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A Learned Ministry?

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A Lectionary for the Next Generation
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Introduction

One of my most memorable instructors in graduate school was a fellow student, further along in the program, who taught introductory Hebrew. She was extremely bright and vivacious—so vivacious, in fact, that the word bulldozer comes to mind. But she was patient with my slow progress in the language. Once, in response to my frustration, she quoted a little aphorism that has stayed with me through the years: education is a process of sedimentation. She meant slow down, you can’t get this overnight, only by gradually building of layer after layer of comprehension.

If getting an education is a slow, steady process, then you have to wonder how that’s ever going to happen at a seminary. People working for an M.Div. degree have to study at a feverish pace just to keep up. Well-intentioned overachievers typically have the stuffing knocked out of them in the first semester. The message seems to be: theological education is fascinating but you have to learn it fast because classes are many, time is short, and this school is expensive. There’s simply too much going on for the sedimentation process to be very effective.

So the question remains, how can we educate seminary students in their own tradition so that they can guide everyday Christians in matters of faith? Marjorie Suchocki argues that we must all think about this together, including seminary faculties and administrations, boards of ordained ministries, and clergy and lay Christians. Her list of suggestions for improvement may just hold the key to genuine reform in theological education.

This issue features three articles about the Revised Common Lectionary (1992). This lectionary is a product of the Consultation on Common Texts (CCT), an ecumenical group of worship specialists that created the Common Lectionary in 1983. Andy
Langford offers a fine background to the process of generating a lectionary. He tells us what was at stake, some of the crucial differences between approaches, and some of the advantages of the new lectionary. What is clear is that this is not just change for change's sake. The revised Common Lectionary shows the result of hard work and solid theological reflection that can serve us well in our congregations for years to come.

But that is not to say that this or any lectionary can satisfy all the spiritual needs of Christian communities of faith. Marjorie Procter-Smith was called on by the Revised Common Lectionary committee to give a feminist critique of the lectionary, and her article is the substance of her presentation to them. Procter-Smith asked, What does a lectionary really do in a community? What message does it convey about what is normative, about whose stories really count? How can we include readings about biblical women that avoids passing on the patriarchalism of the texts themselves?

If Marjorie Procter-Smith sees the lectionary against a larger tapestry of Christian worship, then Douglas Mills sees it against the horizon of the Bible as a whole. The lectionary is only a fraction of the anthology of books that make up the scripture, and pastors need to be involved with the larger picture on a daily basis. Thus he argues for the development of a daily lectionary which will provide order to reading and meditating on God's word. Although Mills wrote in 1986, when the Common Lectionary had just completed its first complete cycle, his words also apply to the revised Common Lectionary. Fortunately, liturgical scholars are in the process of developing a daily lectionary that builds on the revision. One version, written by Hoyt Hickman, has been published over the past few issues of Sacramental Life (years A and B only so far).

This summer, as we contemplate our hopes and plans in mid-year, let us remember that we can plant and water carefully, but God gives the growth. May the blessings of this rich season be with you!

Sharon Hels
A Learned Ministry?

Long ago when North America was still the colonies, the churches established schools for the express purpose of ensuring that we might have a learned ministry. Since United Methodism had not yet been born, these schools were in the Reformed tradition. Much later, in the first third of the nineteenth century, Methodists also turned to the need for establishing theological seminaries motivated by a similar concern. With the growth of the denomination and the increasing levels of education among the Methodist peoples, the old Wesleyan model of educating clergy individually through a mentoring pastor was no longer sufficient. Not without controversy, the denomination moved toward the establishment of schools that could insure that we would have "an educated ministry among us."1 And so the first such schools were established by the Methodists in Newbury, Vermont, in 1840, and by the United Brethren in Dayton, Ohio, in 1871.2

Some 110 years later, Robert Lynn, then associated with The Lilly Foundation, argued for a return to the paradigm of the pastor as a learned scholar who, through a solid understanding of Christian texts and traditions, could challenge and guide the congregation on issues of life and faith.3 The argument for the return of such a model was itself witness to the loss of this model. And its loss raises the

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uneasy question: If challenging and guiding a congregation on issues of life and faith through a critical understanding of our texts and our traditions ceases to be dominant in the model of the clergy, can we assume that congregations will receive such pastoring? Or is it the case that we will have congregations who have little knowledge of their history, either as United Methodists or as Christians with a two-thousand-year-old history? Will we have congregations who know the shibboleths of doctrine without any understanding of the complicated process whereby doctrines come into being? Will congregations be biblically literate? The living nature of the Christian tradition depends upon the answers to the above questions. Only as we live from that tradition in faithful openness to contemporary needs can we be most deeply open to God’s call to mission and, therefore, to our own transformation. A learned clergy, deeply knowledgeable about texts, traditions, and transformation, can share such knowledge with a congregation and thus better equip us all for ministry in the world.

A Crisis in Theological Education

I suggest that the contemporary call for a learned ministry, initiated by Lynn and echoed in various ways by scholars such as Edward Farley, John B. Cobb, Jr., Joseph Hough, and Charles Wood, is a witness to a crisis in theological education that threatens the viability of such a ministerial paradigm. Is a learned ministry indeed possible? Given the conditions within which theological education must take place, can we expect these three brief years to create a sufficient foundation for a learned ministry among us?

The factors working against a positive answer are as follows. First, entering seminarians only rarely come to us bringing any previous studies in religion. We can no longer count on persons conveniently receiving a call to ministry in time to choose a college major in religion studies! And even in those cases when persons decide on ministry as teenagers, they are sometimes advised to major more broadly in the humanities, leaving studies in Christianity until seminary. In any case, most students in our entering classes are prepared mainly by the process of living dedicated Christian lives in congregations. Too often these students are not familiar with biblical
content, let alone biblical scholarship; they are ignorant of Christian history in either its positive or its negative dimensions, and they know little of theology beyond creedal phrases. This means, of course, that all seminary courses must presume a bare entry-level knowledge, so that we begin "masters" study at an introductory stage.

A second factor is the ever-increasing cost of theological education. Our neophyte students, ever caught in the situation of too little financial aid, must often work up to a forty-hour week in order to maintain home, family, tuition, and books. The educational result is that class assignments such as reading are often given a low priority. Class lectures increasingly carry the whole burden of the educational task.

The final and most critical factor is the increasing complexity of ministry itself, such that from ten to fourteen different disciplines, a small host of denominational requirements, and some attention to the varieties of ministerial settings must be supposedly "mastered" within three academic years. Most masters degrees focus upon a single subject area, but ministry is like an ever-diversifying vocation, requiring more and more subject areas to provide a beginning competence level. If many subjects must be taught at the introductory level to students with barely enough time to study, is there not a built-in challenge to the goal of a learned ministry among us?

Models of Ministry

How did we arrive at such a state, and what is to be done? I suggest that a brief exploration of the models of ministry produced over these past decades will clarify some of the problems. Furthermore, the church as a whole, and not the seminaries alone, must together approach a resolution; for I am not willing to give up on the necessity that the church indeed shall know a learned ministry among us, both clerical and lay.

The probing of different models of ministry began in earnest midcentury with the groundbreaking work called The Church and Its Ministry by H. Richard Niebuhr. The new model proposed was the minister as pastoral director. Deeply embedded in this model was a
vision of the congregation itself engaged in ministry, with the pastor exercising the role of facilitator of ministry. Niebuhr saw such a role as being deeply theological in nature. But one of the major effects of the model was the increasing tendency to translate it from the proposed pastoral director to pastoral administrator. Correspondingly, it became important to include studies in administration in seminary curricula. In this modest way, the proliferation of subject matters to be mastered began.

A decade later, Hans Künig proposed a servant model of ministry, and about the same time in America the liberation theologies began coming into being. The servant model posed the pastor under the image of “diaconia,” and as servant with the church to the oppressed within society. The notion of the reign of God as preached by Jesus was interpreted as a dominant call to the social good. In Künig’s words, “God’s cause is humanity’s well-being”, in liberation parlance,” God has a preferential option for the poor.” Within North American churches, this call meant preparation of seminarians to participate in social causes, so that the field of sociology, both of culture and of knowledge, became essential to ministerial education. Eventually sociology of religion spawned studies in ethnography, anthropology, and theology of culture, as well as studies in the new literatures of liberation theologies. Not all seminaries could afford the addition of a sociologist on their faculties, in which cases the new subject matter was often subsumed within the fields of ethics or theology. But however it was dealt with, the age of theological innocence was over: henceforth, all theological studies must perforce deal with a cultural and political critique of theology by bringing to light the hidden norm of privilege. And the curriculum was enlarged accordingly.

In the seventies yet another model of ministry came to prominence, that of the minister as the one uniquely entrusted with the care of souls. Henri Nouwen’s book, *The Wounded Healer,* captured the essence of this model, reinforcing the movement already begun in the late sixties to increase the importance of pastoral care in the curriculum. Clinical pastoral education courses and internships were created, and denominations began making such experience a requirement for ordination, which in turn required seminaries to include such offerings in their curricula.
In the early eighties, the model of the minister as evangelist was promulgated, partly in response to a perceived overemphasis upon the social ministry of the church and partly due to the perduring call to proclamation in word as well as deed that is at the heart of Christianity. Chairs in evangelism were accordingly established, and courses in evangelism correspondingly mushroomed, each with claim to inclusion in curricula requirements.

By this time, the model of ministry was not a matter of successive formulations, each of which replaced the others, but a matter of accretion. For certainly each model stressed an essential facet of ministry: pastors are called upon to be administrators, to be servant leaders in the social mission of the church, to be carers of souls, to be evangelists. Thus, courses were not dropped from the curricula—and indeed, since faculties now included tenured professors who were experts in each of these disciplines, how could the courses be dropped? Rather, the number of disciplines required to equip persons for the ever more complex vocation of ministry simply increased. A typical required curriculum in seminaries included Old Testament, New Testament, history, theology, philosophy, evangelism, ethics, sociology, administration, preaching, worship, psychology of religion, pastoral care, religious education, denominational studies (usually three courses), field education, and often clinical pastoral education—and each of these disciplines had to begin at the introductory level.

But this was hardly the end of it. During all this time the understanding of all religion, and not just Christianity, was rapidly increasing in the academy through the event of the history of religions school. The impact on preparation for Christian ministry lies in the hard fact that until one understands a religion other than one's own, one does not fully understand one's own. To read the religious texts of another culture and to see the formation and function of another religion increases one's sensitivity to the inner structure and social functions of Christianity as a religion and gives Christian leaders a new perspective on the relation of Christianity to other religions (often in our neighborhoods, and no longer conveniently overseas). Such knowledge also illumines the relation of structures within Christianity to the surrounding culture. One ponders anew some of the possible extensions of John Wesley's ecumenically wise advice to "think and let think" in our current age.
of religious pluralism. Preparation for ministry in today’s small world is no longer adequate if future pastors do not begin to understand at least one religion other than Christianity.

There is yet one more area that is of increasing importance to a contemporary model of ministry: the role of the arts in culture and religion. This is mediated by the dominance of films in our society, but in truth a full understanding of liturgy, church architecture, and even the use of metaphor in preaching requires some formal understanding of the arts. And so once again, an area of undisputed importance is introduced into seminary education, vying for its own space on our faculties and in an increasingly crowded curriculum.

Meanwhile, also in the eighties, constituencies and denominations asked that the seminaries include such things as courses in financial management, spirituality, ministry with persons with handicapping conditions, urban ministries, rural ministries, and various ethnic histories in curricula requirements. As a seminary dean at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C., I was regularly besieged by earnest individuals or groups strongly urging us to add a particular course to the required curriculum, or at least to make it available as an elective. They found it hard to comprehend, of course, that by now the M.Div. student had precious few electives; electives are largely the luxury of students in the other programs of our schools. But without electives, of course, students are hard-pressed for the opportunity to go beyond the introductory level of requirements.

Is it any wonder, then, that Edward Farley’s 1983 inquiry into the unity of theological education, *Theologia*, was so avidly read by seminary faculties and administrators? Farley called attention to the fragmentation of theological education and argued in part that the unity of theological education is the “habitus” of virtue inculcated through the seminary experience. Meanwhile, in the School of Theology at Claremont, John B. Cobb, Jr. and Joseph Hough proposed a model of the minister as a theological practitioner and practical theologian and suggested a corresponding control over the curriculum that would put field education into a post-seminary internship, thus freeing up some of the packed curriculum for further work in biblical studies, history, and theology. Charles Wood at Perkins School of Theology developed a complementary model of ministry in his book *Vision and Discernment* that also called upon
the minister to lead the congregation into transformative mission.\textsuperscript{10} And at Candler, James Hopewell’s work in congregational ministry was publicized posthumously in a book called \textit{Beyond Clericalism}, edited by Joseph Hough and Barbara Wheeler.\textsuperscript{11}

Throughout this literature runs the assumption that ministerial education has somehow gone awry in our time and that by attending to the paradigm of ministry and fashioning theological education accordingly, we might be able to strengthen a system that no longer seems to work as well as it once did. A second theme is the renewed emphasis upon the congregation as also involved in the ministry of the church. This introduces a third theme, which is the role of the pastor in equipping the congregation for ministry. And this, of course, is the crux of the problem. Ministry is not an end in itself, nor is the congregation the end purpose of ministry. Rather, the end of ministry is the mission of the church in the worship and work of God. If all of these disciplines are required for effective ministry (in which the congregation is also engaged), then are they not in some sense required for the congregation as well as the clergy? But if the clergy’s education has included all of these disciplines at an introductory level, how is the clergy able to share them with the congregation, much less be expert in each of these disciplines her or himself? So we return to the original question: Is it realistic any longer to expect seminary education to provide a learned ministry among us?

\textbf{A Rationale for Ministry}

Given the curricula logistics I have here outlined, it is probably evident that I feel some reluctant cynicism with regard to this question. I fear that under these conditions, all of our seminaries tend to graduate students who know a little about a lot but not much of anything. We provide an ethos rather than an education. But I am not at all ready to give up on the hope of a learned ministry. I use the remainder of the article to outline the reasons for my zeal and my hope that together we might find ways to approximate the goal.

Why do I consider a learned clergy so vital for the church? As in every age, we live in “perilous times.” I have been working for the past year on a book on original sin, which is itself a depressing
subject. But to deal with the reality of sin is to face head-on the violation of the image of God that pervades our world. Of course, this has always been the case, but today the world is so much smaller, our capacity for destruction is so much greater, and the damage we actually inflict is increasingly disastrous. I mention only the needless starvation in Somalia; the new Auschwitz that is being created in Bosnia-Herzegovina; the Los Angeles riots or uprising (depending on one’s perspective); the S&L scandal which has impoverished many and will continue to do so; the apparent increase in child and woman abuse; the escalating violence among children as well as adults; and, of course, our participation, along with the rest of the world, in laying waste this good earth and its atmosphere. Redevelopment of the doctrine of original sin never seemed so valid.

But what does this have to do with a learned ministry?

I accept Hans Künng’s dictum that God’s cause is humanity’s well-being and that the task of the church in the world today is the deep worship of God through mission. John Wesley said, “One of the principal rules of religion is, to lose no occasion of serving God. And since [God] is invisible to our eyes, we are to serve [God] in our neighbor; which [God] receives as if done to [God’s own] self in person, standing visibly before us.”12 We are called to worship God through our services of worship and through that other kind of worship, which is simply service. I am convinced that God calls the church to the deep ministry of being a transforming force toward the good in society.

But such statements are easily stated and harder to carry out. Such ministry requires more than a modest effort; it calls for congregations to live deeply into their Christian identity and from their Christian identity. It calls upon congregations to be sensitive to our own participation in the ills of society that we are called to address; it calls on congregations to know their history as a people ever involved both in the perpetuation and transformation of history’s sorrows; it calls upon congregations to be deeply immersed in the gospel texts that offer courage and empowerment for ministry; it calls upon congregations to bring theological assessment to the issues of their time and place. And it calls upon congregations to use their various expertise in all the vocations that make up our society in service to God’s call to humanity’s well-being. In short,
congregations need to utilize their secular abilities and theological abilities if they are to be effectively engaged in mission.

But by and large our laity, while quite intelligent and highly educated, are religiously illiterate. Do not our seminarians come from the laity? And if those from the congregations who feel called to ordained service are religiously illiterate, can we really hope that the congregations have a much higher level of religious literacy? And why should we expect it? We teach our children the things of God one hour a week; seldom do we require homework or accountability for what is learned. If we taught mathematics or reading in the same way that we teach religion, parents would rise in a furor, demanding change. But seldom do parents protest that education in Christianity is not rigorous enough; knowing little themselves, they require little of their children. We have congregations who are deeply committed to caring for one another, to participating in Sunday worship, and to being faithful in their giving—but they act out of baptized common sense and do not even realize that more might be necessary.

How is the clergy to equip the congregation for ministry? For given the proliferation of subject matters, the pastor has seldom had the luxury of more than one or two courses in any subject. Congregations often think the pastor does not share biblical or theological studies with them because the subjects are too complex and too deep to be shared. The reality is more apt to be that the pastor is too unsure of the subject matter to begin to share it, lest his or her so-called expertise be exposed. Instead, the pastor falls upon the practical functions of ministry in administration and the individual care of souls, taking continuing education courses in these subjects to increase effectiveness in these visible fields, as opposed to the invisible fields of biblical studies, church history, or theology. I see it in our D.Min. programs: here I think we see the cream of the ministerial crop, exceedingly fine and decent people, with a work week unbelievably filled with the complex tasks of ministry, coming back to seminary hungry to learn. For indeed, even though they have been in ministry for a number of years, their knowledge in biblical studies, theology, and, above all, church history is still rudimentary. We do not have a learned clergy; how can we expect a learned laity?
Practical Suggestions
for Renewing Theological Education

But what is to be done? Our faculties are expert at juggling curricula; we find innovative ways to package the many courses we are called upon to offer so that we might increase the effectiveness of any one course. We arrange the sequence of courses to maximize the continuities of the disciplines. And we work long hours in individual consultations with students, helping them to develop their theologies, all the while seeing how difficult a task that is on the basis of but one background course. The fact is that no matter how we juggle the curriculum, we are still faced with the logistical fact that given the number of courses we must offer, we can never give our students enough.

Furthermore, it is not really possible for us to decrease the requirements of the curriculum for the simple political reason that by now we have faculties whose areas of expertise lie in all these various disciplines. And indeed, each discipline is by now essential to that complex vocation, ministry. To require a curriculum, then, is to require that each discipline be represented among the requirements. Nor is the problem solved if we move to an elective curriculum, since this requires specifying areas in which the electives must be taken; and, again, logistics mitigate against depth coverage.

Yet if we are to have a learned clergy among us, it is essential that seminarians go beyond a rudimentary knowledge of biblical studies, church history, and theology, for the pastor must be the bearer of the texts and the traditions to the congregation. Furthermore, the pastor must be capable of doing so not toward the simple repetition of the texts and traditions but in all the living dynamism of texts which continue to be transformative and hence continue to transform the living, ongoing tradition.

I earlier suggested that the seminaries alone cannot adequately address the problem but that seminaries and denominations working together might. Since I am much impressed by John Wesley's habit of offering "advices" concerning his own theological statements, I dare to follow his example here. But ultimately the resolution to the problem must be a corporate resolution, worked out together, so that my suggestions can be only starting points.
First, it might be that we need to follow the practice of some other denominations by increasing the rigor of our ordination examination process. If in fact we are convinced that a solid foundation in biblical studies is essential for ministry, why not develop standards that require, like the Presbyterians, seminarians to pass a Bible content exam at the beginning of their seminary studies? If professors could assume some knowledge of Bible content on the part of their students, they could move on much more quickly to deeper studies. And why should we not require that prospective elders pass rigorous tests in biblical studies, history, and theology? The effect of such requirements would be that our future clergy would have to use their deacon years to build on the foundation begun in seminary, whether through continued formal or informal study, in order to pass the exams.

Second, we could increase the rigor of our continuing education requirements, using this opportunity to help our clergy to engage in lifelong learning. Several years ago I undertook a study of continuing education programs. My findings indicated that we overutilize continuing education for increasing skills in ministry and underutilize the opportunity for increasing our biblical, historical, or theological knowledge. Further, if my own experience is any guide, the units depend only on the actual hours spent together, with neither preparation nor assignments. I sometimes wonder as to the real contribution to increased depth of ministry offered through such occasions. But what if we put teeth into our continuing education programs? What if we required that two years following seminary education, a pastor must enter a five-year period in which she or he would take at least seven courses in one single subject matter selected from the fields of biblical studies, history, or theology? And what if the assignments in these courses were not academic papers but adaptation of the subject matter to the congregational setting? What if the assignment is to incorporate the subject matter in one’s preaching ministry? Or one’s teaching ministry? And supposing the congregation rather than the professor “passed” the pastor? But that, of course, sounds dangerous.

To continue my speculations, what if upon the conclusion of these first five years the pastor could take an academic rest for one or two years and then commence a second five-year period of study in another discipline? Supposing this fairly rigorous stretch of
continuing education in the texts and traditions were accompanied with intensive workshop opportunities in the various ministerial tasks, such as administration, preaching, education, and pastoral care? Given the complexity of ministry and the introductory nature of most seminary courses, could we not build a system of lifelong education—and in the process, see to a vibrantly learning and learned clergy among us?

Ah, you might say, but if the pastor is involved in all this learning, how is the pastor available to lead the congregation in the mission you earlier claimed was so vital? Ah, I might answer, if the pastor is sharing this learning with the congregation along the way, isn’t it just possible that the congregation will also capture the vision of mission within its own community in ever deeper ways? Cannot the Spirit use the opportunity of deeper engagement with the things of faith to bring about deeper engagement with Christian mission? For mission is our identity.

Yet a third suggestion. We have an enormous opportunity through the parallel ministry track, the diaconate. Since we need a learned clergy for the sake of a learned laity, might we not concentrate directly on the laity as well as on the clergy? Traditionally, the diaconate focused on vocations such as music, education, and service ministries within the church. But what about the possibility of a new kind of deacon as a congregational scholar in Bible, history, or theology? I frequently meet persons coming to seminary for a masters degree simply because they want to learn more about the Christian faith. They usually come to seminary as part-time students, since they continue to maintain their professions; their goal is not to change occupations but to become better-informed Christians. Supposing there was a role for such persons in the diaconate? Unlike future elders, such people have the luxury of focusing upon a single discipline in their masters program. Could we not encourage such study and ordain persons completing such a course as deacons? Their work as congregational scholar would not be a paid service; their livelihood would continue to come from their professions. But would we not have created a conversation partner for the pastor and a consultant in things theological for the congregation as a whole?

Fourth, we need to give greater consideration to materials for lay education. Congregations may be religiously illiterate, but
ignorance does not mean stupidity. United Methodists are committed
to higher education; why should we assume a low level of
intelligence when it comes to adult studies? Actually, of course, we
have made innovative progress with our education programs, such as
the discussion we encouraged surrounding the Bishops’ letter “In
Defense of Creation” a few years ago; we have also introduced the
Covenant-Discipleship concept, and the current Discipling materials.
But do we have study guides that congregations may work with as
they directly confront John Wesley’s writings? Wesley wrote for
“plain” people with a disarming directness and simplicity. His
sermons were written for lay folk who were preaching; why not
utilize them intentionally for lay folk called as congregations into
ministry? I have often thought that A Plain Account of Christian
Perfection—that marvelous document of Methodism—should be
taught in every parish, so that United Methodists can see firsthand
how Christian faith entails continued growth in love, even to the
point of being open to learning from those with whom we
theologically disagree. Wesley pits no opposition between “works of
piety” and “works of mercy,” but rather understands each as the
depth dimension of the other. Why not take these plain accounts to
congregations and expect them to become who they are—that
peculiar people among the Christians known as Methodists? Why not
take as a goal that all United Methodists should be given the
opportunity and encouragement to study the works of John Wesley?

Fifth, since in most of our institutions financial aid is never
enough to support a seminarian through school, could we not
reconsider the proportion of our denominational budget that goes
toward that great mercy accorded to all our seminaries and
seminarians, the Ministerial Education Fund? If the future of our
church depends upon a leadership that provides “an educated
ministry among us” for the sake of the whole mission and ministry
of the church, should not this fund be increased so that students
might spend less of their time scrambling to meet tuition, rent, and
other expenses and gain more time for study?

Sixth, with regard to M.Div. education itself, Joseph Hough
shared with me a vision of creating a Summer Institute for Parish
Ministry. Here clergy and seminarians could study together the
complex of functions that make up the practice of
ministry—certainly not in isolation from biblical studies, history,
and theology, but in such a way that these dimensions of the whole spectrum of ministry would be brought into view. Would denominations support a redevelopment of the M.Div. curriculum so that the academic year was focused on the texts and the traditions, critically understood in terms of their cultural context? The one so-called practical discipline that would thread its way through such study would be homiletics, with every class giving some focus to the implications of the study for the preaching ministry of the church. Meanwhile, the functional aspects of ministry could be dealt with in the intensive summer institutes, not as part of the credit requirements of the curriculum, but as part of the denomination's expectations for ordination. The continuing education clergy in the institute classes could be assigned mentoring functions for the seminarian participants, thus fostering the connectional aspect of ministry that is so necessary within a conference.

Seventh and finally—and perhaps as an alternative to the above—what if we took the two years between M.Div. graduation and ordination to elder seriously as a time of continued preparation? Could we not then construct these five years in such a way that the first three would be dedicated to an M.Div. degree that aimed toward critical mastery of the texts and the traditions, with the two years of post-M.Div. work becoming the true field education of the pastor? Could we not utilize this intensive period of beginning ministry as a time when congregations who are willing to accept the challenge of being a teaching congregation would work with the appointed pastor as she or he began to master the functions of ministry? Seminaries and districts could provide monthly intensive workshops in education, administration, and pastoral care, now to be studied in the productive pressure of parish ministry.

None of the above suggestions is without its problems, and they do not begin to exhaust the ways by which we might address the issues. But it seems to me that the challenge of providing the church with a learned ministry is so great that the seminaries alone or the clergy alone or the congregations alone or the denominational boards alone cannot adequately address the issue; we must address it together. The problem can be solved, and by the grace of God who empowers our efforts, we will indeed have a learned ministry among us.
Notes


2. The Newbury Biblical Institute was established in 1829, but the first class admitted for the purpose of education was in 1840.

3. This was in an address given through the Association of Theological Schools; I am not aware of its publication.


6. This theme is developed even more fully by Küng in *On Being a Christian* (Garden City: Doubleday & Co., 1974), particularly in Section C.IV, "The Conflict."


13. Lois Seifert, of the Claremont United Methodist Church, was asked how we could insure a strong educational program for our children. She answered, "By providing a strong educational program for our adults."
Methodism in an Apartheid Society

In a society in which, since 1948, racial prejudice was made part of the legal system, the Methodist Church of Southern Africa had to find its way. It must be said that there was discriminatory legislation on the statute books before that date, but I shall not even attempt to explain the extremely complex nature of political and other rights which belonged to the various groups. Sufficient to say that political power was in the hands of the white minority.

The Nationalist Party came to power in 1948 on an apartheid ticket and set about trying to unscramble the egg. They had a vision of separating society into completely discrete racial components on the political, territorial, social, educational, economic, and ecclesiastical levels. The idea was that the only contact between members of different races would be where it was unavoidable insofar as the whites needed black labor. This exception gives lie to the idea that was propagated by the Nationalist Party that everything was to be separate but equal.

In 1949 a conference was arranged in Rossetenville, Johannesburg, by the Christian Council of South Africa, forerunner of the South African Council of churches, to discuss the apartheid policy of the newly elected government. Methodist ministers played

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leading roles in that conference, both organizationally and as speakers. It was a multiracial conference, Chief Albert Luthuli, a Nobel Prize winner for his peaceful resistance to apartheid, being one of the speakers. The conferees argued that because God created all people in the divine image they possessed an essential unity which transcended all differences. However, following a suggestion in Chief Luthuli's paper, the conference also stated:

We consider that in principle adult persons of all races should share in the responsibility of the government of the country. This implies the exercise of the franchise. We recognize that at present many such persons are not ready for this responsibility. We therefore agree to a qualified franchise (Christian Council, 1949:76)

The participants, therefore, held that at that stage not all blacks had reached the level of development or education which would enable them to fully participate in the political process.

Apartheid in the Methodist Church

The Methodist Church was, and still is, made up of a mixture of people from all parts of the country, the majority of whom are black. It too was guilty of racial prejudice. Indeed, race prejudice is something which is often practiced unawares. It is embodied in attitudes and behavior patterns as well as in formal measures such as the laws and discipline of the church or in its statistics. It is all-pervasive. The practice and legislation of the Methodist Church reflected much of that unconscious prejudice.

The leadership of the church was in the hands of whites. From the conclusion reached at the Rosseteneville conference it may be safely assumed that the leadership, along with virtually all the “liberal” leaders of the day, held to the idea of a qualified franchise. This presumably meant that certain measures in the church would fall away as and when there was no longer a need for them. As we shall see below, discriminatory practices and legislation in the church were progressively removed, not because whites thought that blacks had developed sufficiently to take further responsibility, but because
Fundamental statements of principle

The 1948 conference responded to the stated intention of the newly elected Nationalist Party government to take away such political rights as coloureds and Africans then enjoyed, with a significant "Declaration concerning Race Relations." The conference stated:

In this multi-racial land we are bound to take account of the basic Christian principle that every human being is entitled to fundamental human rights and dignity and belongs to the family of God. . . . No person of any race should be deprived of constitutional rights or privileges merely on the grounds of race. . . . Political and social rights, especially of the under privileged [sic] groups, should not be reduced but rather developed and expanded. (Minutes, 1948:143)

It deplored the loss of political rights by people who had held them previously. The conference further argued that opportunities for education and employment for these groups should be expanded. With rare insight they held that the welfare of the whole community depended on the poor being enabled to share in and make their contribution to that welfare (Minutes, 1948:143).

The next important statement of principle came some ten years later. By then the architect of what has come to be called "grand apartheid," Dr. H. F. Verwoerd, was the Prime Minister. He vigorously pursued his ideal of separating the races completely with all his considerable intellect and the political powers he could muster in a parliament that supported his views. As Minister of Native Affairs, he had caused an uproar in the churches when he tried to determine by legislation that blacks may not worship together with whites in "white" areas. The churches interpreted this in a broader sense, i.e., that racial groups would not be allowed to worship together and mixed church meetings could not be held. The Methodist Conference held that no government had the right to determine who was to be admitted to worship and that it would
ignore the provisions of the proposed law (Minutes, 1957:140). The Anglican Archbishop of Cape Town, in his capacity as Metropolitan of the Church of the Province, wrote to the Prime Minister in words that have echoed down the years: ‘‘We feel bound to state that if the Bill were to become law in its present form we should ourselves be unable to obey it or to counsel our clergy and people to do so’’ (Paton, 1973:280). The bill was not passed. The Dutch Reformed church had said nothing in the debate to this point. This, it averred, was not because it supported the government in its stance, but it stood aloof, literally to one side, in such matters.

Verwoerd became Prime Minister shortly afterwards when the incumbent died. He was now in a position to implement his vision without hindrance. It is probably significant that his next move in respect to the churches was to write to them telling them that he believed that it was in the best interests of the blacks that separate churches should be established along racial lines. There would then be a church for each ethnic group, as was the case in the Dutch Reformed church. It had churches for whites, Africans, colo-reeds, and Indians. I suggest that Verwoerd did not want to try to legislate for separate churches, which he had the legislative power to do, because he had once burned his fingers in a confrontation with the so-called English churches, largely churches established by missionaries or settlers from the United Kingdom. In response to the letter from Verwoerd, the conference resolved:

**The Conference declares its conviction that it is the will of God for the Methodist church that it should be one and undivided, trusting to the leading of God to bring this ideal to ultimate fruition, and that this be the general basis of our missionary policy. . . . Moreover, Conference believes that an increase, not a decrease, in multi-racial co-operation is God's Will.**

(Minutes, 1960:74)

The conference appointed a strong multiracial committee to deal with matters that should arise from the implementation of the policy. Three of the four lay persons appointed to the committee were black, two advocates at law and one a medical doctor.

The statement itself has proved to be prophetic. It has served as a lodestar in times of tension, reminding us that all the parts of the
Methodist church belong together. In that sense it has had a salutary effect. Although at times there were strong differences of opinion which divided the church along racial lines, it happens less often these days. There is an underlying conviction that we belong together. Issues are debated on their merit and voting takes place on those terms. However, the full implications of what it means to be one and undivided are still being worked out. The original response to the suggestion that separate churches be established was taken in terms of the missionary policy of the church. Since then it has transpired that the conviction has strong socio-ethical implications in the life of the church. Traces of racism in the church have had to be identified and dealt with. We now turn our attention to that.

Dealing with Apartheid in the Church

The church became aware that although it was crusading against apartheid it was itself still guilty of much that had developed in society. Its policy had been to try to bring the races together, and it introduced various measures to do so. One of these was ‘‘pulpit exchanges across the colour line’’ (Minutes, 1961:142). In 1961 it instructed the secretary of the conference to consult with departmental secretaries with a view to removing ‘‘racial demarcation from its official records and legislation’’ (Minutes, 1961:148). Here we can detect a new approach emerging; it was not a matter of qualifying for certain rights and privileges, but it was regarded as wrong to discriminate or differentiate on the basis of race. Removing racial tags from the records and legislation was to take some years to complete. So, for example, statistics of membership were kept and reported to conference along racial lines until 1978.

Removing racial tags from the official records and legislation had important symbolic value, for it signalled that we were one and undivided. But it had wider implications than merely removing racial categories from the legislation. Both ministerial and lay representatives to the Annual Conference were elected by synods in equal numbers from among blacks and whites, respectively. Removing the racial tags meant that synods voted for representatives without taking account of their race. Today one still finds whites
elected as conference delegates although blacks outnumber them in synods. This suggests that the church's ideal of multiracialism is working.

The first black to head up a major department in the church was the Rev. Andrew Losaba, who was elected to be missionary secretary in the mid-1970s. Previously there had always been two secretaries, one white, the other black, with the former doing most of the administrative work. Black leadership has come more strongly to the fore in recent years when several black ministers have headed up major departments. The first black president was the Rev. Seth Mokitimi, in 1964. Nine years later the Rev. Jotham Mvusi was elected to that office. In the years since then the numbers have been about even. Bishop Stanley Mogoba (1982-1987) was the first black secretary of the conference. Until 1987 the president of the conference, who was elected annually, also had circuit and district responsibilities. In 1988, when the church changed to a three-year presidency, it also included the principle of a separated presiding bishop. Bishop Mogoba was the first incumbent. At the end of his term he was re-elected for a further three-year term. It was widely felt that he was the most outstanding leader in the church and that his leadership was needed in these days. He is playing a major role as a peace facilitator among disputing political factions in South Africa today.

Ministerial stipend scales were set on a racial basis until 1976. The Annual Conference determined the minimum stipends to be paid for the various categories. Whites had the highest scale, followed by coloureds and Indians on a common scale with Africans bringing up the rear. In 1974 a stipend augmentation fund was established. Circuits which paid more than the set minimum stipend had to pay a levy on the excess; this went into the fund to augment the stipends of those on the lower scales. The stipends for 1977 were set out on one scale only, approximately 10 percent higher than the previous African scale, with a target of parity above the higher white scale in 1983. This placed tremendous pressure on the poorer circuits, which generally were the rural circuits in the black community. The target was reached nonetheless. It is still common, however, for wealthy circuits to pay more than the laid-down minimum, although this is more usual in urban circuits where incomes are higher.
The issue of racism in the church is neatly summarized in a statement of the 1984 conference:

*While the Methodist church has remained multi-racial and has a consistent record of statements opposing apartheid, it has to a large extent, conformed in practice to the pattern of a racist society. With the emergence of a strong black leadership in the 1960's and 1970's the Methodist church started a process of eliminating racist practices and programmes of education to be truly “one and undivided.”* (Minutes, 1984:279)

If this applied in society at large, it applied all the more in the church. The record of the church in making statements opposing apartheid has been a good one, but the emergence of significant black leaders in the church was an important development. These were often young black ministers who had been influenced by Steve Biko, who emerged as the preeminent student leader in the late 1960s and a spokesperson for the Black Consciousness movement. Until his death in 1977, while in police custody, Biko was the one person who was able to articulate the hopes and aspirations of black people and inspire them to embark on their own liberation.

*Black Consciousness [he said] takes cognizance of the deliberateness of God’s plan in creating black people black. It seeks to infuse the black community with a new-found pride in themselves, their efforts, their value systems, their culture, their religion and their outlook to life [sic].* (Biko, 1987:49)

This philosophy of life encouraged blacks to express their views without hesitation, and they emerged as apologists for the black cause. This development was clearly noticeable in synod and conference debates.

We turn now to an examination of the “record of statements opposing apartheid.”

**Opposing Apartheid in the Society-at-Large**
The all-embracing nature of the apartheid policy is something which is difficult to communicate. It affected the whole of South African society, but it was the blacks in particular who bore the brunt of its negative affects. The law determined your identity. Your identity determined your destiny. It predetermined where you could be born and educated and where you could live, work, worship, participate in sport, and where you could go on holiday. It laid down whom you could marry, whether husbands and wives could live together under one roof, and even where you could be buried. In fact, it is difficult to think of one aspect of life that was free from the laws that held up the edifice of apartheid.

From the time that the Nationalist Party took power in 1948 the Methodist Church opposed its apartheid policy and set out to build a unified society based on the "common membership of the living Body of Christ which knows no racial barriers" (Minutes, 1948:144). While in those early days very little seemed to happen, it nevertheless clung to its ideals. In the early 1950s the comprehensive study by the Tomlinson Commission was released. It was broadly to form the basis of the homelands policy and held out the prospect that all blacks would be removed from so-called white areas. The church recognized the plan for what it was and stated:

*We assert that the land of South Africa is not the possession of the European minority, to be apportioned at their discretion to the various racial groups. Further, we are of the opinion that the whole policy of apartheid is an expression of human arrogance and pride, and reveals a desire to assume what is the prerogative of God alone, the planning of the future destiny of a people.* (Minutes, 1957:137)

From this point of view the church continued to oppose the government's legislative program introducing the details of the apartheid system. In seeking to "bring the judgement of the Gospel to bear on the policies and behaviour of men and nations" (Minutes, 1960:153), it incensed the government to the extent that it accused the church of being a communist organization and, therefore, in terms of the government's own understanding, subversive. The church rejected that accusation, holding that it was merely spelling out the social implications of the gospel (Minutes, 1966:136). The
church’s opposition to apartheid continued over the years and even increased with the emergence of the strong black leadership mentioned earlier. The church continued to seek nonviolent ways of changing the society and averred that it did not seek confrontation with the state. However, its criticism of the behavior of the government’s security apparatus so raised the ire of the minister of Police and Prisons that he publicly attacked the church and the secretary of the Christian Citizenship Department in a speech (Minutes, 1980:197).

Although the church had long rejected the policy of apartheid, it was only in 1978 that it spelled out its opposition to one of the principle aspects thereof, namely, the homelands. The idea was that blacks would be given certain parts of the country, in total about 13 percent of the surface area, which would be parcelled out to the various black ethnic groups. These homelands, none of which were economically viable, would be given political independence. The conference expressed its mind as follows:

This policy:

(i) is designed to deprive South Africans of their citizenship in the land of their birth;

(ii) has as its ultimate goal that there will be no black South Africans;

(iii) supports and perpetuates a system of migratory labour which does not accept full responsibility for the welfare of such labourers or their families;

(iv) has a devastating effect on family life;

(v) will ensure subordination for many years to come of these homelands to the Republic of South Africa;

(vi) has been instituted without proper consultation and without due consideration of the best interests of the people most affected;

(vii) is divisive and disruptive to the mission and unity of the Church. (Minutes, 1978:174)

In that resolution a number of important concerns about which the church had approached the government at various times are
mentioned. These are: the question of South African citizenship for blacks (Minutes, 1957:138); their lack of political rights as citizens (Minutes, 1948:144; 1981:217); migratory labour, with its negative effect on family life (Minutes, 1955:127; 1958:133; 1971:170); and the lack of consultation by the government with those who are affected by its policies (Minutes, 1960:149; 1964:152; 1975:167).

Instead of this policy the conference advocated a unitary state with a common citizenship and the removal of “unjust restrictions” on the citizenship rights of all South Africans without regard to the color of their skin. It also advocated a civil rights campaign, although little came of that (Minutes, 1978:174). The reaction to the rejection of the homelands was swift. The leader of the Transkei homeland, himself a local preacher and former member of the conference, took umbrage at the conference’s decision and banned the church in the Transkei. All its property was confiscated by that state and handed to those ministers who went about setting up an independent church. In 1988 the ban was lifted and The United Methodist Church, the main body of those who broke away and subsequently split up into several churches, was reunited with the Methodist Church of Southern Africa.

One of the aspects of the policy to separate blacks and whites was the Group Areas Act. This legislation was designed to enable the government to move people from one area to another so as to create areas where people of one pigment only were resident or doing business. The greatest sufferers under this legislation were the black people. They were moved from so-called black spots to more remote areas leaving whites to take over the land for redevelopment. Right from the outset the government set about removing black people, although the group areas legislation was not yet in place. Already in 1949, within a year of the Nationalist Party’s coming into power, the conference expressed its “deep concern about the indiscriminate ejectment . . . of African people from Crown and private lands without any provisions made for their settlement elsewhere” (Minutes, 1949:112). After the passing of the Group Areas Act the conference pressed strongly for the repeal of the legislation as well as the proclamations made in terms thereof. It is important to be aware that the government minister had the power to proclaim an area for white or black occupation as he saw fit. This trend towards delegating authority to the various members of the cabinet to make
decisions which had the power of law became an increasingly conspicuous aspect of legislation, a matter I shall return to below. Given the fact that the conference did not approve of what came to be called "removals," it asked that they "be carried out as sympathetically as possible" (Minutes, 1958:134), which was ostensibly the policy of the state, and that adequate compensation be given to victims of removals. In many cases, families who had lived in the same place for generations were moved. Over the years millions of people were affected (Minutes, 1984:276). Black towns were built on the periphery of white cities. Where people were moved to homelands, they often had no work or had to commute (Minutes, 1964:151; 1970:169). As a result, blacks often had to travel long distances to work, considerably increasing their living expenses (Minutes, 1958:137).

Another negative aspect of the apartheid policy which was exacerbated was migratory labor. Workers who lived in rural areas which were too far from their place of employment to enable them to commute became migratory laborers. They would move to the cities to work and live in single-sex hostels while away from home. These workers, mostly men, were open to all sorts of temptations while their families had to adapt to the absence of the man of the house. In a strongly traditional and patriarchal society this created a host of problems. The law prevented men from taking their families with them, even if they so desired. The result was "instability of family life" (Minutes, 1955:127; 1958:133). Indeed the whole system of migratory labor was to be regarded as "morally indefensible" (Minutes, 1965:146). In 1980 the conference, believing that the country was in a state of national crisis as result of the various aspects of the apartheid policy, stated that

[the] economic and social policies . . . have reduced tens of thousands of people to extreme poverty, hunger to the point of starvation, and hopelessness; and have destroyed the fabric of both family and community life for the largest part of South Africa's people. (Minutes, 180:195)

The political rights of colored people were likewise reduced over the years. Initially they were on the common voters roll in some provinces, although they could not stand for parliament. When
suffrage was extended to women this was limited to white women. Immediately after they came to power, the nationalists gave notice that they would reduce the political rights of colored citizens. The conference held that that was contrary to the principle of “no taxation without representation” (Minutes, 1948:144). They lost the right to vote for parliamentary candidates, and in the early 1970s their right to vote for city councillors was also removed (Minutes, 1970:169). When the constitution was amended in the early 1980s, one of the three houses of parliament was to be comprised of colored members.

I want to mention the Indian community here as well. Most Indians had been imported to work as indentured laborers in the sugar plantations of Natal from 1860 onwards, although there were also immigrants among them. So, for example, Mahatma Gandhi lived in South Africa for several years as a young man. He sparked some resistance, but generally the community was politically passive. After 1948 there was a strong move to repatriate them to India. Mercifully, little came of this. In 1962 the conference noted that Indians were henceforth to be regarded as permanent residents of South Africa (Minutes, 1962:141). When the three-chamber parliament was instituted, they were given one chamber. The party which controlled the white chamber had effective control of all legislation; and while the other chambers could delay the passage of legislation they had no veto powers. It appears that the ruling party thought that they would try to bring the coloreds and Indians in on their side of the political divide, but the low voter turnout in those elections showed clearly that the people rejected the system. The conference rejected the constitutional proposals right from the outset, calling “for full and equal political rights for all African, Coloured, Indian and white citizens” (Minutes, 1978:175).

The press also had curbs placed on it. No reporting was allowed on military action other than that which was provided by the authorities in press releases. So, for example, some years ago the rest of the world knew that the South African army had penetrated deep into Angola, but the government denied it, and the local press could provide no information about it. Nothing could likewise be reported on the activities of the police as they tried to contain an increasingly restive population. Notwithstanding the curbs, the conference expressed concern about the activities of the army and
police on several occasions. (See among others Minutes, 1983:270; 1985:234; 1985:298.) In the light of these concerns the conference declared "its support for a free and independent Press with the right to report and comment upon current events including the actions of the State" (Minutes, 1976:182). Curbs on press freedom were seen as a threat to justice.

Detention without trial, which enabled the authorities to hold people incommunicado for various periods of time, was another piece of legislation which was condemned by the conference. It expressed its abhorrence at the law which allowed "almost unlimited power to the State Security apparatus . . . [and] excludes protection by the Courts of the land" (Minutes, 1982:241). During detention no contact with the detainee either by the family, clergy or legal representatives was allowed. In fact, most often the family was not notified that a person had been detained, and no one knew where a detainee was being held when they did become aware of it. (See also Minutes, 1982:241; 1983:273; 1984:292; 1987:307.)

Internal resistance to the policies of the government was growing. This led to the banning of black political movements such as the African National Congress and the Pan-African Congress in 1960. In order to maintain "law and order" the government passed progressively more autocratic legislation and continued to arrogate to itself arbitrary powers.

Already in 1965 the conference expressed concern about

the growing tendency to totalitarianism in South Africa, as shown by police raids; bannings, arrests and imprisonment without trial; increased arbitrary powers given to ministers of state and to the police; and the interference of the state in entertainment, sport and social life (Minutes, 1965:148f).

In 1986 it was still articulating concern at the entrenchment of totalitarian powers by the state and its security apparatus. The conference believed that in spite of these powers the crisis in the country would not be resolved but that it would rather lead to an intensification of the conflict. (See Minutes, 1986:349.) That proved to be the case.
Responding to the Problem

As the years passed, it appeared that the church was fighting a losing battle. The government seemed to be entrenched. With each passing election the white voters gave increasing support to the ruling party. The church was, however, confident in the justice of its cause. It now began to question the authority of the government. It first asked that provision be made for bona fide conscientious objectors in 1959, long before it became an issue in the country (Minutes, 1959:151). The law made no provision for conscientious objection and to advocate it was an offense. Nothing came of that initial approach. The matter was again raised in 1971 after consulting other churches (Minutes, 1971:174). By 1974 the church was starting to question the rightness of the use to which the government was putting the security forces and requested that an objector be allowed to plead "inability to share or accept the relative 'rightness' of the cause for which he is called to fight" (Minutes, 1974:162). In 1977 it agreed with the South African Catholic Bishops Conference, which held that some people regarded it as "an act of disobedience to God to be part of the military structures of this country" (Minutes, 1977:189). By the end of the decade negotiations were under way between the churches and the authorities for the introduction of the category of general pacifists (Minutes, 1979:191f). Pacifists would have to convince a board that their belief was genuine and that it arose from their religious convictions. They were then given "alternative service," but the churches complained that the period of service was punitive—indeed, it was twice as long as the period of military call-up. The conference found the provision for conscientious objection, taken as a whole, to be inadequate. It called for allowance to be made for those who had ethical or philosophical objections to warfare, as well as the just-war objectors (Minutes, 1983:266). Here the church was challenging the legitimacy of the government's defense operation. When in 1985 the conference considered the implications of declaring itself a peace church (Minutes, 1985:288), it so aroused the anger of the government that the study document was attacked on government-controlled television before it could be discussed in Circuit Quarterly Meetings. That effectively killed the debate, since the document was seen by many as subversive even before they had read it.
A matter closely allied to types of conscientious objection is the matter of civil disobedience, because it also calls into question certain acts of the authorities. The conference took certain faltering steps to study the matter of civil disobedience in the late 1970s. In 1981 it resolved that in the case of interracial contact, a matter long dear to its heart, "where the law of man clearly violates the justice of God, allegiance to the Lord may compel infringement of prevailing legal restrictions" (Minutes, 1981:216). This, however, was not to be seen as blanket support from the conference in this matter, for each case would be considered on its merits. In 1983 the government proposed to give the responsible cabinet minister, or officials in his department, yet more arbitrary powers to restrict access by blacks to urban areas and to remove those who were there, as they saw fit—with severe penalties for people who accommodated such persons even overnight. Access to the courts to redress any wrongs was excluded by law. The conference believed that it "would be the severest and most cruel legislation ever placed on the Statute Books of South Africa" (Minutes, 1983:262). It went further and said that it would not regard such legislation as "binding on the consciences of individual members of our church" (Minutes, 1983:263). The church had now crossed the Rubicon. Four years later, after it had adopted the view that "Apartheid is a Heresy," it went even further. It called into question

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\text{the moral legitimacy of the South African regime as a basis for questioning the de jure legitimacy of that regime; [and] therefore, recommends that its members question the moral obligation to obey unjust laws. (Minutes, 1987:286)}
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The following acts are listed: the Population Registration Act, the Groups Areas Act, the Land Act, the Separate Amenities Act, and the Education Act. This was a major departure. Not only was civil disobedience countenanced, but it was positively enjoined. It is significant that in the recent reforms in South Africa all except the last-mentioned act have been repealed. The Education Act has been amended significantly, but the educational problems are so vast that there is no simple solution. It is a matter of finances, physical facilities, and a tremendous shortage of adequately qualified teachers.
In these complex circumstances it was felt that something more had to be done to bring about the end of apartheid. The conference, therefore, decided to examine the matter of economic, political, and diplomatic pressure. The question of economic pressure could not be properly discussed because “we have allowed ourselves to be restrained by the severity of the laws designed to prevent open discussion of economic sanctions” (Minutes, 1985:275). Nevertheless, a committee was appointed to examine the matter. At the same conference, support was given to consumer boycotts, provided no violent coercion was involved. Such boycotts were usually engaged in by black communities when there was a dispute with local white businesses or city authorities. In 1986 it was decided that “selective economic, diplomatic and political sanctions” were a nonviolent way to bring pressure to bear on the government to institute fundamental changes, moving “South Africa from oppression to full democracy and justice” (Minutes, 1986:326). Conference was aware that as sanctions intensified the brunt of the hardship caused by sanctions would be borne by the poor. The result would be widespread unemployment among semi- and unskilled people, mostly blacks. It therefore instructed the Christian Citizenship Department and circuits and societies to initiate programs of relief and self-help.

A Proposed Solution

The conference had its own thoughts on what had to happen to bring peace and justice to the country. In 1960 it called to the government urgently to “consider the calling of a National Convention representative of that leadership of all major racial groups in South Africa” (Minutes, 1960:149). The prime minister rejected the proposal out of hand. (See Minutes, 1961:149.) The conference continued to call for consultation among all the peoples in South Africa to seek a solution to the problems besetting the country (Minutes, 1964:152; 1975:166; 1977:192). It also called for a Bill of Rights to be included in negotiations for a just settlement (Minutes, 1982:249). In 1979 the most comprehensive and significant statement on the matter was made, and it reads as follows:
The conference . . . supports the call of the Prime Minister . . . for change and appeals to the government, as a contribution towards meaningful change;

1. to release Mr. Nelson Mandela, who has been imprisoned on Robben Island for seventeen years;
2. to review the cases of all prisoners held for political offences;
3. to declare an amnesty for those who are exiles and refugees for political reasons only;
4. to convene a National Convention in which such leaders of the black people will be able to participate. (Minutes, 1979:202)

Since February 1990, when the State President, Mr. F. W. de Klerk, announced the beginning of the reform process in which we are at present engaged, all these conditions have been met. Most black political parties accept these conditions and are engaged in the present negotiations. Even those who are holding out believe that at some stage they will have to become involved in negotiations. That is a vindication of the church’s position which it has held over the years.

Notes

1. In this paper I have, for the sake of clarity, had to make use of racial categories which I would not normally use. The term black usually refers to all those who would count themselves as belonging to that group, as distinct from whites. However, the term African refers to blacks of African origin; coloreds refers to those of mixed parentage. In South Africa Indians refers to people who came from the Indian subcontinent, from what today would include Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh.

2. In 1986 the conference again examined its own record and said: “Conference admits its own failure to grapple timeously with the issues of great importance to the disadvantaged people of South Africa and acknowledges that well-intentioned decisions have sometimes been mistaken. It asks for forgiveness for its failures and prays for grace to respond more adequately” (Minutes, 1986: 322f). This attitude of self-examination has helped to counter the growth of self-righteous complacency which develops all too easily.
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The United Methodist Book of Worship and The United Methodist Hymnal are the cornerstones of United Methodist worship. Together, they describe and define our corporate piety, exhibiting who we are as United Methodists and shaping our common worship. At the heart of The United Methodist Book of Worship stands the Revised Common Lectionary. The Revised Common Lectionary is a calendar of the Christian year and a table of scripture readings. And as with the book of worship, this lectionary both reveals how the majority of United Methodists use scripture in worship and prescribes how we read scripture in the gathered community.

Research for The United Methodist Book of Worship showed that approximately seventy percent of all United Methodist pastors always or regularly use the lectionary in planning worship and preaching. This widespread use of the lectionary has a number of benefits: it permits the systematic consideration of large parts of the Bible, assists in long-range planning for pastors, musicians, and lay worship leaders, and facilitates the publication of many other resources to foster enhanced preaching and worship (such as this very publication). It was not surprising, therefore, when pastors in

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local congregations reported to The United Methodist Book of Worship Committee that the single most important resource they needed in our new book of worship was a complete three-year lectionary.

Unfortunately, many United Methodists, along with numerous persons in other churches who use the Revised Common Lectionary, have little understanding of the lectionary itself. As if it were manna from heaven, the lectionary is received and welcomed week by week without any thought about its source or intent. In response, therefore, this article describes the history of the lectionary and the process that created the Revised Common Lectionary, an overview of this lectionary’s major assumptions, and a summary of the major issues confronted by this new lectionary.

History

The Revised Common Lectionary 1992 is a calendar of the Christian year and a table of scripture readings (The Revised Common Lectionary, Abingdon Press, 1992). This lectionary is based on a calendar and table produced in 1983: The Common Lectionary: The Lectionary Proposed by the Consultation on Common Texts. The 1983 Common Lectionary was promoted by many publishers, including our United Methodist publishing units, for the last nine years. The revision is both faithful to and distinctively different from its predecessor.

The Consultation on Common Texts created both the 1983 and the 1992 lectionaries. The consultation, since the 1960s a forum for worship renewal among many Christian churches in the United States and Canada, currently contains nineteen churches and communions. These churches include the Unitarian Universalist Christian Fellowship, the Roman Catholic Church, the United Church of Christ, The United Methodist Church, and diverse other communities, each represented by major liturgical scholars and denominational bureaucrats responsible for worship in the varied communions. This ecumenical gathering of liturgists sponsors projects and publications, including prayers and liturgies for a variety of occasions. It has become the foremost player in worldwide ecumenical liturgical enterprises.
The most visible of all the consultation's efforts is its lectionary. In 1979, after a major gathering in Washington, D.C., in which United Methodists Hoyt Hickman and James White participated, the Consultation decided to create a lectionary that would combine the best of all the lectionaries then used in the United States and Canada. After four years of work, in which Richard Eslinger of the General Board of Discipleship represented our denomination, the 1983 Common Lectionary was born.

The 1983 Common Lectionary was not a wholly new lectionary but was a harmonization and an ecumenical adaptation of the Roman Lectionary for Mass (1969, 1981) and a number of denominational variants that appeared between 1970 and 1976. The publication of the Roman lectionary in 1969 was one of the major achievements of Vatican II. The Romans desired that

The treasures of the Bible are to be opened up more lavishly, so that a richer share in God's word may be provided for the faithful. In this way a more representative portion of holy scripture will be read to the people in the course of a prescribed number of years. (Vatican Council II, Constitution on the Liturgy 4 December 1963 no. 51, tr. International Commission on English in the Liturgy, Documents on the Liturgy, 1963-1979: Conciliar, Papal, and Curial Texts Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1982, para. 51.)

This effort by the Romans inspired a host of lectionaries throughout Christendom, among them a 1976 three-year United Methodist lectionary (based on an earlier lectionary by the Consultation on Church Union). A full discussion of that work can be found in the Introduction to Common Lectionary: The Lectionary Proposed by the Consultation on Common Texts, authored by Horace Allen, Professor of Liturgy at the Boston University School of Theology.

After its publication in 1983, many communions and churches adopted the Common Lectionary for official and trial use. In addition to The United Methodist Church, these denominations included The Anglican Church of Canada, the Anglican Church of New Zealand, the Episcopal Church of Scotland, the Church in the Province of Southern Africa (Anglican), the Presbyterian Church,
U.S.A., the United Church of Christ, the United Church of Canada, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), the Uniting Church of Australia, the Methodist Church of South Africa, the Lutheran churches in North America (for a limited trial use only), and the Episcopal Church (also only for a limited trial use).

The only church that did not adopt the 1983 Common Lectionary for official or trial use was the Roman Catholic Church. While the Roman Catholic bishops in the United States voted to accept this lectionary for trial usage, the Holy See in Rome objected to its use. This rejection reflected a Roman Catholic reluctance to engage in ecumenical dialogue about its own lectionary principles, especially the role of the Old Testament in the service of Word and Table, advocated in its 1969 lectionary. Because the Romans emphasized the centrality of the eucharist in their liturgy, they believed that sermons should be based on the Gospels, and subsequently that Old Testament lessons must be directly linked with the Gospel readings. Despite the Roman Catholic rejection, the 1983 Common Lectionary had a major impact on a number of churches across the world.

But the 1983 Common Lectionary was not a finished work; it was a proposal for experimental use. Using prior liturgical assumptions, such as a distinctly Western shape of the Christian year and the centrality of the Synoptic gospels, the lectionary was completed very quickly. Immediately upon its publication, many churches and individuals offered critiques of the Common Lectionary. Throughout the world, dozens of denominations offered extensive evaluation and hundreds of individuals, including biblical scholars, liturgists, pastors, and worship leaders, reviewed the lectionary in a variety of forms and forums. The critiques generally fell into several areas: the translation used for versification; questions about particular pericopes either included or excluded from the lectionary; the limited number of biblical narratives including women; the shape of the common calendar; the need for a new system of Old Testament readings linked with the Gospel lessons in the Sundays After Pentecost; the selection of psalms; and sensitivity to anti-Jewish readings from scripture. All of these concerns had to be addressed by the consultation.

In response to these critiques, the Consultation on Common Texts authorized a revision of Common Lectionary three years later, in 1986. The consultation selected a Task Force of persons whose
churches actively used the lectionary, who tested the lectionary, or who had serious interest in adopting the Revised Common Lectionary for use. The members included fourteen persons from the United States, Canada, and Great Britain, including Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Anglicans, and United Methodists. Over a period of six years, this committee reviewed, considered, and revised every suggestion given to it. In early 1992, the 1992 Revised Common Lectionary was completed.

**Major Assumptions**

Because the Revised Common Lectionary is a harmonization and an ecumenical adaptation of the Roman Lectionary and a number of denominational variants, it shares with these previous lectionaries the following calendrical and liturgical assumptions.

1. The lectionary is meant for the weekly Lord's Day celebration. Each Sunday is a festival day in its own right for the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. For that reason, the Gospel reading is always the primary lesson. Especially in the Sundays from Christ the King (the Sunday before the First Sunday in Advent) through Trinity Sunday (the First Sunday After Pentecost) the Gospel lesson dictates the first and second lesson of the day. The result is a lectionary with a strong christocentric focus. Unlike the Roman lectionary, the Revised Common Lectionary is not intended to be a eucharistic lectionary exclusively. It does not, therefore, always prepare for the Table but may also be used in liturgies of the Word, as is most often the case in our United Methodist congregations.

2. The lectionary provides three readings for each Sunday and holy day, typically one each from the Old Testament (except during the Sundays of Easter when the Acts of the Apostles are read), Epistles, and Gospels. The only exceptions to this principle are for particular holy days, such as the Easter Vigil, when additional lessons are employed, or when alternatives to particular readings are provided.

3. The Revised Common Lectionary affirms the classic Western calendar consisting centrally of the Sundays and seasons related to Christmas (Advent to Epiphany) and to Easter (Lent to Pentecost).
This calendar preserves the christological basis for the annual cycles of Incarnation (Christmas) and Resurrection (Easter).

4. The lectionary establishes a three-year cycle of readings to encourage a yearly focus on each of the Synoptic Gospels. Because of its unique literary and liturgical structure, the lectionary places the Gospel of John in the high christological cycles of Christmas and Easter and also in Year B as a supplement to Mark.

5. The lectionary, faithful to the intent of the action of Vatican II and our own Wesleyan emphasis upon the Bible, includes a wider variety and larger portions of scripture. The lectionary assists congregations in hearing more of the God's mighty acts of salvation.

6. The Revised Common Lectionary sees the Sundays After Epiphany and the Sundays After Pentecost (which may be named by United Methodists also as Ordinary Time or Kingdomtide) as a single sequence of celebrations. During this Ordinary Time the Synoptic Gospels and the Epistles are read in a continuous fashion.

The Revised Common Lectionary, like the 1983 Common Lectionary before it, differs from the Roman lectionary and its variants (such as those lectionaries now used in the Lutheran and Episcopal churches in the United States) in one major aspect only: the use of the Old Testament on the Sundays After Pentecost. In the Roman, Lutheran, and Episcopalian lectionaries, the Old Testament is always chosen to reflect or enhance the Gospel reading. As a result, therefore, it is possible one Sunday to have an Old Testament lesson from Job, the next Sunday a reading from Isaiah, and the next a reading for Genesis.

According to some liturgists, however, the lectionaries now used by the Romans, Lutherans, and Episcopalians in the Sundays After Pentecost display an inappropriate use of type/gospel themes in selecting the Old Testament texts, employ too few narrative Old Testament passages, use too few Old Testament passages illustrating the role of women in sacred history, and provide insufficient opportunity for continuous or semi-continuous readings from the Old Testament. While the Roman, Lutherans, and Episcopalians believe that these critiques to be inaccurate, the majority of participants in the Consultation believed the role of the Old Testament in the Sundays After Pentecost to be significantly problematic.

In 1983, the Common Lectionary broke with the Roman/Episcopal/Lutheran model by choosing semi-continuous
readings from the historical and prophetic material in the Old Testament in the Sundays After Pentecost. This model provided more extensive narrative readings from the Old Testament. In summary, the 1983 lectionary included in Year A readings from the Penteteuch, in Year B the Davidic narratives, and in Year C, prophetic writings.

In 1992, the Revised Common Lectionary continued the pattern of semi-continuous lessons and added an optional new system of Old Testament readings for the Sundays After Pentecost more closely aligned with the Lutheran, Episcopalian, and Roman lectionaries. The two models for use of the Old Testament are called System 1 and System 2. In System 1, the revised lectionary enables the Old Testament to tell its own story, continuing the philosophy of the 1983 lectionary. System 2 provides readings from the Hebrew scriptures taken from the Lutheran, Episcopalian, and Roman lectionaries, which are more directly tied to the Gospel lesson each day. The Revised Common Lectionary does not favor one set over the other, but allows churches freedom to choose either one or both of these sets of lessons on the Sundays After Pentecost.

The United Methodist Book of Worship employs only System 1. This reflects a Wesleyan perspective that scriptures from both the Old and New Testaments are to be proclaimed and that each Testament may stand on its own, as well as the emergence of narrative preaching in our denomination. In Year A, our Book of Worship includes semi-continuous narratives from Genesis to Judges, with a focus on the story of Moses in Exodus. In Year B, Davidic narratives from 1 and 2 Samuel and Wisdom literature are read. In Year C, the prophetic writings, with an emphasis on Jeremiah, are read. Other denominations are still deciding which system, or both, to use.

The United Methodist Book of Worship Committee’s decision to use only semi-continuous readings makes a difference in preaching during the Sundays After Pentecost. Preachers who attempt to relate all three lessons and the psalm on these Sundays will be frustrated. Unlike the other Sundays of the Christian year, there is no obvious relationship between the three lessons on the Sundays following Pentecost. Preachers must, therefore, choose whether to preach from the Old Testament, Epistle, or Gospel lesson of the day.
Major Issues

Critiques of the 1983 Common Lectionary came from a variety of persons around the world. As already stated, the critiques were in the following general areas: the translation used for versification; questions about particular pericopes either included or excluded from the lectionary; the limited number of biblical narratives including women; the shape of the common calendar; the need for a new system of Old Testament readings linked with the Gospel lessons in the Sundays After Pentecost; the selection of psalms; and sensitivity to anti-Jewish readings from scripture.

The publication of the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible in 1990 made it necessary to reexamine the versification of all the readings in the lectionary. The NRSV made minor changes in versification in the Bible and significantly altered the paragraph breaks throughout scripture. For example, the Song of Mary in the RSV began at Luke 1:46b, while in the NRSV it begins at Luke 1:47. Because there are over 1400 pericopes in the lectionary, checking the versification took considerable time and patience.

In addition to simply updating the versification of the 1983 lectionary, many persons criticized the beginning and ending verses of many lessons. Breaks in the lessons at times destroyed the integrity of particular pericopes and sometimes made listening to and understanding a particular passage difficult. For example, a congregation using pew Bibles may find it difficult to follow lessons that jump over verses. As a result, the task force looked at every reading and made numerous adjustments. For example, the ancient hymn in Philippians was changed from 2:9-13 to 2:5-11, and the first creation story was changed from Genesis 1 to Genesis 1:1-2:4a. In this work, narrative and canonical critics played a major role in helping the task force in its work.

Choosing which scripture lessons from the Old Testament would be read in the Sundays After Pentecost caused the task force to consider seriously the canonical shape of scripture. As the result of much dialogue, the most significant changes to the lectionary occur in the Old Testament lessons on the Sundays After Pentecost. While the revision of the Common Lectionary affirms the principle of semi-continuous readings, in all three years major changes are made to reflect the emphases of scripture itself. In Year A, the lessons
provide a wholistic treatment of the Pentateuchal material, with a special focus on the Mosaic Covenant. Unlike the 1983 lectionary, which emphasized only the person and work of Moses, the lessons in the revised lectionary begin with creation and end with the story of Deborah. The lessons in Year A include: the creation, Noah, the call of Abraham, Abraham and Sarah, Hagar’s rejection, the sacrifice of Isaac, the engagement of Rebekah and Isaac, Jacob and Esau, Jacob’s ladder, Jacob with Leah and Rachel, Jacob and the angel, Joseph sold into slavery, Joseph’s reconciliation with his family, birth of Moses and nine more lessons on Moses, Joshua, and Deborah.

In Year B, while the 1983 lectionary focused on the Davidic material and related wisdom material, there was a lack of attention to other persons in the Davidic narrative and to the whole of the wisdom literature. In response, the Revised Common Lectionary continues a focus on David and wisdom material, while expanding and strengthening both. The lessons focus on the development of the monarchy from Samuel through Solomon, following the canonical structure of 1 and 2 Samuel. The readings then continue with material from Job and Proverbs. Of particular note, the revised lectionary, for the first time ever in a lectionary, has a four-week cycle of readings from Job that deal with theodicy. The readings conclude with two Sundays on Ruth, who prefigures Mary as read in Luke’s Advent narratives in Year C.

Year C makes major changes to the Old Testament readings after Pentecost. In the 1983 lectionary, the emphasis was on the Elijah-Elisha narrative (ten Sundays), followed by Jeremiah (three Sundays), Ezekiel (two Sundays), and the minor prophets considered in canonical order (ten Sundays). The value of this system was an emphasis on prophetic material and especially the ministry of the minor prophets. The Revised Common Lectionary affirms this emphasis while reordering and reprioritizing the semi-continuous texts in order to represent more faithfully the whole of the prophetic tradition. First, the role of Elijah, a major prophet, is strengthened, while the role of Elisha, a minor prophet, is diminished. Two, the revised lectionary places each of the prophets in their correct chronological order. Three, Jeremiah becomes the central figure in this year. While recognizing that Second Isaiah and Ezekiel are also important, both Isaiah and Ezekiel are covered well elsewhere in the
lectionary, especially during the Christmas and Easter cycles. Jeremiah is now read for nine Sundays in this Ordinary Time. Four, Lamentations is added to the lectionary. And five, the lectionary recognizes that Isaiah was written by at least three different authors, at different times, and uses material from Isaiah First, Isaiah Second, and Isaiah Third in the correct chronological sequence.

Another major concern among many men and women was about the place of women in scripture in the lectionary. While noting that the biblical culture was patriarchal, many expressed the concern that lectionaries perpetuate a bias against the role of women in scripture. For example, the following women have not been represented in any previous lectionaries: Sarah, Hagar, Rebekah, Leah, the Jewish midwives, Miriam, Deborah, the good woman of Proverbs 31, Hannah, the woman with the issue of blood, the Syrophoenician woman, Dorcas, and Lydia. In addition, while the household codes of Ephesians 5 have been included in previous lectionaries, narratives about sexual violence against women, such as the rape of Tamar, were omitted.

The Revised Common Lectionary now includes all the women listed above by expanding pericopes or substituting one narrative for another. The lectionary also now deletes the household codes. Unfortunately, the revision does not include the rape of Tamar. This lesson was avoided primarily to respect those traditions (especially the Roman Catholic) which do not preach on Old Testament lessons. This prevents a reading about sexual violence, followed by the acclamation: "This is the Word of the Lord," and upon which a sermon would then not be preached. Another generation will tell whether this was a wise omission or not.

One of the major efforts of the task force was a comprehensive review and revision of the use of the Psalms throughout the whole lectionary. In its work, the task force adopted a new set of principles regarding the selection of psalms:

1. The psalm shall be chosen as a liturgical response to the First Lesson.
2. The psalm shall fit harmoniously within the general tenor of the celebration of the day.
3. The lectionary should draw upon the breadth and diversity of the Psalter, and canticles (biblical songs found outside the Psalter)
will be used when suitable. In this revision, 105 psalms and 10 canticles are included.

4. There will be periodic repetition of a number of more familiar psalms for pastoral, catechetical, and musical reasons.

5. Through the use of brackets, an optional fuller reading of a psalm portion may be indicated.

In *The United Methodist Book of Worship*, whenever the Revised Common Lectionary suggests a psalm not included in *The United Methodist Hymnal*, the book of worship lists the lectionary psalm and then suggests an alternative psalm which may be found in our hymnal. Of United Methodist interest, many of the decisions reached by the consultation on the use of the psalms were anticipated and encouraged by the persons who worked on our own United Methodist Liturgical Psalter as found in our new hymnal.

The shape of the common calendar presented some problems in the revision of the lectionary. Not all churches which follow the Western liturgical calendar, notwithstanding the major differences between the Western and Eastern calendars, celebrate each holy day on the same day and indeed, the variations are affirmed with partisan intensity. For example, some Anglicans and the Roman Catholics celebrate the Transfiguration each year on the Second Sunday in Lent, while others celebrate the Transfiguration on the Last Sunday After the Epiphany. The Revised Common Lectionary allows both possibilities. In addition, the revision adds two more days to the yearly calendar: a Ninth Sunday After Epiphany, for those rare years when such a Sunday is needed because of the date of Easter, and Holy Saturday. *The United Methodist Book of Worship* adopted this calendar as the structure for its resources for the Christian year, with minor exceptions. Unlike the Revised Common Lectionary, *The United Methodist Book of Worship* does not include in its calendar the christological, special days of Annunciation, Visitation, Presentation, and Holy Cross, although resources for these days are located elsewhere in the book of worship.

A whole host of problems arise because scripture lessons, written in the cultural and religious context of the ancient Middle East, are now read in contemporary congregations. A number of persons noted that readings emphasizing God's promise of the land to Israel in today's world can be understood as Zionist and used against Christians of Arab descent. Other readings, especially some from
John and Paul, may encourage Christian anti-semitism. While attempts were made to be sensitive to these issues, at heart is the more profound difficulty of how to relate a distinctively Christian lectionary to other religions.

The Future of Lectionary Revision

Work on the 1992 Revised Common Lectionary has been completed. There is currently no person or group undertaking a serious critique of this particular lectionary with an eye toward future revision. For United Methodists, this lectionary will probably remain effective throughout the life (some twenty-five years) of The United Methodist Book of Worship.

Yet, lectionary revision is never over. Ongoing efforts are underway in Great Britain to create a four-year lectionary. The British lectionary would give one year to each of the four Gospels and radically alter the shape of the Western Christian year. Work has also begun to create a daily lectionary that will relate to the Revised Common Lectionary. This work, by Hoyt Hickman and others, has significant implications for example on the development of the daily office in the Wesleyan tradition. Other language liturgical groups (particularly German and Spanish liturgical groups) are investigating lectionary reform. And the World Council of Churches and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity (Roman Catholic) have been asked to engage in a worldwide, multinational, and ecumenical dialogue on lectionary renewal and reform. The dream remains alive that one day there will be among all who call themselves Christian a true Common Lectionary.

Bibliography


Marjorie Procter-Smith

Beyond the New Common Lectionary: A Constructive Critique

We live our lives through texts. They may be read, or chanted, or experienced electronically, or come to us, like the murmuring of our mothers, telling us what conventions demand. Whatever their form or medium, these stories have formed us all; they are what we must use to make new fictions, new narratives. (Carolyn Heilbrun, Writing a Woman’s Life, 37)

No high steeples, no single word, no same announcement Sunday after Sunday. Rather the images explode in the aesthetic play of community, communion, Word, grace: women disciples speaking and being heard, memories of women recalled and celebrated, Deborah’s song and Mary’s Magnificat, Esther’s beauty and Mary’s adornment, chatting, laughing, weeping, singing, feasting. (Rebecca Chopp, The Power to Speak, 88)

In creating a lectionary a church plots its own narrative, tells its own story, remembers its meaning-bearing events. In proclaiming and receiving the readings of a lectionary, a worshipping community creates its own identity, sees itself reflected, projects itself into the future. The biblical stories which the church privileges and honors in

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the public reading of scripture have formed us and continue to form us all.

Any lectionary is interpretation, for in a lectionary a biblical text is removed from its literary context and placed in a liturgical/homiletical context. And in this context the text is radically reinterpreted by altering the genre from written to oral, by combining the text with other scripture texts, by creating beginnings and endings for the text, by providing non-biblical commentary in the form of psalms, hymns, prayers, and sermon, and by placing the text in a larger liturgical context which itself may be governed by a theological theme or occasion of the church or secular year.

The purpose of this interpretation is to claim the ongoing importance of these texts for the contemporary church, even for the contemporary world. By “playing” liturgically with biblical texts, the church attempts to free them from their apparently time-bound place, even from their literally bound place between the covers of a book.

But where are the women in these stories, and how do the interpretations of the lectionary reflect and create liberating stories for women who proclaim and receive these stories? How much are lectionary systems bound by the plots of women’s lives found in the scriptural stories, and how can we make new plots from old stories?

To begin with, we must acknowledge the male-centered character of the biblical texts themselves and the patriarchal social context in which they were told, written, and edited. The plots of women’s lives found in those texts are patriarchal plots: marriage and motherhood; servitude and dependence; beauty and power or beauty and evil; victimization and suffering. The occasional Esther or Deborah stands as the exception to these plots who proves the rule: women are peripheral to the story, which is a story of the words and deeds of men.

Contemporary lectionary systems, including the new Common Lectionary, recognize and accept this character of the biblical texts. Because they must exclude some texts they focus on major figures: Abraham, Moses, Elijah and Elisha, David, Paul, Peter, John. Because they cannot include every event in the Bible, they must focus on major events: the Exodus, the sacrifice of Isaac, the preaching at Pentecost, and so on. By focusing on the major events and themes of the biblical narrative, lectionaries actually intensify
the androcentrism and patriarchalism of the Bible. The odd, anomalous story—the daughters of Zelophehad demanding their inheritance, the divine annunciation to Samson’s mother, for example—has no place in such a scheme. But it is just such stories which modify or challenge the overwhelming androcentrism of the Bible as a whole by showing women stepping out of their assigned roles, resisting patriarchal limitations.

To the extent that the lectionary serves to remind the assembly of our common heritage, to renew our sense of common identity, and to understand our present life in light of our past, the intensely androcentric rendering of that heritage in contemporary lectionaries distorts the community’s identity by suggesting that women were marginal to that history and passively accepted their marginalization. To the extent that the purpose of the lectionary reading in worship is to build up the community, that purpose remains unfulfilled if the needs and interests of women in the community are not allowed to be reflected in the biblical story.

This critique of lectionaries is motivated by theological, pastoral, and ethical concerns. Theological, because the omission of such texts and the inclusion of texts which support women’s subordination to men provide the ecclesiastical context within which women’s theological concerns are muted or marginalized. Pastoral, because such a pattern of inclusion and exclusion delegitimizes women’s spiritual and religious needs and concerns and perpetuates restrictions on women’s access to religious leadership and authority in the present. Ethical, because the pattern of inclusion and exclusion appears to give divine and ecclesiastical legitimacy to the present oppression of women and others in church and society, an oppression which includes denial of economic, social, educational, and health-care benefits on the basis of gender.

But this critique is also motivated by hope. For within the liturgical reinterpretation of biblical texts lies the possibility of a form of interpretation which does not replicate the patriarchal biblical plot. In this sense, then, the idea of a lectionary as a radical reinterpretation of ancient texts for the contemporary church and world holds promise. In order for this promise to be realized, however, we must begin to take into account both the work of feminist and liberationist biblical scholars and the present sense of alienation from the biblical story experienced by many women.
Revisions of the Common Lectionary

The Common Lectionary and its current revision can be critiqued with regard to its choice of texts by the following categories: (1) a critique of inclusion; (2) a critique of omission; (3) a critique of combinations of texts. A few examples of each will have to suffice.

The 1983 version of the Common Lectionary included several texts which affirm or imply women's subordination to men, most notably Eph. 5:21-33 ("Wives, be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord"). This text is now omitted from the revised Common Lectionary. The Genesis 2 text on the creation of woman from the side of the man, formerly paired with the Matthew text on the indissolubility of marriage, now appears only as an alternate text. These changes are improvements. On the other hand, one wonders about the inclusion of Prov. 31:10-31, "A good wife who can find?" While the text praises a woman, she is being praised for adapting well to what Carolyn Heilbrun calls "the marriage plot," a patriarchal plot which definitely serves men's interests, in this case the husband who "has no lack of gain."

The earlier version of the Common Lectionary omitted a number of texts about women which have been included in the new revision: Miriam at the Red Sea, Hagar, Rachel and Leah, Deborah, and Esther, Tabitha, Lydia, the Syrophoenician woman, and the bent-over woman. Unfortunately, the woman who anoints Jesus' head and the women disciples are still marginalized in the passion narrative readings and are found in no other place in the lectionary. Priscilla and the prophetess daughters of Philip are still absent.

In sum, although the revisions of the Common Lectionary generally increase the number of texts which include women and reduce the number of texts which teach the subordination of women, the changes made do not challenge the general androcentric and patriarchal perspective of the Bible itself. But such a lectionary which could include this challenge would have to be constructed on very different principles than any of our current systems.
Authority of the Bible

When the Bible is read in church, whether the readings follow a lectionary or not, it is commonly understood, both by the reader and by the hearers, as the "Word of God." The liturgical announcement of the reading by using such terms, the use of ceremonial actions such as processing with the book, uplifting it, and so on, serve to emphasize this understanding. It is made explicit in the prayer in the United Methodist Hymnal which may precede the reading: "...as the scriptures are read and your Word proclaimed, we may hear with joy what you say to us today." Such a context endows the reading of the selected text with contemporary authority in the community.

However, the work of feminist and liberation biblical scholars raises fundamental challenges to this view of the authority of the Bible. These scholars direct our attention to the dangers of uncritical acceptance of biblical authority for women and other oppressed people. They argue that this understanding serves the ideological interests of the powerful, that the authority of the Bible is extrinsic and not intrinsic, and that the question of biblical authority is finally an ethical one. South African biblical scholar Itumeleng Mosala notes that "the Bible is the product, the record, the site, and the weapon of class, cultural, gender, and racial struggles." This view is confirmed by others who point to the use of biblical injunctions of obedience to authority and affirmations of male dominance to justify violence and oppression of women, children, and other subjugated persons. (See the work of Sheila Redmond on child sexual abuse, Susan Thistlewaite on battering, and Vincent Wimbush on the use of the Bible to uphold slavery.)

At the same time, many women and other oppressed people have also found important resources in the Bible for their own struggles for freedom and dignity. Texts which proclaim emancipation and justice can sometimes work to subvert patriarchal authority which would use the Bible to curtail the freedom of some. However, by using the authority of the Bible against itself, they are in fact challenging its authority, claiming that authority for themselves and their struggles. This approach to the authority of scripture sees the biblical text as a living text which is to be of use to real people in their struggles; the authority of the Bible is "not that of a classic,
but as that of a constitution,” as Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza puts it, not as a set of laws but as a set of interpretive paradigms of a living community.

It is not enough, then, simply to reject the Bible in its entirety as useless and even harmful for women and others. But neither is it sufficient to accept it unquestioningly as authoritative text, as the “Word of God” for us. Any system which attempts to make the Bible useful for the contemporary church and the world must find a third way which goes beyond present lectionary systems, which, as Rebecca Chopp suggests, can allow the images to “explode in creative play,” freeing the voices of women in the texts.

Constructing a Feminist Lectionary

Freeing up the voices of women in the texts, offering alternative plots for women’s lives, and making new stories out of the old patriarchal plots require keeping in mind certain critical truths about scripture.

1. Any use of the Bible in worship must recognize that the Bible is androcentric in its language and imagery and patriarchal in its original and its contemporary social-political setting. To the extent that the Bible assumes or defends the subordination of women to men, it must be regarded as hostile to women’s spiritual and physical well-being. To the extent that it assumes or defends the institution of human slavery, it must be regarded as hostile to the spiritual and physical well-being of African Americans and colonized peoples. To the extent that it assumes or defends unquestioning obedience to authority, it must be regarded as hostile to the well-being of children and all oppressed peoples.

2. The hostility of patriarchal texts in the Bible to women, to children, and to men who are oppressed should not be softened, glossed over, or otherwise obscured, since it is a formative part of our common heritage, and we continue to live with its consequences.

3. The human cost of hostile texts should be recognized, lamented, and repented of in the context of common worship, both in the ancient stories themselves and in the appropriation of those texts in the present.
4. Canonical biblical texts commonly mute or silence women's voices. The "whisper of women that can be heard in certain places in or under the biblical text," in the words of Jane Schaberg, should be amplified by means of feminist translation and by means of liturgical proclamation in song, prayer, dance, poem, sermon.

5. The biblical silencing and erasure of women from the texts should be recognized as an ideological move, and thus the biblical canon must be acknowledged as distorted and incomplete. This calls for an expansion of the traditional notion of canon to include noncanonical writings both ancient and contemporary.

What would a lectionary which recognized such truths look like? It would require a feminist translation of scripture, to begin with. While current inclusive translation projects, which correct androcentric language to include women, are useful, these projects alone are insufficient to deal with the absences, distortions, and hostility in some texts. For this, a feminist translation is required which can draw attention to the silences and missing stories, read behind the hostility, and subvert the misogyny of particular texts. Such a translation would enable a congregation to read between the lines, as well as confront the hostility in many scripture texts.

The search, largely futile, for positive scripture texts about women would become less urgent, and the church would be able to accept and deal with the lack of such texts. A lectionary which recognized these truths, moreover, could also take note of silences and absences in the texts, and a creative liturgical context could provide the place where biblical women's silenced voices could be freed.

Such a lectionary would include hostile texts, but not to be proclaimed as "Word of God." Instead, such texts would be the basis for services of lament, repentance, and exorcism. Or they could be contrasted with emancipatory texts in such a way that their hostility would be clear and clearly subverted, not only by emancipatory texts but also by an emancipatory liturgical context.

Because the liturgical context is at least potentially multisensory, the use of scripture in worship need not be limited to the reading of a fixed text. Already in moving the text from a written form to oral, its medium has been altered. It also has the possibility of being interpreted in image and action as well as spoken word.
Let me give two examples of how these principles and proposals might be put into effect. One example demonstrates the amplification of silences in the texts. The second exemplifies the subversion of hostile texts. Both were developed and used in seminary chapel services.

A service intended to focus on women's call to ministry began from Jane Schaberg's observation regarding the lack of women's call stories in the New Testament. A feminist translation of the Bible, she argues, would include a blank page with the heading, "The call of the women disciples." Such a device would point to the silences in the texts. We took this "blank text" for our text for this chapel service.

In order to draw attention to the silence, a reader introduced readings of the call stories of the male disciples with the announcement, "Hear how Jesus called Simon and Andrew to be disciples," followed by the reading of the text. Interspersed among these readings were "readings" of the call of women disciples. These were introduced with a similar announcement: "Hear how Jesus called Mary Magdalene to be his disciple." But this announcement was followed by silence, during which a veiled women entered the chancel area and took a place in silence. The women disciples were thus named and presented, one after another, silent and hidden, until a group of about ten women stood before the congregation.

Following the sermon, which invited the congregation to imagine the lives and ministries of women disciples, a poem by Miriam Therese Winter ("A Psalm for Everywoman," from WomanWord) was recited line by line by the women representing the silenced women disciples. As each woman spoke her line, she removed her veil. By the use of word, silence, movement, image, and poetry, the absence of women from the biblical text was presented to the congregation.

In fact, the congregation participated in both the silencing and the recovery of voice by the use of a hymn. Both the opening and closing hymn was "Here I Am, Lord," a very popular hymn associated, at least in our seminary, with one's call to ministry. But for the opening hymn, the congregation was instructed to stand, hymnals open to the hymn, but to remain silent while the organist played all the verses. At the close of the service, the congregation
sang the hymn, thus moving from being silenced to having a voice, in solidarity with the biblical women disciples and with many women today.

Another service, a communion service, was called "The Stones Will Cry Out." This service drew attention to the suppression of women's witness to the resurrection by contrasting the Gospel texts which report the witness of the women with the Pauline text which ignores them. A refrain, "If we do not speak, let the stones cry out," wove through the litany of scripture readings as well as the eucharistic prayer which was written for this occasion. As communicants returned from the altar, they were offered a small stone, which they took away with them. In this way, both by allowing the scripture itself to critique its own suppressions and by the use of liturgical and poetic interpretation, the congregation was invited to hear scripture texts critically and to commit themselves to resisting attempts to suppress any voices.

These services are but two examples of the possibilities open to the church when a new approach to the construction and use of a lectionary is accepted. As Rebecca Chopp envisions, images explode in creative play, women disciples speak and are heard, women are remembered and celebrated. And the church is better able to proclaim the gospel to the world.

Bibliography


W. Douglas Mills

Being Formed by the Word

"All who desire the grace of God are to wait for it in searching the Scriptures," said John Wesley in his sermon "The Means of Grace." By an individual's reading, hearing, and meditating on the scripture, God has an open channel through which to speak to and by which to convey grace upon him or her. God's story, contained in scripture, is the story that creates the community of God's people. Scripture articulates the fundamental relationship of people with God and with one another. Hearing the word again, as it has been heard in all times past, the people of God are formed in God's call of election, God's judgment of transgression, and God's word of reconciliation.

The people of God share in common the family heritage of the past that is recalled at celebrations and anniversaries. This is the story that has brought believers into the present and that leads them into tomorrow. The story told in scripture is the story of the family of Christians as it struggled to come into being, as it rejoiced in its conquests, as it cried in its sorrows, and as it found hope in being God's people. It is in the story of scripture that Christians discover who they are and who they are meant to be.

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The language of scripture is the language of prayer. Believers recall the mighty acts of God that scripture reveals as the secret of human redemption. God acted to redeem the family of believers from Egypt, again to redeem the family in Babylon, and again when God's Son lay in a grave. God's mercy endures forever; on this the members of God's family trust that God will redeem them.

The clearest example of scripture as the language of prayer is in the Psalms. The Psalter is a record of the family at prayer. In these prayers, the family members hear voices of praise, thanksgiving, complaint, anguish, trust, and awe, which sound not only like the voices of the family but also like the voice of each individual.

**Daily Prayer**

Daily prayer was the rule of practice in the Jewish synagogues and, consequently, was probably the practice in the early Christian community. Luke summarizes the life of the early church in Jerusalem as one in which its members persevered in the teaching and fellowship of the apostles, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers (Acts 2:42). Because the earliest Christian community understood that part of its task was prayer, by the end of the first century all believers were instructed to say the Lord's Prayer three times a day (Didache 8:3).

The New Testament writers believed there are specific times of the day that are appropriate for prayer. Luke reports that Peter and John went to the temple at the hour of prayer, three o'clock in the afternoon (Acts 3:1). Even the Gentile, Cornelius, kept this time of prayer (Acts 10:3). Peter had his vision of the clean and unclean animals during the noon hour of prayer (Acts 10:9).

The first Christians had an accepted rhythm, inherited from their Jewish ancestry, to their times of prayer. This rhythm included not only the ninth hour (3:00 P.M.), the sixth hour (noon), and the third hour (9:00 A.M.), but also early morning and late evening to correspond to the times of the morning and evening sacrifice.

In the tradition of the church, daily prayer has become synonymous with the daily office. Contemporary Christians have been introduced to it through the communities of monks who have the daily office as their set pattern of prayer. Nevertheless, the daily
office also presents a certain tension within the church’s tradition. The history of the daily office is a long and detailed problem which scholars have not settled completely. It includes the public gatherings of communities of Christians for daily prayer as well as individuals or communities establishing fixed hours for private prayer. We may call the public gatherings of the early church for daily prayer the cathedral office and the private gatherings of the monks the monastic office.

Apart from the Sunday service of Eucharist (Holy Communion), the church originally gathered for public worship twice a day, in the evening and in the morning. Frequently, another service was scheduled on the eves of Sundays and major festivals, but the basic pattern of two public gatherings remained the model until monastic influences changed it.

The monastic movement was a development that sprang from the laity in the church who set themselves apart from the world in order to practice with all intensity the call of unceasing prayer. The dedication to constant prayer required more than two services a day, so the early monks lived a devotional life that was based on other precedents for daily prayer. There are numerous warrants and precedents for any number of scheduled times for prayer, including two, three, five, seven, or eight daily times for prayer. However, these monastic rounds were established for the edification of the individual more than for the community to join in unison adoration.

The shape of the monastic office was constructed primarily for meditation, while the cathedral office was constructed more for public supplication and adoration of the present Christ. In fact, the public office was shaped much like the eucharistic liturgy, without the service at the table. Daily prayer as we know it is a fusion of the public cathedral office and the more private monastic office.

The importance of listening to the word of God has been recognized in Protestant circles as well. John Wesley commended his followers to practice this at least twice a day. Wesley knew that such has always been the practice of the church in its desire to pray without ceasing. In the practice of praying the daily offices, scripture has always been at the center. Listening to the word of God facilitates a deeper level of response to the Lord. To this end, a daily lectionary is required to provide an orderly sequence of lessons that,
in time, cover the whole of God's story and call the believers into it to make God's story their story.

The Historical Development of Lectionaries

At Vatican II the Roman Catholic church asked for a new Sunday lectionary. A new calendar was the preliminary step in the process. The Second Vatican Council decided that, in worship, "the treasures of the Bible should be opened more lavishly so that richer fare might be provided for the faithful at the table of God's Word. In this way a more representative portion of sacred Scripture will be read to the people over a set cycle of years." The strength of the new church calendar is its grasp of the central portion of Christian experience and its ability to reflect the vivid message of biblical salvation. The strength of a lectionary based on such a church year is its recovery of scripture as central to Christian faith. This principle that affirms the importance of scripture is attractive also to Protestants, and the resultant ecumenical lectionary is a symbol of Christ's prayer that "all may be one" (John 17:21, KJV).

A lectionary based on the Christian cycle of festivals reflects the very nature of our relationship with God as presented in scripture. When the acts of God are reiterated year after year and day after day, praise of God is deepened. Believers are saved from a false spirituality based on works rather than on God's mighty acts. A lectionary is needed for all the people of God to recover a sense of community and, mostly, to recover a sense of continuity in the sweep of time. Daily time is sanctified by the reliving of God's claim upon history. Even private worship in common with the whole church, made possible by a church year and ecumenical lectionary, keeps prayer from being individualistic. Such a lectionary is an aid to spiritual formation, a way to "proclaim the death of the Lord, until he comes" (1 Cor. 11:26, NEB), and a way to recover valid worship of God.

An orderly sequence of scripture selections used in the public worship of a religious community is not new. The synagogue is the most likely origin of weekly readings. Some scholars even argue that New Testament books, such as Mark or Matthew, are simply a collection of pericopes once assigned in some form to a liturgical
year. The synagogue model of cyclical readings developed in ancient and medieval times into lectionaries among Christian communities. The Apostolic Constitutions of the fourth century clearly refers to a five-lesson sequence.

The Council of Trent fixed the Roman lectionary in 1570 by using those readings that had evolved with meaning over a thousand years. The Anglican lectionary, based on the Roman readings, also went through a period of change. Archbishop Cranmer revised the Roman Breviary into the Book of Common Prayer. Three scripture lessons were assigned for morning prayer and two lessons for evening. However, the lectionary was detached from the church year and began on January 1. The orderly reading of scripture was the chief function of the daily offices in the 1549 Book of Common Prayer.

John Wesley, who used the Anglican prayerbook, was certainly aware of the benefits of a lectionary. In 1784, when Wesley responded to the desperate cry for help in the new American states, he sent his revisions of the Anglican rites. Wesley’s Sunday Service was intended to be the Book of Worship for the recently born Methodists. In this extensive service, Wesley provided proper lessons to be read at morning and evening prayer on the Sundays through the year. Wesley assumed that more than one lesson would be read, though how many lessons more is not indicated. His lectionary provided only that the first lesson be used at both services, except Easter Sunday, Whitsunday, Trinity Sunday, Christmas, Good Friday, and Ascension Day, for which he provided two lessons apiece. That Wesley provided a New Testament reading as the second lesson for these days is evidence that Wesley expected more than one lesson, but probably only two, to be used regularly in worship.

The Ecumenical Sunday Lectionary

The decision by the Roman Catholic church at Vatican II to open more lavishly the rich fare of God’s word led to some of the most radical changes in the long, long history of the lectionary. More than simply updating, the Council fathers set out many reforms. The eighteen members of this group assigned to work on the lectionary were instructed to make proposals, which they did only after years
of biblical studies, experimentation, and revisions. The fathers studied existing pericope systems and sought the advice of many biblical scholars. A rough draft was completed by 1967 and revisions made in 1968. The final product was decreed to begin on November 30, 1969. The new order of readings was based on a three-year cycle in which three readings—an Old Testament, a Gospel and an epistle—were assigned.

Since many Protestants had been consulted in the development of this new lectionary, the lectionary immediately caught the interest of Protestant denominations. Hailed by some as the finest lectionary in Christian history, it was natural that other traditions adopt much of it. The Episcopal church first used a revision of it in the Book of Common Prayer of 1970. The Presbyterian Church in the United States and the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America also adopted it, with revisions, in 1970. Other denominations followed suit.

In the fall of 1972, the Consultation on Church Union (COCU) Commission on Worship began work on a lectionary to serve as a symbol of church unity and as an aid to those churches without a recent lectionary. The first necessity before the commission, the adoption of a calendar, resulted in the acceptance of the calendar outlined above. The commission then aligned the four common lectionaries (Roman Catholic, Episcopal, Presbyterian, and Lutheran) in parallel columns according to Sunday and season. The lectionary that was put forth by the commission is a consensus using the lections on which sources agreed or, if the sources did not agree, using the lection that best fit the sequence. Duplications were avoided. The product follows the Roman calendar, a three-year cycle, and three readings per Sunday system.

Final approval was given to the COCU lectionary in 1974. Meanwhile, the Section on Worship of the United Methodist Board of Discipleship had begun work on new worship resources. Seeing no reason to recommend a lectionary other than the COCU one, the section proposed its use among United Methodists. Responding to the desire that a psalter be included, Hoyt Hickman and James White prepared a consensus psalter for the COCU committee, which was adopted and included in the package for United Methodists.

Part of the struggle to be a more vital and faithful church is the ongoing reform and renewal of worship. Renewal is a good sign of a
healthy and lively faith. It signals, at every turn, the discovery of Christ in the life of the church and in the mission of the church in the world. Though the time has been short since the introduction of the lectionary, United Methodists now are given the opportunity to accept a refinement of that lectionary. The previous lectionary was very good; none of the older lectionaries, especially those on a cycle of one or two years, could match the new order in terms of approach, coverage, and balanced treatment of biblical material. Indeed, the success of the new calendar and lectionary was greater than had ever been anticipated. However, the developers of the COCU lectionary had intended all along to reconsider their work after two full cycles. Critiques of the methodology and the ecumenical state allowed evaluation to happen sooner.

In 1978 the Consultation on Common Texts (CCT) created a committee to revise the lectionary. "The guidelines were clear: create a consensus calendar and lectionary for all three years, do not disturb the Gospel lesson arrangement except in very special circumstances, and retain the principle of thematic correlation on festival days and during the Advent/Epiphany and Lent/Easter cycles." The ecumenical committee produced a polished consensus lectionary for Sunday worship services, which was introduced to The United Methodist Church on the first Sunday of Advent, 1983.

Lectionary Criticisms

Lectionaries as a whole have met with considerable criticism. The most verbal complaint comes from preachers and worship leaders who feel that freedom in worship has been sacrificed. The pastor is the hinge on which the community revolves around the scripture. Ideally it is the pastor's job to relate the context of the community to the identity of the faithful as it is shaped by the canon; therefore, imposed lections may be at odds with congregational needs. However, lack of biblical knowledge, theological misperception, pastoral subjectivity, and a host of other issues keep this ideal from being reality. A minister who reads and preaches from a well-balanced lectionary covers most major biblical themes and is forced away from redundant, but favorite, themes. Lectionary preaching is good discipline.
Another criticism of a three-reading lectionary is the often strained relationship between texts. In the christological cycles, the Gospel lesson ideally determines a theme to which the Old Testament lesson and sometimes the epistle lesson relate. In reality, the relation is sometimes awkward. Also, there are many Old Testament themes that cannot be matched with a New Testament text. This problem is alleviated if a greater portion of the Old Testament is used and if all realize that it is not necessary for all the lessons to be in congruence.

There will always be doubt among some that the integrity of the whole of scripture can be preserved with a lectionary that, of necessity, must exclude portions of scripture. This is a particularly crucial question in regard to the Old Testament. Choosing only themes that are congruent with New Testament texts, and then only by allusion or incidental matter, does not allow important thrusts of the Old Testament to be discovered. Congruence itself deprives the canon of its strength in diversity. In response, it must be said over and over that, while lectionaries are a positive and extremely useful tool, they cannot substitute completely for a study of the Bible in toto. There is a sense in which a lectionary will be of greatest value only when it is projected against the whole of scripture.

Methodology for a Daily Lectionary

In the historical review of the ecumenical calendar and lectionary and the theological justification for the use of both of these, certain methodologies have surfaced which govern the development of a lectionary. It must be kept in mind that the lectionary (COCU or CCT) in use in United Methodism and ecumenical circles is a lectionary primarily of Sunday, eucharistic texts. What is not to be found in the ecumenical arena or in United Methodism in particular is a lectionary of daily biblical lessons.

If the number of Bible study guides, lay helps for biblical interpretation, and small group studies is any indication, then there is certainly a revival of interest in studying the word of God at its source. Several quarters have heard the call for biblical preaching, and others have heeded the desire for scripture-centered Sunday school literature. The body of believers wants to reclaim its
scriptural identity and discover its biblical roots. Men and women everywhere are asking for a guide to Bible reading, and all the reasons cited for the acceptability of liturgical renewal are motivation enough to provide for this need. A program of Bible study would indeed further discipline, foster spiritual formation, emphasize God’s gift of salvation while reevaluating human achievement, and give substance to the unity of the church.

The methodology used in past calendar and lectionary developments can, with additions and revisions, be used to attain this goal of an ecumenical daily lectionary.

1. It is important and necessary to follow the Christian church calendar. This insures the reading of the full sequence of God’s mighty acts. Our present calendar, pivoting on two Christological cycles, is the most refined system enabling us to “know nothing . . . except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:2). Our calendar presents the whole story of God’s self-disclosure, from God’s calling of Israel to God’s calling of the New Testament church in Christ.

Two corollaries go along with this first principle:

a. Civic and national holidays are to be omitted from the course of readings. Not only do these holidays detract from the ecumenicity and catholicity of a lectionary, but civic festivals tend to emphasize the good works of humankind as opposed to the gracious acts of God. Even within Methodism, the entire denomination is not geographically limited to one country, so some civic holidays have no meaning in other parts of the church. Furthermore, the church within one county needs to reexamine its observance of some holidays. While we may not be able to stop the recognition of the U.S. Independence Day, we do not need to turn that into idolatrous worship of civil religion.

b. It is necessary to reach an agreement on dating in the Christian calendar. For the most part, all are in agreement that the church year begins with Advent. The CCT lectionary committee has reached general agreement with other trouble areas, also. Lutherans had adopted a different method of dating Sundays after Pentecost, causing some summer lessons to be “off,” or different from the Roman-Catholic, Episcopalian, and United Methodist systems by two or three weeks. Agreement must be had that requires the renumbering of Ordinary Time before the season of Lent to account for the movable date of Easter.
2. Traditions which already have a daily lectionary are also using the ecumenical Sunday lectionary, thus presenting two sets of texts assigned on Sundays. The Sunday texts from the individual daily lectionaries do not coincide with the Sunday eucharistic texts from the CCT or COCU lectionaries. To alleviate this problem, the Sunday eucharistic lections need to be the definitive assignment. This may create problems in traditions that have morning and evening prayer as well as a eucharistic service. That concern needs study and experimentation; innovations may be the answer. In the meantime, the eucharistic texts should stand as the Sunday assignment.

3. It is traditional that certain books be associated with certain seasons. Lessons chosen for Lent reflect the ancient practice of preparation for baptism, for example. Job and Jonah have long been associated with Good Friday. The COCU lectionary has even convinced us that in the three-year cycle, Matthew is associated with year A, Mark with year B, Luke with year C, and John interspersed in the christological cycles. The CCT lectionary goes even further to associate the Pentateuch and Mosaic narratives with year A, the Davidic narrative with year B, and the Elijah-Elisha narratives along with wisdom literature with year C. There are good reasons for these associations but none are above review. Nevertheless, some recognition of this must be maintained in a daily lectionary.

4. Although lectionaries of different churches have not always been the same, two related principles govern the selection of texts:
   a. The best lectionary in terms of coverage is a *lectio continua*. Continuous reading of a biblical book facilitates complete encounter. As a general rule, continuous readings are to be the norm for a daily lectionary.
   b. A *lectio continua* makes the best sense during Ordinary Time of the calendar. During the Christological cycles (Advent-Epiphany, Lent-Easter), thematic correlation between Gospel and Old Testament lections allows users to see the interrelatedness of scripture. Granted, the congruity of themes must be considered carefully. Still, relatedness is important. In a daily lectionary, not all three lessons must be congruent, though that is preferable. Furthermore, when the Sunday theme will be continued for several
days, the divergent and converse themes would make for a well-balanced treatment.

5. The three-year cycle and a three-reading assignment are not historical requirements. Both criteria make logistical sense, however. A daily lectionary on a two-year cycle cannot be governed by the three-year Sunday readings of the ecumenical lectionary.

6. Existing daily lectionaries need to be consulted. Just as the COCU and CCT lectionaries are consensus lectionaries, so must a daily lectionary attempt to incorporate the best of several traditions. Daily lectionary development will be encumbered by the fact that there is little agreement between existing lectionaries, especially since most are on a two-year cycle. Consensus can be a guide, though impossible at times.

7. Pericopes must be defined by careful scholarship. “Scholarship” leaves much room for criticism and doubt; yet, there are guiding principles to be observed. Textual devices used by the biblical writers to note pericope beginnings and endings should be given control. Choppy readings which omit verses midsequence should be expanded to include those verses. Lections need not be unreasonably long; lections should neither be tailored to meet preconceived notions of thought nor cut in such a way that a unit is interrupted.

8. The last item will be subject to the most criticism. It has four parts:
   a. During seasons of thematic association between lessons, the Gospel lesson is to be the controlling text. This idea is not contrary to the method used for the ecumenical lectionaries now available.
   b. In those seasons of thematic association, the controlling Sunday lections need to govern thematically over a period of several days. The Sunday theme could be continued through the following Saturday with the next Sunday beginning a new theme. Perhaps a better idea is to use Wednesday as a “swing” day so that a theme is continued from Wednesday through Tuesday with the controlling Sunday lections coming in the middle. This would provide a period of anticipation of the Sunday lections, followed by a time of review. Creativity might be useful in this system to include texts that are related by virtue of opposite or divergent themes. Such a method using this anticipation/continuance idea provides a better-balanced lectionary.
c. Certain weeks constitute an octave and these days should guide the selection of texts. Holy Week is such an octave and traditional texts are associated with each day of that week. Other such octaves occur after Christmas and after Easter.

d. Repetition is to be minimized. This will be best accomplished by observing a lectio continua when the season allows for it.

A daily lectionary based upon such methodology would be compatible with the CCT lectionary and would be easily accessible for those using the Sunday eucharistic readings.

Notes

3. Constitution on Sacred Liturgy, Article 51.
The Coat of Arms and the Shield of Faith: Reflections on Pastoral Ministry

When the monarch of Great Britain appoints a person to serve as a member of the House of Lords, he or she is entitled to acquire a coat of arms. The shield on the coat of arms is divided by a cross into four quadrants. What one puts on the shield in the quadrants symbolizes that individual’s life. Each shield is unique because it conveys the aims, aspirations, and qualities of the person’s character and vocation.

Writing to the Christians at Ephesus, St. Paul urged them to put on the whole armor of God, “above all taking the shield of faith” (Eph. 6:16). If a pastor were to create his or her own coat of arms, the shield would bear the marks of his or her personality and perception of the Christian faith and pastoral ministry. The cross at the center is the same for every shield, for the cross gives meaning and purpose to all aspects of ministry. But the signs and symbols pastors choose for the quadrants will vary because each of us is unique and our gifts are diverse. The Reverend Lord Soper once

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said, "Had I purchased . . . a coat of arms, I think probably I would have included a 'soapbox' in one of the quadrants, in view of my addiction to open-air preaching."

In sharing my choice of symbols for the four quadrants of my own shield, I will reflect on those aspects of pastoral ministry that express my understanding of the essence of the pastor's role in our fragmented contemporary culture.

The Centrality of the Cross

The cross is the axis of the Christian faith, and it is by the cross that life is brought into its true focus. Dr. Albert Outler tells the story of the warrior-king Charles XII, who in 1716 visited a little village seaport town named Ystad in the south of Sweden. King Charles arrived unexpectedly at the village church for worship. When the pastor realized that the king was at the service, he reflected on what he should do regarding his sermon. Should he preach the message he had prepared or take this opportunity to praise King Charles and the royal family for their leadership of Sweden? He decided to lay aside his sermon. After the service the king greeted the pastor and went on his way. A short time later the church received a special gift from the king. The pastor called the congregation together to share in the opening of the gift. When the large box was opened, there was a life-sized crucifix. Attached to the cross was a note from the king: "Let this crucifix hang on the pillar opposite the pulpit, so that all who shall stand there will be reminded of their proper subject."¹¹

In his preface to Karl Heim's book, The Gospel of the Cross, John Schmidt writes: "The strength of the gospel of Christ lies in the Cross and the Empty Tomb. In the former it faces honestly and boldly the tragedy of sin; in the latter it rises to the glory of victory."¹² Theologia crucis is not an incidental note in theology; instead, it permeates the whole. "When one wants to sew," wrote Søren Kierkegaard, "one must knot the thread." The cross is the knot in the thread of Christian faith. It is the point of departure and arrival for the pastor's ministry. In a pastor's life, devotion, theology, and service meet and are intermingled because they meet at the cross.
As pastors we are not withdrawn from the world but live in the midst of it. This gives us the opportunity to interpret human experiences in such a way that they will be illumined by the cross. We are called to be persons for others. Pastoral ministry is not for those who seek to distance themselves from other people. In any parish there is enough sin, anxiety, sorrow, and suffering to keep a pastor up at night, offering intercessory prayer. Jesus said, “The Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matt. 20:28). Paradoxically, we find life by losing it in self-giving love. Life is always a losing battle when it revolves around oneself.

In his book Gospel Characters Leonard Griffith tells the story of Cardinal Leger, who resigned his position as archbishop of Montreal to become a missionary priest among the lepers in Africa. Some would say he demoted himself. But it is an open question whether achieving the top positions in the ecclesiastical ladder is superior to working among Christ’s lepers. The cross redirects one’s life from the desire to be served to the desire to serve. “The beginning and the end of all Christian leadership,” writes Henri J. M. Nouwen, “is to give your life for others.”

The cross calls us to reflect on our reasons for being in ministry. As we struggle to proclaim and live the Word, the drama of our own cross is acted out. In our burden for others to believe and have life in his name (John 20:31) we draw near to the cross. When we look at life through the lens of the cross, the multifaceted and sometimes fragmentary aspects of our ministry are put into proper focus.

**Prayer Desk and Study Table**

Prayer and study are crucial to an effective ministry, so in the first quadrant of my shield of faith I would put my prayer desk and my study table. As pastors, we are workers together with God in prayer and study. Regardless of the pressures on our time, we must give attention to these activities.

Prayer in its highest form comes when the Spirit prays through us. One evening I visited with a woman whose husband was undergoing surgery the next morning. Later, when he was recovering, she said, “As you prayed, I had the feeling that he
would come through the surgery." Kierkegaard wrote that "the true relation in prayer is not when God hears what is prayed for but when the person praying continues to pray until he is the one who hears what God wills." Whatever we do that has either substance or results is bound to the ministry of our Lord. He prays for us, for those to whom we minister, and for those we seek to enlist as Christian disciples. "It is in the ministry of prayer that we enter most directly into the ministry of Christ."

There are existential moments at prayer when a cloud of God’s presence surrounds us and fills our hearts. In these deep moments of prayer the Spirit prays through us and God meets us in the depth of our being. Time and eternity impinge upon one another, and we catch a glimpse of life’s eternal significance. It may well be that more is accomplished as we lift persons to the throne of grace in prayer than takes place in some hurried visit. I believe the power of intercessory prayer is far greater than we imagine. "Prayer is for the religious life," states P. T. Forsyth, "what original research is for science ... by it we get in direct contact with reality."

In the Methodist parsonage at the City Road Chapel in London there is a small prayer room with a prayer desk facing a window. In that room where John Wesley waited upon God and offered his prayers, great things began, including fundamental changes in Wesley’s life and ministry which led to a spiritual awakening throughout England and North America. Karl Barth has written: "The first and basic act of theological work is prayer," and theological work must have "the manner and meaning of prayer in all its dimensions, relationships, and movements." In prayer we are catapulted into the front line of battle in the Christian life. The form of your ministry is shaped by your prayer life.

The call of God to preach the Word and be a pastor demands integrity of heart and mind. Paul’s words to the young minister Timothy go to the core of this responsibility: "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved by him, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly explaining the word of truth" (2 Tim. 2:15). The call to preach is at the same time a call to the best of preparation. Completing a theological seminary degree is only one milestone in the pastor’s continuing theological education and preparation for ministry.
Books are essential tools in the minister's workshop. Prayer and study are wings for ministry. It is important to have a reading agenda; the pastor who neglects reading and study has been compared to a shopkeeper who forgot to replace inventory as sales continued. Pastors must feed their own minds if they are to feed the minds of others. A broad range of general and in-depth reading in biblical studies and theology go together.

The disciplines of prayer, study, and reflection are components of the good soil in which the Word takes root and comes forth to bless (Mark 4:3-8). The result of wrestling with the truths of the gospel in one's study becomes visible to the congregation in the pulpit. The pulpit, in turn, sends the preacher back to the study for another word. Just as the preacher cannot bypass the study on the way to the pulpit, there is no way around the road that leads back to the study. One Sunday is soon followed by another with opportunities to preach the Word.

When I shared the general idea of the four quadrants of the pastor's shield of faith with a seminary professor, he immediately responded, "In one of the quadrants I would have the teacher's desk, but I would be standing on the student's side." The best teachers are those who remain learners. One of the joys of Christian ministry is that the doors of learning and experience are always open. Ministry is never a dead end. Backed by private prayer and serious study and preparation, the Word comes with open power.

**Proclamation of the Word**

In the second quadrant of my shield of faith I would put the pulpit. Preaching the gospel is more demanding than it may appear. Karl Barth defined preaching as "man's language about God, in which and through which God Himself speaks about Himself." God in Christ is not silent but has a word for the world today, and the preacher is called to proclaim that word. "Faith comes from what is heard," wrote St. Paul, "and what is heard comes by the word of Christ" (Rom. 10:17). The pastor as preacher is called by God to proclaim the word. It is by the Holy Spirit that the preacher's words and life become the occasion for God's Word to be spoken and
heard. The Word transcends both pulpit and pew to reveal the won­
der and glory of God's presence.

The historic Reformed church in Debrechin, Hungary, has an
 elevated pulpit with a winding staircase and pulpit doors on which
portions of scripture have been inscribed. At the foot of the stairs
are the words, "You shall be my witnesses" (Acts 1:8). The first
landing is marked, "God, be merciful to me a sinner!" (Luke
18:13). On the wall further up are the words, "I am praying . . . for
those whom thou has given me" (John 17:9). On the next landing
the preacher faces the promise, "Every one who acknowledges me
before men I also will acknowledge before my father who is in
heaven" (Matt. 10:31). On the right and left panels of the double
doors opening into the pulpit are the words, "We preach Christ
crucified" (1 Cor. 1:23).10

Whenever we come to the pulpit to preach the Word, the
watchwords of the Reformation need to be kept in mind—sola
Scriptura, sola fide, sola gratia, which means solus Christus. Here
our feet are fixed on the Solid Rock. Preachers are not a vanishing
species; proclaiming the Word is not anachronistic. The God who
had a word for King Zedekiah has a word for us in our time. The
spiritual vitality of the church is always linked with the vitality of
preaching. "When preaching is strong and confident," affirms Alan
Walker, "the church is strong and effective. When preaching is
weak and uncertain, the church is muted in its witness."11

History records the impact of the gospel in bringing about social
transformation. In Adventures of Ideas Alfred North Whitehead
remarks that the preaching of the Wesleys was the effective force in
bringing about the abolition of slavery in Great Britain.12 Slavery
was seen for what it was in the light of the gospel—a denial of
human dignity and the reality that all persons are created in the
image of God. The Word of God has not been diminished in its
power to transform persons and social structures. The walls that
alienate and separate give way to the impact of the gospel.

Although the Bible is beyond the complete reach of any preacher,
there is an exhilaration that comes from studying and preaching the
Word. Fred B. Craddock has observed that "biblical texts move
forward toward us, not backward away from us." God is always
moving toward us in seeking love. Biblical texts are inexhaustible.
The truths of God's Word continue to spring forth from scripture.
The ministry of the Word and Sacrament should not be separated. Proclamation interprets and gives meaning to the sacraments. The sacraments dramatize the Word. Both the proclamation and the sacraments not only proclaim and dramatize what God has done in the past in Christ, but they also give witness to what God continues to do by grace. True preaching has a sacramental nature because it is more the work of the Spirit than just the preacher's effort. Preaching is the means, as Paul affirms, "through which God will save those who believe" (1 Cor. 1:21).

**Sandals and Staff**

The sandals and staff in the third quadrant of my shield of faith symbolize a vital dimension of ministry: the pastor among the people doing the work of pastoral ministry. For a pastor, this is not merely an option. The pastor must identify with the people he or she seeks to serve. The more meaningful that identification becomes, the more effective the ministry. Jesus taught in the synagogue, but he went where the fishermen were mending their nets; he went to the tax collector's office; he spent time visiting in homes; he talked with farmers and merchants at work; he visited the sick and those in sorrow; he had time for the children, and he walked the highways and byways of life proclaiming the kingdom of God.

As the pastor goes among the people, many opportunities arise to counsel in an informal setting. Jesus draws upon the shepherd imagery of the Old Testament as expressed in Ezekiel 34. This is vividly seen in the Gospel of John, chapter 10, as he speaks of himself as the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep (John 10:11). The shepherd image is also found in Matthew 9:36: "When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd." "The task of the good pastor," states Virgil P. Howard, "is to allow the voice of the one, true shepherd to be heard in all its absoluteness, exclusiveness, and if need be, offensiveness." In the crosscurrents of shattered relationships and conflicting interests the pastor is called to reveal the divine presence.

Since pastors are under-shepherds of the Good Shepherd, they will find themselves walking in the ways of the Good Shepherd.
Jesus asked Simon Peter, “Do you love me more than these?” (John 21:15), and he asks us the same question. If we answer yes as Peter did, the command follows: “Feed my lambs, tend my sheep, feed my sheep” (John 21:15-17). A genuine caring and love for people go with the territory of Christian ministry; they determine an effective ministry.

The ministry of the Word includes not only the proclamation of the gospel from the pulpit but the work of the parish. Pastoral care is an extension of the pulpit. A pastor’s ministry is most needed when the crucial hour strikes in the life of an individual or family. At such a time the pastor must put other demands aside in order to be present where ministry often counts the most. The very presence of the pastor in such an hour speaks of God’s grace and caring. At the death of one member of a family, the rest can breathe easier when they know that their pastor is with them sharing their pain and loss. The pastor communicates God’s caring and sustaining power that enables them to face their immediate tragedy and sorrow with a greater degree of acceptance. A pastor who fails in such a time can never recoup the loss in ministry. More than once the faithful pastor hears, “God must have sent you.” “You always come when I need you most; your visits mean so much to me.” An elderly lady in a nursing home said to me as I was leaving, “Come back soon. You are a part of my life.” I replied, “You are an important part of my life, and I will see you again before long.”

In The Anatomy of an Illness, Norman Cousins quotes Francis Peabody’s famous remark: “The secret of the care of the patient is in caring for the patient.” Cousins continues, “There is a miraculous moment when the very presence of the doctor is the most effective part of the treatment.”

Dr. Curtis Hames, a noted heart research specialist and a member of my congregation at First United Methodist Church in Claxton, Georgia, illustrates this point. Often he would call me in the evening after office hours and hospital rounds and ask, “Aubrey, would you like to make some calls with me?” I always said yes. We would drive out in the country and nearby communities and make home visits together. As we went in to see a patient, he would introduce me and then proceed with his medical examination. When he finished, he would ask the patient, “Would you like for Dr. Alsobrook to have a prayer before we go?” They always agreed, and I would offer a prayer of
thanksgiving for the doctor and the means of medical science and pray for God’s healing grace to be upon the patient. Then we would say good night and go to the next patient—sometimes several miles away.

Two other pastoral functions are included in my symbol of sandals and staff. The first is Christian education. The pastor’s aggressive role in Christian education is vital. “‘When the teaching elder does not teach, the effect is felt throughout the entire Christian congregation.’” Teaching children, youth, and adults is a part of Jesus’ Great Commission. The central place of teaching in the pastoral office comes to us through the classical pastoral writers such as Clement of Alexandria, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Wesley, and others.

The second function is leadership in worship and administration. Special services and ceremonies call for careful thought, prayer, and preparation. The wedding is a time of joy when threads of sorrow run through hearts taking on significant change. The wedding ceremony brings together the premarital counseling by the pastor and all the preparations and festivities of families and friends. As for funerals, each of them is different, and a pastor should give careful thought to preparation for each service. The liturgy can be a powerful source of comfort and strength for the family and, likewise, an affirmation of the Christian faith in the face of death. A few weeks after the funeral, I visited a woman who had lost her husband after a long illness. I spent most of the visit listening to her recount her experience of the time around his death. It was good therapy for her to share her thoughts, feelings, and decisions. Many times the pastor’s greatest ministry is in being a caring listener rather than talking.

Open Doors

In order to symbolize the continuous unfolding drama of ministry, I would put a pair of open doors in the fourth quadrant of my shield of faith. These are church doors that open inside and out. As pastors, we enter through these doors for many forms of ministry, the chief of which is leading the congregation in worship, preaching the Word, and administering the sacraments. The doors swing out into
the world to allow pastor and people to fulfill their ministries in the
workaday world.

G. K. Chesterton once told a story about having only vague
memories of his father. As a child, he received a toy theater as a
gift. The characters were cutouts in cardboard, one of which was a
man with a golden key. He was unable to recall just what role the
man with the golden key played, but he always associated that
character with his father. He linked his father with the golden key
because his father was always opening doors for him into worlds of
wonderful and thrilling experiences. He opened the doors of his
imagination that excited his mind to search for truth. He opened
doors of human understanding and doors of God’s revelation.

Likewise, the pastor stands at the crucial place to open the doors
that allow others to come to a knowledge of God. The doors of the
local church swing out into the world through its sharing in the
world mission of the church for Christ. Much depends on the mind
and heart of the pastor in the church’s outreach. The pastor’s heart
must be aflame to make Christ known beyond the walls of the
church. As the congregation leaves the house of worship and fans
out into the community, the service continues. The congregation that
seeks to bear its witness in society will reflect upon and draw
strength from worship and study. But no one can store up the
benefits of worship or service. We need the renewal of worship and
searching the scriptures on a regular basis, just as we must express
our vision of the gospel in life’s ongoing experiences.

It is a mystery of divine grace that God takes our words, however
imperfect, and speaks to people’s needs. When George Whitefield
invited John Wesley to preach for him in the open air, it turned
Wesley’s whole ministry around. Prior to this time, Wesley, like
other Anglicans, thought that the only place for the Word to be
preached was the church building. The response to Wesley’s
preaching in the fields was so overwhelming that he continued it. As
Wesley preached to the coal miners, to those at the market cross,
and to others in the common walks of life, he opened up their lives
to the gospel of Christ. In the ordinary circumstances of life the
gospel opens doors of eternal meaning that bring new life in Christ.
Wesley’s life reminds us of the truth of Fred Craddock’s words:
“Life on its grandest scale comes to him who opens the doors to the
ordinary.”
There is a paradox of the door of faith. On the one hand, faith is a gift of God, as the author of Acts states: “When they arrived, they called the church together and related all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith for the Gentiles” (14:27). On the other hand, human beings are free to open the door of faith with the help of the Spirit (Rev. 3:20). The proposed Presbyterian confession helps to get the paradox of faith into focus:

_God invites us to put our trust in Christ. He leads us to abandon our old way of life and to adopt Christ’s way. We are awesomely responsible for this decision and have the fearful ability to say no to God. But when we have trusted and repented, we see very clearly that God's Holy Spirit worked this in us._

Even before a pastor arrives to assume his or her responsibilities, the doors of the parish are being opened to welcome the new pastor. Open hearts and homes receive one who has come to be their shepherd. Sometimes, even though the pastor has just recently come, the doors of hearts burdened with anguish are opened freely. The trustful relationship so soon established stands upon the integrity of other pastors. A vital part of the healing process can occur when someone is willing to listen with caring and the assurance of confidentiality. “Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ” (Gal. 6:2).

Doors also open to friendship and public service that can last well beyond the allotted years of formal pastoral ministry. The church family and the pastor’s family are bound together in Christian fellowship and service. In some cases, the pastor and his or her family will develop ties of friendship that are as close as those of their own relatives. Doors of ministry also open into the public arena, including public education, government, and civic life. God has a way of continuing to open doors for ministry for servants of the Word, as God does for all who believe. Even retirement is not a wall that delimits but a door that opens to other avenues of service for Christ and the church.

In time we all come to the place where the doors of this life close behind us. Karl Barth has written that “... our being in time will one day come to an end, when our present will never again be followed by a future.” As the doors of life close, the doors of the
eternal open. As Jesus said to Martha, "I am the resurrection and
the life. Whoever believes in me, even though they die, will live"
(John 11:25). In this last quadrant, the doors are a powerful symbol
of hope.

As you reflect further on your faith and theology of ministry,
what would you place in the four quadrants of your shield of faith?
What is the integrating catalyst that moves the different aspects of
your ministry toward fulfillment?

Notes

1. Albert Outler, The Christian Tradition and the Unity We Seek (New York: Oxford
University Press, 1957), 141.
2. John Schmidt, Translator's Preface to Karl Heim, The Gospel of the Cross (Grand
61-62.
1970), 72.
6. Daniel T. Niles, The Preacher's Calling to Be Servant (London: Lutterworth
Press, 1959), 93.
78.
and Winston, 1963), 150.
Winston, 1963), 69.
10. George R. Sweazy, Preaching the Good News (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey:
27-28.
13. Virgil P. Howard, "Homiletical Studies: Exegesis and Exposition fo Gospel
17-18.
15. Thomas C. Oden, Pastoral Theology (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983),
142.

It is all too evident in our time of colossal economic and environmental crisis that Christianity as a movement and the historic church have failed dramatically. This is so, at least, if Christian faith has anything to do with the approximation of the reign of God in history. Theodore Jennings asks, "How shall we explain to ourselves that nearly one-third of the earth's inhabitants claim to believe the gospel, while leaving human relationships as much characterized by greed and violence as ever they were before the gospel was first sounded forth?...? How is it that the message of good news to the poor has become a sedative for the privileged while the poor perish?" How do we face the fact, he goes on, that the wealthiest, most powerful, the greediest, and most destructive nations on earth are the most "Christian," and that, for example, in the 1980s 100 million children died of starvation, malnutrition, and related diseases? This atrocity far exceeds the twelve million deaths of the Nazi war and holocaust. Meanwhile, the specters of nuclear, greenhouse, and ozone disasters threaten the very life of the planet.  

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Wesley’s Theological Legacy

The question of the practical relevance of Christianity to the urgent dilemmas of the late twentieth century underlies Theodore Jennings’s book on Wesley: *Good News to the Poor: John Wesley’s Evangelical Economics*. Jennings, formerly a professor at the Evangelical Methodist Seminary in Mexico City and now Professor of Constructive Theology at the Chicago Theological Seminary, has made an important contribution to the renewed Wesley scholarship that has been flourishing since the seventies, especially spurred on by the widespread perception of an affinity between Wesley and liberation theology. Jennings’s book was an important stimulant to the Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies at Oxford in the summer of 1992.

Jennings thinks that what Wesley had to say in the eighteenth century about economic justice may provoke us to do our own thinking about our situation; this may be especially so for spiritual descendants of Wesley in the Methodist and United churches and other inheritors of the Social Gospel and “religious radicalism.” Wesley is still interesting because we find him struggling with the gospel and its meaning for a world of transition and overwhelming poverty and pain, a world that was in many ways not so different from our own.

Wesley believed there was power in the gospel to change the world. His goal was certainly not to found a successful, prosperous and prestigious denomination. It was to “spread scriptural holiness throughout the land,” to transform lives, and thereby also to transform England and the world. Some historians of Methodism (Bready, Wearmouth, Thompson, and Semmel) and more recently some liberation theologians (Miguez Bonino, Tamez, and Cone) have credited Wesley and Methodism with great historical liberative efficacy, while others have contested this. But whatever Methodism’s achievements in the past, humanity is now facing desperate circumstances, and Christianity appears to be offering neither effective solutions nor the spiritual power to implement them.

Jennings thinks that we still have much to learn from Wesley, both from his theology and practice and from his failures. The radicalism of Wesley has been conveniently overlooked by Methodists. That radicalism was based, in part, in his doctrine of
sanctifying grace: Salvation is not simply a justification which exempts us from holiness. Salvation by grace, rather, capacitates us for holiness. If there is no visible transformation of behavior, grace has vanished. Grace produces real, publicly testable effects. Wesley expected to see this in the transformed lives of individuals. Yet grace affects every aspect of life, including the economic and political. Renewal of faith and converted lives, then, would add up to a transformed society.

*Good News to the Poor* makes an impressive case for Wesley’s serious practical and theological commitment to economic justice. He himself lived very frugally and constantly associated with the truly poor, visiting wretched prisons, and the homes of the destitute, seeing their misery first hand, and begging for the poor in the streets—all of which produced in him an authentic, heartfelt “option for the poor.” He publicly denounced the exploitation of the poor by grasping doctors, lawyers, merchants, distillers. He vehemently denied that the poor were idle, attacked the practice of slavery, and refused to accept the notion that business competition for profit justified doing economic harm to one’s neighbor. Wesley, for all his conservative monarchism, even defended poor people who engaged in outbursts of rebellion and rioting. Basic to Wesley’s option for the poor and its practical implementation was his theology of stewardship. Because “the earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof,” human beings do not truly own what they possess. Everything is entrusted to us from the Creator. Private property is relativized, and indeed private luxury is theft. For example, in his sermon “On Dress,” he declares, “Every shilling which you save from your own apparel, you may extend in clothing the naked. . . . Therefore, every shilling which you needlessly spend on your apparel is, in effect, stolen from God and the poor.” Wesley expresses similar disapproval of large, expensive houses, costly food and entertainment and enjoins and practices radical simplicity of life. What is more, he denies, in that semi-Puritan age, that wealth is a sign of God’s favor and instead constantly warns his hearers that wealth and the worship of mammon are the greatest of all dangers to the soul and lead to certain damnation. Because of this Wesley originally called for the sharing of all things in common, as in Acts 2 and 4. It would be the natural and logical result of Christian love and stewardship. The adoption of pentecostal communalism by the
Methodist societies would be so attractive that it would spread, together with the gospel, throughout the land, and even people of other religions would see the glory of Christ, and the gospel and holy living would spread throughout the earth. Jennings argues that Wesley's theology and ethics of stewardship constitute a frontal attack on the fundamental presuppositions of consumer capitalism and amount to a counter-economics. The God-centeredness of faith implies that every aspect of life is governed by the gospel. This was a total rejection of the Lutheran "two kingdoms" doctrine and of the Reformation doctrine of simul justus et peccator. It was also a dismissal of the popular deism of the day, which saw the deity as absent, inactive, and irrelevant to real life.

The Wesleyan Failure

Wesley soon learned that such economic and social transformation was not going to happen, at least not quickly. Predictably, powerful interests rose up against him. Violent mobs, roused by influential people, disrupted his outdoor meetings. Vicious lies were spread abroad about his alleged corruption and sedition. Wesley found he had to defend himself and his movement against these attacks from the economic and ecclesiastical elite, who felt threatened by the success of his movement, especially the huge crowds who heard him gladly. While confronting and facing down the mobs with great personal courage, Wesley proclaimed the loyalty of Methodists to the king (King George had refused to have him silenced) and to the established church, assuring all that he was not fomenting a revolution. His loyalty was real; there is no doubt that he was truly devoted to the king, and his genuine love for the Church of England, of which he was a loyal priest, is unquestionable. He was also hampered by the official teaching of the Homilies and Articles of the Church of England, which explicitly rejected "all things in common." Further, resistance to his economic vision among his own people was accompanied by their own increasing prosperity. Significantly, "all things in common" was not written into the rules of the Methodist societies. Wesley never ceased to regard pentecostal communalism as the ideal for Christians, even if he did not try to implement it. Yet he can be found from time to time prudently providing excuses for the
accumulation of wealth by Methodists. His famous three rules: “Gain all you can, save all you can, give all you can” became a giant loophole through which Methodists participated in the general service of mammon by getting it just two-thirds right. Jennings comments, “Wesley’s rhetoric self-destructs” (p. 167). Later in life Wesley himself seems to suggest that perhaps the gospel itself self-destructs:

... the Methodists in every place grow diligent and frugal; consequently they increase in goods. Hence they proportionally increase in pride, in anger, in the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, the pride of life. So, although the form of religion remains, the spirit is swiftly vanishing away. (Thoughts upon Methodism XIII, 258)\(^5\)

Wesley, in spite of his great apparent success and fame, knew in his old age that he had failed precisely in the growing economic worldliness of the Methodist people:

I am distressed. I know not what to do. I see what I might have done once. . . . But alas! the time is now passed; and what I can do now I cannot tell. (Causes of the Inefficacy of Christianity, VII: 287-88.)

Learnings

Our author, like other admiring critics of Wesley, thinks that, of course, he lacked an adequate systemic critique of his context. He was a man of the eighteenth century, the age of the individual. He was pre-socialist, pre-Marxian, hampered by official Anglican political theology. We might add (though Jennings does not make this point) that Wesley operated with a faulty doctrine of sin, believing that “Christian perfection” was possible in this life. Closely connected with this was his lack of a sense of sin as structural and corporate. Thus, we discern in Wesley today a kind of individualistic moralism, naively expecting individuals to be “entirely sanctified” while yet living in an exploitative and economically harsh and threatening environment.
Today we have less excuse, being able to draw upon the human sciences and the insights of the social gospel, neo-orthodoxy, and liberation theology. Jennings makes a number of specific “first step” proposals for the alteration of the lifestyle of Christians and the churches: to stop building expensive church buildings until there are no more hungry children; to pay church staff (clergy, professors, administrators, secretaries, janitors) on an egalitarian basis; to govern church schools and hospitals according to the “option for the poor”; to renounce the “economy of death” and to give poverty and environmental concerns top priority in the church’s agenda. This would give credibility to our efforts at evangelization, proving once again that the gospel is not impotent. In a world where the Marxist hope has faded, what other hope is left? Jennings’s message is a challenging one:

We have the possibility of learning something about evangelical economics from the practice and teaching of Wesley. But, as Wesley said, far more is at stake here than the faithfulness of the people called Methodists. What is at stake is the truth of the gospel and the healing of the earth.

Jennings is calling us to radical discipleship, and his suggestions are inspiring. Unfortunately most of us know that his admirable proposals for individual and institutional Christian lifestyle will not be implemented, except by a very few—at least not in the foreseeable future. Jennings, like Wesley, is loathe to recognize the hard nut of predictable human sinfulness. Like Wesley, he appears to expect something like “entire sanctification” from people living in a harsh and threatening social environment. He reflects, I think, Wesley’s inadequate doctrine of sin as “original,” in the sense of received, inevitable, predictable, and systemic. Also, Jennings, like Wesley, offers only a nascent, implied critique of capitalist economic and social structures. Christians need, do they not, a larger social vision, indeed a socialist vision, of human society organized cooperatively? “Where there is no vision, the people perish” (Prov. 29:18 KJV). We need to begin the enormous task of bringing economic power under the sway of democratic structures. Recent Latin American theological critiques of capitalism in the face of the collapse of Soviet communism (e.g., that of Franz...
Hinkelammert make us (especially those of us outside the United States) aware of just how complex a project it is to resist the rule of transnational corporations, the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, and the United States government. Indeed, even within a structurally transformed socioeconomic world, workable solutions to great problems will always have to take account of ordinary human weakness and self-interest. The call to discipleship must include a vision of systemic change and a modest, viable political strategy.

To be fair to Jennings, however, there is no doubt that the process of personal sanctification and individual commitment to lifestyle change on the part of a few, and of church institutions, is essential for the eventual transformation of social and economic systems, and who better than Christians, and especially Methodists, to initiate the process?

Notes

J. Philip Wogaman

Homiletical Resources
From the Gospel of Matthew:
Faith and Discipleship

In The Cost of Discipleship, Dietrich Bonhoeffer makes the point that obedience to Christ is both the consequence of faith and the basis of faith: "only he who believes is obedient, and only he who is obedient believes" (Revised edition, Macmillan, p. 69). Bonhoeffer was challenging the typical Protestant view that faith always comes before works. To the contrary, he argues, it is often the other way around, and our faith follows from our actions. Or, to put it as Bonhoeffer probably intended, faith and action are two sides of the same coin. We really cannot have one without the other. This means that we really do not have one before the other.

The lectionary selections from Matthew for June 20 through July 25 draw us into the question of how faith is related to action in the Christian life. They are taken from the Matthean chapters on the calling and commissioning of the twelve disciples. Prior to the first lection, the disciples have been named and given certain instructions about their mission. Now, in Matt. 10:24ff., Jesus proceeds to explore the meaning of discipleship. From one side, these passages challenge the simple priority of faith to "works" that treats

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"works" as a negotiable option for people of faith. When faith is permitted to stand alone, the result is often narcissistic. I may struggle painfully over issues of faith, enduring even the "dark night of the soul." But it can be a very subjective thing measured, finally, only by my own sense of spiritual well-being. Christians are perenni ally tempted to reduce faith to whether or not they feel good. Never mind that the surest way to not feel good is to be wholly caught up in oneself. We may acknowledge that self-centeredness is not consistent with faith; do we fully understand that "faith" detached from action is self-centered? The modern sociological classic, Habits of the Heart by Robert Bellah and associates, explores the breakdown between private religious experience and the acceptance of public responsibility in contemporary American society. One of the case studies in that volume is of a Sheila who acknowledged, quite frankly, that she had her own private religion which she called "Sheilaism." It may not have been an altogether satisfactory form of religion, but it was authentically her own and she was honest enough not to attribute it to anything outside herself. Christians can develop their own forms of "Sheilaism" under the name of Christian faith or spirituality.

It can be expressed in the privacy of our discussions with a counselor or spiritual director or in the corporate experience of a prayer group focused primarily upon itself. But can such subjectivism be authentically Christian?

Of course, faith and action can also be separated by emphasizing only action. It is not what we believe but what we do that counts. Christian moral activists can be very impatient with time wasted in thought or prayer. The important thing, really the only thing, is the work of caring for the homeless or feeding the hungry or healing the sick. That may, as a matter of fact, be better than religious self-centeredness. But action detached from faith contains its own forms of self-centeredness. We seek to find inner peace through outer deeds; we find we can never do quite enough to quiet the spiritual uneasiness. Moreover, we find ourselves becoming self-righteous. Our relationships with others, even with those we seek to help, become corrupted. We ourselves become candidates for early burnout. These consequences are bad enough in themselves. But detaching our actions from a grounding in faith also deprives us of clearheadedness about what actions are needed. At
issue is the question what is at stake in our actions? Why do they matter—apart from our anxious desire to avoid guilt for not doing them?

The inherent unity between faith and action is why Christian ethics should never be treated apart from theology. Some versions of ethics have sought to do exactly that. For example, some forms of natural law ethics treat issues of justice and morality as nonreligious philosophical questions. Superficially at least, that may seem understandable. After all, one does not have to be a religious genius to see the connection between human suffering and the objective realities of hunger, homelessness, and disease. Christians and non-Christians can make common cause in dealing with such things. Why do the religious reasons of Christians matter, so long as the objective human reasons are understood and acted upon? Wouldn’t it be better to be fed and sheltered by a compassionate non-Christian than to be ignored by a Christian? Most of us would say yes to that, while acknowledging shamefully that many Christians, ourselves included, often do ignore human distress.

But the deeper questions keep coming back. Why be compassionate? Why act for peace and justice? Nonreligious answers, if deep and enduring, turn out to be more religious than we think. If we define religion as what we believe in and value the most, then what we do is closely related. Christian ethics is dependent upon theology because it is an expression of what Christians value most. In his *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, H. Richard Niebuhr argues that all of us live on the basis of a “center of value.” We value all other things on the basis of their relationship to what we value most. Niebuhr speaks of three typical forms of valuing. “Polytheism” is the scattered valuing of many different things as we are attracted to them. Ultimately, this is a very self-centered form of worship, leading to self-centered ethics. “Henotheism” is the valuing of one’s group—which can be anything from one’s own family or community or nation to one’s ethnic group or gender (from the Greek *henos* = tribe). That is a higher form of loyalty than self-centeredness. But it is lower than worshipping the center and source of all being, which is what Niebuhr calls “radical monotheism.”

The passages in Matthew are about valuing God above all else and organizing one’s life accordingly. They challenge every form of
self-centeredness and materialism. They also stand in judgment against inordinate love of one’s own group, even of one’s family. That judgment may be especially important in a time when group loyalties have become absolute god for so many people. These loyalties do not go deep enough. We are required to devote ourselves wholeheartedly to the One who is the source of all being.

Matthew, in common with the rest of the New Testament, understands that One to be revealed in Jesus Christ. Devotion to Christ, obedience to Christ is devotion and obedience to God.

That central principle of New Testament ethics defines the basis and starting point of the Christian life; it does not, by itself, supply the details. That we are to worship God and be obedient to Christ is given. What, specifically, obedience means may not be as clear. The demand is laid upon us as an accompaniment of our faith and our salvation. Ultimately it is a demand contained within grace, for it is given with and not prior to the news of our salvation. It is a demand laid without qualification upon our whole being, just as the grace that accompanies it is a gift without reservation. Nevertheless, what it means in judgment, decision, and action requires much further inquiry. We can be certain that God loves us wholeheartedly and that we must respond with utter devotion. We cannot be as certain about what exactly we should do. The latter requires us to think responsibly, to study carefully, to consult with others, and to learn from our own experience and that of others.

Such an ethic may appear relative, as surely it is: it is relative, always, to God, who is the only absolute. Every particular commandment, even those prescribed in specific biblical writings, must be seen and judged in the light of the deeper disclosure of God in the person of Jesus Christ.

The Third Sunday after Pentecost: Matthew 10:24-39

It happens that the third Sunday after Pentecost of 1993 is also the traditional Father’s Day. I do not know whether that occurred to the Common Lectionary committee, but is it not a wicked coincidence that we here encounter the line, “I have come to set a man against his father” (10:35a)? We are forced to confront the sentimentalities and idolatries of family loyalty without much ceremony. “Whoever
loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. . .” (10:37). So much for the family-life emphasis fondly embraced by some politicians. Indeed, “one’s foes will be members of one’s own household” (10:36). Can the words be taken literally?

Well, yes and no. The whole passage is about our first loyalty, the one that sets the context for all the rest. Family ties, no matter how fulfilling, should not become the basis for a form of henotheism. If they are, they can become social sin in the guise of human tenderness, as Reinhold Niebuhr suggests in his classic Moral Man and Immoral Society. Even Mafiosi are reputed to have wonderful family relationships, on the basis of which demonic evil is inflicted upon persons outside those ties. The somewhat obscure verses 24-25 underscore the point that we are identified by and with those whom we acknowledge to be our masters. Christ must be the master of the house; then everything else will be clear.

But if one’s first loyalty to God, in Christ, is clearly established, the harsh words concerning family relationships must no longer be taken literally. Jesus’ own favorite metaphor for God is, after all, drawn directly from family life. That metaphor is designed, not to establish the superior status of fathers to mothers nor to treat God as more masculine than feminine, but rather to convey something of the tenderness of God. Three of the most beautiful verses in the New Testament, contained within this lection, underscore God’s caring: “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.” Presumably, parents can care for their children on that basis as can children their parents. But to say that is to place all members of family units in the faith context. Each is important to God. The value of each transcends purely human affection. That does not set human affection aside; it deepens it with a more ultimate status.

There remains the question of whether loyalty to Christ requires the sacrifice of all other ties and loyalties. What does it mean that “whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me” (vs. 38) or that “those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it” (vs. 39)? No doubt there have been Christians who, taking those words quite literally, have
played havoc with personal relationships and responsibilities. Is that the intention? Note that the words are "lose their life for my sake" and not "lose their life for the sake of losing their life." Losing one's life is not the point; giving it over to Christ is. Who, then, is this Christ to whom the disciple is to give over his or her life?

Is this a self-absorbed fanatic, a religious cult leader bent upon exploiting gullible followers? Of course not. This is the one whose whole being is consumed by love, the one who has become the bearer of God's grace. This is the one who gave himself over to death on the cross in faithfulness to God and in obedience to love. Obedience to this Christ, then, is also obedience to this love. Surely those with whom one has most immediate contact, including one's own family, are to be loved and cared for. That is not in competition with obedience to Christ; that is a part of the meaning of obedience to Christ!

But if obedience to Christ does not require the sacrifice of all other ties and loyalties, our attitude toward them must be transformed. No longer are they an end in themselves. No longer are they allowed to shut out the wider spheres of loyalty to which we are summoned by Christ. No longer can they be a mask for self-centeredness. Sometimes, indeed, Christ may call us to abandon relationships and responsibilities we had thought to be very important. More often, Christ's call comes within the fabric of life where it finds us.

I write these words where I live and work, in a great but troubled American city. What might such words mean here? Surely they do not mean the abandonment of home and family. But it seems to me rather that they mean that I cannot abandon the hurt and broken city in order to preserve a little island of familial bliss. Christ's call is to identify myself with the whole metropolis as a God-intended community of love and justice and to make my contributions, however meager they might be, to the healing of this city. I cannot allow my loyalty to family to be pitted against that more inclusive loyalty; the two must now go together. Similarly, as a Christian disciple, my caring now must encompass the whole world. I cannot solve all the world's problems, but I can become a part of the solution.

The concluding lines of this lection are deeply insightful. They evoke the emptiness of a self-centered life in contrast to the
abundance of a life based upon loving commitment. One of the deepest conundrums of theological ethics is the question how to relate God’s grace to God’s judgment. If God’s grace is freely given, absolutely and without precondition, then what becomes of God’s righteous judgment? Can we, laying claim upon grace, safely fudge on the demands of justice? Can we, with Voltaire, trust that “Oh, God will forgive, that is his business”? On the other hand, if God’s righteousness and justice are effective, what about grace? Does God, at some point, conclude that grace just hasn’t worked out, so this poor sinner will, after all, have to be consigned to eternal damnation? Some grace! It seems to me that it diminishes grace even to treat it simply as the divine resource making it possible for us sinners to conform to God’s righteous demands. That does not quite capture the depth of God’s affirmation of each of us, in spite of our persisting inability to live righteously.

The relationships between grace and works remain a conundrum. But verse 39 points the way out. God’s grace is and remains absolutely trustworthy; God’s mind will not change. But a self-absorbed life shuts the door upon grace from our side, while a life freely given to God keeps it wide open. Thus the paradox: by seeking, in a self-centered way, to find fulfillment we shut the door to the grace without which there can be only frustration. But by giving ourselves over to the life of love we open ourselves to the only thing that makes fulfillment possible. We cannot receive love unlovingly.

The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost: Matthew 10:40-42

The lection for this Sunday is very brief. It establishes the connection between the master and the disciple. “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.” True disciples are emissaries of Christ, who, in turn, is from God.

That lays a heavy demand upon all who would be disciples. We are, in effect, to be Christ to others. I am not sure I want others to judge Christ by my behavior! Indeed, my discipleship, no matter how hard I work at it, is bound to fall far short. But if I hear the name Christian, people will make the connection. It is inevitable that
they should. How else can the world find Christ than through his disciples? To put this differently, how could one speak meaningfully of the love of Christ without there being manifestations of that love visibly at hand? Just as Christ’s own teachings about the love of God had to be expressed in his own life, so must the teachings of Christians about Christ resonate in their own lives. The proclamation of the gospel rests finally upon demonstration.

The specific illustration mentioned in the text, “Whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones” (vs. 42a), connects teaching with experience. In a sentence anticipating Matthew’s parable of the last judgment (Matthew 25), the deed of kindness is taken to be the criterion of everything else. It suggests the image of vulnerable people (“these little ones”) in their need, and how the cup of cold water given “in the name of a disciple” (who, in turn, represent Christ, who, in turn, represents God) is ultimately the gift of God.

What is the reward of the righteous, referred to here? The passage does not say. I should like to think it intrinsic to the act itself and not some external thing given for this good behavior. Is it not an outgrowth of verse 39 from last week’s lection; i.e., is it not the gift of life itself? By contrast, an extrinsic reward would become an external reason for doing the good deed. I give the cup of cold water, not because of my love for the weak person who needs it, but because I want something in return. I want to be recognized. I, in turn, want lots of cold water to be given to me. I want to go to heaven, and I fear that God will not let me go to heaven if I neglect this person’s need for cold water. In a word, I may not care anything at all about this poor person for his or her own sake. It is for my sake that I act. Surely that is not consistent with verse 39.

There is another issue for modern readers lurking in this passage. Is our discipleship always contained in the direct, individual act of goodness, or can it (or need it) be expressed through corporate institutional structures?

The direct act of kindness has an undeniable prima facie appeal. It is personal. It entails direct communication between the one who receives and the one who gives, so that the reason for giving (the love of Christ) can more readily be seen as a part of the gift. In the controversies over provision of food, clothing, shelter, and medical care to indigent persons in contemporary North America, it is often
claimed that these welfare benefits should be provided not by cold, impersonal government but rather by “hands-on” charitable agencies, preferably church-related, that can take a personal interest in those being helped.

In my own city, controversy has raged for some years over the efficacy of large public shelter programs for the homeless rather than small-scale shelters provided by neighborhood churches. Church-related hospitals are similarly regarded as the place for real caring; public hospitals are sometimes understood, by definition, to be impersonal. In one of his celebrated utterances on poverty, former President Ronald Reagan remarked that if every church in America would take responsibility for just one poor family there would be no further problem. That seemed to ease whatever tension he may have felt over the ideological flaws in government welfare programs. But, since it was always inconceivable that every church in America really would accept that challenge, the poor were left about where they started out.

I am impressed by the objective concreteness of the scriptural illustration. Thirst is real and so is a cup of cold water. I wonder whether that is not the clue we need to translate this demand of loving obedience into the complexities of modern life. Do we not also face, though in different form, the objective question of what “these little ones” actually need, along with the further question, what will actually, realistically meet the need? Given the very different kind of economic order and the very different urban civilization, might we not need a different way of insuring delivery of the cup of cold water? I vividly remember one of the great battles my pastor father took on in a small Ohio community in the late 1930s. The town had no water purification and delivery system, relying instead on wells and cisterns which periodically spawned epidemics of typhoid fever and other maladies. In that environment, one might well give the cup of cold water—and typhoid fever along with it! The issue was whether little Winchester would tax itself to issue bonds to match New Deal grants and have itself a water system.

Was that, could that be, an act of giving done in the name of Christ? Christ might not be explicit enough in the trail of government action and finance to be recognizable to those receiving the water—though Christ surely would be present in the motivations of Christians supporting such a program. But suppose Christians
were to oppose such programs on the grounds that they were not specifically enough Christian and that, as a result of this opposition, the programs would fail, and that, as a result of the failure, "these little ones" would not have their cup of cold water or would have a case of typhoid fever along with their cup taken from the well. Would it not then be clear that the love of Christ had been turned on its head and become disobedience instead?

This is the point at which scripture does not, by itself, provide us with specific instructions for its own fulfillment. That is a good reminder that discipleship entails the disciplined (or discipled) mind as well as the obedient heart and will. A part of our obedience is our commitment to think through the problems of our age, be they local or global, in light of God's love and to seek what will actually work.

The Fifth Sunday after Pentecost: Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

In 1993 the fifth Sunday after Pentecost falls on July 4 which, in the United States, is the day of civic celebration of national independence. Those preaching in the United States may wish to relate their message to this national observance, in which case Psalm 72, also appointed by the lectionary for this Sunday, may provide a better homiletical opportunity. That psalm resonates with the spirit of "America the Beautiful" and some of the deeper values in the national ethos, including the responsibility of rulers to care for the weak and poor and the nation's responsibility to be a blessing to other nations.

Matthew 11 is not as easily related to the civic agenda of this day. (Interestingly, the word of judgment upon cities in Matt. 11:20-24 is omitted from the selected readings!)

The appointed readings, however, carry their own message. Verses 16-17 contain that curious reference to the children's playful chant: "We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; We wailed, and you did not mourn."

The meaning of that emerges in the next verse. Jesus is referring to the "double bind" in which popular attitudes dismiss either a rigid or an open style of life. John the Baptist is dismissed as crazy for living ascetically ("neither eating nor drinking"). But Jesus is also condemned for being open to all kinds of people and for not
being ascetic. Either way you turn, you will be condemned. The children's chant says, in effect, that you won't respond to us when we are joyful, but neither will you respond when we are mournful. Jesus rounds out the pericope by implying that these popular attitudes don't matter; what matters is the end result: "Wisdom is vindicated by her deeds."

At the very least, this pericope is a reminder that we cannot define faith by negatives. Our faith is not summed up in what we are against or what we avoid doing. We need to be against some things and we need to avoid doing some things, all right. But that is because of the positive claims of faith and life. Clearly, Jesus was not afraid to associate with all kinds of people, no matter how disreputable they were; clearly, also, he did not avoid eating and drinking, regardless of the criticism of some.

The second half of the Matthew lection points more deeply into Jesus' message. It is easy to imagine this being spoken to ordinary peasants, the "peoples of the land." Verse 25 says very plainly that ordinary people can grasp the truths that matter, sometimes better than the more learned. Is that not so? I have been a teacher of theology for more than thirty years; and, in my experience, any theological point can be made and understood by virtually anybody above, say, twelve years of age—provided it is explained in a familiar vocabulary. That is a word of reassurance to humbler folk not to be intimidated so easily by the "experts." I do not read this as an invitation to the kind of anti-intellectualism that substitutes sentimentality for serious thought. I understand this to mean that everybody is capable of serious thought. The work of the theology expert is a work of service, helping us to sort out issues and problems in our faith and to identify some of the intellectual pitfalls into which we can fall. It is not to do everybody's thinking for them.

But Jesus' point cuts even deeper, for he makes it clear that faith is more than our thinking. Essential truth is present even with "infants," that is, even by those who cannot yet express it in abstract forms. If love is at the heart of the faith, then clearly we can see what Jesus intended to convey here: Love is grasped, both in its presence and its absence, by "infants." And, unfortunately, love can be overlooked altogether by very learned people.

The final verses, 28-30, are a scriptural gem. We can think of this as a word of grace to all upon whom life has dumped its worst
garbage, the oppressed, the suffering, the sorrowful. It is a word of caring that helps establish, up front, that the gospel is especially directed to people in their need. In context, it probably refers to the burdens of low self-esteem laid upon the humble by the self-righteous. In Jesus’ time and in ours, the demands of faith have been laid on in such a way that many people are excluded almost by definition. In our time, I think of women who are often put in a double bind between the demands of career (you cannot find real fulfillment unless you are pursuing a successful career) and the demands of home (you cannot find real fulfillment except as a wife and mother). In time, we may hope that cultural expectations will accommodate the full equality of women while defining roles more manageably. In the meantime, women are entitled to a word of hope. Similarly, homosexual persons are in a double bind. On the one hand, it is acknowledged even by conservatives that people have little control over their sexual orientation—and that some may have no control at all. On the other hand, homosexual persons are advised that if they cannot change—as many clearly cannot—they have no other moral alternative but total abstinence from sexual expression. Much we still do not know about sexual orientation. But can we, in the spirit of verses 28-30, lay a burden upon homosexual persons that the rest of us are not expected to bear? The word of verses 28-30 is a word of reassurance. Nobody is required to do or to be what they cannot do or be. In a way, this brings us back to the little children’s game of verse 17, where there is no possibility of pleasing others. But Jesus is not playing games. God’s caring love liberates us to a life of love and freedom; it is not an impossible set of demands.

The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost: Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

Jesus’ instructions to his disciples continue with the famous Parable of the Sower, given first to the great crowd (vss. 3-9), then explained privately to the disciples (vss. 18-23). For homiletical purposes the two passages can be used together, although it seems probable that only the first represents actual teaching by Jesus while the second is more likely a later interpretation.
The parable itself is straightforward enough. It is an account of why the gospel is not well received by everybody. Some people just don't understand it. Some receive it as a brief fad, then move on to something else. Some are too distracted by worldly cares or competing values. But to some it speaks deeply and enduringly and they receive it gladly. Each of these categories has homiletical possibilities.

The first is depicted as seeds falling on a path which do not even begin to sprout before the birds eat them up. In the commentary (vs. 19) this is interpreted as those who do not even begin to understand the gospel. It makes no connection with their experience. Which raises a nice question: What is the obligation of the sower of the seed to be understood? To make connection with the life experience and mental horizon of those to whom the gospel is presented? The answer surely is that this is a real obligation. But there is a deeper point. If the gospel is not received until it is understood, then clearly it has intellectual as well as emotional dimensions. The gospel is not just about the way we feel; it is also about the way we think. Furthermore, neither can we be forced nor can we force ourselves to think in a particular way. If there are doubts to be overcome and contradictions to be resolved, these problems have to be worked through intellectually. When the church presents the gospel without explanation, without attempting to make connection with the mind of the age, without submitting it to the thrust and counterthrust of argument among reasonable people, it is, in effect, laying the seeds on a concrete sidewalk and expecting them to grow.

The seed falling on shallow soil is a lovely metaphor for much popular piety in our time. One thinks instinctively of a number of the celebrated televangelists (happily, not all of them) whose appeal is to superficial emotions. The phenomenon can appear to be very religious, very "spiritual." It can, indeed, be presented as a judgment upon less intense, less spiritual forms of piety. But it has no roots. It flourishes and then dies, and even while it flourishes it scarcely touches important aspects of one's life. Such superficial piety is fully consistent with racism, materialism, national chauvinism, even with sexual promiscuity. It just feels good, but the gospel is about more than feeling good.

Perhaps we should also remind ourselves that this is also an apt metaphor for theological and liturgical fads. These come and go with
some regularity. When the gospel is tied too exclusively to such fads, it goes down with them.

The seed among the thorns of verses 7 and 23 warns us of the world’s competing false gods. Here the issue is not lack of understanding. The gospel may be well enough understood but insufficiently valued. Competing deities of wealth, power, and prestige choke out the gospel even among people who understand well enough that these gods are ultimately false and dehumanizing. More subtle are the competing values of family or nation, the henotheisms of which H. Richard Niebuhr speaks. When those values are made ultimate, they inevitably choke out the deeper, more liberating love of God. Love of God and love of country cannot be simple parallels, as the “God and country” theme suggests. One or the other will necessarily come first. That is true of every other group loyalty, including the church when the church is elevated above God. When our group loyalties are not subordinated to and in service of our deeper loyalty to God, God gets choked out.

The seed sown on good soil invites us to consider mature faith and its preconditions. Do faith and action have to be pitted against each other? Must we choose between piety and critical thought? Can Christian faith not be expressed in both its personal and its social dimensions without the one cancelling out the other? Mature faith expresses wholeness in which every aspect of life finds expression that enhances every other aspect. It is often easier to preach a truncated gospel that exaggerates some things while diminishing others. The deeper yearning of humanity is for a form of faith that puts it all together. The seed landing on good soil can symbolize a faith that brings all aspects of life into meaningful focus. That is a notable challenge in an age that has confronted so many evils; so many social, economic, political, and technological changes; and so many advances in scientific knowledge. A gospel that takes its place as just one more phenomenon amidst all of this is seed landing on shallow or thorny ground. A gospel that can help us draw all of this into creative harmony, grounded in God, is seed sprouting in good soil.
This lection is another parable about the proclamation of the gospel (vss. 24-30) accompanied, again, by private explanation to the disciples (vss. 36-43). These passages, not directly paralleled in either Mark or Luke, cannot be treated prima facie as authentic sayings of Jesus (though the first may well have its origins in a simple remembered parable of Jesus). But, as expressions of the church’s faith, both have homiletical possibilities.

The initial, underlying idea is, of course, that the kingdom of God has enemies. Not everybody is in favor of God’s good purposes. Whether or not we follow the lead of the second pericope in personifying evil in the form of the devil (many of us would not), the whole point of the lection is lost if evil is not taken seriously. It cannot be defined away by treating it as a simple mistake by well-intentioned but misguided people or be regarded as an illness stemming from natural causes. It is deliberate turning away from God’s intended good. The radical character of evil is underscored by the particular weed chosen to illustrate it in the parable. It is not an annoying but harmless dandelion or crabgrass; it is darnel, a weed resembling wheat, which is, however, poisonous. It can have the appearance of something good while being, in fact, something very bad. That is what evil is; that is what the good news of God’s kingdom encounters, in many forms and on many levels.

How are we to tell the difference between good and evil? That may not be so easy! The wheat and the weeds are growing side by side, closely resembling each other. The difficulty of telling them apart may be more implied than stated in the lection, but it is worth noting that this parable has sometimes been used in support of religious tolerance. (An essay by Roland Bainton, “The Parable of the Tares as the Proof Text for Religious Liberty to the End of the Sixteenth Century” in Church History, I [1932], pp. 3-24 explores this perceptively.) Indeed, the difficulty of being absolutely certain in drawing distinctions between truth and error, good and evil is possibly the very strongest basis for religious freedom. If we cannot be absolutely certain who is right and who is wrong about everything, then we had better be careful lest unintentionally we silence the one who is right. We may discover, in the end, that we
have been silencing God. A good deal of what was once labeled evil has turned out to be good (such as women assuming full equality with men in the life of the church); just so, much that we thought good has turned out to be evil (such as human slavery).

In a world in which different sects and religions confront one another in anger and in which controversies over such things as abortion and homosexuality contribute to mutual displays of self-righteousness, perhaps the parable of wheat and weeds has a lesson for us. We must not be too sure. We must be more open. We must be more patient. God may surprise us in the end.

Even if we feel we can tell the wheat from the weeds, the parable warns us not to hurt the wheat by going after the weeds. Like all metaphors, this cannot always be applied literally. Sometimes evil, having been identified, does need to be confronted. The parable should not encourage passivity in face of injustice. But it is nevertheless a good reminder that the blows aimed at evil can also strike the good. Bombing a population center may be the most effective way to defeat an evil military power. But how much human good will be destroyed in the process? (The "just war" principle of proportion raises exactly that question.) Silencing a heretic may remove an erroneous opinion from public debate. But will it also intimidate people, including the heretic, who have other valuable contributions to make? (The alleged heretic, Michael Servetus, who was burned at the stake in Calvin's Geneva, was also one of the leading scientists and all-around intellectuals of sixteenth-century Europe.) Maybe it would be better to wait until both truth and error have had full opportunity to reveal themselves; that may be time enough to harvest the one and discard the other.

The explanatory passage, verses 36-43, adds the further eschatological dimension. While phrased partly in violent form, evoking images of a vengeful Christ and the torments of hellfire, the serious message is of the ultimate triumph of good. At the end of the age, evil will be defeated and God's good will prevail. The seeds that have been sown can be trusted, as can the expected harvest. We can trust what God has been doing.

That may be the most important message of all in this pericope. Much of the religious animosity of our time has its source, not in an overbearing confidence in the rightness of one's view and the wrongness of all others, but rather in the inability to trust God's
workings in human history. Are we engaged today in a "cultural war" with high stakes, as some religio-political rhetoric asserts? Maybe so. But do let us have more confidence in God's ability to nudge the truth along toward the final harvest. That may make us less prone to undermine the very gospel of truth and love by manipulating inconvenient truths and by running roughshod over those who get in our way.

So far as the "furnace of fire" and the "gnashing of teeth" are concerned, I would have preferred not to have to deal with them, because the picture of a God who torments the wicked physically does not seem consistent with the God whose grace reaches out to all of us despite our wickedness. Nevertheless, the "gnashing of teeth" is at least a good reminder that it is a terrible thing to have turned away from God's love intentionally, discovering, as inevitably we must, that we have sabotaged ourselves in the process. Such remorse is reserved for that betrayal of God and of others which is also self-betrayal. Even that may not be beyond the grace of God; I believe it is not. But it is beyond the teaching of this pericope!

The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost:
Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

Here we have six parables of the kingdom, each helping to illuminate the character of God's reign and the urgency of our response to it.

The first, the Parable of the Mustard Seed in verses 31-32, depicts the kingdom's explosive growth from small beginnings. The second, the Parable of the Yeast in verse 33, suggests the penetration of the kingdom into every aspect of life. Together, these parables are a remarkable anticipation of the explosive growth and pervasive influence of the Christian church through twenty centuries of Western history. Anybody predicting the religious future of the Roman Empire during the first century A.D. could safely have ignored the inconsequential band of Christians. They would scarcely have appeared on a survey of religious preferences during the period, and where they did appear the obstacles they confronted would have appeared nearly insurmountable. Yet, within three centuries they had become the official religion of the Empire, and
for many centuries their world view dominated Western thought
forms at almost every point.

Acknowledging that not all such cultural triumphs were faithful to
the original gospel, the great avalanche of good set loose by those
very humble beginnings is well symbolized by the growth of the
mustard seed and the leaven.

The Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s also illustrates the point
of these parables. The Congress on Racial Equality (CORE) came
into being in the late 1940s, devoted to the overcoming of racial
discrimination and segregation through nonviolent methods derived
from Gandhi and the New Testament. In a very inconspicuous way,
this tiny organization distributed handbooks on nonviolent resistance
in black colleges throughout the South and conducted workshops and
small-scale practice demonstrations with small groups of people.
This minuscule beginning—this mustard seed, this leaven—exploded
into a great, nation-transforming movement in the 1960s. In the end,
the "Jim Crow" institutions of segregation collapsed, the right of
minority group persons to vote was established, and sweeping
cultural changes were begun. The kingdom had not come in its
fullness, but its power and pervasiveness had been demonstrated.

The message is an important one for people who despair of any
movement toward the good. At any moment in history, the powers
of evil can seem so pervasive, so intractable. But something else is
also at work. In the long run, it is God's kingdom that matters.

The parables in verses 44-46 return us to the question, what do
we value most? They make clear that God's reign is worth
everything else. We have no interests that are of greater significance
than this one central value. The two little parables make the nice
point that all of our other values can be and should be subordinated
to God. What folly it would be to preserve $5,000 worth of
possessions if, by selling them, we could acquire a field worth a
million! Or, who would be stupid enough to cling to a few items of
costume jewelry when, by selling them, we could acquire a ten-carat
diamond? The parables' searching question is, what do you have that
is more precious than your relationship to the God of the universe
and all ages? God is the center of all value, the basis upon which
everything else is measured.

The parable of verses 47-50 is another version of the Parable of
the Weeds from last week's lection. This time it is good fish and bad
fish, both caught in the same net but destined to be separated out at the end of the age. In this sequence of parables, however, the Parable of the Good and Bad Fish punctuates the message that everything depends upon being among the good fish who are devoted to the kingdom and not among those to be discarded. Whether or not one wants to take the “furnace of fire” imagery literally (as I do not), is it not enough to contemplate what it would be to waste one’s life altogether by embracing false values and pursuing goals that take one away from the central goal of the kingdom? What remorse could be deeper than the realization that one has been altogether wrong about life—that one has missed the point completely?

The final parable of verse 52 is about the householder who “brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.” Among the writings of the New Testament, the Gospel of Matthew is especially careful to avoid the impression that the inherited traditions did not matter. “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill” (Matt. 5:17). Nevertheless, Matthew can also say, “You have heard that it was said... but I say to you” (e.g., Matt. 5:21-22, 27-28, 31-32).

The contest between conserving the good of the past and breaking new ground is as fruitless as it is perennial. A church body with which I was associated adopted the theme “Committed to Christ, Called to Change” for its program for a four-year period. I could agree with that, but still considered it only a half-truth. I could equally well say that, as a consequence of my commitment to Christ, there were some changes I should resist to the death! The good always has a history that needs to be understood and celebrated. At the same time there is always room for improvement based upon deeper commitment and greater insight. James Russell Lowell’s poem (and hymn) reminds us that “new occasions teach new duties, time makes ancient good uncouth.” How often we have had to set aside the absolute verities of our forebears in order to keep faith with the deeper loyalty to God, whose spirit engages our spirits restlessly. Still, the uncouthness of much ancient good is balanced by much ancient good that remains good. Were it not so, we would have long since abandoned scripture altogether. Instead, we have encountered in scripture the basis of dramatic new forms of obedience to the God whom we meet in Christ.