense of relative self-sufficiency at the local level. Still, there have been some gains with respect to that goal also. Third World countries have been able to restrict some of the most obviously exploitative practices of transnational corporations. The ideal of self-sufficiency, at least in food, has won some ground.

The United States government in the eighties and early nineties, however, has been deeply committed to free trade as the solution to global economic problems. It has expanded free trade with Canada and Mexico, and in what is called the Uruguay round of negotiations it is persuading the leaders of the great trading nations to adopt a new GATT that will outlaw the policies by which nations have defended themselves against the worst effects of free trade. For example, the present agreement allows a country in which there is famine to stop the export of food in order to feed its own people. The new proposals would forbid that as in restraint of trade. Even if that particular proposal is dropped as a compromise, the other provisions will have much the same effect.

Those who would move the world decisively in this direction know that many people would be hurt by the new rules. But they are convinced that in the long run all will be better off since the total production of goods and services will increase. Hence they want to reduce the political force of what they see as shortsighted opposition. To this end they long kept the negotiations secret. At least one person who has tried to alert others to what is going on was threatened with prosecution for espionage under the Logan Act. Clearly the proponents of these new proposals know that a great deal is at stake. Even in this country all national or state legislation
designed to protect human health, the rights of workers, family farmers, or the natural environment will be subject to being overruled as in restraint of trade. Third World governments will be drastically disempowered.

Of course, the administration cannot implement the agreement without congressional approval. Here lies the hope of those who believe that the homogenization of the planet and its control by a few economic interests is a disastrous end to human history. We know that trying to solve the problems of the planet by speeding up economic production will not work, since the environment simply cannot survive this kind of pressure. The unimpeded pursuit of general economic growth, directed only by market mechanism, is suicidal. Some of us believe that with time to organize and make the case, Congress could be persuaded to block these agreements.

Probably the administration thinks so, too. Their passion for secrecy suggests as much. Further, they have arranged with Congress that it will have no authority to amend the agreements. Instead it will have to act within sixty days of receiving the proposals, and a simple majority vote for or against is all that Congress is allowed. Since the negotiations have taken longer than expected, Congress agreed in May, 1991 to extend this so-called “fast-track” approval process until 1993. A final vote on a revised GATT will most likely be taken by that time.

As you can see, I have decided that it is not appropriate to speak abstractly of pluralism at a time when the possibility of developing healthy pluralistic models is about to be lost, perhaps forever. I suspect that many have regarded agreements about international trade as too technical to be of interest. I hope more will become interested. I fear that the destiny of the planet is about to be irrevocably decided.

**Self-Sufficient Economic Communities.** If these final steps of homogenization and centralization are avoided, and if we can retain some room to experiment with other models, how would this work out? I propose that in our country, more and more groups should develop relatively self-sufficient
local economies with an agricultural base in family farming and an industrial base in small factories. It has been shown that a quite small community, say ten thousand people, can produce most of what they need, and indeed do so in ways that retain healthy competition. Some of these communities might be ethnic and ethnic values might dictate the amount and kinds of goods that were desired as well as the way they were produced. Others would be multi-ethnic and could experiment with ways in which small communities could be enriched by diverse contributions. All would aim at sustainable relations with the natural world. I am not suggesting that these communities would not trade with each other. Most of them should and would. But this trade would be free in a sense in which what is called "free" trade is not.

Let me explain. A few centuries ago most countries, and even most regions within countries, produced the necessities of life. They were then free to trade or not to trade with others. When they chose to trade, they did so because this could improve the quality of their lives. Europeans could survive without spices, but by exchanging their surpluses for spices, they could enjoy their food a great deal more. When the exporters of spices acted voluntarily and received in exchange goods that enriched their lives, both sides gained by trade. This trade was truly free.

But the legacy of colonialism and the effects of the neocolonialism of contemporary trade policy, are quite different. A country that can no longer feed itself is not free not to trade. It must sell its products at whatever price others will pay in order to purchase food at whatever price others will sell. Its only freedom is to choose between this exchange and starvation. To call this trade "free," as is normally done, is a travesty. Truly free trade can be restored only as local communities become relatively self-sufficient. Obviously this will also be a greatly reduced trade, requiring far less fossil fuel and contributing much less to the greenhouse effect. But here we are emphasizing that it will be a form of economic life that will allow people of different cultures to express their values in what they produce, how they produce it, and how they live.
A Model for Positive Cultural Change

My greatest sense of urgency is focused on this ecological model. But there is another model of pluralism that also seems to me to have relevance to our thinking of the future of this nation. It could be called the evolutionary model to complement the ecological one.

In interpreting the world of living things, evolutionary models have played a large role. They have been dangerous. When applied to human society, they have been used to justify the survival of the fittest, meaning by "fittest," whoever survives in the military and economic competition. In relation to the natural world, they have led to depreciation of simpler organisms and preoccupation with the latest and most complex products of the evolutionary process.

Nevertheless, evolution is a fact, and its focus on cumulative change producing desirable results is not wrong. The ecological model by itself abstracts from all of this and can support a quite static world view. The ecological model, when abstracted from possible negative uses, provides us a way of thinking of *e pluribus unum* that avoids taking one extant culture as normative or just leaving the many as many. Still, it suggests that each of the many remains internally unchanged. In this model the cultures are not modified by their relation to one another.

What I am calling the evolutionary model works best if we think of the evolution of the ecosystem rather than of the evolutionary emergence of a new species. Here the assumption is that the healthy functioning of the ecosystem brings about positive changes in the species that make it up. In the context of human society, it means that different cultures can learn from one another and be enriched and transformed by what they learn.

As I am thinking of this model, it does not mean that one culture is assimilated into another or that their differences will disappear. Each culture will continue to be that culture. But a culture is not static. There is not an ideal form of the culture somewhere in the past which is to be forever preserved. Cultures change and grow, and one of the main
causes is encounter with other cultures. These encounters are often destructive, but they need not be. A culture with sufficient confidence and rootage in its own traditions can adopt and adapt from other cultures in creative ways. As several cultures learn from one another, there are growing elements of commonality among them. But because that commonality emerges from divergent histories that remain alive, there is no homogenization.

With respect to cultural pluralism in the United States, I am subordinating this model to the ecological one. The assimilative force of the dominant culture is so great that few minority cultures are in position to learn from it without being absorbed by it. The immediate need is to strengthen the basis for a healthy pluralism. But one of the reasons for calling for such a healthy pluralism is that it provides a basis for growth and transformation on the part of each community. Out of such growth can come elements of unity that are not now present in any of the ethnic groups.

The Role of the Church in Sustaining Cultural Pluralism

What do these models imply for the church? They certainly imply that the church should support and nurture self-esteem in all of the ethnic groups that take part in its life. The church is already doing much in this direction. It gives visibility in leadership positions to representatives of diverse ethnic groups and includes their voices when decisions are being made.

Nevertheless, giving leadership to representatives of ethnic groups is not enough. Indeed it has its ambiguities. Almost inevitably, when members of non-dominant ethnic groups are given high offices in the church, they are expected to act very much as the holders of that office have always acted. In other words, the very ways we have of honoring ethnic groups work towards their assimilation into the dominant inherited pattern.
Critics speak of this as cooptation. They are not wrong. But when they imply that this is a conscious strategy deliberately adopted by the majority in order to disempower the minority, they usually are wrong. I believe that the present leadership of the church is genuinely committed to ethnic empowerment but lacks models other than assimilation and separation. To give leadership in the church is a form of assimilation. To form ethnic congregations tends to be a form of separation.

The ecological model would encourage a measure of separation at the congregational level but would then emphasize patterns of relationship among these congregations that are currently rare. The structure of our church brings congregations together at the district and conference levels, but it does not encourage networking of congregations with one another. If congregations of the dominant ethnic group seek out congregations of smaller ethnic groups, asking their assistance as well as offering help, the contribution to self-esteem, and to the building up of healthy pluralism, will increase.

We also have opportunities to contribute to self-esteem and to support cultural pluralism in relating to ethnic groups outside the church. Some of these ethnic groups express their ethnicity and strengthen their cultural heritage through the traditional religions of their cultures. Appreciation for other religious traditions has grown dramatically among Christians, and this has already led to growing self-esteem among participants in these other traditions. Most of the initiative for relationship with these groups still lies in Christian hands, and many local churches can take such initiative. It may be even more important that when other religious groups approach us, we respond positively.

Perhaps the most difficult place to strengthen the self-esteem of persons from other cultures is when they are part of the local congregation itself. The assimilative force of such membership is overwhelming, especially if there are only a few members of the ethnic group in the congregation. Indeed, assimilation is what they may want. If so, it would be absurd to discourage it or to make them feel guilty for this
desire. The task then is simply to support self-esteem in this process. On the other hand, if they want to maintain separate cultural identity within the predominantly Anglo congregation, we can create opportunities for them to discuss this project with other members and teach the congregation about the values of their distinctive heritage. But realistically they must accept the fact that the congregation will have the character of the dominant group.

The situation is different in the much rarer case when the congregation has no dominant group but is itself genuinely pluralistic. Here is an opportunity to experiment with both the ecological and the evolutionary models. The ecological model suggests that diverse services of worship be offered to express the ethnicity of the several groups, although there would also be special occasions to celebrate the unity of the whole. It would suggest that the several groups accept diverse roles that all see as complementary and mutually supportive, serving one another.

The evolutionary model would allow a measure of separate- ness but would see the goal as evolving a form of worship that would be different from that of any of the traditions involved, yet fulfilling of the deepest concerns of each. Dialogue aimed not only at mutual understanding but also at mutual transformation would play a major role.

A Call to Action

I began by suggesting that the church has the possibility of modeling for the larger society some healthy pluralistic patterns. I hope that I have suggested ways in which, to some extent, we are already doing that. I hope also that by offering models of what we are doing at our best, I can encourage that behavior. I do commend the ecological and evolutionary models, if both are used with due caution and the recognition of their respective dangers. I especially ask that all who affirm cultural pluralism sound the alarm about the new and critical threat posed by proposed new trade policies. While the church is modeling healthy models, it must ask that the
government not take actions that will block their implementation.

Note

How can one explain the amazing adaptability of the Wesleyan tradition? As a worldwide communion with 63 member bodies, it represents many nationalities, cultural and ethnic groups, social classes, theological positions, and patterns of church structure and life.

In the United States alone, the Wesleyan tradition is represented by many bodies, including the Free Methodist, Nazarene, African Methodist Episcopal, Christian Methodist Episcopal, United Methodist, and African Methodist Episcopal Zion Churches. The United Methodist Church is the largest one of these, and it embodies pluralism within itself as well. It includes churches in the U.S., Western and Central Europe, and parts of North Africa. Furthermore, the United Methodist Church is the most diverse Protestant church in the U.S., and its membership represents the span of social classes and cultural and ethnic groups that constitute the larger population. Pluralism is the order of the day—or, perhaps, the disorder of the day.

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To speak of pluralism in terms of disorder is to recognize the confusion and apprehension that is caused by such diversity. The drafters of the 1988 theological statement of the United Methodist Church carefully avoided the word pluralism so as to downplay the theme of pluralism that was so evident in the 1972 theological statement. The 1988 statement was intended to provide doctrinal unity for this highly diverse United Methodist Church.¹

The disorder caused by pluralism also appeared in the controversy over the recently revised United Methodist hymnal. The Hymnal Revision Committee was very diverse itself—a far cry from the days when John Wesley alone decided what would and would not be included.² The church's response to the committee's recommendations were often very ambivalent, particularly regarding hymns from diverse traditions—including Asian, Hispanic, Native American/Indian, and Black). One analysis of 1988 General Conference issues also noted that hymns "that refer to God as Mother and as having feminine characteristics" received mixed reactions.³

The report also documents continuing disagreement regarding the role of the Bible in United Methodist belief, the priority to be given to membership growth, and the future direction of the Ethnic Local Church Missional Priority. United Methodist clergy and laity agreed that the missional emphasis should be incorporated into existing programs and structures. Most believed that the church should provide special resources "to help ethnic minority congregations carry out their ministries" (pp. 8-9). On the other hand, the same group hesitated when asked whether congregations should be encouraged "to include elements of worship from different ethnic minority traditions in their own worship" and to "invite ethnic persons to become part of existing congregations rather than develop ethnic-only churches" (pp. 8-9). In short, congregations still see their doors as the boundary between themselves and significant experience of inclusivity. What does this say about cultural pluralism in the contemporary Wesleyan tradition?
Culture Meeting Culture: Cases from the Past

The history of the Wesleyan tradition offers many examples of what happens when culture meets culture. I have selected two cases which tell at least part of the story. Both are drawn from the Methodist Church in Kenya, where missionary cultures have met ancient tribal cultures, where many tribal traditions have coexisted for centuries and where three major religious traditions live side by side still today—African tribal religion, Christianity, and Islam.

The Tribal Rite of Female Circumcision in Kenya.

Female circumcision is a traditional practice of most of the tribes of Kenya, and serves as an initiation rite into adulthood. The practice involved the removal of the clitoris, condemned with increasingly loud voice by missionaries of the Church of Scotland Europeans considered the practice abusive and unnecessary. The Alliance of Protestant Missions attempted to abolish the practice among the Kikuyu in 1922, but the Kikuyu Central Association charged the missionaries with trying to destroy Kikuyu society. On the other hand, the All Kikuyu Native Conference at Kambui favored abolishing female circumcision.

The Methodists made a strong statement against circumcision in 1930. But when they consequently lost more than 90 percent of their membership in Meru, the center of Methodist mission activity in Kenya, the statement fell into immediate disuse.

Quietness reigned for a few years until the public debate was reopened with some fresh perspectives. The first step was to see the issue from a non-European perspective. A. J. Hopkins pointed out that the girls in Meru saw circumcision as conferring "a dignity which gives them a standing in the tribe." Others questioned the need for the church to censure tribal practices at all. Mr. Worthington, who had been General Superintendent when the 1932 negative resolution had passed, wrote that:

*The function of the Church is not to impose upon any com-*
Mr. Laughton argued that "Christianity ought to permeate tribal life as leaven in the lump, not shattering it as with an explosive." Ultimately, the Methodists in Kenya decided not to ally with other Christian groups who were attempting to suppress the native custom; instead, they followed the injunction of the Kenyan government to work through education to change attitudes toward circumcision. They recognized the political and nationalistic issues at stake, especially the crisis of self-determination, and chose the road of compromise. The theological rationale for this decision was expressed by A. J. Hopkins:

"It is the aim of the Christian Mission in Meru to open wide the door of opportunity in the New Life to every girl and boy, and to see that no obstacles are deliberately placed in the way of any who desire fully to develop personality and to take advantage of the new educational and economic opportunities."

The case of female circumcision raises conflicting issues that are still alive today, even though the practice of female circumcision is comparatively rare in the world today. How did the Wesleyan tradition shape the Methodist Church's response to female circumcision in Kenya? Certainly the church discussed the issue actively in conferences and in print. While it also passed rulings, it alternately enforced, ignored, and reversed them. The dominant response was to let individuals and families decide for themselves and to avoid confrontation in order to keep the doors open to offer New Life to everyone. What does this say about cultural pluralism in the Wesleyan tradition?
The Case of the Kiama—Oaths of Initiation

The second case also focuses on tribal practices in Kenya in the early twentieth century. All Meru boys experienced two rites of initiation, one at puberty and one a little later at the time of circumcision. Some boys were selected for a third oath and rite of passage, known as kiama, so that they could enter the njuri, or the administrative leaders of the community. Members of the njuri were selected because of their strength of personality and integrity, and they were responsible for making important decisions for the people. The initiation rite itself involved sacrificing a goat, and the entire ritual was done in the presence of the njuri.

The rite was very problematic for the Christian missionaries, and they condemned it. They realized, however, that the Christian men of Meru who were not initiated into the njuri could not hold important leadership positions in their community. The district commissioner sought a reconciliation that would allow Christian men to continue giving leadership in their tribe and preserve the pool of future leaders for Meru. The compromise of 1938 provided an alternate rite of initiation without a goat sacrifice:

In future any Christian, selected and willing to serve on the njuri, would be allowed to take the oath on the Bible, the oath being administered by elders of the candidate’s Church in the presence of the njuri.11

The district commissioner, among others, argued that initiation would provide "complete solidarity amongst the elders of the Meru tribe."12 The initiation practices allowed both Christians and persons in traditional religions to share in the leadership of the community.

The compromise was not without controversy. The Methodist Church participated in the new ritual, but the minutes of staff meetings record objections to the compromise, especially because the practices were associated with nkoma (spirits) and taboos. Within the Methodist connection, the person most instrumental in activating the compromise, Philip M’Inoti, was rejected by many young African Christians, who refused to receive Holy Communion from...
him; they objected that the Church was being inconsistent in its response to African traditional customs. Some non-Christians protested that the Christians were entering njuri through the back door. They mocked these Christian njuri as njuri ya mauku (or njuri of the Book), and a few even forced the Christian initiates into another traditional initiation.13

In commenting on the initiation practice of kiama, Nthamburi notes how remarkable was the missionaries' decision to allow Christians to be initiated into njuri. He concludes that "Methodist missionaries believed that those customs that were essentially African and worthy of survival should be built into the fabric of the African Church..." (p. 80). Further, the Christian Churches sought to secure the "highest good of the people" and to contribute to "communal strength and solidarity."

The compromise was not uniquely Methodist; Roman Catholics and Presbyterians participated in the revised initiation as well. However, as the major Christian body in Meru, the Methodist leadership in this case reveals the Wesleyan tradition at work.

Theological Reflections and Cultural Pluralism

In the midst of such cultural controversies, how have responses been shaped by Wesleyan theology? We cannot draw universal conclusions from two cases; nor can we connect Wesleyan theological themes with the decisions in these cases. The Kenyan Methodist Church did take positions, however, that correspond to theological emphases of the Wesleyan tradition.

Before we look at them, we do need to recognize that Wesley's personal attitude toward different cultures and contexts is not easily transferable into the world of today. We in the late twentieth century have a heightened sense of cultural diversity, of racism, whether implicit or explicit, and of the variety of religious practices even within Christian churches. Neither John Wesley nor any other Christian leader of
earlier times can provide an easy way to live with cultural pluralism.

To dispel any idealism about the Wesleyan tradition, we need only turn to John and Charles Wesley as early ministers in Georgia. With typical enthusiasm for rigor in matters of faith, John Wesley insisted on certain church practices, which alienated him from his Anglican parishioners there. For example, he demanded baptism by immersion, though the church was not normally bound by that practice. Charles Wesley had a special concern for Sabbath practices. In one instance, he confined a doctor who had gone shooting on the Sabbath. During the doctor's confinement, one of his patients miscarried, and Charles was blamed. In neither instance do the young Wesleys seem interested in the cultural context of Georgia, though even the naive Wesleys of Georgia days were actively visiting the Native American and Spanish communities near their parish. John was even studying Spanish so he could minister to Spanish-speaking natives and colonists in their own tongue.

In time, the Wesleys' attitudes and approach to ministry changed. They responded awkwardly to diversity in those early years, and their later years were also marked with many struggles, such as the need to decide when to stand firmly over against the church or popular opinion and when to seek a common ground for communication. There were no easy answers for the Wesleys, but their own faith commitments led them to work through the dilemmas, rather than to avoid them. The spirit of their wrestling is more illuminating than the particular decisions they made in any one moment.

John Wesley's theology offers clues that can guide our own decision-making. In the remainder of this essay, we will look at Wesleyan theological themes that cast light on the contemporary issue of cultural pluralism and correspond with faith issues discussed by the Methodist Church in Kenya.

Experience as Witness to Faith. Since so much misunderstanding and conflict across cultures today are sparked by differences in cultural forms, the Wesleyan focus
on experience is probably the most important theme to in­
form our reflections on cultural pluralism and on the two par­
ticular cases presented here.

For John Wesley, experience was a deeper dimension of
faith than institutional forms, even more central to faith
than the sacraments, creeds, and knowledge of the Bible.
Wesley was certainly not indifferent to these "means of
grace," but he contrasted formalism with the witness of the
spirit. He often quoted Romans 8:16: "The spirit itself
bearth witness with our spirit that we are the children of
God." 16 Wesley spoke critically of formalized Christians who
emphasized only formal expressions of faith.

The arguments used to negotiate the decision on female
circumcision in Kenya also distinguished between cultural
forms and the experience of new life. Mr. Worthington said,
"The function of the Church is not to impose upon any com-
munity a set of regulations, but to introduce men and women
of every race to the perfect life..." He added the "recognition
that no set pattern of Christlikeness can be on Africans
and Europeans alike." Later, A. J. Hopkins said, "It is the aim
of the Christian Mission in Meru to open wide the door of op-
portunity in the New Life to every girl and boy..." The
church leaders wanted to keep open the possibilities for invit-
ing persons into this new life, which they considered to be
more important than repressing a particular cultural form
that the people of Kenya valued very much at the time.

Wesley contrasted living faith with closed, human
categories. Perhaps his clearest summary is in "A Plain Ac-
count of Genuine Christianity." In describing genuine Chris-
tianity, he describes what faith is not:

*But what is faith? Not an opinion, no more than it is a
form of words; not any number of opinions put together, be
they ever so true. A string of opinions is no more Christian
faith than a string of beads is Christian holiness.*

*It is not an assent to any opinion, or any number of
opinions. A man (sic) may assent to three-and-twenty
creeds; he may assent to all the Old and New Testament (at
least, as far as he understands them) and yet have no

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16 QUARTERLY REVIEW/SUMMER 1992
Wesley wrote the Plain Account originally to Dr. Conyers Middleton, a deist and Cambridge don who had written that post-New Testament times could not be authoritative for Christians because no evidence could be found of miraculous powers in them. Wesley replied that Christian faith is grounded in both apostolic and subsequent times; God’s miraculous powers are at work throughout time. With such a view of ongoing revelation, one cannot close the gate to new questions and understandings of faith that emerge when culture meets culture.

Faith is a gift of God, and it goes beyond what we can know in other ways. Faith opens us to a “knowledge of things invisible, showing what eye had not seen, nor ear heard…” (p. 91). It is a sense of assurance based in internal evidence. The external evidence of Scripture and doctrine promises us this experience, and the experience itself is the completion of the promises. Wesley’s passion was that everyone might experience this assurance: “May every real Christian say, ‘I now am assured that these things are so; I experienced them in my own breast. What Christianity (considered as a doctrine) promised, is accomplished in my soul…” (p. 91). Note that doctrine is not taken to be irrelevant, any more than is the Bible; they are both bearers of the promise. The experience of faith witnesses to the truth of that promise:

And this I conceive to be the strongest evidence of the truth of Christianity. I do not undervalue traditional evidence. Let it have its place and its due honour. It is highly serviceable in its kind and in its degree. And yet I cannot set it on a level with this.

These themes reappear in the Wesleyan theological tradition; Jacob Albright (founder of the Evangelical Association) affirmed that Christian experience is more important than mere belief in a creed and participation in the sacraments, and Philip Otterbein (founder of the United Brethren) called revitalization of Christian faith the heart of his mission.

One repeatedly hears echoes of Wesley’s emphasis on ex-
perience as internal evidence of God. The witness of God's Spirit with our spirits relativizes all opinions and formalism. With this witness, we can tolerate formal differences across cultures and respect different experiences of the Spirit. The experience of God in our lives gives us a passion for revitalizing Christian faith. Both the spirit of tolerance and the passion for revitalization are in evidence in the two cases from Kenya.

Love of God and Neighbor as a Way of Faith. What, then, is the way of faith? Wesley describes Christian life as the love of God and neighbor, a recurring theme in his sermons. The love of God and neighbor is the heart of Christianity, as opposed to mere opinions. Opinions certainly do not define the way of faith. In fact, Wesley insists that he would not quarrel with anyone about an opinion; what is important is that persons love God with all of their heart and soul and mind and strength, and love their neighbors as themselves.

The love of God and neighbor was the theme of the controversial sermon that marked the end of Wesley's invitations to preach at Oxford. He describes the experience of an early Christian: the person's spirit of rejoicing, the love of God shed abroad in the person's heart by the Holy Spirit, and the love of neighbor expressed in word, deed, and truth. He concludes the sermon with a claim that he is concerned not with "doubtful opinions" but with our "common Christianity." He also sounds this theme in "the Character of a Methodist." The distinguishing marks of Methodists are not "opinions of any sort" or a particular scheme of religion or set of notions. Rather, Methodists believe that "all Scripture is given by the inspiration of God," that the written word of God is "the only and sufficient rule both of Christian faith and practice," and that Christ is the eternal, supreme God. Beyond these three beliefs, Wesley advocates tolerance. He concludes, "But as to all opinions which do not strike at the root of Christianity, we think and let think."

Wesley's final answer to inquiries about Christian life is
very simple: The heart of the matter is the love of God shed abroad in one's heart—loving God with all of one's heart and soul and mind and strength, and loving one's neighbor as oneself. And if this leaves any doubt in his readers, he concludes: "For opinions, or terms, let us not destroy the work of God. Dost thou love and serve God? It is enough. I give thee the right hand of fellowship..." (p. 302). This is not a right hand of fellowship that is blind to differences but one based in the unity of the Spirit.

Justification by Grace through Faith. I have begun with the most obvious aspects of Wesley's theology for reflecting on cultural pluralism—namely, the significance of experience as witness to faith and the life of faith defined in terms of loving God and neighbor. Were these the only messages, the challenge of culture meeting culture could still seem insurmountable. But all of these affirmations are built on one central affirmation: that God is the initiator and architect of salvation. We are justified by grace through faith. We do not earn salvation by what we believe or do.

Beliefs do not save us, but where Wesley focuses on particular beliefs, he names the promise that God saves us. Thus, he refers often to the belief that God was in Christ and that Christ loved us. He says: "[F]aith is a divine evidence and conviction not only that 'God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself' (2 Cor. 5:19), but also that 'Christ loved me and gave himself for me.' By this faith we are saved; we are justified and sanctified. The promise is so bold that we can expect it now. In speaking of sanctification, he says, 'If you seek it by faith, you may expect it as you are, and if as you are, then expect it now..." (p. 282).

Reflecting on the two cases with this theological point of view, one is inspired to humility regarding particular opinions and judgments. What the Kenyan cases reveal, however, is a willingness of the people to wrestle hard with their ethical judgments and to set them into the context of a larger hope of inspiring Christian faith and life. Mr. Worthington's statement again exemplifies this spirit, emphasizing the importance of introducing people "of every race
into the perfect life" and recognizing that "no set pattern of Christlikeness can be on Africans and Europeans alike." Such a spirit urges us to humility about our own judgments, recognizing that God's work in persons' lives will not necessarily follow the set patterns we have in mind. Such a spirit calls forth not only tolerance in responding to cultural pluralism but also a sense of mystery before the boundless, undefinable work of God's salvation.

Plain Truth for Plain People. One last theme will be considered here, and it describes the theological method of John Wesley and many of his successors. Theology is intended to be "plain truth for plain people." Wesley explained that his own attempt to use the language of common life and avoid technical jargon and a show of learning arose from a desire to communicate faith.

One notable quality of Wesleyan theological method is its grounding in praxis—reflecting on practice, thus drawing knowledge from experience. Often taken to be a fault, Wesley's failure to produce a systematic corpus of theological literature has led instead to a theology of wrestling. This has inspired a spirit of "practical divinity" in the people of Wesleyan tradition. Wesley himself often began his theological discourse as a response to a practical issue in the community, such as a controversy or a decision regarding Christian life. He even made frequent use of questions in his sermons and theological essays, weaving frequently asked questions or questions of objection into his writing. In this way, he entered dialogically into the wrestling on a given issue. Even in describing Methodists, he described their experience and method, drawing conclusions from these practical moorings.

Further, Wesley did expect people to find conclusive guidelines for their decisions in orthodoxy or Scripture. According to Wesley, orthodoxy itself is less important than having "the mind that was in Christ." And regarding Scripture, Wesley says, "Scripture, in most points, gives only general rules; and leaves the particular circumstances to be adjusted by the common sense of mankind [sic]." Wisdom is expected to emerge from living life as well as from doctrines.
of the church and from Scripture.

Certainly the reflections offered in the two cases from Kenya reveal a serious theological reflection emerging from the situations themselves. The Methodists who pondered these serious issues did not apply a pre-formed doctrine to the matter. Such is the praxis approach to theology that has marked so many theologians in the Wesleyan theological tradition, most notably Jose Miguez-Bonino, Mortimer Arias, James Cone, Elsa Tamez, Marjorie Suchocki, Douglas Meeks, Theodore Runyan and John Cobb. To group all of these people together is in many ways peculiar, and some are more praxis-based in their theological method than others. All, however, wrestle theologically with major problems in the contemporary world.

Ironically, three-quarters of United Methodist clergy and laity polled in 1990 thought that "a clear statement of common beliefs would help to unify the church." Of course, such a general statement from one poll cannot be overinterpreted, but the popular opinion within the church may be moving away from praxis approaches to theology and more toward orthodoxy. This is regrettable. If the educational ministry of the church is to respond to rising cultural pluralism, it will require more ability to engage in praxis knowing, not less. It will take more ability to begin our reflections with particular situations rather than universal principles. Fumitaka Matsuoka has clearly named this as a challenge to theological education:

In a pluralistic and multicultural world the order of knowing and doing moves from particular to universal. In a multicultural world one becomes aware of one’s own particularity, be it ethnicity, gender or class, with a recognition of one’s dependence on the web of humankind. Precisely this truth is what the current homogeneous educational ordering is loath to admit.

What is true for theological education may be even more true in parish life, where educational ministry is engaged with every aspect of persons’ lives.

A second quality of Wesleyan theological method should
also be identified: it is very integrative. Wesley himself integrated Scripture with tradition, experience, and reason, and he integrated across very different points of view. By avoiding the compartmentalized thinking that is more natural to academia than to the general population, he enhanced his ability to communicate plain truth to plain people.

In relating Scripture with other sources of revelation, Wesley took seriously the revelatory value of Scripture, especially in revealing the heart of Christianity. He also urged that Scripture be interpreted as a whole, giving preference to the plainest texts. Wesley assumed that Scripture is inspired by God and offers guidance in matters of morality. But Scripture also interacts with experience, reason, and tradition in revealing God and guiding the community.

Wesley not only integrated sources but also different, even opposing, positions on theological issues. He wove justification and sanctification into the fullness of salvation, and he critiqued those who denied one or the other. He also integrated active participation with passive waiting in the life of faith. Although he insisted that people do not initiate or effect grace, he encouraged persons to participate in the means of grace. Also, Wesley held a view of human beings as both sinful and holy. His doctrine of God stood between the deists and apologetics, critiquing both and drawing from both. Finally, his theological positions on the church drew both from the early church and from Anglican tradition, so that his views on ministry were shaped by both.

Such an integrative theologian draws broadly from different sources, wrestles with the differences and puts forth a theology that is shaped in that process. Likewise, we cannot afford to eliminate the variety of sources or points of view in a world that is crying out for truth. The challenge before us is to simplify, but to simplify by wrestling with differences rather than by ignoring them or refuting them.

Conclusions for Educational Practice

A few broad conclusions can be drawn here to suggest direc-
tions for rethinking the practice of educational ministry in the church today. The first conclusion is that we engage in an education of wrestling. The whole of the Wesleyan tradition is marked by serious wrestling on questions of belief and practice. The Wesleyan tradition grew as a movement to enliven faith. Therefore, it was not dominated by attempts to formulate a full bedrock of doctrine for a new church, or positional doctrines that would stand over against the existing church or against the world. Instead, it formulated a theology that proclaimed God's salvation and enlivened the faith of the people.

The Wesleyan tradition has long confronted the hopes and questions of peoples from varied contexts and backgrounds. This very history may account for the adaptability and diversity of the tradition. It may also suggest that we encourage teaching in the church that stirs and supports people in their wrestling. We need curriculum resources that ask questions more than give answers, resources that resource wrestling.

The second conclusion is that teaching be grounded in the experience of faith. Teachers need to listen and enable others to listen to the different experiences of faith within their particular group, congregation, or community. These experiences are not just novelties to be admired from a distance but experiences that have deep meanings for people; they are worthy of respect. And these experiences can generate conflicts among persons whose experiences are different. The conflicts have to be faced and negotiated as well.

Teachers also need to introduce persons to experiences of faith beyond their own community—from other parts of the world and other periods of time. One important value of biblical and historical study is its ability to lead us into other worlds of faith experience, heightening our sense of God's ongoing action in the world and our sense that faith appears in more than one form. Teachers can introduce the experiences of other persons through storytelling, media communication, case studies, and other methods that give voice to persons who are distant from their own community.

A third conclusion is that teaching inspire the love of God and neighbor. This suggests that we give attention to the
spirit of our teaching in the church and not simply to the sub-
ject matter. We also need to give attention to the methods of
our teaching, the ways in which we involve persons in the ac-
tive life of loving God and neighbor. Many possibilities come
to mind for involving the community in service to God and
the world through worship, study, fellowship, and actions for
justice and peace. The challenge is to engage the whole com-
munity in meaningful life together and in acts of love within
the world.

The sacraments and rituals of the church nurture the
spirit of mystery and love. Teaching itself is most fully under-
stood as sacramental, and ritual is an important part of teach-
ing in any context.\textsuperscript{34} Sacramental teaching takes place
whenever people participate in the love of God and neighbor
with the gathered faith community. When people probe their
deepest questions and share their deepest commitments,
when young persons serve as acolytes and laity as servers in
the Eucharist, they participate in the mystery and love of
God.

Sacramental teaching also takes place as the church serves
in the world, stirring persons in their awareness of the world
and in their abilities to respond, critique and transform. In a
world of cultural diversity, we are reminded that the kind of
service we give and the spirit with which we give it are criti-
cal. We need to be engaged in service that is just and caring
toward the whole world, and not just toward our kind; we also
need service that is done in partnership with others and not
paternally for others. This is one of the messages commu-
nicated loud and clear by the church leaders wrestling
with difficult issues in Kenya.

The fourth conclusion is that the foreground of educational
ministry should be the grace of God and faith of the people.
Theology is important to educational ministry because it ex-
presses faith. Scripture and tradition are important because
they bear the promises of God. What is most important, how-
ever, is a vision grounded in the grace of God. Perhaps we
need to reflect further with a Randolph Crump Miller on the
idea that theology is in the background of Christian educa-
tion, and faith and grace are in the foreground.\textsuperscript{35}
Certainly, we might approach issues of content and cultural differences with more openness if we were more concerned with the grace of God alive in our world than with our own particular way of defining theology and interpreting Scripture and historical tradition. In fact, we might reach out to face cultural differences with eagerness and anticipation that our faith will be deepened and broadened as culture meets culture.

The final conclusion is that we should design educational ministry to engage plain people with plain truth. This is not anti-intellectualism or reductionist theology. It is a plea for Christian education that struggles with the real issues of real people and draws on scholarship to resource and make meaning in that struggle. It is also a plea for integrative theology in which we draw richly from multiple sources (Scripture, tradition, experience, and reason) and seek ways to understand conflicting theological views. This is especially important when we face cultural diversity, because the various sources will reflect different cultures. The attempt to understand and appreciate these conflicting theologies will help us to cross cultures.

The practice of communicating plain truth to plain people can lead to many different educational practices. Sometimes people will read and discuss very technical theological works; sometimes they will tell their faith stories to one another; sometimes they will engage in actions of service and political reform. In any case, the people hopefully will reveal their deepest passions of faith and not simply repeat the standard beliefs or practices as identified by a denominational body.

This idea of plain truth for plain people suggests the continuing need for broad representation on denominational boards and agencies. It suggests that we need to consult broadly in local communities as we create educational designs and resources at the denominational level. Further, attention needs to be given to developing curriculum resources that represent the many varied voices of the people. Some specialized language and cultural resources will be needed, but these should not replace efforts to include the voices and faces of all people in those curriculum materials.
that are used most broadly in the church. Finally, we need to
listen to theological voices from around the world and across
religious traditions, including those voices that are spoken
from the grassroots and those that are spoken from profes­
sional theologians. (They are all plain people, after all!)

These conclusions finally come together for me in the
image of a banquet. Imagine a banquet where all of the
people come to the table, sharing in grace and eating in
covent with one another. They bring foods to share, and
they bring languages and customs. Moments of strangeness
and conflict come; they cannot be avoided. The revellers have
to wrestle with their strangeness and conflict so that they
will not finally destroy their banquet with stony silence or un­
just distribution of the food or subtle and not-so-subtle rejec­
tion of some of the guests gathered for the feast.

Around this table, the people will share their past ex­
periences; they will experience together the grace of God and
the grace of community-in-covenant. They will give thanks to
God for the feast and to one another for companionship at
the table. They will find themselves coming and going,
taking food out to those who have none, bringing new per­
sons and food in, and praying all the while that the banquet
table will finally be open to the whole world.

My vision may not be your vision, and yours may not be
mine, but perhaps, at the banquet table we can feast
together and form a vision for tomorrow.

Notes

1. The shift is described in Mary Elizabeth Moore, "The Style and Substance
   of United Methodist Theology in Transition," Quarterly Review, vol. 9, no. 3
   (Fall 1989), 44-63.

2. Craig Gallaway, "Tradition Meets Revision: The Impact of the Wesley
   9, no. 3 (Fall 1989), 64-79.

3. Office of Research, An Analysis of Major Issues Addressed by the 1988
   General Conference and a Comparison with Beliefs and Attitudes of Local
   Church Members (Dayton, OH: General Council on Ministries, 1990), 5.

4. I have chosen this case because of its importance to the people of Kenya;
   it is also a case that sharpens the pluralism issues, because many women,
especially outside Africa, view clitoridectomy as destructive of women.


6. Ibid., 76; cf. A. J. Hopkins, "Female Circumcision," in file marked Minutes of Staff Meetings and Other Papers, 1934-1950 (Nairobi: Methodist Archives), 4. This paper was written for staff consultations, July 1940.


8. Nthambu, 74; cf. W. H. Laughton, "Initiation of Girls," in Laughton Letters (Nairobi: Methodist Archives), 2. This was a reply to Hopkins' memorandum, July 24, 1940.

9. Ibid., 77. Those churches that chose a less compromising path faced a devastating crisis, according to Nthamburi, because they were condemning the only African political party that existed at the time. They created considerable misunderstanding, and opposition groups emerged against the missionary activities.

10. Ibid., 77; cf. A. J. Hopkins, "Girls' Circumcision," in file marked Hopkins Papers (Nairobi: Methodist Archives), 3. The paper was written March 21, 1941.


12. Ibid., 81; cf. District Commissioner, Meru, to Church Leaders, September 30, 1952 (Nairobi: National Archives).


16. John Wesley, "The Character of a Methodist," in Selections from the Writings of the Reverend John Wesley, M.A., ed. Herbert Welch (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1916), 292. Wesley's footnotes extend his point: "I will not quarrel with you about any opinion. Only see that your heart be right toward God, that you know and love the Lord Jesus Christ; that you love your neighbour, and walk as your"
Master walked; and I desire no more. I am sick of opinions: I am weary to bear them." (293n) Wesley links this concern with Christian unity. (292n)

22. Such unity is understood as a calling to be one body in one Spirit.

23. John Wesley, "The Scripture Way of Salvation," in John Wesley, 278. This theme was present in Wesley's early preaching and writing, but it came to full expression in "The Scripture Way of Salvation," first published in 1785. Albert Outler takes this essay to be as good as any single one to communicate Wesley's theology. The text (Eph. 2:8) was the same as his last and most controversial sermon in Oxford, "Salvation by Faith." (117-118)

24. John Wesley, "Preface to Sermons on Several Occasions," in Works, I:104. Note also that on topics of common human concern Wesley often wrote accessible summaries: A Plain Account of Genuine Christianity and A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists.


26. Wesley here was responding to the objection made by some that class meetings are not supported by Scripture. John Tyson notes that most of what Wesley called opinions were matters of Christian practice; thus, he allowed diversity of practice (Tyson, "Essential Doctrines and Real Religion," 188).


30. Ibid., 20-21. I noted earlier that Wesley does not assume that the Bible offers complete guidance in every question of action.


February 26, 1991

Dear Jeff:

Thank you for your most recent letter from the Persian Gulf. I'm sorry we cannot speak face to face as we did last summer. I think better when I write, though speaking off the cuff is easier. The Apostle Paul knew that letters were people's tangible representations. In any event, I know your parents are pleased we correspond.

Thinking back to our conversation last summer, you and I explored two primary questions. First, how do you go about selecting a seminary? I write now, however, in response to your second question, which may throw light upon the first: what should seminary and theological education do to best prepare persons for pastoral leadership? This is the crucial question. Once you determine the purpose...

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LETTER TO A YOUNG SEMINARIAN
and focus of theological education, the choosing process will clarify itself.

I want to begin by saying what I think a seminary is not. This may seem an odd way to proceed, but it will be helpful to look at competing viewpoints on topics that have been hotly debated for decades. First, a seminary is not a supercharged Sunday school. In theory, students bring their faith to seminary. They don’t come to find it. No doubt, the content of a person’s faith will be widened and heightened at seminary, and this is well and good. But the larger point is this: the task of theological education is more fundamental than strictly “spiritual formation.”

Second, a seminary is not a vocational institute where one learns “how to” techniques. In this view, theological education trains people specifically for pastoral functions: counseling, teaching, preaching, performing weddings and funerals. In some quarters, this view of the seminary is gaining credence with surprising strength.

Third, a seminary is not a long retreat where students are absorbed into “church culture.” Many seminaries, representing a variety of denominations, shape students by removing them from “the world” for a time. During this captivity, students surrender to particular dogmas or institutional dictates and pledge loyalty to them. In exchange, the seminary provides a climate in which to network, learn jargon, and be socialized into the denomination’s values and goals. In other words, the task of this style of theological education is to make an outsider into an insider.

Jeff, I think it is important to name these contending perspectives because mine is different. I should say all three approaches have some validity, however. We should strive to be spiritually formed and to celebrate funerals with competence. And as distasteful as networking may seem, one must have colleagues in ministry. My question is, rather, what is the primary aim or task of theological education?

I write so fervently because I have returned from our Annual Conference Board of Ministry interview retreat. Listening to seminarians, both in interviews and in outer halls reminded me of the quip that “youth is wasted on the young.” I heard some say that seminary is simply a place to do time until one gets to the real business of church business. Others feel that seminary is a hoop to jump through, meeting another of many denominational requirements for ordination. No wonder these students experience seminary in such negative terms! They do not understand the educational process, and therefore they have no expectations of it.

But I'm not sure I was any better off when I was at that stage. I would have sounded just like the seminarians who talked about
"doing time" and denominational hoops. I considered much of my theological education was nothing more than a series of checkpoints. At every stage, both academic and spiritual, came the question: did I really want to be a United Methodist parson? In the mid-1970s I wondered who really cared about Irenaeus, the Council of Nicaea, Daily Offices, Feuerbach, or Chalcedon. I would have greatly preferred to explore the issue of the collision between modernity and today's church. It took me some time to see that Augustine's struggles in his own time provide at least one clue in our attempt to solve our twentieth-century mysteries.

Despite my grossly limited perspective, my professors—Albert Outler, Victor Furnish, John Deschner, and James White, among others—taught me well. I was also engaged in learning other languages besides the strictly theological. I was busy learning Methodist pastoral jargon: jurisdictional politics, the appointive process, apportionments, and the like. Beyond jargon, I was learning to network. I learned about people and their strengths and weaknesses. To this day I believe that knowing people within the United Methodist connection has offered unique resources for my churches.

During my seminary years I also was learning technique. People usually pay little attention to someone else's function in a community ritual. Take baseball, for instance. Have you ever noticed where a first-base umpire goes when a ball is batted to the shortstop? No? The truth is that not even a seasoned player could tell you. No one is supposed to notice an umpire—and generally no one does unless the umpire blows a call. The point is, after many years of being in worship, I couldn't remember how our minister celebrated communion or even how she baptized infants even though I had seen these rituals hundreds of times. I suppose we are all this way. We rarely listen to directions until we ourselves must drive.

Technique seems a minor matter until your first Sunday in a parish. Then you must put a bulletin together, order worship, and think through a thousand details. Many seminarians become enamored with the idea of becoming proficient at these tasks, and they miss the theological foundation upon which the rituals are built. What I mean by "miss" is simply that a student may hear theological material without integrating it. Of course, a seminary cannot give the student a will to learn anymore than a hospital can give a patient the will to live. By the time a student reaches the level of seminary education, the responsibility for becoming educated is theirs.

We have looked at what seminary is not. So we are back at our original question: What should a seminary and theological education do to prepare a person for pastoral leadership?
Ironically, perhaps, sometimes it has to do with providing students a chance to figure things out for themselves. Jeff, I spent my third seminary year teaching at Gbarnga School of Theology (GST) in Liberia, West Africa. During this year of teaching, I matured in multiple ways. This year especially gave me a more developed perspective on my theological education.

My Liberian year allowed me to step back, separating the essential from the nonessential in my own seminary experience. After all, there are some things that no one can teach us. At GST, I learned that the bulk of education is directed toward the discovery of self. Returning to seminary, I was focused on new educational questions regarding ministerial preparation. What did I need from seminary that I could not get anywhere else? Who was I as a pastor now, after directly experiencing Christianity in its Third-World garb? Would my theological education prepare me to go to appointments for which Bishop Russell—or any bishop—may need me?

Stepping back also gave me a new field of vision. In the midst of theological education we are so immersed in notebooks and textbooks that our ability to see the larger scheme is negligible. For many seminarians there is barely a vista beyond the first appointment. Prior to my year in Africa, I was so busy studying and working to pay tuition with four or five part-time jobs that I had no time to meditate theologically on my education. Now I think we should think theologically all the time and about everything. Our own theological education is an excellent place to start.

Fortunately, in Africa I was removed from my native and often nonreflective culture, which afforded me time for contemplation. I asked myself a hard question: Where did I project myself in ministry upon graduation and in ten, twenty years? The biggest mistake in the average seminarian’s thinking is that seminary prepares us mainly for our first church. Ideally, however, theological education gives us vision for the whole of our ministries—a vision large—to allow for years of growth. Ideally, the seminary gives us the fundamental tools by which we learn to grow into the vision.

But the seminary does, of course, have an active role to play. Theological education is a safe crucible in which vital piety can be forged. John Wesley’s memorable and oft-quoted maxim was, “Let us unite the two so long divided—knowledge and vital piety.” In a Wesleyan sense, this is the proper aim of theological education. Wesley knew that well-educated clergy would challenge and ably teach congregations. Solid theological education could produce leaders possessing Christian vision. Even his lay preachers were required to engage in intensive reading programs. No matter how well educated the
leader, however, effective ministry, in Mr. Wesley's estimation, always springs from faith alive in the Holy Spirit.

A sound seminary education helps pastors think theologically about events in the daily lives of faithful people. Though it is important to know "how" to do a wedding or a funeral, the Christian community has a crucial need for people to help it contemplate the theological implications implied by these holy occasions. Pastors are called to be not simply "good 'ol preachers" or "professional" functionaries but rather representatives of the faith. Christian ministers act on behalf of Christ through Christ's church, making explicit what God makes implicit in every area of human experience.

Vital to this process of thinking theologically is the process of critical inquiry. The best gift seminary gave me was to make me a better steward of my reasoning capacity. Some may call it a healthy or holy skepticism, but it compels me to examine subjects in light of the Christian witness of faith. This means to think critically and reflect theologically. Theological education does not merely confer the facts of faith as much as it attempts to facilitate our faith-thinking as incarnate in life. Theological education is not necessarily about making judgments pertaining to beliefs as much as it concerns forming discriminating judgment, that is, what is true, ethical, and sound—and why. This is the vital nature of seminary education.

Occasionally, students will enter seminary already understanding the purpose and aim of critical inquiry in theological education. But I imagine this is rather rare. Apart from their call to ministry, people move toward theological education for manifold reasons. Unfortunately, many first-year theological students reflect the theological gap existing between a school of theology and the church to which it sends its graduates. These students are eager to get to the business of ministry, eschewing the substantial theological undergirding which a seminary best provides.

I try to remember that the seminary and the church are interdependent. The seminary needs the church because it provides students with the raw material of faith, issues, and ideas that will be shaped by theological training and reflection. Likewise, the church needs the seminary because it cannot do without leaders and thinkers who not only know the formulations of faith, but who can also reformulate faith within the rapidly changing contexts, whether they are cultural, economic, social, sexual, linguistic, or political in nature. The church needs leaders who understand past judgments about the Christian faith, and can continue to form faithful and discriminating judgment in the future.

LETTER TO A YOUNG SEMINARIAN
Another aspect of the grand vision, linking knowledge and vital piety, is that it all comes together in us. It is the student him- or herself who is the bridge between the seminary and church.

Occasionally the charge is leveled that theological education is all theory, no practice. I do not believe this, but the criticism surfaces often enough to be addressed. For the seminary scandalized by this stereotype, however, the student becomes a means of redemption. The student takes the theory of a seminary classroom and incarnates this theory into the lives of people. This is done by the student, and later the pastor, using the theoretical skills of pastoral care, Christian education, or church administration learned by reading and lecture. At the same time, the skills are refined in light of the experiences encountered in hospital rooms or at wedding rehearsals. Never forget, all practical skills in ministry if rightly learned and understood will be informed constantly by other less obvious seminary grounding: systematic theology, historical theology, biblical theology.

The student in this understanding of theological education is able, like a capable translator, to speak to two parties who share little common language. Good pastors share worship experiences and sermons which communicate at the level of the congregation. Simultaneously, no pastor should forget the deep wells of the learned tradition behind every pastoral act. Thus, the student as bridge allows the local church access to great quantities of learning and reflection accumulated over the centuries. The seminary holds this learned tradition as both trust and resource for all Christians. In a real sense, the student closes the circuit between the seminary and the church. The student is the bridge upon which the faithful of past and present converge to prepare for faith’s future.

Jeff, your task in seminary is to experiment, test, question, critique, and explore. These tasks, done unhindered within the seminary’s protection of academic freedom, foster a vision of Christ’s faith that the church needs—a vision the church will use to deal with crises not yet imagined.

Most of our earthly realm has been mapped and charted. People have been to Antarctica and Fiji. It looks like further exploration will be up to NASA. The one place, however, where we all become explorers is not with respect to land, sky, and water but rather with respect to time. Every day creates an opportunity to explore moments into which no person has yet ventured. Our task, as leaders of Christ’s church, is to lead people on an expedition into unknown time. Faithful leaders will help churches claim time for God, or to meet God faithfully when we arrive.
Well, Jeff. I have probably gone overboard with all this theologizing. I hope, however, this letter will raise other issues for us to discuss when you return from the desert. The return from the desert is, after all, a biblically appropriate place from which to respond to ministry. We wish you Godspeed and a safe return.

Sincerely, your friend,

David Mosser
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United Methodist pastors' increased use of the lectionary is both promising and perilous. Many pastors have used the lectionary to preach biblically and theologically sound sermons which shed the light of truth and grace on contemporary issues and which provide glimpses into God's vision for existence. Since the content and shape of a sermon is largely determined by its source, preaching which originates in and is shaped by the Bible and doctrine exalts the timeless above the timely. It is able to subordinate psychological/political analyses and rhetorical style to divine revelation and theological/integrity.

There is a peril, however, when the sermon is confined to the Bible or doctrine. Biblical/doctoral preaching can be a pious excuse for avoiding contemporary issues. Preachers then resort to irrelevant dogmatism or a simple retelling of biblical stories. Barth's image of the preacher with a Bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other represents a corrective to a form of biblical/doctoral preaching which escapes the necessity of confronting the contemporary with the Eternal in redemptive and transforming ways.

Kenneth L. Carder is pastor of Church Street United Methodist Church in Knoxville, TN. He is also the author of Sermons on United Methodist Beliefs (Abingdon, 1991), and Leader's Guide, Doctrinal Standards and Our Theological Task (Graded Press, 1989).
In addition to the lectionary, pastors have another important resource for their sermons: by adopting the denominational theological statement "Doctrinal Standards and Our Theological Task" at the 1988 General Conference, the church has made a real effort to clarify doctrinal foundations and motivate theological inquiry and exploration. Pastors who study the theological statement and use the common lectionary can indeed revitalize their preaching.

Although laity, too, are showing a great deal of interest in doctrine and theology, pastors and academicians tend to underestimate their intellectual ability. One group of pastors was asked to identify words in a draft of the Leader's Guide, Doctrinal Standards and Our Theological Task that they believed the laity would not understand. Among the terms which the pastors selected were "theology," "historic creeds," "doctrinal standards." When the results of the survey were shared with a local church study group consisting of a cross section of laity, the response was laughter—followed by anger for the insult to their intelligence.

Laity look to the preacher for theological leadership, and the primary arena for the exercise of that leadership is the pulpit. Gone is the era when the preacher was the most informed person in the community on most issues. In our age of specialization many persons in our congregation will have a grasp of science, psychology, sociology, and economics that far exceeds the preacher's. The preacher, however, is increasingly expected to show mastery of biblical interpretation, historic doctrine, and theological perception.

Preaching with biblical/doctrinal/theological integrity in contemporary times is not an easy task, however. The secular mindset of our communities requires that we understand the nonreligious manifestations of theologically based needs. For example, few contemporary United Methodists grapple with the issue of works righteousness versus grace in theological images. They do, however, struggle with such modern counterparts to religious legalism in the notion of self-worth rooted in success, achievement, power, and prestige. The gospel of grace as defined in Galatians desperately needs to be proclaimed from today's pulpit, but proclaiming it by simply recounting Paul's formulations or substituting a pop psychology of 'I'm okay; you're okay' will only widen the gulf between human need and God's grace.

Preachers must also recognize the complexity of the issues. We may be tempted to evade these problems by retreating into simplistic, pious platitudes or institutional busyness. But I am convinced that if we clarify the biblical, doctrinal, and theological perspective(s) by which contemporary issues and dilemmas are viewed, we can avoid offering naive solutions to complicated problems. The preacher's task
is first to think **theologically** about the issues; and the primary sources for such thinking are the Bible, historical theology, the community of faith, and the faith of the preacher.

Finally, the preacher must translate the abstract, Transcendent Word from scripture and doctrine into the concrete experience of human existence. Preaching is frequently too abstract, using language and images with which the listeners have no corresponding concrete identification. The language and image of the Bible and our historic creeds seem "other worldly" and ethereal to many worshipers. Preachers often assume that the listeners share their own understanding of the concepts or that they will instantly convert their concepts to private, heretical ideas. The preacher must therefore strive to (1) recognize and keep alive the tension inherent in our finite understanding of the infinite; (2) constantly probe for clarity through disciplined study, prayer, discussion; (3) cultivate awareness of and sensitivity to the theological issues present in every experience; (4) ask questions such as, What difference does this theological affirmation make in peoples' lives? What experience have I had or read about or seen that illustrates this doctrine or affirmation?

**John Wesley as Model for Biblical/Doctrinal Preaching**

John Wesley serves as a helpful model for preaching that is biblically based, doctrinally sound, and theologically probing. Wesley gave prominent attention to the central themes of Galatians and Colossians: law and grace, freedom and discipline, mutuality and accountability, new life in Christ, reconciliation, justification, and fullness of life. A brief overview of Wesley's homiletical style and content will provide a helpful framework in which the contemporary preacher can preach the Epistle lectionary texts from Galatians and Colossians.

Wesley based his preaching on the "Scriptural way of Salvation," meaning the way in which individuals and communities experience the fullness of God's prevenient, justifying, and sanctifying grace. His oral sermons, delivered without notes or manuscript, were meant to convince and convert while his written sermons taught and nurtured the converts and the leaders of the Methodist revival. The poor and marginalized heard his sermons gladly. Those who responded were gathered into class meetings where they were nurtured, admonished, and held accountable. Through the proclamation of the fullness of
God's grace and through the nurture by communities of grace, people experienced forgiveness, dignity, self-worth, reconciliation, and transformation. Wesley's message, plus the nurture experienced in small groups, were more important than the style of his preaching.

In the Letter to the Galatians Paul confronts the distortion of the relationship between law and grace, obedience and freedom, the work of the Spirit and personal and communal accountability. These same issues emerge in Wesley's encounters with the so-called "gospel ministers." Wesley used this term sarcastically to refer to those who preached the promises of Christ without the commands of Christ, a "cheap grace" with no demand. A true gospel minister, on the other hand, represented an ideal for Wesley. The true gospel minister preached the whole gospel and did not separate God's love from God's demand. He preached both justification ("Christ died for us,") and sanctification ("Christ lives in us"). In a "Letter on Preaching Christ," dated December 20, 1751, Wesley warned:

... the gospel preachers, so called, corrupt their hearers; they vitiate their taste, so that they cannot relish sound doctrine; and spoil their appetite, so that they cannot turn it into nourishment; they as it were, feed them with sweetmeats, till the genuine wine of the Kingdom seems quite insipid to them. They give them cordial upon cordial, which make them all life and spirit for the present; but, meantime, their appetite is destroyed, so that they can neither retain nor digest the pure milk of the word. 

Wesley adds in another letter, "... he that goes no farther than this [justification by faith], that does not insist upon sanctification also, upon all the fruits of faith; upon universal holiness, does not declare the whole counsel of God, and consequently is not a gospel minister." Wesley's concerns regarding the dangers of the gospel preacher can give us an idea of what constitutes "cheap grace" today. Failure to preach "Christ in all his offices" and preaching "the gospel" without law results in "healing the wounds of the people lightly." Although the immediate result, according to Wesley, may be increased growth in popularity, the long-term effect harms the preachers and the listeners.

Wesley attributed his success to "the Methodist way of preaching" which was characterized by "plain speaking to plain people" and an emphasis on both the law and the gospel, the promises of Christ and the commands of Christ. Preaching the gospel means "preaching the love of God to sinners, preaching the life, death, resurrection, and intercession of Christ, with all the blessings which, in consequence
thereof, are freely given to true believers. Preaching the law is "ex-
plaining and enforcing the commands of Christ, briefly comprised in
the Sermon on the Mount." Wesley felt that every sermon should in-
clude both law and grace, with grace receiving the dominant em-
phasis.

A casual reading of Wesley could give the impression that the law
is a prelude or condition of grace. Wesley, however, avoids the trap of
legalism by affirming that all the commands of Christ are "covered
commands." That is, whatever Christ commands Christ empowers us
to fulfill. Furthermore, through God's grace we enter into loving
relationship with Christ and are transformed by the relationship or
friendship, not by dogged obedience to external commands.

The Three Aspects of Grace

Wesley's emphasis on threefold grace is especially relevant for under-
standing and preaching the insights of Galatians. The fullness of
grace is trinitarian-prevenient, justifying, and sanctifying.
Prevenient (or "preventing" in Wesley's words) grace is available to
all. It is God's unmerited love and power directed toward humanity
in creation, in all gifts which we receive without merit. Prevenient
grace is the porch, and many people live their entire lives on the
porch. Prevenient grace, though, is only one movement or dimension
of the inexhaustible grace of God.

Justifying grace is the awareness and acceptance of the redeeming
work of Christ. It is the assurance that one is a child of God, forgiven
and reconciled. Justification is the doorway into a new identity, a new
sense of self-worth, and a new destiny. Justification includes a per-
sonal assurance that Christ died for me; he has taken away my sin;
and he claims me as a brother or sister (cf. Wesley's experience at
Aldersgate).

Sanctification represents our unending, grateful response to jus-
tification. It is "holiness of heart and life," "being made perfect in
love," "the complete restoration of the divine image." Sanctification is
all the rooms of the infinite house of grace in which we long to dwell
and feel at home.

Prevenient, justifying, and sanctifying grace are not fixed, sequen-
tial, one-time experiences. They are dynamic, interrelated, and inex-
haustible. Each prepares for the other and all three are experienced
continually. They are rooted in our trinitarian experience of the full-

DOCTRINAL/THEOLOGICAL THEMES FOR PREACHING 107
ness of God, whom we know as Father/Creator, Son/Redeemer, and Holy Spirit/Sustaining Presence.

Wesley's preaching of grace was supported by the pastoral care, instruction, and accountability experienced in the class meetings. Those who responded to the preaching were gathered in small groups where they received instruction from Mr. Wesley and/or the class leaders on the central doctrines of the faith and the biblical message. The class meetings consisted of confessions, instruction, admonishment, reproving, and loving support. Wesley's written sermons became primary sources for instruction and nurture, as did his *Explanatory Notes on The New Testament*. The annual conferences, which began in 1744, were centers of theological discussion and doctrinal clarification as Wesley and the Methodist preachers engaged in lively dialogue over issues such as the meaning of justification and sanctification, the work of the Holy Spirit, the means of salvation, and the mission of the people called Methodists. Unlike contemporary United Methodist pastors' meetings and Annual Conferences, which are largely devoted to institutional maintenance and promotion, the early Methodists in England came together in order to understand and experience the grace which they proclaimed, to hold one another accountable, and to support one another in interpreting and living out the meaning of the gospel which they proclaimed.

Themes in Wesley, Galatians, and Colossians and Their Relevance of Contemporary Preaching

Paul's responses to the challenges to the gospel in the first century parallel challenges which Wesley confronted in the eighteenth century and which we face in the latter twentieth century. Since United Methodist pastors proclaim the gospel out of the Wesleyan heritage, our preaching can be informed by considering four central themes shared by Wesley and the Epistle lections.

Before reviewing the themes of Galatians and Colossians, a few introductory comments are in order. Authorship of Galatians by Paul is firmly established by biblical scholarship. The principle issues focus on Paul's authority as an apostle (1:1–2:14), salvation by grace through faith (2:15–21), the relationship between the law and grace (3:1–4:7), the nature of Christian freedom (5:1–26), and individual and communal responsibility. As indicated by the angry, emotional tone of the letter, Paul's authority as an apostle and the validity of
the gospel which he proclaimed had been challenged. The opponents were evidently the Judaizers, who considered circumcision to be necessary for salvation and incorporation into the church (1:6-9, 3:1-4:31). For Paul, circumcision was more than a ritual; it represented the whole law—or Torah. Accepting circumcision was tantamount to accepting obedience to the Torah as necessary for incorporation into the community of Christ, which nullified Christ's own redemptive, saving work. The conflict with the Judaizers forced Paul to define to the Galatians the relationship between law and grace, faith and freedom.

The authorship and context of Colossians are less certain than those of Galatians. Pauline authorship has not been firmly established; however, scholars agree that the letter contains Pauline themes. It represents a defense of Pauline theology, whether by Paul or another writer, in the face of an early heresy. The letter addresses a church which Paul neither started nor visited, but one nurtured by Epaphras, a co-worker of Paul (1:7; 4:12). The false teaching that motivated the writing of the letter seems to contain syncretistic, philosophical, and Gnostic elements (2:16, 18, 20-23). The heresy threatened the unique supremacy of Christ by making him one among several heavenly figures. Christ is depicted in cosmic terms (1:15-23), and the cosmic Christ makes possible fullness of life and the conquest of all 'rulers and authorities' (2:6-15). The writer of Colossians, instead of directly and boldly contradicting the images of the opponents, Christianizes them by adapting elements of their mythology to describe the supremacy of Christ and the new life Christ gives (1:15-20; 2:16-19).

We now turn to four principle themes in the lections and in Wesley and their relevance for contemporary preaching.

First, Paul and Wesley are preoccupied with soteriology, the theology of salvation; and their concerns grow out of personal experience as well as intellectual perception. What is the means of salvation? How are persons redeemed, justified, and incorporated into the people of God? Is salvation to be understood as primarily a human achievement or a gift from God?

Paul's soteriology emerged from his experience as a devotee to the Torah who had concluded that the Torah could not save. Paul's diligence in keeping the law failed to overcome his alienation from God and it did not provide the assurance of incorporation into the people of God. What he experienced in Christ was a new way of reconciliation with God and a new door way into the household of God.

James A. Sanders contends that the Torah contains two dimensions. One is the narrative or story, called haggadah, which serves to
answer for Israel the question of identity, "Who are we?" A second dimension is the legal one, called halakah, which serves to answer the question of lifestyle, "What are we to do?" Sanders argues that the fundamental difference between rabbinic Judaism and Paul's perspective on the Torah was that rabbinic Judaism placed the emphasis on halakah while Paul placed it on haggadah. It would seem that prior to his experience on the Damascus Road Paul focused on "what are we to do?" in order to be God's people; while in Christ he experienced anew the haggadah, an identity rooted in God's gracious action.

Wesley's journey toward a soteriology rooted in grace parallels that of Paul. His disciplined lifestyle, his academic achievements, and his religious devotion were called into serious question after his failure as a missionary in Georgia and the personal disappointments in romance. The period between December 1737 and May 1738 was filled with searching, self-doubt, and a crisis of faith. Although Wesley's interpreters make more of his so-called heartwarming experience at Aldersgate Street, May 24, 1738, than he makes, the experience does seem to mark a shift in Wesley's soteriology from sanctification as a prelude to justification to sanctification as a consequence of justification. God has acted decisively in Christ Jesus to claim us as forgiven children of God (justification) and in faithful response we are in the process of being transformed into the image of God (sanctification). For Wesley, God's prevenient, justifying and sanctifying grace represents "the scriptural way to salvation."

Both Paul's and Wesley's preoccupation with soteriology seem alien to the contemporary secular mind. The search for salvation, even among religious people, tends to be sought through therapy, technology, political and economic triumphalism, and the cult of success and prosperity. Achievements, titles, academic and athletic awards, political power and personal prestige have become secular versions of works righteousness. The hollowness of much of contemporary life is evidenced by addictions and the rise of destructive behavior. The collapse of community makes the modern world a fertile field in which to preach Paul's and Wesley's soteriology in new images.

Secondly, Paul and Wesley devote considerable attention to the relationship between the gospel and ethics, grace and obedience, doctrine and conduct. Paul feared that the Judaizers were influencing Galatians to seek salvation through obedience to the law rather than through faith in Christ. According to Paul, the fundamental nature of the gospel is grace, God's loving disposition and action in Christ toward creation.
Justification has to do with relationship: God’s gift of a new relationship which becomes a power that both obliges us to obey God and makes the obedience possible (cf. Gal. 2:15-21).

For Paul, submission by the Gentiles to circumcision is submission to the Torah as the source of identity and rules of conduct (Gal. 5:2-12). God’s gift in Christ cannot be earned by good behavior or religious rituals. It can only be gratefully and joyfully received. Relying on anything other than God’s grace for our identity, worth, and wholeness only leads to bondage “to the flesh.” (Gal. 5:16-21).

Paul did risk the misunderstanding that salvation by grace through faith rendered ethics or conduct irrelevant. Both the Galatians and the Colossians confronted such a distortion. In Galatians Paul affirms that the law was preceded by God’s promise to Abraham (3:15-18) and served as a custodian or disciplinarian. It defined, exposed, brought to consciousness disobedience to God. The law functioned to point Israel in the direction of a new age in which God’s promises to Abraham would be fulfilled. In Colossians the writer countered the Gnostic, libertine notion that there is no relationship between Christ’s resurrection and ethical living (Col. 2:1-17); and in Galatians Paul affirms that life in the Spirit results in fruits of the Spirit (Gal. 5:16-26).

Wesley confronted the issue of the relationship between law and grace from a different perspective. He feared that in emphasizing salvation through grace the law would be ignored. He affirmed that preachers should preach the law as a means of bringing the hearers into an awareness of the need of grace. The right method of preaching, therefore, is as follows:

... after a general declaration of the love of God to sinners, and his willingness that they should be saved, to preach the law, in the strongest, the closest, the most searching manner possible; only intermixing the gospel here and there, and showing it, as it were after off. After more and more persons are convinced of sin, we may mix more and more of the gospel in order to “beget faith,” to rain into spiritual life those whom the law hath slain; but this is not to be done too hastily either.

Wesley agrees with Paul that the law is a gift and therefore cannot be separated from grace. It is a gift which confronts us with both the insufficiency of our own efforts and a means by which we can live out our response to God’s gracious gift in Jesus Christ.

Wesley emphasized the close relationship between doctrine and ethics. He disagreed with some of his contemporaries, including George Whitefield and some Moravians who preached that good
deeds prior to justification were but "splendid sins." Wesley believed that one should do what is right even if one's heart was not so inclined. In the General Rules for the Societies, the means of "doing good" include "... trampling under foot that enthusiastic doctrine that 'we are not to do good unless our hearts be free to it.' "

Holy living, being made perfect in love, is the continuing process of God's sanctifying grace, according to Wesley. Justification without sanctification is comparable to Bonhoeffer's concept of 'cheap grace.' The fullness of God's grace includes nothing less than God's persistent presence and power working to restore and fulfill the divine image in us. One can no more limit God's grace to being justified than one can limit life to being born.

The contemporary preacher continually confronts the distortion of the relationship between grace and law, doctrine and ethics. On the one hand, there exists the notion that grace is merely a superficial positive thinking about one's self, a pious form of pop psychology of self-acceptance and self-actualization. Abundant life is found in "being all you can be," feeling good about yourself, and an inner quiet achieved through escapism and denial. Freedom is defined as "doing one's own thing," the absence of restraint or accountability, and the ability to pursue one's own goals without regard to others. In such a culture of cheap grace, Paul and Wesley represent a needed corrective.

A third theme confronted by the Epistle lections and John Wesley is the particularity versus the universality of Christ.

Paul faced the crucial question of who should be included within the community of the redeemed. The Judaizers in Galatia held that converts must be incorporated into the Jewish community as a prerequisite. Contradicting such particularization, he proclaimed that justification by grace through faith was not a matter of relieving individual guilt. Rather, justification had to do with incorporation into the community of God's promises. Rather than expunging guilt, God was in Christ opening doors of inclusiveness (Gal. 2:15-21; 3:1-29).

"There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (3:28).

In Colossians the universality of God's grace in Christ is given cosmic proportions. The author takes what may be a mythic hymn and uses it to affirm that Christ is not limited to the church; instead, the whole cosmos is under the sovereignty of Christ (1:15-20). God's action in Christ reveals God's transcendent, cosmic, and eternal action to reconcile the totality of creation.

Wesley confronted in the eighteenth century the conflict between religious bigotry and what he called "the catholic spirit." In a sermon
entitled "A Caution against Bigotry," Wesley warned of limiting God's action to those of one's own "party" or religious group. Wesley's sermon "Catholic Spirit" presents his conviction that love for God and neighbor is the heart of religion and that the catholic (universal) spirit is catholic (universal) love. This principle runs through his life and works: In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, freedom; in all things, charity. Wesley, like Paul, found in Jesus Christ a spirit of universality which expressed itself in an inclusive love.

As we confront the diversity, or pluralism, of our contemporary world, we may well ask: How is Christ to be preached in a world where less than 25 percent of the people are identified as "Christian"? What does it mean to affirm that there is no salvation apart from Jesus Christ? Has belief in Jesus Christ become a contemporary expression of the position of the Judaizers in Galatia? The contemporary preacher would do well to ponder both Galatians and Colossians, then move across the centuries and spend a long visit with Mr. Wesley as preparation for proclaiming the particularity and universality of Christ.

A fourth theme in the Epistle lessons and the preaching and work of Wesley is individual freedom/accountability and covenantal community.

As stated previously, Paul's emphasis on justification has to do primarily with the means by which people are incorporated into God's covenantal community. Through Christ we are initiated into God's community as an unmerited gift. We are set free from the law, but the freedom is not individual autonomy. We are set free to love, and through love we are "to become slaves to one another" (Gal. 5:13). "For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, (You shall love your neighbor as yourself." (Gal. 5:14). The "works of the flesh" identified in Galatians 5:16ff are misuses of freedom and violations of community; while the "fruit of the Spirit" have to do with promoting community (Gal. 5:22f.). Accountability to God includes "bearing one another's burdens," reconciling those who have fallen and working for the good of all (Gal. 6:1-2, 10). The new life in Christ results in putting to death that which fractures community and hurts others (Col. 3:1-9), living the truth that "there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Sycian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!" (Col. 3:11). It is letting Christ rule in our hearts, "to which indeed you were called in the one body" (Col. 3:15).

As the Body of Christ (cf. 1 Cor. 12; Eph. 4:1-16), members of the covenantal community share in a mutual dependency. Members are related to one another, not as one is related to an organization but as
to an organism—as a branch is to a tree, a bud to a flower, a neutron to an atom, leaven to a loaf. Therefore, talk of freedom as autonomy or “doing as I please” is impossible. Mutual dependency, accountability, support, and mission characterize the body of Christ.

Wesley’s success in proclaiming the gospel of prevenient, justifying, and sanctifying grace cannot be separated from the class meetings and societies. In the small groups which met weekly, these questions were asked of each member: (1) What sins have you committed since we last met? (2) What temptations have you faced from which you were delivered? (3) How were you delivered? (4) What have you committed for which you are uncertain as to whether it was sin? In the context of confidentiality, love, and support persons were held accountable and assisted in living in response to the grace which they experienced. Furthermore, they provided aid to the poor and expressed love to those enduring hardship. Wesley’s own commitment to the poor and marginalized, their response to the gospel and their participation in communities of grace reflected Paul’s balance in Galatians and Colossians between individual freedom/accountability and covenantal community. It also provided visible affirmation to Wesley’s contention that there is no holiness apart from social (communal) holiness.

Perhaps the most formidable challenge for today’s preacher in western culture is extricating the gospel from rampant individualism. A culture that places prime value on individual freedom, individual initiative, individual self-fulfillment has difficulty hearing, much less believing, a gospel rooted in God’s redemptive grace active on behalf of and experienced in community. A society which tends to define freedom as the absence of accountability resists a freedom which grows from being a slave to agape. However, the proclamation and experience of a cosmic Christ whose sovereign love binds all together offers the best hope to our fragmented and heavily armed world, in which many of God’s children are hungry, homeless, sick, addicted, enslaved, and alienated.

**Galatians 3:23-29**

The preacher may need to choose one of two emphases in the lection—the custodial role played by the law or the new order of existence brought by Christ. Either can be a fruitful contribution to any congregation. Rules do serve a positive purpose; indeed, they are necessary. However, life put together by obedience to external expectations results in either self-righteousness or despair; blind conformity which rejects diversity or iconoclastic nonconformity which makes virtue of
rebellion. Life motivated and shaped by confidence in God's promise that we are all children of God is freed from the burden of earning or proving one's worth or identity. One loses the need to relate to others in terms of rankings or racial/national/religious/gender characteristics. Our shared identity and worth are rooted in the God to whom we belong; not in our racial characteristics, our national origins, our religious affiliations, or our personal or collective achievements. All distinctions have been removed, and the church exists to live out in its life God's vision of a new humanity. As a redeemed people, the church is a counter-community where barriers are removed. All persons are affirmed as children of God and live a lifestyle which reflects that identity.

Galatians 5:1, 13-25

What does it mean to be free? Recent events in eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union illustrate the deep-seated longing for political freedom; however, the assumption that removal of totalitarianism brings freedom is an illusion. Although freedom implies the idea of choice among options, the absence of oppression, the removal of emotional barriers to wholeness and health, and a self-mastery which enables one to transcend some limitations, the freedom of which Paul speaks is this: accepting the liberating work of Christ as the source of ultimate security. Paul warns that trusting anything other than God's grace in Christ for freedom and security will lead to slavery. The preacher might wish to read Jacques Ellul's The Ethics of Freedom for a probing analysis of Christian freedom.

The sermon may begin with a question: Do we really want to be free? Freedom is risky and therefore produces insecurity. Like the prodigal who came to himself in Luke's story (Luke 15:11-32), we may prefer to be treated as a hired hand than as a son or daughter. We may use our freedom to destroy a sense of community by using competitiveness, coercion, manipulation to pursue one's self-interest. One whose freedom is rooted in grace, however, can live with insecurity. God's grace can weave even our wrong choices into the fabric of wholeness. Furthermore, freedom that is a fruit of grace expresses itself in love, not in self-seeking. It is the freedom expressed in the ability and willingness to give up one's own life for the other, as the only one who was truly free gave up his life for us all.
Galatians 6:7-18

The lection, it seems, inappropriately divides chapter 6. The central theme is the tension expressed in personal accountability and responsibility for one another as people who "belong to Christ" (5:24). Two points are clearly made: within the community of Christ, we are both held and held accountable. If any one is detected in a transgression, those "who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness" (6:1). In the community of Christ, we are to hold one another in compassion, forgiveness, and reconciliation.

This does not mean, however, that accountability is to be avoided. "Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow." (6:7). Grace is not synonymous with indulgence or deliberately ignoring wrongdoing.

A community formed and shaped by grace both holds one another and holds one another accountable. It lives in terms of "the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ" (6:14) which has brought into being a new creation (6:15).

Colossians 1:1-14

The community at Colossae is troubled by false teachers who apparently rely on a superior knowledge (2:8, 18), and who consider Christ one among many angels or cosmic powers (2:8, 20). At stake is the uniqueness and sovereignty of Christ. The writer, perhaps Paul but definitely one who is able to defend Pauline theology, is confronted with a church confused about the uniqueness and universality of Christ. He begins with a greeting and thanksgiving (1:1-8), followed by a prayer for community (1:9-12), and an introduction to a Christological hymn (1:13-14).

Many preachable ideas emerge from this pericope. One is the affirmative tone in which the writer approaches a potentially explosive and divisive issue. He writes out of his own faith in the gospel and confidence in the church's faith, not patronizing them but recognizing and commending their genuine faith.

The sermon could productively focus on the tone in which the church deals with controversy in general. The church couches much of its debate in judgmental, negative, scolding tone, whether the issue is homosexuality or trinitarian language or doctrinal standards. This pericope is a marked contrast to such a style of leadership.

Another potential theme for the sermon centers on the idea of saints (1:2, 4, 12). An age which relegates saints to stained glass, the distant past, or irrelevant monasticism would do well to pause to con-
sider the context in which the Colossians letter uses the term. The
term connotes the faithfulness and holiness of ordinary people of God
who live extraordinary lives in response to God’s claim upon them.

**Colossians 1:21-29**

This pericope follows immediately upon the profound Christological
hymn which affirms Christ’s supremacy over the whole created order
(vv. 15-20). What is the significance of Christ’s cosmic supremacy for
the local congregation? That is the central question to which the
pericope responds.

First, since through Christ “God was pleased to reconcile to him-
self all things” (v. 20), the Colossians have been reconciled to God and
to one another. The church’s identity and mission are rooted in God’s
reconciling acts in Jesus Christ. The church’s identity as a social in-
stitution is superseded by its origin in and existence for reconciliation.

Secondly, since Christ is “the firstborn from the dead” (v. 18), Paul
can rejoice in his suffering (v. 24), which then participates in Christ’s
afflictions. A community that originates in God’s reconciling action
and serves as an agent of reconciliation always risks suffering; a con-
gregation cannot identify with people who are hurting without itself
getting hurt. The willingness to enter into the sufferings of an
alienated and broken world is glaringly absent from much of the con-
temporary emphasis on church growth and congregational develop-
ment. Renewal is not the result of strategies for growth; instead, God
brings new life when those who have been reconciled live out the im-
pclications of their reconciliation.

Thirdly, since the mystery of God has been uncovered in Jesus
Christ, the church lives toward a new future, “the hope of glory” (v.
27) in which everyone may be presented as “mature in Christ” (v. 28).
The goal toward which the church lives is Christlikeness. We are a
people who live toward a vision, which is nothing less than the res-
oration of the divine image in all people as revealed in Christ Jesus.

**Colossians 2:6-15**

Today’s lection divides into two parts: (1) an appeal to live according
to Christ’s lordship or supremacy (vv. 6-8); and (2) the basis for such
an appeal (vv. 9-15).

What is the central focus of our identity? Since Christ is the cosmic
Lord, Christ must be the one who shapes our identity. The fundamen-
tal confession of our faith is “Christ Jesus the Lord” (v. 6). As Lord,
our lives are to be “rooted and built up in him and established in the
faith" (v. 7). Centering life in any other reality, whether a "philosophy" or "human tradition" or "elemental spirits of the universe" (v. 8), is to be made captive to deceit and to forfeit God's purpose for our lives. In an age which beckons us to center our identity and worth in achievements, success, possessions, professions, and a myriad of other elemental spirits, we would do well to re-examine the implications of the Lordship of Christ on our identity and worth. The basis for the appeal to live according to the Lordship of Christ is threefold (vv. 9-15). First, Christ is the full manifestation of God. The fullness of divinity lives in him (v. 9); therefore in Christ we, too, can experience the fullest expression of the divine reality. The acceptance of a lesser reality as the object of ultimate loyalty only leads to dwarfing of our God-given destiny.

The second basis for the appeal is that through baptism we have experienced the "circumcision of the heart" (vv. 11-14). In baptism we participate with Christ in the cosmic drama of dying and rising (v. 12). The resurrection which God brought in Christ has now been effected with us, giving us power to become more than conquerors.

Finally, all competing powers for human loyalty have been annulled through the death of Christ Jesus on the cross (vv. 14-15). All "principalities and powers" (v. 16) have been defeated. Therefore, only the One who has defeated all earthly and cosmic powers can bring our identity to full fruition.

Colossians 3:1-11

Today's pericope contains two basic movements: (1) our identity and destiny resulting from our baptism (vv. 1-4); and (2) the implications of our identity for who we ought to be (vv. 5-11). The passage is in the familiar pattern of a declaration (who we are) and the imperative (what we ought to do and be) in response.

Our identity has both a present quality and a future expectation. Already we have died to our old selves and been raised with Christ (vv. 1, 3). Our life is "hidden with Christ in God" (v. 3). There is more to our identity than biology, sociology and psychology. Who we are is bound up with Christology, for the risen Christ is the source of our lives--our values, our worth, our destiny. But what we are presently is only an intimation of ultimate destiny "which will be revealed with him in glory" (v. 4). First John expresses the insight: "Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is" (1 John 3:2).
Identity expresses itself in actions. We are known by our deeds. Because we have been given a new identity which moves toward full maturity, we are to "put to death . . . whatever is earthly; fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed which is idolatry" (v. 5). The writer clearly affirms that "being raised with Christ" does not remove the notion of accountability to God and the community (v. 6). Personal morality and social responsibility are manifestations of the new life (vv. 7-10). They are evidences that we have been clothed with a new self, "which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator" (v. 10).

The new identity which expresses itself in a new lifestyle results in a new inclusive community. As people claiming their identity and life in Christ, "there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all" (v. 11).

John Wesley, as we have seen, charged the 'gospel ministers' of his day with preaching the gospel's declarative without proclaiming the imperative. He admonished the Methodists to preach both:

God loves you; therefore, love and obey him. Christ died for you; therefore, die to sin. Christ is risen; therefore, rise in the image of God. Christ liveth evermore; therefore, live to God, till you live with him in glory.

Wesley added this appropriate reminder: "This is the scriptural way, the Methodist way, the true way. God grant that we may never turn therefrom, to the right hand or to the left."

Notes

4. Ibid.
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