T. M. Hinga
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Baptism as Liberation
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Introduction

As each year draws to a close, the forces of journalism gather to decide on the big stories for their New Year's editorials. Religion editors do this, too, and it's always interesting to see what has made an impression on them. It occurred to me to wonder if the fallout from the Re-Imagining Conference (which was held in 1993) would make the list this year. I suspect not; followup stories don't generally make front pages. But it would make a terrific feature article. If reporters covered religion like they cover politics, that is, to death, they would observe the life cycle of another skirmish in the liberal-conservative wars. They would also have a chance to convey the sorrow Christian women experience when their own theological explorations are misrepresented and condemned. Then they could try to figure out why it's so tough to think and speak theologically on the issues of our day in the churches.

I have no quarrel with religion editors. But long after the conference itself has lost its news value, we are the ones who are left to try to convert the vast energy for controversy into fuel for theological conversation. As we have been accustomed to doing. So since we are already learning how to deal with issues of gender and sexual ethics with our fellow Christians, we might just as well throw another log on the fire and talk about Christology. It all comes down to that anyway. This issue, we have some expert assistance: Dr. Teresia M. Hinga is a member of the faculty of Kenyatta University in Nairobi, Kenya, and has taught at Harvard Divinity School and Iliff School of Theology. Her article does some important things for us: first of all, she has written about a real Africa, not a tourist destination; two, she speaks candidly about Christ and Western culture, a message we must hear plainly. And three, she does not forget African women. The Christology coming from various African contexts is a strong dose of...
reality—from which emerges a real, living hope for the future. I invite you to explore it.

The emphasis on Christology continues with David Tripp’s analysis of Wesleyan hymns. He quotes Benjamin Franklin’s telling statement, written five years before the American Declaration of Independence: “As to Jesus’ divinity . . . I see no harm in its being believed . . .” As Tripp notes, this is an extraordinarily arrogant statement, softened only by a consideration of the context, which is apparently the question of whether government officials must be Christian or not. (Happily, the right decision was made.) What is alarming, though, is the laissez-faire approach to trinitarian thought among many Christians today, regardless of their occupation. The doctrine of the Trinity permeates our communal song and therefore seeps into our consciousness to form our thinking about God, and the only question is whether we will embrace and live out the claim made on us.

Some of our readers will remember Gayle Carlton Felton as the person who presented the Baptism Study Paper to the General Conference Committee on Faith and Mission in 1992. Her presence on that committee brought scholarly depth and guidance to the project. So it is a pleasure to think along with her about some of the theological aspects of the sacrament of baptism using the classical categories of theology, anthropology, soteriology, ecclesiology and eschatology. Felton’s redefinition of the poor is both historically aware and forward looking. Debra Dean Murphy’s piece on the eucharist makes a perfect companion piece, uniting the themes of sacrament, hymnody, and eschatology. Her work evokes a vision of the New Jerusalem that was so vividly portrayed by the eschatological communion scene at the end of Robert Benson’s classic movie, “Places in the Heart” (1984).

Our theological reflection spot is occupied this issue by a wonderful essayist, Clarke Chapman. True to the calling of the writer to go boldly where many have been before, he tackles the question of sexism in trinitarian language with gusto. Will you take the challenge?

The last two articles in this issue are scripture studies, and we should pause for a word of explanation. From now on, the lectionary study will be one quarter ahead, so that it can be of greater use in sermon preparation. That done, let me commend to you the work of Tom Troeger and Mark Trotter. In his essay, “Getting the Gospel by Word of Mouth,” Troeger has taken the unusual step of inviting other voices to join his own. The result is a wonderful summoning of the
“voiceless" in scripture, the ones whose thoughts and wisdom are otherwise unrecorded. Trotter’s distinctive voice is well known to many of our readers, and he leads us through Acts with the sensitivity of a master preacher.


Abba, send your Son into my heart, that he may not only be born there but also grow and mature and take over the direction of my life. May your love make of me something of value and worth, someone in whom you can rejoice. May the stable of my soul be transformed and become a temple filled with your Spirit. May my soul be transformed and become a beacon, shedding light in the midst of a dark and troubled world. Oh, risen Jesus, I pray this in your name, you who humbled yourself to be born of a virgin in a stable in an occupied country in order to show me the infinite mercy and love of the divine Creator.

Amen.

Sharon Hels
At one point during his ministry, Jesus is reported to have confronted his disciples with the question “Who do men say that I am?” (RSV). Some thought he was Elijah, Jeremiah, or some other prophet. But Jesus was apparently less concerned about such a generalized answer. He wanted to find out more specifically what his disciples themselves thought of him and his encounter and relationship with them. On that occasion, we are told that Peter was able to confess, both on his belief and that of others with him, that Jesus was indeed the Christ, Son of the Living God (Matt. 16:13).

The answer to this question posed by Jesus to his disciples is one with which each culture, each generation, and each people confronted with the Gospel of Jesus have to deal.

In this paper, I will attempt in a very preliminary way to outline the answer (or more precisely answers) that Africa, in its multiplicity of contexts, needs, and voices has given to the question Who is Jesus?

Africa is not monolithic. That Africa is a vast and diverse continent manifesting a bewildering plurality of cultures, needs, and human aspirations makes the answers given to this question necessarily heterogeneous. Indeed, this heterogeneity makes it incredibly difficult to define the African answer to the Christological question.

T. M. Hinga was the Louis Iliff Visiting Professor at Iliff School of Theology in 1993 and visiting lecturer in the Harvard Divinity School Women’s Studies Program in 1991-92. She is a faculty member of Kenyatta University in Nairobi, Kenya.
Perhaps, given this difficulty, it is wise for us to go back to the beginning of the story of Africa's encounter with Christianity. Although in a sense Christianity is an African religion (considering that even in biblical times, and in early church history, North Africa and part of Ethiopia were part and parcel of the thriving Christianity in the Mediterranean world), it is only in the nineteenth century during the era of mission and colonization of Africa that the rest of Africa (sub-Saharan Africa) came in touch with Christianity through the zealous work of nineteenth-century missionaries.

This initial encounter of Africa with Christianity and with Christ was ambiguous because Christian evangelization and colonialism happened almost simultaneously. Indeed, it is not farfetched to say that evangelization and colonialization were the two sides of the coin of European (and other western) presence in Africa. Christianity presented itself to the Africans as the religion of the colonizers; nineteenth-century Christianity was the religion of the imperialists and can therefore for the sake of convenience be described as an "imperial Christianity." This factor had implications for the way Africa viewed the Christ implicit in this Christianity. Africa first experienced Christ as the conqueror. Jesus was presented as the warrior king in whose name and banner (the cross) new territories both physical and spiritual could be annexed and subjugated. The very language that was used in missionary discourse was militant. Christians perceived themselves as "Soldiers of Christ" marching as "in war," determined to win the heathen for Christ. In the case of Africa, missionaries presented Africa as a conquering Christ; Africa was the "booty" to be expropriated for Christ.

The situation was also made worse by the fact that missionaries also identified with the nations from which they came. They were concerned not only with propagating the good news to the conquered nations, the "heathens," but also with catering to the interests of their own nations in the conquered territory. For example, in discussing the ambiguities of the missionary enterprise in Africa Jean Marc Ela observes that Lavingerie, one of the pioneer missionaries in Africa, has been presented in history books as "the forerunner of French Colonization," since owing to his work "The French flag and the cross would now carry French and Christian civilization to the lands of Islam (North Africa) and Fetish-worshippers (sub-Saharan Africa)." In the kingdom of Dahoney, the Lyon African missions were considered "effective ambassadors of French influence," while in Portuguese
territories, the Holy See accepted the view that missions were part and parcel of Portuguese national expansionism."

Indeed, the conflicting nationalistic interests of the various missions led to a "partition" of Africa into what was called "spheres" of missionary influence, whose purpose was to preempt the severe rivalry and competition between missionaries. It is noteworthy, for example, that the partitioning of Kenya into various spheres of influence was done by the colonial government. This hand-in-glove relationship between missionaries and colonialists had serious implications for the way Africans came to perceive Christ and respond to Christ.

To begin with, the conquests of Africa in the name of Christ often implied an attempt at erasing of aspects of cultural self-expression that Africans held dear. By and large, missionaries were convinced that Africa, if it had a "religion" at all, was in need of a substitute. Describing African religion and culture as "paganism," they tried to eradicate African spirituality and African culture in a style that was meant to create a "tabula rasa" upon which they would inscribe a new spirituality. Furthermore, they did it without apology. The effect of this approach has been likened to that of a bull in a china shop.

The attempt to create a clean slate was not effective. Instead of creating a clean slate, missionaries more often than not managed to create identity crises in the minds of Africans and a gross sense of alienation and rootlessness. This is the kind of alienation and confusion that is lamented, for example, by Ngugi Wa Thiongo in his book *The River Between* (Heinemann, 1965). To illustrate the impact of the image of the conquering Christ upon the mind and spirituality of Africans, Ngugi outlines the character of Joshua, a Christianized Gikuyu man who had learned to despise his Gikuyu heritage as being in complete opposition to the demands of Christ. It is because of this sense of being uprooted and alienated that African Christians across the continent responded by rejecting the Christ who seemed to condone their cultural effacement. They were convinced that Christ did not desire that they lose their cultural identity in the way they worshiped. I refer here to the spectacular phenomenon of independent churches, of which by 1969 there were estimated to be at least six thousand on the continent. Judging from the names that these churches give themselves, it is clear that they reflect the need for a Christianity (and implicitly a Christ) that affirms rather than negates their being as Africans. For example, one church calls itself African

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Israel Church of Nineveh; another African Orthodox Independent Pentecostal Church; and a third one, the Church of Christ in Africa. In these churches, on one level, the answer given to the question, Who is Jesus? is that Jesus is a person who meets them where they are, who affirms them and values them as Africans. They, therefore, see no reason to abandon, leave alone apologize, for worshiping God in a typically African way—by the drum, dancing, clapping.

This deep yearning for a Christ who identifies with the Africans within their cultural and social milieu has in recent times found "formal" expression in the emerging "inculturation theology" particularly within the Roman Catholic circles in the African continent. Theologians are beginning to give a formal shape and label to this type of Christology as they try to capture the Africans' struggle to reverse the effects of the "tabula rasa" approach to evangelization in Africa.

It is these "inculturation theologians," for example, who are writing dissertations, papers, and books conceptualizing in a more systematic way how Africans would formally describe Christ in their own cultural idiom. Hence, we have people like Professor Njauufi of the Catholic University of East Africa discussing how Jesus can be considered as our ancestor particularly with regard to his mediatorial role—being the link between humans and God, just as ancestors are supposed to be within African culture. Recently, Dr. Wachage of the same institution outlined how Jesus Christ is our "Muthamaki," Ideal Elder, who can be entrusted with questions of justice within society, just as traditionally the "athamahi" elders were the custodians and implementors of justice. Such formulations of Christology in scholarly circles are but a crystallization of the yearning of Africans, since their initial encounter with Christianity, for a Christ who would really be Emmanuel—God with them, incarnated in their culture—not God against them.

The Liberating Christ as the Iconoclastic Prophet

At another level, however, it can be said that the problem of cultural alienation and cultural genocide on the African continent was part of the wider problem of the African continent. The insistence that Africans adopt the cultural practices of the West as they adopted Christianity was perceived as one aspect the Western imperialism that
affected Africa in all spheres of life, politically, economically, culturally, and spiritually. In fact, Africans quickly perceive the hand-in-glove relationship between imposition of Christianity and colonialism. This perception was expressed in cynical witticisms commonly shared among Africans. The Agikuyu saying “Gutiri Mutungu na Mubea” suggested that in terms of the relationship and the attitudes of missionaries to their wards, it was difficult to distinguish between them and the typical colonial settler. Another widely known witticism is the observation that when the missionaries came they had the Bible and we had the land. Now, they and their kind have the land and we have the Bible.6

The Africans’ perception of the symbiosis between Christianity and the subjugation of Africa led to a certain restlessness among African peoples. This restlessness led some Africans to reject Christianity entirely as they attempted also to resist the imperialism that seemed to be its flip side. Many Africans decided that they would have to go back to their traditional religions. Among the Gusii and Luos of Kenya, a revival movement emerged insisting that Africans must stick to their spirituality. The “cult of Mjumbo” and Ndiniya Misambwa among the Luhyas were both expressions of this feeling that somehow Christianity and colonialism were related and that if the fight against imperialism were to succeed, Africans must necessarily fall back on their precolonial religion.7

Among the Agikuyu, the guerrilla fighters against colonialism were clearly aware of the need to fall back on their own spiritual and theological resources in the struggle for justice. They felt that Christianity and the Christian God were seemingly condoning that colonization. Consequently, as they camped in cold nights in the forests on the slopes of Mount Kenya, they encouraged each other with songs and hymns. One such song urged them to pray earnestly and to beseech Ngai (the Agikuyu name for God) truly, remembering that Ngai is the same one of old (i.e. before Christianity), reliable, and concerned about justice for the people.8

Now while some of the Africans felt that the best way forward was to reject the Christology implicit in the imperialism, others were able to perceive that it was a distortion of reality to regard the image of Christ as part and parcel of the colonization process. It will be recalled that, although missionaries often did not distance themselves adequately from the colonial enterprise in their praxis, they also, Sunday in and Sunday out, preached the “gospel” to their converts,
bolstering their "sermons" with readings from the Bible. From these readings it became clear that Jesus was not an imperialist monarch or taskmaster who was concerned about keeping people down. Instead, it was perceived that Jesus as presented in the Gospels was more often than not in the company of the poor, the Am-ha-aretz, the people of the land. Gradually it dawned on at least some sections of the Africans that Christ did not desire their subjugation. He was, indeed, on the side of the oppressed. He was the Messiah, who identified entirely with the downtrodden. His works on earth were a clear manifestation of God at work to liberate the poor, feed the hungry, and heal the sick.

This perception of Christ is once more clearly evident and clearly expressed in the self-understanding of independent churches. It will be noted that more often than not, these churches crystalize around a charismatic prophetic figure, whom members of African churches often describe as "Black Messiah."

The identification of people living in the twentieth century as "messiahs" has become a major stumbling block, particularly to those within mission and established churches who subscribe to the uniqueness—the once-and-for-allness—of the Christ event. To them, the idea of a Black Messiah is sheer heresy. One critic of this affirmation laments about Kimbangu and Matswa (leaders of independent churches) thus:

Both Kimbangu and Matswa claim that they will break up the old order in which they are slaves to the white people, and all Africans will share in the new order. These dreams and visions are perversions of biblical expectations. It has given the impression of henotheism—that God has favored some people only. Now the prophet claims God for himself and his people.9

For this critic of the independent churches' view of messiahship, the main problem is that they are seen to undermine belief in Jesus Christ. As another critic opines, "African Christianity and African Christ are utterly opposed to the revelation of the unique Messiah, Jesus, David's son."10

The point of controversy here seems to be this: Does God through Christ take the side of the oppressed or is God a Christ of all nations, races, cultures, and social classes equally regardless of the injustices that such nations, races, and social classes may be inflicting on the others?
As far as the independent churches are concerned, the answer is that in situations of oppression, God through Christ should be, and indeed is, on the side of the oppressed. Consequently, as God was on the side of the oppressed Jews in the Exodus event, so also, God is expected to be on the side of the colonized. Indeed, it is claimed that just as God raised Moses to be liberator of the Israelites, so also has God raised for them iconoclastic prophets concerned about changing the oppressive structures. These prophets are God's way of indicating solidarity with the Africans. They are God's anointed, God's messengers, Messiahs for Black people. For the independent churches, these prophets continue the iconoclastic prophetic ministry of Jesus and are, therefore, functionally similar to Jesus.

Of course, for those who hold that the work of Christ is a once-and-for-all event achieved once-and-for-all two thousand years ago, the claim of African independent churches that God is concretely with them today in and through their charismatic leaders is sheer blasphemy. The theological controversy on this rages on.

Suffice it to say that in our attempt to outline what Christ has come to mean in the African context, the notion that God identifies with Africans in their search for social/political justice is clearly manifested in the symbolic affirmation that Christ is or ought to be on the side of the oppressed. Africans not only see the modern-day prophets to be in line with the prophets of the African heritage who played the same role as social critics of traditional society but they also see the charismatic role of their leaders as being in direct continuity with that of Jesus, the prophetic leader, who was in his time a "troubler" of his society. He in turn was continuing the role of Hebrew prophets such as Amos, Isaiah, and Micah, who were noted in their time for their outspoken desire to change social structures in the direction of justice, love, and peace.

It is at this point that the Christological affirmations of members of independent churches, however outlandish they may sound at first, begin to resonate significantly with those of the newly emergent Black theology of liberation in Africa. In Black theology circles, God and Christ are affirmed to be categorically opposed to social injustice and oppression of any kind. In a context where people have been oppressed because of their blackness, it is unequivocally affirmed that Jesus is on the side of the Black people. This seems, for example, to be the clear affirmation by James Cone, an African American theologian who affirms that...
There is no place for a colorless God, or Christ in a society where people suffer because of their color. The black theologian must reject any talk about God which stifles African determination by picturing God as a God of all peoples—either God is identified with the oppressed to the point that their experiences become his, or he is a God of oppression. (Hinga, 239)

Whatever controversies may arise from this affirmation of God as "Black," it is very clear that in these churches, the biblical portrait of Jesus is as iconoclastic prophet, whose task is not to maintain status quo but to upset them in favor of the oppressed. 11

This same image of Christ is central to earlier formulations of Black theology of liberation particularly in South Africa but also in the rest of the continent where being Black, being African has been the occasion for oppression.

Looking at the same context from another angle, we note that in general the situation in Africa is typically that of powerlessness in the face of many overwhelming circumstances. The acute sense of powerlessness has led to an accenting of another biblical portrait of Christ. This is the portrait of Jesus as the dispenser of the "Spirit"—what I would call for lack of better terminology the "pneumatic Christ." Of this Christ, there is ample evidence in the New Testament, where after his resurrection Jesus dispenses God's Spirit (Power) over his disciples. The effect of this "receiving" the Holy Spirit, as is described in Acts 2, was to transform the disciples of Jesus from a bunch of intimidated peasant fishermen and workers from rural Galilee into confident, outspoken proclaimers of the faith that their crucified Master was, indeed, the Messiah he claimed to have been. They constantly draw attention to the fact that it is this resurrected Christ who has enabled them to be confident and in whose authority they spoke.

I would argue that this image of Christ as the empowerer of the powerless through the gift of the spirit (God's Power) to those who are powerless in history is a very popular one indeed in Africa. Members of independent churches celebrate the fact that God has given them Spirit-filled leaders and has even bestowed the Spirit upon the members themselves despite their powerlessness in society. This understanding of God amidst them is for them the clearest evidence that God cares for even the little people in society. God gives the
voiceless a voice, the powerless power—in the Spirit. This understanding is so popular that these churches have summarily been dismissed in some circles as “Spiritist” churches. Nevertheless, I would claim that this is the clearest and most popular image of Christ today since the majority are, indeed, in need of power, living as they do in contexts of oppression.

Who Do African Women Say Jesus Is?

It is not clear whether it is by accident or by patriarchal design that the Christological question in the Bible is phrased in very androcentric language: “Who do men say that I am.” My suspicion is that given Jesus’ close relationship with women during his earthly ministry, his question would have been inclusive of women. For us today it is therefore pertinent to reflect on African women’s response to the question of who Jesus is.

Since women live in the same historical circumstances that have led to the affirmation of Jesus as being on their side, wishing to affirm them when they were disempowered and alienated, I would say that African women would take part in the above affirmations of Christ. They celebrate the fact that Christ empowers them to fight against social injustice. By the same token, Jesus is on their side as they fight for liberation from sexist attitudes and practices in society. This struggle takes on a particular angle in Africa, because on the one hand women are naturally in the struggle for cultural affirmation as African peoples in the face of the cultural alienation discussed earlier. For that reason they are legitimately involved in the search for lost African values and the reconstruction of our African cultural heritage. At the same time, however, they realize that just as in the time of Jesus, when certain customs and cultural practices had a negative effect on women’s lives—e.g., taboos about menstruation and punishment on those who committed adultery—similar taboos and customs that are inimical to women are to be found in African societies. African women are having to deal with such issues as polygamy, female circumcision, and widow inheritance from the vantage point of being women. As they set about analyzing these aspects of their culture, they appropriate the image of Christ the iconoclast, who challenged similar conditions in his own cultural context.

Women are also embracing for themselves the image of Christ as
the "friend" of women—their personal confidante. When confronted with difficult circumstances, they affirm Jesus as their personal Savior.

Above all, African women seem to have the most need to claim the image of Christ as the empowerer of the powerless. In situations of oppression, women find themselves to be at the bottom of the heap—often suffering doubly—on account of their gender and the role they play in society. Quite often, women claim the sustaining power of Jesus to overcome these situations. They will also, however, claim the authority of Jesus to make decisions and to take actions that their location in society would otherwise not allow them. African women, therefore, have clearly defined Christologies that are conducive to their welfare, while they reject presentations of Christ that drive them further into the quagmire of powerlessness.

Beyond Liberation—Toward a Christology of Reconstruction and the Search for Jesus the Healer

The images of Africa that we are normally exposed to are those of a continent in distress, a continent torn asunder by war, poverty, hunger, violence, and sometimes gross violation of human rights. The most acute form of this distress occurs in South Africa, where Black people continue to be treated as second-class citizens in their own country. Elsewhere, Africa is still reaping the bitter fruits of its colonial heritage—decaying economies and political institutions that do not seem to work. The overall picture is, indeed, a dismal and distressing one.

However, I would suggest that all is not lost in Africa. In spite of all its problems, you will still find joy and hope in Africa. In a small but significant way, Africans are engaged in the slow but necessary task of rebuilding the continent, a process of trying to heal Africa's gaping wounds. I would also claim that religion, indeed Christianity, is part and parcel of this process of reconstruction. In a clear and persistent way, Christians have played the prophetic role of Jesus in contemporary society. Bishop Tutu and Allan Boesak of South Africa, Bishop Mugo and Bishop Okulu of Kenya, as well as other theologians and church people across the continent, have shown that Christ the critic of an oppressive society is alive and well. In the name
of Christ, they have sought to deconstruct and demolish oppressive social structures.

I would say that for us on the continent, demolishing and deconstructing are necessary but not sufficient. We must engage urgently in the process of reconstructing the continent, and the initiative to do this must come from within the continent. It is at this point that yet a final image of Christ must come into play on the continent: that of Jesus the healer. In our attempt to rebuild and heal the continent, Jesus remains a beacon and a partner. I would also say that this process of reconstruction, reconciliation, and healing has already started. Theologians across the continent are beginning to reflect critically on the role of theology in dealing with issues of poverty, disease, environmental degradation, neo-colonialism, dependency, wars, and the lack of democratic structures. Over and above the persistent need for a theology of liberation and a Christology to match, there is slowly emerging what has been dubbed a theology of reconstruction, as Africans are beginning to rebuild the continent, to heal its numerous wounds. In this process of reconstruction, no doubt, an image of Christ as the healer and reconciler will be pertinent.

This theological reflection arises out of the emerging new role of the church in Africa. In recent times, the church has been at the forefront in the struggle for reconstruction—being actively present in the search for practical solutions to the many problems that beset the continent. The All-African Council of Churches, for example, has an active refugee program which works in liaison with the United Nations and local sponsoring churches. In Kenya and Zambia, and no doubt in South Africa, the church has been active in the democratization process, participating actively in politics and urging the creation of a meaningful civil society on the continent. Of course, these are only small beginnings, but they are ones that create hope in the continent. One hopes that the church of Christ, constituting believers in Christ's liberative and healing capacities wherever they are in the world, will join hands with Africa as she struggles to heal and rebuild herself. One hopes, also, that when this happens it will be done in partnership with Africans rather than for or on behalf of Africans. It is only when others recognize the African people's need for self-definition and self-determination that we can say that Africa is on the road to recovery.
Notes

1. The fact that missionaries were not only concerned with evangelization of Africa but also with fostering interests of their respective nations is manifest in the various expressions of the missionaries' goals. David Livingstone, for example, confided that part of his goal in working in Central Africa is that his work would "result in an English colony in the healthy highlands of Central Africa" (quoted in Lamin Sanneh, Translating the Message, 1989, 116).

2. Joshua, a major character in Ngugi's book, considers the essence of his salvation to constitute being snatched from what he considers the "Egypt" of his Agikuyu cultural traditions. He daily offers prayers of gratitude to God and to the local missionary who made this salvation possible. See Ngugi Wa Thiongo, The River Between (Heinneman, 1965), 31.

3. For a detailed theoretical analysis of the emergence of these independent churches, see D. B. Barrett, Schism and Renewal in Africa (Oxford University Press, 1969). Barrett hypothesizes with considerable persuasiveness that a central cause of the emergence of these movements is the failure in Christian love on the side of missionaries, who failed to see their converts as equals before God. Through this failure, they belied the central theme of Christianity, that is, the equality of all human beings before God.

4. The Agikuyu of Kenya, for example, confronted by the missionaries who demanded that they abandon their customs and traditions as a precondition for becoming Christians, responded by staging an exodus from the missionary church and establishing their own churches which they called the Gikuyu Karinga (The Pure Gikuyu) Churches. For a historical analysis of this phenomenon, see P. Sandgren, Christianity and the Kikuyu (Peter Lang, 1989).

5. See, for example, the collection of essays on Faces of Christ in Africa, edited by R. Schreiter (Orbis Books).

6. This was a commentary on the fact that missionaries also alienated land and settled on it at the expense of the Africans. They also grew crops like coffee and employed Africans as laborers, often treating them in much the same way as the colonial settlers.

7. For details of these religious movements of protest, see Rotberg and Mazrui, Protest and Power in Black Africa (Oxford University Press, 1979).

8. For a detailed analysis of this see Maina Wa Kinyatti, Thunder from the Mountain (Africa Press, 1989).


10. Ibid.


12. For a recent articulation of African Women's concerns in this context, see the collection of essays edited by Mercy Oduyoye entitled The Will to Arise (Orbis, 1992).

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Pastoral experience, as well as years of theological reading, makes it grievously clear to me that many Christians in the West, of all orthodox persuasions and of all degrees of articulacy, suffer from contagious Socinianism—a nuanced, modernized form of the Arian denial of the Trinity, a blight which has ravaged the Christian community since the seventeenth century. The arrogance which has attached to this stance finds classic expression in the words of Benjamin Franklin to Ezra Stiles, of March, 1770:

"... as to [Jesus'] divinity. ... I see no harm ... in its being believed, if that Belief has the good Consequence, as it probably has, of making his Doctrines more respected and better observed; especially as I do not perceive, that the Supreme takes it amiss, by distinguishing the Unbelievers in his Government of the World with any peculiar Marks of his Displeasure." 1

Is Trinitarian belief alive and well in the churches? How can we tell? And does it matter anyway?

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"To know what was generally believed in all Ages, the way is to consult the Liturgies, not any man's writing."

This observation of the seventeenth-century jurist John Selden, in his *Table Talk*, has proved serviceable to many researchers; and hymnody, like other aspects of worship behavior, has yielded valuable data on doctrinal history, although the notion that all hymns are theologically vacuous (as, of course, some of them undeniably are) is not dead. Anyone who has spent time sitting by deathbeds or listening to stories about unsuccessful attempts at Christian child-rearing needs no further proof that hymnody carries an enormous theological freight, for good and ill, and that it insinuates its dogmatic deep into the unconscious, as well as throughout the overt consciousness of entire cultures.

In this study, I shall try to calculate the degree of Trinitarian character present in the Wesleyan tradition of hymnody and raise some questions about the present survival of that character. Leaving aside several fascinating questions such as the Trinitarian dimension of Charles Wesley's whole opus, or comparison of the theologies operative within the Wesley family or the place of Methodism in relation to neo-Arianism or the integrity of Methodism's theology in general, we shall look at the 1780 *Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists* (CH 1780), in the excellent edition of Hildebrandt, Beckerlegge and Dale (Oxford, 1983) and ask what place *explicitly* Trinitarian hymns occupy in that book. (That book, both in its permanent influence and also in its patent need to be almost immediately supplemented and revised, is a vital, perhaps the central, indicator of the character and limitations of the Methodist movement.) The next step will be to put the 1989 *United Methodist Hymnal: Book of United Methodist Worship* (UMH 1989) on the stand to give evidence of how many explicitly Trinitarian hymns are found within it and so to tell us what is happening to Trinitarian faith in part of the American half of the world Methodist family. Finally, we must ask: What does it matter?

First, we must determine what is an "explicitly Trinitarian" hymn. In the case of the Wesley hymnody, this is not an entirely simple question. In one sense, any hymn (or prayer, etc.) from a community of Trinitarian profession that is not inconsistent with assertion of the equal deity of the Three Persons is Trinitarian; it will, we assume, be read and sung in a Trinitarian sense. This is not always a safe assumption, except in the case of authors who, like Charles Wesley,
virtually always use “God” to connote the Trinitarian entirety of
godhead or who (again like Charles) frequently address the second
and/or third Person in terms of absolute divinity, while failing entirely
to mention the first.
One example of this is CH 138:

1. Thee, Jesus, thee, the sinner’s friend,
   I follow on to apprehend,
   Renew the glorious strife,
   Divinely confident and hold,
   With faith’s strong arm on thee lay hold,
   Thee, my eternal life...

3. Give me the grace, the love I claim;
   Thy Spirit now demands thy name;
   Thou know’st the Spirit’s will;
   He helps my soul’s infirmity,
   And strongly intercedes for me
   With groans unspeakable...

6. Descend, pass by me, and proclaim,
   O Lord of hosts, thy glorious name,
   The Lord, the gracious Lord,
   Long-suffering, merciful, and kind,
   The God who always bears in mind
   His everlasting word...

8. Mercy he doth for thousands keep,
   He goes and seeks the one lost sheep,
   And brings his wanderer home;
   And every soul that sheep might be—
   Come, then, my Lord, and gather me,
   My Jesus, quickly come...

The central portion of this hymn is that the Spirit’s plea, already
being uttered within the petitioner, be granted—the Spirit has already
become present and active in this person, even though the petitioner is
a “mourner brought to the birth,” to the brink only of first
conversion—and the Spirit’s plea is that the petitioner should receive a
knowledge of the triune Name and nature which will transform his or
her nature. The appeal is based upon the identity of being (and, therefore, also of will, thelema) and mutual knowledge between the pleading Spirit and the one who is petitioned, who is Jesus (see vv. 1, 8). The Father is not named. Jesus knows the will of the Spirit (cf. Romans 8), is appealed to with a clear allusion to wrestling Jacob (Genesis 32), is asked to “pass by” the people (the individual?) and there to proclaim his Name (cf. Exodus 33–34) as the one who keeps mercy for thousands: in all these aspects, Jesus exercises the role of the God of Israel. (It would be simplistic to say that Charles confuses Christ with the Father; rather, each of the Persons, in the light of the New Covenant, is equally recognized in the Yahweh of the Hebrew Scriptures). All of this makes sense only as a celebration of Trinitarian faith; but, since the First Person is not mentioned distinctly, this hymn will not be classed here as “explicitly Trinitarian.”

We shall consider as “explicitly Trinitarian” only those hymns in which, on a defensible reading, all three Persons are unmistakably indicated. It is rare in Wesley hymnody that such an explicit reference is confined to a concluding Trinitarian doxology. Even such a feature is not trivial; for the doxology, unless it is at odds with the plain sense of the hymn, may be as much the entire hymn’s defining climax as the baptismal formula is clearly the strategic goal of the totality of Matthew’s Gospel. CH 67, at first glance, might seem to be only marginally Trinitarian on these criteria, but on closer examination we find that the naming of the Trinity in the last line is the climax and point of the entire argument—brought through death by Christ, each of the redeemed is given their new name/nature, the impress of the three Divine Persons in and by the beatific vision:

1. Thou, Lord, on whom I still depend,
   Shalt keep me faithful to the end;
   I trust thy truth, and love, and power,
   Shall save me till my latest hour,
   And when I lay this body down,
   Reward with an immortal crown . . . .

4. Dost thou desire to know and see
   What thy mysterious name shall be?
   Contending for thy heavenly home,
   Thy latest foe in death o’ercome:
Till then thou searchest out in vain
What only conquest can explain.

5. But when the Lord hath closed thine eyes,
   And opened them in paradise,
   Receiving thy new name unknown,
   Thou read'st it wrote on the white stone,
   Wrote on thy pure humanity,
   God Three in One and One in Three.

Shalt in the second line is more than a future tense; this modal auxiliary has the force of an imperative. This degree of boldness (not rare in the Wesleys) is justified and even made obligatory by the intimate relationship with deity revealed and established in the incarnation. Reluctance to affirm the incarnation, like reluctance to affirm the Trinity, springs from, and exacerbates, a disbelief in a divine generosity which can share its glory. That disbelief is caused by an unwillingness to imagine a generosity so extreme—or a generosity which asks of us a matching openness.

This simple specimen exemplifies several important features of the apprehension of the Trinity expressed and transmitted in CH 1780: the presence of the Trinity in the entire process of creation/redemption is constant, even when implicit; experience of, and devotion to, the person of Jesus is always also a relationship with the Father and the Spirit—each of the Persons encounters us as Godhead in entirety, on a principle of symperichoresis; at a catechetical level, we are led through consideration of Jesus into a wider, all-encompassing, apprehension of the triune Deity.

“A little body of practical and experimental divinity”

CH 1780 was not a hymnal for a church—indeed, none existed in English-speaking Christendom at the time. It was designed for a voluntary body functioning largely within a national church. It assumed, even though it avowedly and deliberately supplemented, the ritual life of that national church, with its daily and weekly proclamation of the whole of Scripture, its daily and weekly affirmation of the common Christian faith in the creeds, its daily and
monthly round of praise and petition in psalms, canticles, litany, preces and collects. Within that assumed framework, Wesley's collection had a very specific job: to give voice to the Methodist societies as they summoned people into a demanding and transforming experience of God. This experience begins with individual longing and growth and moves on into corporate Christian service. The sections of the book follow a clear schema—which Methodists, within a very few years, found inadequate, over-regimented, and embarrassing . . . but that's another matter. We must ascertain the proportion of explicitly Trinitarian hymns selected for each section. That allocation was done by John Wesley; we are reduced to guesswork for explanation, but it is safest to assume neither that he consciously chose items for each heading by any criterion of their degree of Trinitarian explicitness nor that Charles, the principal author, stressed or soft-pedalled the Trinitarian theme in this or that context on some deliberate principle. Rather, we seem to be dealing with subconscious forces, which may in the end be more significant than deliberate choices. How CH 1780 worked for its users in services no one can be sure, for there is no record of how often in any given year or generation any particular hymn was used, except for a tiny handful of localities or preachers. The evidence of hymnody, at least in its official forms, must be used with discretion. But the fact remains that this formally endorsed collection, in the selection and balance of its preferred contents, governed the corporate mind of several Methodist Connexions around the world for 120 years.

Here are the section headings of the original 1780 form of CH, with the explicitly Trinitarian hymns under each listed and with a note of the percentage of the items in each section thus categorized:

Part I—Introductory Hymns
Section I. Exhorting and beseeching to return to God (Nos. 1-11):
6. Sinners, turn, why will ye die
7. Let the beasts their breath resign
9. Sinners, obey the gospel word
10. Ye thirsty for God, /To Jesus give ear
4/11 = 36.35%

Section II. Describing
1. The Pleasantness of Religion (Nos. 12-21)
16. Happy the souls that first believed
19. Rejoice evermore with angels above
21. Ye simple souls that stray $3/10 = 30\%$

2. The Goodness of God (Nos. 22-38)
25. I thirst, thou wounded Lamb of God
26. Saviour, the world's and mine
32. Would Jesus have the sinner die $2/17 = 11.76\%$

3. Death (Nos. 39-52)
None.

4. Judgment (Nos. 53-64)
60. Stand th'omnipotent decree $1/12 = 8.5\%$

5. Heaven (Nos. 65-77)
67. Thou, Lord, on whom I still depend
69. Leader of faithful souls, and guide
70. Saviour, on me thy grace bestow
72. We know, by faith we know
   (In v. 5, "the earnest" = the arrahon of 2 Cor. 1:22 KJV = the Spirit.)
75-6 (originally one item). The Church in her militant state
77. A fountain of life and of grace $6/13 = 46.15\%$

6. Hell (No. 78)
None

Section III. Praying for a Blessing (Nos. 79-87)
79. Father of omnipresent grace
83. Spirit of faith, come down
84. Sinners, your hearts lift up
85. Come, Holy Ghost, our hearts inspire
   (In "God, through himself," "God" = the Trinity, the carefully chosen
   pronoun emphasizing the intimate unity of the Persons)
86. Father of all, in whom alone
87. Inspirer of the ancient seers $6/9 = 66.66\%$

Part II—Describing
Section I.—Formal Religion (Nos. 88-91)
90. My gracious, loving Lord $1/4 = 25\%$

Section II.—Inward Religion (Nos. 92-95)
92. Author of faith, eternal Word

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93. How can a sinner know / His sins on earth forgiven

2/4 = 50%

Part III
Section I. Praying for Repentance (Nos. 96-103)
None

Section II. For Mourners Convinced of Sin (Nos. 104-123)
105. Wretched, helpless, and distressed
113. God is in this and every place (For the Spirit, see v. 6/Rom. 5:5)
117. Expand thy wings, celestial Dove
3/8 = 37.5%

Section III. For Mourners brought to the Birth (Nos. 124-161)
130. Jesu, if still the same thou art
132. While dead in trespasses I lie
(131 is not listed separately, as 131-2 originally formed a unity)
139. O Jesus, let me bless thy name
159. Come, holy celestial Dove
4/38 = 10.5%

Section IV. Convinced of Backsliding (Nos. 162-174)
None

Section V. Recovered (Nos. 175-181)
175. I will hearken what the Lord / Will say concerning me
177. My God, my God, on thee I call
2/7 = 28.57%

"Part IV. For Believers"
Section I. Rejoicing (Nos. 182-256)
194. Arise, my soul, arise.
196. Jesus, thou soul of all our joys (Note dedicatory text, "... with the Spirit.")
209. See how great a flame aspires
210. All thanks be to God / Who scatters abroad
211. All glory to God in the sky
212. Meet and right it is to sing
221. Away with our fears, / The glad morning appears
222. Young men and maidens raise
225-227. Father, of all, whose powerful voice (paraphrase of the Lord's Prayer)
229. Hail, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, / One God in Persons Three
230. O Lord, our God, we bless thee now
234. Thou, my God, art good and wise
240. Great God, to me the sight afford
242. Father of me and all mankind
243. Come, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, / One God in Persons Three
244. Jesus, my Lord, my God! / The God supreme thou art
246. The day of Christ, the day of God
247. Spirit of truth, essential God
248. Hail, Father, Son, and Spirit, great / Before the birth of time
249. The wisdom owned by all thy sons
250. Jehovah, God the Father, bless, / And thy own work defend
251. Hail, holy, holy, holy Lord, / Whom One in Three we know
252. Holy holy, holy Lord, / God the Father and the Word
253. Come, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, / Whom one all-perfect God we own
254. A thousand oracles divine
255. Thee, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, / Inexplicably One and Three

Section II. Fighting (Nos. 257-284)
258-260. Soldiers of Christ, arise
270. Shall I, for fear of sinful man, / The Spirit's course in me restrain
283. To the haven of thy breast

Section III. Praying (Nos. 285-295)
285. Jesus, thou sovereign Lord of all
287. The praying Spirit breathe (Wesley's orthography corrected!)
289. O wondrous power of faithful prayer
291. Jesus, I fain would find / Thy zeal for God in me
293. Lord, that I may learn of thee
294. Ah, when shall I awake / From sin's soft soothing power
295. Saviour on me the want bestow

Section IV. Watching (Nos. 296-311)
297. Father, to thee I lift mine eyes
298. God of all grace and mercy
311. Be it my only wisdom here

Section V. Working (Nos. 312-319)
314. God of almighty love

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Section VI. Suffering (Nos. 320-330)
324. Come on, my partners in distress
327. Father, in the name I pray / Of thy incarnate love
\[\frac{2}{11} = 18.18\%\]

Section VII. Groaning for Full Redemption (Nos. 331-379)
331. The thing my God doth hate
338. Jesus, my life, thyself apply
339. Heavenly Father, sovereign Lord
341. Come, Holy Ghost, all-quick'ning fire, / Come, and my hallowed heart inspire
344. Ever fainting with desire
350. Father of Jesus Christ my Lord
351. My God! I know, I feel thee mine
355. O God of my salvation, hear
357. Father, see this living clod
365. I want the Spirit of power within
\[\text{"want"=\"lack\"; orthography corrected again}\]
366. Father of everlasting grace
369. Prisoners of hope, lift up your heads
372. Who hath slighted or condemned / The day of feeble things
379. Since the Son hath made me free
\[\frac{15}{49} = 30.6\%\]

Section VIII. Brought to the Birth (Nos. 380-405)
391. Lord, I believe a rest remains
400. Thou God that answerest by fire
401. Once thou didst on earth appear
\[\frac{3}{26} = 11.54\%\]

Section IX. Saved (Nos. 406-428)
406. God who didst so dearly buy / These wretched souls of ours
407. Quickened with our immortal Head
411. Who can worthily commend/ Thy love unsearchable
412. Us who climb thy holy hill / A general blessing make
415. God of all-redeeming grace
\[\text{(for reference to the Spirit, see v. 1, line 6, alluding to Heb. 9:14)}\]
418. Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, / One in Three, and Three in One
423. Father, to thee my soul I lift
426. O God of peace and pardoning love
\[\frac{8}{23} = 34.78\%\]
Section X. Interceding for the World (Nos. 429-465)
429. Let God, who comforts the distressed
431. Sun of unclouded righteousness
444-445. Father if justly still we claim
448. God of all power and grace
461. Come, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, / To whom we for our children cry
464. Come, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, / Honour the means ordained by thee
465. Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, / In solemn power come down.

(In the 1749 Hymns and Psalms, the human-denoting pronouns in this baptismal hymn were feminine; regrettably, John made them all masculine for CII 1780)

7/37 = 18.91%

“Part V. For the Society”
Section I. Meeting (Nos. 466-475)
467. Peace be on this house bestowed
474. See, Jesu, thy disciples see

2/10 = 20%

Section II. Giving Thanks (Nos. 476-486)
476. How happy we are / Who in Jesus agree
477. How good and pleasant 'tis to see / When brethren cordially agree
480. The people that in darkness lay, The confines of eternal night
483. The earth is the Lord's, / And all it contains

4/11 = 36.36%

Section III. Praying (Nos. 487-518)
491. Unchangeable, almighty Lord
492. Father of our dying Lord
496. Thou God of truth and love
500. Father, at thy footstool see / Those who now are one in thee
501-504. Father, Son, and Spirit, hear / Faith's effectual, fervent prayer
505-508. Come, and let us sweetly join
511. Jesu, thou great redeeming Lord
516. Come, thou all-inspiring Spirit / Into every longing heart
518. Come, let us use the grace divine

9/32 = 28.12%

Section IV. Parting (Nos. 519-525)
525. Lift up your hearts to things above, / Ye followers of the Lamb

1/7 = 14.28%

METHODISM'S TRINITARIAN HYMNODY: A SAMPLING
Out of a total of 525 items, we list altogether 123, or 23.42 percent, as “explicitly Trinitarian.” For the purposes of this study, I have erred on the side of caution by taking the larger possible figure for the total contents (not diminishing them by allowing for the division of long hymns into quasi-independent items), and by counting only once the hymns presented in CH 1780 in detached parts, thus, preferring the lower possible total for the Trinitarian pieces. These data tell us little until we then compare them with their equivalents in other traditions or in the same tradition at different sampling points. An ecumenical comparison would be instructive, but the methodology would need a thorough foundation in principle, and that is not our concern here.

Even in isolation, however, some potentially interesting patterns emerge: the thickest concentrations of Trinitarian hymns are in areas of confidence and thanksgiving—praying for blessing (66.66%), praying as a fellowship of believers and seekers (54.54%), inviting seekers to the joys of inward rather than merely conventional religion (50%), communion with heaven (46.15%), giving thanks (36.36%), and rejoicing (35.61%)—and, significantly, in the longest single section, which determines the overall character of the collection.

“Transcripts of the Trinity” (CH 7, 3:2): The Essential Dogmatic Matrix

Far from being a marginal speculative luxury, the doctrine of the Trinity is the absolutely indispensible presupposition and even summary of the Christian gospel celebrated in the Collection and in the community for which it was designed. The dogma is a guarantee of the gospel of salvation, of course, but far more than that it is the basis of the obligation incumbent on all creatures and the source of all hope:

You, whom he ordained to be
Transcripts of the Trinity;
You, for whom himself was sold,
You, on whom he still doth wait,
Whom he would again create;
Made by him, and purchased, why,
Why will you for ever die?

(CH 1780, #7, v. 3)
The "transcripts" are to reflect and to share the divine nature of triune love; this divine purpose and promise is spelled out in terms of creation, redemption, and inward re-creation. Note that, while the three aspects of the work of grace are described in terms of the three Persons ("appropriations"), the text prefers to emphasize the unity of the divine essence, the unity of the Persons in action $ad$ $extra$, in the traditional phrase and principle which are denied or simply neglected in much recent exposition.

The Triune God is not only the gift and giver in the sacraments but also the agent and content of all mission, extending beyond the realm of the ecclesiastically depicted sacred into the transformation of all society. Union with godhead is essentially a Trinitarian event; this is the only basis for union within the church. The Trinity is not solely sovereign over creation in a supernal realm of transcendence, but more significantly the Trinity encompasses creation. This becomes clear only as we are brought, in worshipping and serving faith, within the life and relationships of the divine Persons.

"Seeking the Middle Ground": The United Methodist Hymnal 1989

Our 1989 book is, of course, in no sense a revised version or equivalent of Mr. Wesley's 1780 Collection. Its role in defining and transmitting the identity of a Christian community is no doubt comparable, and its doctrinal continuity with the ancestor work must be substantial (and demonstrable) if the communal identity is still to be honestly asserted. However, the community served has a place in the Christian world and in the Christian mission which has had to undergo many redefinitions, and the Christian liturgical repertoire has undergone two centuries of growth and attrition. Even the Wesley hymns are not immune to the almost universal reign of liturgical mortality. The continuity of Methodist worship does not depend on the survival of Wesley hymns—their perpetuation is subject to dogmatic criteria, and their viability as liturgical texts is not guaranteed. What we shall look for in The United Methodist Hymnal 1989 (UMH 1989) is the place of explicitly Trinitarian hymns of any provenance. Again, we break down the analysis by the sections of the book (not including the orders of service, the prayers dotted around among the hymns, or the psalms):
The Glory of the Triune God (Nos. 57-152)

61. Come, thou almighty King

62. All creatures of our God and King [Doxology only]

64-65. Holy, holy, holy. Lord God almighty (English and Spanish)

70-71. Lesser Doxology (Two musical settings!)

79. Holy God, we praise thy name

80. Te Deum: “Canticle of the Holy Trinity”

82-83. Gloria in excelsis (BCP and ICEL versions)

85. We believe in one true God

88. Maker, in whom we live

(This is a Charles Wesley piece, from the 1747 Hymns for Those That Seek and Those That Have Redemption in the Blood of Jesus Christ; as written, it presents an “economic” approach to the Trinity, based on an “essential” Trinity. Replacing “Father” with “Maker” is lamentable in the extreme; it alters the hymn’s careful balance of economic and essential concepts; it reduces the opening to a trivial tautology and robs us of a powerful juxtaposition of the masculine title of the First Person with the maternal imagery of “in whom we are, and move”—a converting interpretation of divine paternity.)

90. Ye watchers and ye holy ones (Doxology)

90. Venite (Doxology)

(The Gloria Patri survives here, presumably because of post-BCP inertia; why is it omitted from the other canticles and psalms? Since this omission removes them from the realm of Christian worship, which is a fairly drastic step, some explanation might be in order . . . . and if we must refrain from “Christianizing” these items, they must be left out)

94-95. Bishop Ken’s Doxology

102. Now thank we all our God (Doxology)

108. God hath spoken by the prophets

(109. Creating God, your fingers trace)

(Is this an inescapably Trinitarian hymn (as the author would surely intend), a Unitarian (Sabellian?) hymn, dwelling on four aspects of divine activity?)

114. God of change and glory.

(“One Giver” = the Father?)

[116. The God of Abraham praise]

(This was written as a Christian hymn, but the revisers have wreaked mortal damage on it. The Trinity has been banished, and therewith the whole dimension of redeeming love: to keep Oliver’s stanza 3 [“I shall . . . to heaven ascend!”] without his preceding “he shall save me to the end / Through Jesu’s blood” is so hostile to Oliver’s plan as to be unforgivable. If the hymn needed so much defacement, the only honest plan was to throw the whole thing away. A translation, rather a Christian
equivalent, of the Yigdal is available. Cantor Meyer Leon gave Thomas
Olivers a transcription of his tune for the Yigdal after the latter had shown
him the text of his Christian imitation of the Jewish hymn. If a Jew can
recognize and respect the Christian character of a hymn, why cannot we?)

119. O God in heaven

The Grace of Jesus Christ (Nos. 153-237)
160-161. Rejoice, ye pure in heart (two settings)
182. Word of God, come down on earth
184. Corde natus ex parentis (Doxology)
187. Rise, shine, you people
188. Christ is the world's light (Doxology)
1192. There's a Spirit in the air
214. Savior of the nations, come
215. To a maid engaged to Joseph
296. Sing, my tongue (Doxology)
315. Come, ye faithful (Doxology)
324. Hail thee, festival day (taking all seasonal variants together!)

The Power of the Holy Spirit (Nos. 328-536)
(This wording lights up warning signals: popular contemporary devotions
stress the Spirit as power-giver for more than religious reasons; the
prevalence of this theme among threatened or ambitious lower-middle-class
Protestants is a symptom of a dangerous malaise)
331. Holy Spirit, come, confirm us
332. Spirit of faith come down
346. Sinners, turn, why will you die
347. O let the Son of God Enfold you with his Spirit and his love
369. Blessed assurance
372. How can we sinners know / Our sins on earth forgiven
374. Standing on the promises
383. This is a day of new beginnings
422. Jesus, thine all-victorious love
439. We utter our cry
447. Our Parent, by whose name / All parenthood is known
(Why correct Ephesians 3:15? Less devastation than in #88, since
Tucker's emphasis is on the parental relationship of the First Person, both
within the life of the Trinity and universally. Why has "Lord Christ, yourself
a child" become "O Jesus, who, a child . . ."? Tucker is contrasting the eternal
splendor of the Logos with the miraculous limitation of human childhood.
Does the change here covertly question the deity of the Second Person?)
513. Soldiers of Christ, arise
515. Out of the depths I cry to you

The Community of Faith (Nos. 537-699)

530. Spirit of the living God
541. See how great a flame aspires
545-546. The Church's one foundation

(Helen Bruch Pearson's recent charge that this hymn's ecclesiocentric complacency and inept attitude toward the Spirit "makes of the Trinity a diminished fourth rather than a Major Third" warns us that, when we have listed our "explicitly Trinitarian" hymns, we have hardly begun to evaluate them for adequacy as vehicles of Trinitarian worship.)

547. O Church of God, united
550. Christ, from whom all blessings flow

("one spirit" in v. 2 must be an accident for "one Spirit," an orthographic mishap which often befell John Wesley in CH 1780)

551. Awake, O sleeper
559. Christ is made the sure foundation (Doxology)
560. Help us to accept each other
571. Go, make of all disciples
579. Lord God, your love has called us here
595. Whether the Word be preached or read
596. Blessed Jesus, at thy word

(As created by Charles Wesley, this was a Trinitarian hymn: "God through himself we then shall know" conveys the ontological equality/personal distinctiveness of the Persons. Since the entire hymn is addressed to the Spirit, the third-person address in "God through the Spirit" is syntactical and therefore a theological nonsense. "Through God's own self we then shall know [what?]" (Kimbrough) sees the problem without easing it. "God through God's self . . . " might be tolerable. If a hymn cannot be kept without making it a farrago of nonsense, drop it.)

604. Praise and thanksgiving be to God our maker
605. Wash, O God, our sons and daughters
606. Come, let us use the grace divine

(The typological blemish in v. 3 [read "To each (sc., each covenanting worshipper) the cov'nant blood apply"] does not reduce the immense debt of world Methodism to the 1989 revisers for restoring the authentic text and verse-form, which even John Wesley did not appreciate)

611. Child of blessing, child of promise
619. Now the silence
632. Draw us in the Spirit's tether
640. Take our bread
(In v. 2, whose is "your blood"? The Father's? A subtle allusion to one exegesis of Acts 20:28? Or a momentary confusion of the Persons?)

648. God the Spirit, guide and guardian
649. How shall they hear the Word of God?
651. Come, Holy Ghost, our souls inspire
657. This is the day
   If UMH 1989 contained more than the first verse, this would be a Trinitarian hymn par excellence!
660. God is here
661. Jesus, we want to meet on this holy day
670. Go forth for God
675. As the sun doth daily rise
679. O splendor of God's glory bright
680. Father, we praise thee, now the night is over
682. All praise to thee, my God, this night (Doxology)
686. O gladsome light

A New Heaven and a New Earth (Nos. 700-734)
711. For all the saints (Doxology)
714. I know not why God's wondrous grace
727. O what their joy and their glory must be

Applying our strictest criteria and omitting the bracketed items, which could have been explicitly Trinitarian but for various reasons cannot be so regarded, and not counting those items which are simply doxologies or are explicit only at their doxological conclusions, we finish with 70/734, or 11.41 percent. Since 1780, the proportion of explicitly Trinitarian hymns has dropped by slightly more than half. In a small number of cases, the loss of Trinitarian character is due to recent editorial ax work; the principal cause is a shift in popular taste and in hymnographic production.

The loss of Trinitarian material from the Wesleyan root tradition is substantial: there are twelve survivors, including one that John forgot in making up CH 1780. What this means in terms of cultural inanition must be discussed elsewhere. Much of the loss has been made up at least in part by hymnographers of all orthodox Christian traditions in the intervening two centuries. Even allowing for these compensating factors, the decrease in the Trinitarian character of authorized Methodist hymnody (and not only in these United States; in the British Methodist 1983 Hymns and Psalms, the proportion has dropped to 13.51%) is precipitous and must at least

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be noted and explained, if possible. Ecumenical comparisons may illustrate these developments; they will not justify them. These tasks also cannot be addressed here.

"What Shall We Teach? How Shall We Teach? What Shall We Do?"

Since 1744, these questions have been the essential agenda of a Methodist Conference. The hymnological data here gathered present the world Methodist community with a group of tasks—theological, historical, liturgical, educational, and above all of corporate self-examination. A revival of Trinitarian awareness, if that is what ought to be our aim, will be most effectively pursued by the revival of Trinitarian song, which will create the mental and emotional growth medium for prayer and reflection. It is of course justifiable to do our theology directly in the making of hymns and prayers and the ordering of liturgies, but integrity requires that we also stand back and ask the dogmatic and exegetical and philosophical questions involved in such work directly and with logical rigor.

Having given thirty-five years of research to these issues, I shall not be so foolish as even to try to sum up the main issues, let alone discuss them! All I want to say here is this: if we intend to maintain or even to invigorate the Trinitarian faith in our churches, we must sit down and count the cost. And the cost is immense: we shall have to think and pray and live like Christians. No aspect of existence will be left unchallenged if we follow the Trinitarian understanding to its conclusions.

On a Trinitarian understanding, God is not “above” or “below” so much as “around,” “encompassing.” We—creation as a whole, that is—are within the personal activities and plans and shared designs of God. In simplistic terms, we are there as gifts of each of the Persons to each of the others, as beneficiaries of concerted devices of love on the part of each of the Three. This leaves no room for comfortably remote notions of “transcendence” or let-it-all-hang-out schemes based on “immanence.” The atonement must be seen as a radically internal event in the divine life. Without losing the awesome category of mystery or claiming to view all things from God’s vantage point, a Christian theology which admits the reality of being adopted within the Only-begotten by the power of the Spirit as a child of the Primal
Parent, of Abba, will show a degree of boldness not always typical of recent Christian thought, boldness both of speaking of God and in speaking to God.

The Father hears him pray,
His dear Anointed One,
He cannot turn away
The presence of his Son;
His Spirit answers to the blood,
And tells me I am born of God.
(CH 1780, #202, v. 4)

As soon as we envision the ground and font and norm of our being as all-encompassing love acted in a mutual society of Persons among whom "there is none before and none after," and as soon as we start to admit that this pattern of being and relationship is the matrix within which all being is brought forth and the image after which all being is modelled, then disturbing consequences follow for our notions of social life. Both laissez-faire and dictatorship come under total condemnation. No church which professes Trinitarian faith can consistently disown other churches, with all their sins and errors, or base its own structures of operation upon principles of domination or of living for ourselves, at any level. In both church and general society, Trinitarian faith logically applied proves to undermine gender prejudice. In all areas of human encounter, a concept of the person as potentially open to all other persons, totally respecting the identity of all other persons, promises to be revolutionary. If we are not careful, Trinitarian understanding of deity pulls us into an entire philosophical program of rethinking not only ethics and aesthetics but the whole of ontology, too.

But is the whole thing a luxury, or a degenerate mystification, as some have charged? All I want to say here is the trial of Jesus, with his threefold assertion of equality with the Power (Mark 14:62), the assertion which the Sanhedrin rightly understood and which made his conviction and condemnation inevitable, the assertion which made the Passion and its sequel not only an atonement but an all-transforming revelation, leaves a Christian no option but the Trinitarian way.

To foster a heritage, academic and reflective disciplines are necessary but insufficient; viability of doctrine requires a milieu of celebration. As a small, but not trivial, step towards a fuller enjoyment
of our Trinitarian faith in both corporate and private celebration (and I leave for an appendix one example of our substantial inheritance in individual devotion), let me suggest that we rescue and use, for example, two of Charles Wesley’s works of art.

One is what we may call his “Invitatory,” CH 1780, #366:

Father of everlasting grace,
Thy goodness and thy truth we praise,
Thy goodness and thy truth we prove;
Thou hast, in honour of thy Son,
The gift unspeakable sent down,
The Spirit of life, and power, and love.

Send us the Spirit of thy Son,
To make the depths of godhead known,
To make us share the life divine;
Send him the sprinkled blood I apply,
Send him our souls to sanctify,
And show and seal us ever thine.

So shall we pray, and never cease,
So shall we thankfully confess
Thy wisdom, truth, and power, and love,
With joy unspeakable adore,
And bless and praise thee evermore,
And serve thee as thy hosts above:

Till, added to that heavenly choir,
We raise our songs of triumph higher,
And praise thee in a bolder strain,
Out-soar the first-born seraph’s flight,
And sing, with all our friends in light,
Thy everlasting love to man.

Some modifications might be made to this hymn to accommodate serious changes in language and ethical and theological perception without compromising the author’s sense and intention. In the last stanza we might read, “And praise thee, open face to face. . . . Thy everlasting, boundless grace.” There are signs that, at least in the last century, this hymn was sung as a morning devotion; it might find a place in a new resource for the Daily Office, together with “Christ,
whose glory fills the skies" (in Charles's original, not in John's quaint adaptation!)

The other piece to look at here is Charles Wesley's sung Creed, from his versified translation of Jones of Nayland's Catholic Doctrine of a Trinity; a hymn more worthy to stand among the credal formulae in UMH 1989 than most of the crypto-Arian novelties presently included:

1. Hail, holy, holy, Lord,  
   Whom One in Three we know;  
   By all thy heavenly host adored,  
   By all thy Church below.

2. One undivided Trinity  
   With triumph we proclaim;  
   Thy universe is full of thee,  
   And speaks thy glorious name.

3. Thee, holy Father, we confess,  
   Thee, holy Son, adore;  
   Thee, Spirit of truth and holiness,  
   We worship evermore.

4. The incommunicable right,  
   Almighty God, receive,  
   Which angel choirs, and saints in light,  
   And saints embodied give.

5. Three Persons equally divine  
   We magnify and love;  
   And both the choirs ere long shall join  
   To sing thy praise above.

6. Hail, holy, holy, holy Lord  
   (Our heavenly song shall be),  
   Supreme, essential One, adored,  
   In co-eternal Three!

A resuscitation of our Trinitarian witness, if feasible, would, of course, accord with the professed dogmatic commitment of the United
Methodist Church and the associated members of the American branch of the world Methodist family. Unlike the British Mother Conference, it has pledged itself to Articles, in the first of both series of which (and I cite from the 1992 edition of *The Book of Discipline*, despite the apparent insistence of p. 40, n. 1, that most of the doctrinal formulae are merely legislative enactments) we find uncompromising affirmation of the Trinity:

... and in unity of this Godhead there are three persons, of one substance, power, and eternity—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. (p. 58)

... the one God reveals himself as the Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, distinct but inseparable, eternally one in essence and power. (p. 65).

That is what we say we believe. If we still believe it, we can hardly do other than to celebrate it. If not, then it is time to close the store and go home. For good.

Appendix One: The Trinitarian Devotion of One Pioneer Methodist: Thomas Collins (1810-1864)

This British Wesleyan Methodist (in U. S. terms, M.E.) evangelist of the pioneering post-Wesley generation consciously adopted the counsel not only of John Wesley and other Methodist guides (Hester Ann Rogers, Lady Darcy Maxwell) but also of the Puritans John Owen and John Smith and the Roman Catholic Marquis de Renty. Aware of "carrying about with him an experimental verity of the Holy Trinity," he ordered his weekly prayer thus:

*On Monday* I set my soul to meditate upon the Father's majesty, and love, and unspeakable gift. I address Him, adore Him, embrace Him. *On Tuesday*, the glories of the eternal Son, the merit and mercy of the Redeemer, the compassion of the great High Priest, and the royalties of the enthroned Mediator, become my theme. I draw nigh to Him, claim Him, trust Him. *On Wednesday*, the Holy Ghost, the Lord and Giver of life, the witness for Christ, the Spring and benediction of all sanctity, is the Object of my thought and faith. I open my heart to Him,
yield to Him, commune with Him. On Thursday, I just begin at
the beginning, and, following the same order, run through it
over again. As for the Sundays, well, they are all "Trinity
Sundays" with me now. As their light dawns I say

Hail! Father, Son, and Spirit, great
Before the birth of time,
Enthroned in everlasting state,
JEHOVAH, ELOHIM!
Thy powerful, wise, and loving mind
Did our creation plan;
And all the glorious Persons form'd
To make Thy favourite, Man.
Again Thou didst, on council met,
Thy ruined work restore;
Establish'd in our first estate,
To forfeit it no more.
And when we rise in love renew'd,
Our souls resemble Thee
An image of the Triune God,
To all eternity.

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2. On the Wesley Hymnody in General, and CH 1780 in Particular:


3. The Wesley Sacramental Hymns

(These are not examined separately here; but they illustrate specific areas of Trinitarian thought in unique ways):


4. Some Issues in Trinitarian Theology


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Notes


2. One very obvious candidate: the hymns of Martin Luther. See Markus Kenny, ed., Luther’s geistliche Lieder und Kirchengesänge: Vollständige Neudition in Ergänzung zu Bd. 35 der WA Archiv zur WA der Werke Martin Luthers, Bd.4) Koln/Wien: Pömmel Verlag 1985. Of 45 pieces in total, 18 (40%) are substantially Trinitarian or include a Trinitarian doxology; 15 (31.11%) are substantially Trinitarian by the strictest criteria: Nos. 2, 4, 10, 15, 16, 17, 23, 24, 29, 31, 35, 36, 38, 41. This list includes the Creed (24) and the Te Deum (31). Note that this corpus of hymnody was designed neither as a self-contained or complete hymnal nor as a comprehensive confessional or catechetical platform. The high proportion of explicitly Trinitarian material here is therefore all the more significant; it is of the very stuff of Luther’s thought, not a propagandistic feature.


5. William Jones, The Catholic Doctrine of a Trinity proved by above an hundred short and clear arguments, expressed in the terms of the Holy Scriptures, compiled after a manner entirely new, and digested under the four following titles: 1. The Divinity of Christ 2. The Divinity of the Holy Ghost 3. The Plurality of Persons 4. The Trinity in Unity (I have used the 1813 Philadelphia edition of Whiting and Watson). In his “Letter to Miss B., April 17, 1770” printed posthumously in The Methodist Magazine XXIX (Feb. 1806): 88, John comments: “Mr. Jones’s book on the Trinity is both more clear and more strong, than any I ever saw on that subject. If any thing is wanting, it is the application, lest it should appear to be a merely speculative doctrine, which has no influence on our hearts or lives: but this is abundantly supplied by my Brother’s hymns (sc. On the Trinity). It is a shortcoming in the Methodist heritaje that the absolute need for an intellectual apologistic in parallel with the mission of preaching, fellowship, and sacraments, a need met in the work especially of Waterland, Sherlock and Butler, has not been duly acknowledged.

"Early Methodist Visions of the Trinity," *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society, XLVI* (1987), 22-44, 57-69. Collins's rule of prayer was not an uncritical perpetuation of an inherited pattern; I detect in his careful wording more than a side-glance at the contemporary debate within British Methodism of Christ's eternal Sonship, definitively ended by Richard Treffry, Jr., in his *An Inquiry into the Doctrine of the Eternal Sonship of Our Lord Jesus Christ* (London, Wesleyan Conference Office, 1865). Unconsciously picking up a suggestion of Hippolytus of Rome (in *Contra Noetum*), Adam Clarke had speculated in his NT commentary that the eternal Logos, fully divine, co-eternal and consubstantial with the First Person, is most aptly called Son only after the Incarnation. This was neither Arianism (though Cardinal Newman seems to have thought so) nor Adoptionism, as more recent writers have mistakenly concluded.
Good News to the Poor: Baptism as Liberation

In 1667 the legislature of the colony of Virginia passed a law stipulating that the reception of Christian baptism did not alter the legal status of a slave. The need for such statutory clarification makes it apparent that the master class of colonial America was struggling with an inherent relationship between baptism and liberation. This paper will explore some aspects of that relationship by viewing baptism in terms of several theological categories, noting how these understandings of baptism have been shaped in North American Methodism and what they might mean for the church's ministry to and with marginalized persons—"the poor." This effort is based upon the recognition that those who dominate and those who are dominated operate with different interpretive presuppositions. The liberation potential of baptism is more easily grasped by the oppressed than by the oppressor.

The Nature of God

Baptism is predicated upon certain understandings of the nature of God—theology in the narrower sense of that term. God is a supreme...
personal being who created the physical world and remains active in human life and history. Because the divine nature is that of outreaching love, God takes the initiative to redeem humanity and to bring persons back into loving relationship with God. God is engaged in a struggle against evil to establish justice in love. God's ultimate provision for human salvation is through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Baptism is a sign of "the Lord's favor"—grace which is inclusive of all persons and is not conditioned by circumstances such as wealth, race, or gender. This all-encompassing and egalitarian nature of divine love endows every individual with dignity and value and demands that God's people treat each other according to their God-given worth.

The services of baptism in the 1989 United Methodist Hymnal include language designed to evoke the congregation's sense of participation in "God's mighty acts of salvation." This is especially apparent in the prayer of thanksgiving over the water which encapsulates salvation history from Creation through the Flood, through the Exodus and the Promised Land, and on to the event of Jesus Christ. Such awareness of the workings of God in and through the events of human history is an essential foundation for liberationist concepts. Only as God is understood to be both concerned and involved in the realities of human existence in the present can the centrality of peace and justice ministries be grasped.

American Methodists share with Christians of all times and places the difficulties of remaining faithful to the living out of these truths about the nature of God. They have often failed to exemplify the all-encompassing divine love and have imposed human qualifications and strictures on the universality of divine grace. In the area of baptismal practice, for example, some intriguing twists have shown up. In general, American Methodists have offered the sacrament of baptism quite freely to adults who wished to receive it. Few, if any, prerequisites have been imposed. Nineteenth-century Methodism was frequently criticized, even ridiculed, by rival denominations for this prodigality. Yet such open practice may reveal a devaluation of the sacrament more than it exemplifies the free accessibility of divine grace. Baptism has been interpreted as simply a preliminary step in the process of becoming a member of the church. To become a "real" member of the Body of Christ after baptism required a period of several months of probation for instruction and scrutiny, the taking of further vows, and in some cases an experience of conversion. In
effect, baptism was offered as freely as grace, but *membership* was restricted to a clearly defined and carefully regulated in-group. This allowed Methodism to be true to its theological heritage but selective of its demographic constituency in ways which were sometimes inimical to inclusion of marginalized persons. Such selectivity was manifested in diverse ways in a variety of local settings, depending upon what persons were considered undesirable as church members. Historical records do not provide the evidence to trace these dynamics, but it can be surmised that ethnicity, marital status, socioeconomic class, and conformity to mores and folkways would be among the determinative factors. Certainly the requirements and supervision of the probationary relationship were a potent instrument of social control. Here the limited nature of the in-group was defined and enforced.

Children have historically been treated as “poor” in both culture and church. They have constituted a group of nonpersons, powerless and often oppressed. A dichotomy is apparent in the debates over the eligibility of certain children to receive infant baptism. Methodist theology unequivocally grounded infant baptism in the saving grace made available to all in the atonement of Christ. Children were heirs of this redemption and so were entitled to its sign—baptism. Yet Methodism has continually wrestled with questions about baptizing the children of parents who were nonmembers or, worse, nonbelievers. The introductory rubric of the current baptismal ritual in United Methodism states, “Parents or sponsors should be members of Christ’s holy church.” Concern for the proper Christian nurture of baptized children, if they are to grow up in the faith, is to be taken very seriously. But here is another tool by which human beings can define and limit the in-group of those who are recognized as recipients of “the Lord’s favor.” Divine grace might indeed be free, active, and inclusive; but it is not sufficient to make one a Methodist.

**The Nature of Human Beings**

These ambivalences in Methodism were obviously the results of understandings of the nature of human beings as well as of the nature of God. Traditional Christianity emphasized the sinfulness of all humanity. Every person is separated from God, alienated and lost. All are powerless to bring about their own salvation, and so are dependent...
upon the redeeming action of God. John Wesley was adamant about
the totality of human depravity, as this example from his sermon
“Original Sin” illustrates: “But here is the shibboleth: Is man by
nature filled with all manner of evil? Is he void of all good? Is he
wholly Fallen? Is his soul totally corrupted? . . . Allow this, and you
are so far a Christian. Deny it, and you are but an Heathen still.” The
human capacity to respond to God is a divine gift—prevenient
grace—not an innate human quality. Such anthropology was
inherently egalitarian and inclusive. Regardless of the differences in
their external circumstances, all human beings are equal in their sinful
state and equivalent in their inability to escape from it. Theological
positions which assume the moral superiority of any group or
individual—whether the privileged or the oppressed—are built upon
false presuppositions.

The sacrament of infant baptism has historically been understood as
the antidote for original sin. Because all were born sinful, all were in
need of this application of redeeming grace. Major parts of
Christianity—notably Roman Catholicism—long taught that a child
who was denied baptism was barred from God’s eternal kingdom.
While he denied that God’s grace was so limited, Wesley affirmed as
the first benefit of baptism: “. . . the washing away the guilt of original
sin by the application of the merits of Christ’s death” (Treatise on
Baptism). As the acceptance of the doctrine of original sin attenuated
in Methodism, a new rationale for infant baptism had to be developed.
By the mid-nineteenth century it was clear that this new rationale
would be quite the opposite of the traditional one: infants were to be
baptized because they were born already within the covenant of divine
grace and entitled to baptism as its emblem.

Obviously, Methodism was sharing fully in the nineteenth-century
American ethos with its increasing emphasis upon the ability and
goodness of human beings. Ideas like original sin and moral
impotence appeared antiquated and irrelevant. Rather than being
burdened by inherited sin, children were born innocent denizens of the
Kingdom. These understandings reshaped baptismal theology in ways
well expressed by Robert W. Goodloe, whose The Sacraments in
Methodism (Abingdon, 1953) molded the thought of countless
Methodist ministers of the last four decades. The moral nature of
children is viewed with optimism: “Children, we believe, are born in
innocency, not guilty of inherited sins; they are possessed of a
capacity which at the opening of accountability enables them to enter
upon the way of salvation or upon the way of sin, depending upon the choice to be made by the child" (p. 117). Arguing a relationship between theological thought and political developments, Goodloe writes: "So that today in a great democratic country like America there are those who cling to the Catholic inheritance of original sin and baptismal regeneration; but as democracy increases, in both state and church, the worth of the individual advances, and the "whosoever will" teaching of Jesus is on the march!" (p. 106). It is not difficult to discern here the basis of infant baptism understood primarily, even exclusively, as dedication of the child by the parents, as well as the rationale for incessant requests for "rebaptism" in adulthood. Such emphasis on the human capacity for decision and positive action effectively vitiates the leveling nature of baptismal grace offered as antidote for the sin of all persons. When it is believed that persons are able to achieve salvation through their own merits and efforts, those who have lesser resources and power can be blamed for their own situation. Theological, sociological, and political positions from the Puritan "signs of election" to the judgments of Social Darwinists to contemporary criticisms of affirmative action and welfare programs provide evidence of this. Little sympathy for "the poor" is offered by views which deny the inherent sinfulness and helplessness of all persons and, instead, emphasize the ability to determine one's own destiny.

If the current baptismal rituals can be taken as evidence, Methodism may be returning to more orthodox concepts of the power and pervasiveness of sin. The first question addressed to a candidate (or to parents or sponsors) is, "Do you renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of this world, and repent of your sin?" This inquiry is significant for the relationship between the church and "the poor." It recognizes the universality of human sinfulness—a condition which includes both the powerful and the oppressed. This sinfulness is identified as not only individual but also corporate and systemic. Ministries of peace and justice are surely dependent upon such a recognition. It is, however, of both interest and concern that this question to baptismal candidates has emerged as a chief focus of dispute and opposition in the church to the new liturgy. Many contemporary United Methodists are uncomfortable with assertions of their and their children's sinfulness and are oblivious to the scope of evil. For too long, most Christians have understood sin as personal action in violation of moral codes of behavior. Fruitfully
addressing the condition of the marginalized will require recognition of "the principalities and powers of this world" such as racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism, and ageism.

Salvation

If humankind, as both individuals and society, is characterized by sin—by broken relationships, alienation, and lostness—then soteriology is a major concern. The gospel proclaims God’s action in Jesus Christ to bring forgiveness, liberation, and healing. In Wesleyan theology this action of God must be responded to by acts of human volition which are made possible by divine grace. American Methodism has struggled with this synthesis of the divine and human roles in the salvation process. In the milieu of camp meeting revivalism in the nineteenth century, soteriology became much more anthropocentric. In the individualistic ambience of the period, there was difficulty in perceiving how God acts through church and sacraments. In the protracted debate about conversion as opposed to nurture, both sides of the argument presumed human capability. Salvation was the reward of those who chose and strove.

Other aspects of the theology of salvation were in tension with middle-class lifestyle and values. A group seeking to differentiate itself from the masses was uncomfortable with the equal accessibility of grace to all. Emphasis upon human ability and volition is much more attractive to the empowered; the powerless are more easily, indeed more necessarily, dependent upon grace. Self-abnegation was a concept popular only when it could be applied to women, children, and other nonpersons in the society. Change is most sought by those who have something to gain; it is less welcome by the dominant. Evangelical conversion, whether ritualized by baptism or not, was an egalitarian force which empowered those who experienced it. The accounts of women and of blacks in the Great Awakenings provide repeated evidence of this. Women who were converted received a new sense of their own worth before God and their ability to serve God’s people. A plethora of reform movements such as abolition, women’s rights, and care of the mentally ill; of organizations such as The Woman’s Christian Temperance Union, the missionary societies, and woman’s clubs; and of educational endeavors, notably the Sunday school movement, have their impetus here. Slaves who experienced
conversion were enabled to withstand the often brutal efforts of their owners to keep them from worshipping together and proclaiming their faith.

Baptism as the sign of new status and identity is the most appropriate instrument for ritualizing the salvation experience. The sacrament is sign and vehicle of liberation from the dominion of sin and evil. Believer’s baptism with its emphasis upon transformation was thought by many to be more congenial with revivalistic soteriology. American Methodists, however, never departed from the advocacy of infant baptism—although they did not practice it universally. Perhaps they realized that it is the baptism of infants which most graphically portrays the loving care and redemptive action of God offering salvation before persons can do anything for themselves. Baptism understood as God’s act must afford immense comfort and confidence to “the poor.” Others are at pains to stress the necessity of human decision and commitment—actions which are more comprehensible and appealing to those who are in social positions of relative autonomy. Perhaps some of the current controversy about baptism in United Methodism has its rootage here.

The Church

The Christian church is the community of God’s people. As the Body of Christ it edifies and sustains its members in the living of redeemed lives. The sacraments are vehicles of divine grace, signs of the continued presence of God with God’s people. As the corporate selfhood of Jesus Christ, the community of faith is to be active in the contemporary world, working for the salvation of individuals and society. The church is God’s designated instrument for the redemption of the world.

American Methodism has always had difficulties with the concepts of church and sacraments. While deeply rooted in Anglicanism, its development in this country was initially much more societal, even sectarian. This tendency was not obviated by the official creation of the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1784. Indeed, it is telling that references in the Discipline to “society” were not changed to read “church” until 1816. The Methodist societies/churches of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, though lacking in ecclesiastical accoutrements, exemplified some of the most authentic
features of the church of Jesus Christ. These early groups formed tightly knit, supportive communities based upon the power of conversion and the demands of discipleship. They edified and sustained their members through mutual nurture and discipline. The strength of these faith communities was seen in regular worship and spiritual formation, as well as in quarterly meetings and camp meetings. The earliest Methodist societies were rather radical communities, energized by the revolutionary egalitarianism of the gospel. They welcomed the participation and leadership of women. They were inclusive of African-Americans within predominantly white groups. Sadly, both gender and racial inclusiveness quickly diminished. Women who not only had early served as society and class leaders but also had ridden circuits preaching, were relegated to less conspicuous positions as Methodism became more ecclesiastically structured. Blacks were segregated into worship services of their own, and black preachers were denied full ordination opportunities. Apparently, both increase in institutionalization and elevation in socioeconomic status resulted in dissipation of inclusivity.

Contrary to many prevailing impressions, the sacraments were consistently important to American Methodists. Thomas Coke and others of the period testify to the overwhelming pent-up demands for baptism that they were called upon to meet when ordained Methodist ministers first became available in America. The sacramental controversy of the 1777–1784 period threatened fundamental changes in the character of American Methodism and the sundering of its Wesleyan identity. It was largely the pressure upon John Wesley to provide ordained ministers who could administer the sacraments that forced him into taking steps which established a separate ecclesiastical Methodist body in America. The tensions in Methodist self-understanding are, however, apparent here as well. The formative decades of the Methodist Episcopal Church featured prolific debate and voluminous writing on baptism—focused especially on the related issues of eligibility of infants, mode, and rebaptism. Yet reception of baptism was not officially required for church membership until 1836, and it continued to be a subject of dispute for some time thereafter. With the greater regularizing of baptismal practice, its liberating and leveling potential appears to have been lost. Baptism did not really incorporate one into the community of faith; other requirements had to be met to accomplish that. The tenaciousness of that view can be illustrated by another quotation from Goodloe in 1953: "No, baptism
of an infant does not admit that child into the membership of the Methodist Church” (p. 115). Neither were baptized adults accepted as full members. Methodists quenched the power of baptism and retreated from its liberationist implications in their determination to define and protect the status of an in-group rather than an inclusive community. A Congregationalist periodical The Puritan pinpointed the confusion when it commented in 1843 in criticism of Methodism: “But how a person can join a class which is part of a church, and be admitted to the most holy ordinances of the church, and still not be a member of the church, is hard to be understood.” The ambivalence of these views was revealed by the vehemence of Methodist squabbles with the Baptists over baptismal theology and practice. Methodists perceived that any tolerance of the Baptist view that the baptism of believers by immersion was essential would undercut the legitimacy of Methodism as a church of Jesus Christ. As Francis Asbury commented in his Journal: “If plunging-baptism is the only true ordinance, and there can be no true church without it, it is not quite clear that Christ ever had a Church until the Baptists plunged for it.” In resistance to this Baptist contention, and its corollary of closed communion, Methodists may have overreacted in downplaying the significance of baptism and the accessibility of the Lord’s Table.

A diminishing sense of community seemed to characterize American Methodism by the latter half of the nineteenth century. Could this be related to the rising socioeconomic level of the majority of its membership? Early Methodism, while including persons of all classes, was notably strong among the lower socioeconomic groups. As Methodism developed into an official “national church,” it was less broadly inclusive. Perhaps community is a necessity for the powerless and individualism a luxury of the powerful (or at least of those who optimistically aspire to power). Baptism, the sign of incorporation into the community, remained quite easily available, but its significance was sharply limited. The liberationist potential of the sacrament was denied as other prerequisites were imposed for entrance into the restricted in-group to which the community had shrunk—shrunk not in numbers but in breadth.

Infant baptism remained without question the declared practice of the denomination, but its significance was depreciated. Understood in its richness, infant baptism is a dramatic affirmation by God of the worth of those considered nonpersons in human society—a group which has historically included children. The sacrament professes the
corporate nature of the family of God, the solidarity of the community of faith, and the inclusivity of the covenant people.

Questions about the significance of baptism—just what does it “do” for its recipient—are relevant to current debates about the place of certain groups of people in the church. One of the strongest arguments for equality of women in Christianity is based upon their equal participation in baptism—the emblem of the New Covenant—as they could not in circumcision—the emblem of the Old. Bishop James Thoburn glimpsed the liberating potential of baptism for women when in 1893 he pleaded futilely with the Methodist Episcopal Church to authorize women missionaries to administer the sacrament to “heathen” women in India rather than to allow them to die unbaptized because men were denied access to them. What does it mean for the church to baptize certain persons but then to refuse to consider them as candidates for ordination? In United Methodism this question is now more relevant to the situation of homosexual persons than to women, but the issue is the same.

The Mission of the Church

The faithful Christian community exists not solely for its own spiritual sustenance but for its mission to redeem the world for Jesus Christ. This mission is to persons as individuals, as members of various groups, and to the systemic structures of society. The church is to proclaim the good news of salvation made available by the action of God. The living out of salvation calls forth holiness of life that works for peace and justice in human relationships. The sacrament of baptism marks a transformation in how persons interact with the world. The baptized person has a new ultimate loyalty to Jesus Christ, a radically changed set of values and standards of judgment.

American Methodism began its life under the mandate, adapted from Wesley, “To reform the Continent, and to spread scriptural Holiness over these lands.” Although early Methodists were little involved in political activities, they did offer a radical critique of some prevailing practices of the society, notably slavery. The slavery issue, however, is also an example of how this reformist attitude tended to moderate, even dissipate, in time. Retreat from the antislavery stance began early and continued through the secession of the Wesleyan Methodists and the schism into northern and southern churches in the
1840s. In the last decades of the nineteenth century, Methodism both North and South was identified with the dominant practices and values of the secular culture. The missional impulse expressed itself in efforts to reform specific evils of society—notably the use of beverage alcohol—and to spread Christianity to “heathen” lands. These efforts represented superficial tinkering rather than fundamental renovation of the society in accord with the demands of the gospel.

It is frequently asserted that Methodists became involved in the social gospel movement quite late—not until the early twentieth century. This, however, is true only if one looks exclusively at the activities of men in the church. Methodist women, both North and South, were widely and ardently involved in social justice ministries by at least the 1880s. Salient examples are the deaconess movement, home and foreign missionary societies, and Methodist leadership in the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union. The work of these women evidenced not only desire to win persons to Christ and to alleviate suffering but also radical goals of revolutionizing society. As Frances Willard admitted in her autobiography, *Glimpses of Fifty Years*:

"Under the mold of conservative action, I have been most radical in thought." Even the very act of mobilizing women to work together in these efforts at reform was a liberating and empowering thing. Willard exclaimed in the recognition of this truth: "The great power of organization is that it brings women out; it translates them from the passive to the active voice; the dear, modest, clinging things didn't think they could do anything and lo and behold, they found they could.” African-Americans, both men and women, were also striving to effectuate major changes in America which would result in a more just, more Christian society.

It was, not surprisingly, the repressed groups in the society which recognized and acted upon the liberating power of Christian baptism, even if they did not explicitly acknowledge it as their source. Baptism is rightly understood as a political act—a transfer of ultimate allegiance, an acceptance of new lordship. Owners suspicious of the loyalty of their slaves and patriarchs concerned about the submissiveness of their women had long been aware of this. Baptism is a basis of empowerment for every individual, a strong symbol of the unique worth of every person. Christians receive identity and purpose as co-workers with God in the work of redeeming the world. Baptism is commissioning, even ordination, for the ministry to which all Christians are called. This ministry involves proclaiming and
actualizing the good news of liberation from the forces which bind human beings in spiritual, psychological, economic, social, political, and physical oppression. The second question addressed to candidates for baptism in the current United Methodist ritual expresses this aspect of the sacrament: “Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves?” Baptism is to function as an awakening of conscience and an empowerment which propels Christians into the arena of Christ’s struggle to answer the cries of suffering humanity.

Eschatology

Christianity has a linear view which understands history to have begun with a divine act and to be moving toward a culmination of the divine purpose. In the event of Jesus Christ, God’s battle with the forces of evil was decisively won. The church awaits the actualization of God’s final victory and the reign of God’s will as supreme over all. This Realm of God will be characterized by relationships of love—by eternal freedom, community, peace, and justice. While only divine power is sufficient to accomplish this end, baptized Christians are called to participate in the active labor of bringing this reality into concrete existence.

While there has been some apocalyptic strain in American Methodism, it has remained muted. As Methodists grew generally more prosperous and powerful within the society, interest in the end of history greatly lessened. The missionary vision of world evangelism and the social gospel effort to reform the nation operated largely upon the assumption that human endeavor would be sufficient to build the Realm of God on earth. Eschatological interest seems to have ceased with the failure of these grandiose goals. The eschatological note is very faint, even silent, in contemporary United Methodism.

It is the oppressed who must and do look for divine vindication. This is manifested in the strong apocalyptic strain in the theology of the slaves which continues in much black theology today. A profound experience of the power of evil may be required in order to grasp the necessity of divine intervention. Those who suffer yearn for the overthrowing of the systems of oppression. The emphasis in much feminist theology upon reconciliation and healing—not only with
God, but also in relation to other persons, within oneself, and with the natural world—looks toward a transformed order of existence.

Baptism is the promise that this visionary Realm of God will become reality. It incorporates persons into the community of the redeemed who dwell under the sovereignty of God and strive to fulfill God’s plan. Baptism is the earnest of a new world of freedom and the liberating empowerment to work with God toward its advent.

The Future of Baptism

Frederick Herzog has said that the contemporary church must “draw together the polluted waters of poverty with the water of baptism.”
The sacrament has in itself the essence of praxis, for it is an action as well as a belief. In the case of a baptized infant, it is an action first, an act out of which belief later comes. In baptism the saving activity of God is both portrayed and conveyed in language, in movement, and in water. The community of the baptized has experienced the good news and is sent to make it real in the lives of the poor. Contemporary Christianity is too often split between those who urge evangelical conversion and those who tout social action. Primitive Christianity and primitive Methodism were characterized by insistence upon both.

Perhaps pervasive lack of appreciation for baptism and widespread lack of concern for “the poor” are somehow linked in American Methodism. They may be linked not as cause and effect but as concomitants of the same underlying weakness: too much stress upon individualism and human capability, too little emphasis upon faithful community and divine grace. If so, renewal might come through recovery of the authentic significance and power of baptism so that the church might proclaim the good news of liberation to all persons.
Debra Dean Murphy

Bread, Wine, and the “Pledge of Heaven”: A (Wesleyan) Feminist Perspective on Eucharist and Eschatology

Feminists, historically, have had little use for eschatology. Indeed, the traditional Christian doctrine of last things, of final consummation, of the dramatic culmination of all of heilsgeschichte, has been viewed with more than a little disdain for its seeming devaluation of life in this world. Moreover, the emphasis on the “spiritual” nature of heavenly existence has often served to denigrate and deny bodiliness—and feminist scholarship has well documented the historical identification of women with the body and men with the mind or spirit. Eschatology’s explicit “linear” dimension has also been criticized as a kind of imperialist view of creation and history that privileges Christianity and denies other, more cyclical or “process” accounts of nature and redemption.

Feminist treatment of the sacraments in general, and the eucharist in particular, has also demonstrated the androcentrism that has served to protect and perpetuate male privilege within the church. As Marjorie Procter-Smith has observed:

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... the sacraments have traditionally functioned to legitimate male power (by restricting sacramental or consecratory power to men), to value men's bodies as being more "like Christ" than women's (by denying or limiting women's access to ordination), to value men's will and initiative over women's (by giving men control over not only the sacraments themselves but also access to the sacraments), and to sacralize men's bonds and heritage (especially through a male celibate priesthood, but also more subtly in defining sacramental ministry as a male vocation to which women can be admitted only under carefully controlled circumstances).

Christine Gudorf, writing on the modern papacy and women, argues that the sacraments are modelled on activities from the realm of nature and are a religious attempt to "replicate functions which, in the historic division of labor, are predominantly feminine." Baptism is like birth, eucharist like women's preparation and serving of meals, anointing of the sick like women's care for the ill and dying. Priestly functions, then, are primarily feminine ones. "The sacraments," Gudorf maintains, "replicate the natural activities of women while claiming that the replications are more real, more effective, more powerful than the originals, because they are spiritual as opposed to natural." Gudorf presses her readers to recognize that "the true value of sacraments should lie not in their ability to displace the natural roles which provide their sacramental signs but in their ability to integrate the natural with the spiritual." Indeed, much of feminist scholarship has rightly been devoted to healing this perceived split between "natural" and "spiritual," between "mind" and "body," between "public" and "private," between "nature" and "culture."

Given feminist theology's generally negative assessment of Christian teachings on eucharist and eschatology, we have to ask if there is anything good that can be said on these subjects from a Christian feminist perspective? Can feminist theology even speak of a connection between eucharist and eschatology in any meaningful way?

This essay will be an attempt to answer these two questions affirmatively. By engaging Catherine Bell's account of ritual as practice and as strategy and by examining John and Charles Wesley's insights into the social, practical, and eschatological implications of Holy Communion, I will attempt to explicate an understanding of the eucharist as the central act of ecclesial life which constitutes
Christians as a radically connected, eschatological community of mutuality and solidarity—a community embodying nothing less than the divine life of the triune God. This understanding of the eucharist as communal praxis is neither a radical revision of traditional sacramental theology nor an invention de novo; rather, it points to an often neglected aspect of the church’s understanding of the holy meal.

The Sacrament as “Ritual”

What occurs when a community of Christians celebrates the eucharist, indeed when it worships, is often described broadly as “ritualistic.” Very often, particularly within Protestant circles, the term carries pejorative overtones, i.e., mere rote behavior, actions void of any real content or meaning. However, the term “ritual”—especially within the context of cultural or religious theory—is generally understood “in the descriptive sense of regular patterns of behavior invested with symbolic significance and efficacy.”

Building on the work of Clifford Geertz and others, recent critical theory in the anthropology of ritual has focused less on mechanistic or functional analysis of behavior and more on an explication of the meaning of particular human activities.

Understanding not only ritual but all cultural activity as essentially semiotic, theory has been concerned with “sorting out the structures of signification.” In regard to worship and ritual, Lawrence Hoffmann has stated the task this way: “… the study of liturgy ought first to ask how liturgical rituals encode the world for those who ritualize.”

Catherine Bell’s recent book Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice offers a highly theoretical account of ritual discourse, practice, and meaning, dealing with such topics as “the ritual body,” “ritual, belief, and ideology,” and “the power of ritualization.” I find her explication of ritual as practice and as strategy (and the attendant claims of each) useful for discussing the theological connection between eucharist and eschatology. To avoid the impasse created by understanding ritual as either a separate structural category within cultural systems or constitutive of all human activity and behavior, Bell proposes an approach that refers to

the particular circumstances and cultural strategies that generate and differentiate activities from each other. This approach, which assumes a focus on social action in general,
would then look to how and why a person acts so as to give some activities a privileged status vis-à-vis others. Rather than impose categories of what is or is not ritual, it may be more useful to look at how human activities establish and manipulate their own differentiation and purposes—in the very doing of the act within the the context of other ways of acting.

“Ritualization,” then, is “a way of acting that specifically establishes a privileged contrast, differentiating itself as more important or powerful.” I find this understanding of ritual as embodying strategy helpful in considering eucharistic practice in an eschatological way. For it is the case, I would argue, that the act of sharing the eucharistic meal together “establishes and manipulates” the meal’s own “differentiation and purposes.” It is “within the context of other ways of acting,” (i.e., not sharing, not recognizing equality) that Christians, when they celebrate the eucharist, bear witness to the fact that this sharing of bread and wine is not the way of the world; it is a sign of the inbreaking reign of God. Eucharist is, as Kenneth Leech has observed, “essentially a social act, and in our world it becomes a subversive act, an act of disaffiliation. It is the sacrament of equality in an unequal world.” To make use of Bell’s language, participating in the eucharist is a way of acting that specifically establishes such a contrast and claims for itself a primacy and a power that, I would suggest, serves to deny or negate “worldly” power and therefore refuses inequality, refuses unfair distribution, refuses radical separateness.

Bell herself mentions the Christian eucharist within her discussion of “ritualization,” marking its differentiation as a contrast to conventional eating. But I want to argue that the eucharist, viewed eschatologically, is more fundamentally distinguished not from how Christians eat but how they treat each other, indeed how Christian identity itself is constituted. The eucharistic meal embodies a strategy which proclaims that in the realm of God the body of believers is defined by its radical connectedness and by its participation in the very life of God, a strategy that consciously and deliberately subverts the dominant ethos of radical individualism in which the church lives and operates.

Here I would suggest that Geertz’s notion of ritual analysis as an explication of meaning is less appropriate for understanding eucharistic practice. For if sharing the eucharist is understood to be
constitutive of identity in a most fundamental way, then there is no “meaning” of the act separate from the act itself; participation in the eucharist does not mean the Christian community is egalitarian; it does not mean that it refuses to be exclusive; it does not mean it claims economic solidarity; it does not mean that it is corporately identified—the act itself is the very constitution of this people so defined.17

The point is that, if the sacrament of Holy Communion is understood in this way, one does not need to speak of finding a way to “make” Christianity more egalitarian, more inclusive, more sensitive to issues of economic justice, more concerned with the social nature of the church and its members. Christians are, from the beginning, egalitarian, inclusive, economically and socially interconnected. What is problematic in the arguments of many feminists who (rightly) criticize the androcentrism and patriarchy of the church is their inability to allow that such criticisms can be made from within the tradition—that these oppressive, alienating structures are contradictory to and inconsistent with other, more binding Christian claims. Equality and inclusiveness are, I am suggesting, already “built into” the system if we will consider the eucharist in this eschatological way. That the church refuses to recognize and practice such an eschatological vision is another matter.

And, of course, this refusal is characteristic of most of Christendom today. Not only do most Christians not think of the eucharist as a social (indeed political) act, but the wide variety of interpretations (mostly individualistic) of what it means to come to the Lord’s table work against achieving any kind of unity of purpose and intent. Moreover, as noted earlier, the sexism and hierarchalism inherent in most understandings of Holy Communion have served to marginalize and alienate women and other groups. But if, as I have suggested, the eschatological implications of eucharistic practice, which point us to our participation in the very reign of God, can be drawn out strategically, then maybe, from a feminist perspective, we can in fact say something positive about what it means for Christians to break bread together.

At this point we turn to the eucharistic hymns and theology of John and Charles Wesley as a place where we can see an emphasis on the Lord’s Supper as communal praxis and where some eschatological themes emerge.
The Sacrament as “The Pledge of Heaven”

Thee, King of saints, we praise
For this our living bread,
Nourish’d by Thy preserving grace,
And at Thy table fed;
Who in these lower parts
Of Thy great kingdom feast,
We feel the earnest in our hearts
Of our eternal rest.

On the surface, it seems strange that the early Methodist movement—with its itinerant ministry, its mission to the North American frontier, its reputation for evangelical fervor and heartfelt piety—would place such a high priority on the sacrament of Holy Communion. Emphasis on the eucharist, after all, was (and is) generally assumed to be associated with a preference for “high church” formality, for elaborate, ceremonial liturgies. But for John and Charles Wesley, celebration of the eucharist was central to Christian faith and practice. As John wrote in one of his sermons: "Let everyone therefore who has either any desire to please God, or any love of his [sic] own soul, obey God and consult the good of his own soul by communicating every time he can; like the first Christians with whom the Christian sacrifice was a constant part of the Lord’s day’s service."

What is equally striking in the theology and hymnody of the Wesleys is that they viewed the eucharist in an eschatological light—as a “foretaste of the heavenly banquet.” Prior theological discussion—both Protestant and Catholic—tended to focus on the notion of real presence in the eucharist and on the meaning of the eucharistic sacrifice. The hotly contested debates of the sixteenth century, especially, bear witness to the intensity of the polemics devoted to these doctrinal matters. The Wesleys do indeed treat the concepts of real presence and eucharistic sacrifice, but, unlike the earlier reformers, there is a decided emphasis on the meal’s eschatological dimension—most evident in the eucharistic hymns, collected in Hymns on the Lord’s Supper, published in 1745. While these hymns deal with the common categories of memorial, means of grace, and sacrifice, eschatology is a fundamental theme:
To heaven the mystic banquet leads;
Let us to heaven ascend;
And bear this joy upon our heads
Till it in glory end.22

The church's celebration of the Lord's Supper anticipates the final heavenly feast; it is, in the words of the Wesleys, the "pledge of heaven." It is, as Colin Williams has noted, "a pledge of the climactic banquet with Christ which there awaits us."23

One way of viewing the eschatological emphasis in the Wesleys' eucharistic theology is to see it in light of the themes we have already discussed, namely, that the eucharist constitutes a new people. Again from one of the hymns:

Saviour of life, and joy, and bliss,
Pardon and power and perfect peace
We shall herewith receive;
The grace implied through faith is given,
And we that eat the Bread of heaven
The life of heaven shall live.24

This understanding of the church as a new people, a people set apart, is pervasive in John Wesley's theology, particularly evident in his penchant for method and for discipline. For him, the Christian life was not an individualized, isolated existence but a communal way of being and way of living—a life that could be accomplished only within a context of accountable discipleship, a context which implied the mutual upbuilding of believers in their journey together from sin to holiness.25 This "social" aspect of Christianity is nowhere more evident than in Wesley's "Sermon on the Mount, IV": "I shall endeavour to show that Christianity is essentially a social religion, and that to turn it into a solitary religion is indeed to destroy it."26 And he continues: "When I say this is essentially a social religion, I mean not only that it cannot subsist so well, but that it cannot subsist at all without society, without living and conversing with other men [sic]."27

Wesley's early class meeting (a weekly meeting of persons who would exercise mutual accountability for their discipleship) was the result of Wesley's insistence that the life and faith of the believer is not a one-on-one proposition between a person and God but rather a relationship with God that could be mediated only by the gathered
community in accountability to one another. The Methodist "societies," of which the class meetings were subgroups, were for Wesley integral to the edification of the whole church. The members' intent was "to speak, each of us in order, freely and plainly the true state of our souls, with the faults we have committed in thought, word, or deed, and the temptations we have felt since our last meeting." 28

Within this context of accountable discipleship, of recognizing the radical connectedness of the body of believers, Wesley was adamant in insisting on not only frequent but "constant" communion. 29 At a time when the Anglican church was experiencing a general decline in eucharistic worship (in most parish churches there were only three celebrations a year), Wesley counters with this admonition: "Whoever therefore does not receive . . . either does not understand his [sic] duty or does not care for the dying command of his Saviour, the forgiveness of his sins, the strengthening of his soul, and the refreshing it with the hope of glory." 30

The Wesleys also understood the eschatological dimension of the eucharist within the context of the mission of the church. For it is in the context of mission—the church proclaiming and living out its message of hope and salvation—that the eucharist as eschatological event makes sense. That the church regularly celebrates Holy Communion is a sign of its belief that God through Christ has brought about a new reign, ushered in the very realm of heaven in which, at its fullest realization,

... no creature will kill or hurt or give pain to any other . . . violence shall be heard no more, neither wasting or destruction seen on the face of the earth. "The wolf shall dwell with the lamb" (the words may be literally as well as figuratively understood) "and the leopard shall lie down with the kid." They shall not hurt or destroy, from the rising up of the sun to the going down of the same. 31

Within this setting of cosmic redemption Wesley develops his ecclesial themes of accountable discipleship and participation in the eucharist as communal praxis. The invitation to join in the banquet of the Lord is extended to all—even to "sinners":

Come, to the supper, come, Sinners, there still is room; Every soul may be His guest,
Jesus gives the general word;
Share the monumental feast,
Eat the supper of your Lord.²²

The church’s mission was to proclaim the good news of the gospel, and the sharing of the Lord’s Supper was, for the Wesleys, central to that proclamation. This eschatological emphasis underscores a shift in the very understanding of the nature of the eucharist—from the idea of the sacrament as primarily an individual matter (one’s own soul communing with God) to a more communitarian focus (the community of believers in relationship to each other). A banquet, after all, is a communal celebration.

Conclusion

It is my suspicion (and personal experience) that most Christian feminists who wrestle seriously and honestly with the claims made on them by Christianity and by feminism live with a great deal of ambivalence; there is a certain tension built into a Christian feminist perspective which is not always easy to negotiate. Even when the church concedes, as it often has, that the gospel of Jesus stands opposed to sexism, racism, classism, and all forms of oppression and coercion (no matter how subtle), the lived experiences of many women and other marginalized groups render this little consolation.

For too long Christianity has failed to challenge Western culture’s dominant understanding of human personhood as radical individualism and separateness; construction of the “other” has functioned as that which legitimates one’s own integrity and self-defined boundaries. But if there is hope, it is in the church’s eschatological vision of a “new creation” which is a realm of mutuality, of connectedness, of solidarity—a place not where differences are denied but where they are understood to enhance, not threaten, genuine community; a community embodying nothing less than the divine life of the triune God.³³

But this hope must not be for the far-off, distant future whereby Christians are expected to wait passively for its advent. This hope must be actively embodied in the people who gather at the table of the Lord. In very theological terms, this hope must be made manifest in
the strategic act of breaking bread together. As Charles Wesley well knew:

By faith and hope already there,
Even now we by the Lamb are fed;
Our Lord's celestial joy we prove,
Led by the Spirit of His love,
To springs of living comfort led.34

Notes

1. Rosemary Radford Ruether, for example, notes that "[i]n recent years, feminism, the ecological movement, and a revival of the world view of native peoples have all challenged the eschatologies of both an ultimate future at or beyond the end of history and the escape of the soul from the body to Heaven." Sexton and God Told: Toward a Feminist Theology (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), 250. I am grateful to Janet Fishburn, Stanley Hauerwas, Pamela Kassen, Steve Long, and Leigh Schmidt for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this essay.

2. Sherry B. Ortner was one of the first feminists to make this connection in "Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?" in Woman, Culture and Society, ed. M. Z. Rosaldo and L. Lamphere (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974), 67-87.


4. Ibid, 306. In line with Ortner's analysis of gender, Gudorf also makes the claim that "if women are understood to be more distanced from culture of which religion is a part, and more closely tied to nature, which religion struggles to transform, it is no wonder that there is resistance to women as primary agents of religion."


7. While Gudorf's analysis is insightful, she ends up in some ways reifying the very categories whose boundaries and distinctions she is attempting to blur. She also fails to account for the way in which the category "nature"—for Christians—must be reinscribed into a new teleological order so that it becomes a theological description, not readily transparent or self-evident. My point is that the sacraments imitate the "natural" realm only after the "natural" has been defined within the church's story of God's creative and redemptive activity. I am grateful to Stanley Hauerwas for helping me see this point.


9. Geoffrey Wainwright, Doxology: The Praise of God in Worship, Doctrine, and Life (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 8. There is, however, a school of thought within ritual theory that claims that ritual is not activity which is set apart from a particular culture's body of behaviors (as Wainwright's definition would
suggest), but that all human activity is in some way ritualistic. According to British anthropologist Gilbert Lewis, most theories of ritual fall into one of these two camps, *Day of Shining Red: An Essay on Understanding Ritual* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).


11. Ibid, p. 9. In this vein, eucharistic doctrine from Augustine onward has been built on the theory of the *signum* which "conveys something else to the mind, besides the species which it impresses on the senses." Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, III, q. 60, a. 4 (New York: Benziger Brothers, Inc., 1947), 2347. Consistent with what I will be arguing, there is also in Thomas a sense in which the *res* and the *signum* are linked—a moment when the thing and that which signifies the thing cannot be separated.


13. Catherine Bell, _Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice_ (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992). Bell's treatment of ritual is highly theoretical and systematized and thus may seem an odd choice for explicating a theological argument concerning the eschatological dimension of the Christian eucharist. However, as I hope to show, Bell's analysis, with its emphasis on ritual as practice and as strategy, is quite helpful in understanding eucharist and eschatology from the kind of feminist perspective being developed here. It also provides a useful methodological framework for understanding Wesleyan eucharistic theology in these "practical" and "strategic" terms.


15. Bell, 90.


17. John Howard Yoder labels this separation of act and meaning a "rationalistic" or "Zwinglian" understanding of symbol. He writes, "In this [rationalistic] frame of reference one can say (although no one did for a long time) that breaking bread together means economic solidarity, so that forms of social life which transcend individualism and share with larger communities are preferable to those which name as agents only independent individuals. But the derivation is an intellectual operation, arbitrary and unaccountable. This we might call the 'zwinglian' way of access to an economic meaning of the Eucharist." "Sacrament as Social Process: Christ the Transformer of Culture" in _Theology Today_, vol. 48 (April 1991): 36.


20. I do not mean to imply that this eschatological theme is entirely absent in eucharistic theology prior to the eighteenth century. Indeed, I think one can argue that in figures as diverse as Thomas Aquinas and John Calvin there is, to some degree, an
eschatological dimension to their views on the eucharist. Although, it is also arguable that theirs is an "individualized" eschatology (the idea of the individual person communing with Christ)—an idea quite different from what I am exploring here.

21. Leigh E. Schmidt has shown how these communal, eschatological themes are present in the eucharistic piety of 16th- and 17th-century Scottish Presbyterians, particularly evident in the way in which they celebrated the eucharist: sitting around large, adjoining tables (as opposed to kneeling) and dividing the elements among themselves (instead of "receiving" them from the minister). "The long, connected tables on earth were extensions of that great table in heaven. The community of saints in the world was linked through the sacrament to a perfect community... Such an eschatological vision of the interrelatedness of their ritual acts with those of the saints in heaven gave an ultimate focus to the communal actions of the Lord's Supper." *Holy Fairs: Scottish Communions and American Revivals in the Early Modern Period* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 101.


24. Hymn no. 56, Rattenbury, 212.

25. Of course, feminists and “postmodernists” generally are suspicious of the term “discipline” with its connotations of hegemonic and coercive power structures (cf. Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish*, New York: Vintage Books, 1979). But, as D. Stephen Long has rightly pointed out, “The theology of discipline that we must incorporate into our ecclesial life should not seek to internalize a hegemonic power; rather, it should offer a “counter-discipline” to the disciplining into Western civilization that our church presently offers.” D. Stephen Long, *Living the Discipline: United Methodist Theological Reflections on War, Civilization, and Holiness* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992), 14.


27. Ibid., 534.

28. John Wesley, “Rules of the Band Societies” in *The Works of John Wesley*, ed., Rupert E. Davies (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 77. It is worth noting that the class meetings emerged out of Susanna Wesley’s kitchen meetings, reminding us that Wesley’s vision of communal discipleship had its origins in the practical, day-to-day activities of maintaining a household. The baking of bread in these kitchens is also a compelling image in relation to the bread of the eucharist. I am grateful to Steve Long for reminding me of this point.

29. I do not find Wesley anywhere making a direct link between his idea of mutual accountability and the “duty of constant communion,” but it does not seem to me to be an illegitimate reading of Wesley to make such a connection.

30. Ibid., 429.


32. Hymn no. 8, Rattenbury, 197.


34. Hymn no. 93, Rattenbury, 225, emphasis mine.
Can We Talk about the Trinity?

Trinity talk is back—have you noticed? For theology in the twentieth century, in fact, interest in the doctrine of Trinity has reached unprecedented heights. The momentum began a generation ago with the work of European giants, the two Karls—Barth and Rahner—who derive the concept not from abstruse speculation but from God’s relatedness to the world, the revelation in Christ. Interest in the theme has been increasing ever since. By now one has only to scan the publisher’s lists, for example, or the titles of recent articles in this and other journals to see how widely the Trinity is now discussed. The angels must smile at the irony. A doctrine formerly downplayed or sometimes even jettisoned by the church in its scramble to win recognition from modernity has reemerged, now construed as a time-tested response to questions both new and old.

Yet how much of this excitement has touched those who sit in the pews on Sunday morning? Have any ripples from this new ground-swell reached the local church? I find little evidence that it has. And if my surmise is correct, this marks a disturbing state of affairs. For Christian doctrine belongs in the congregation; it is not merely the private preserve of church authorities or the training ground for theological gymnasts.

Historically, doctrine has been the codification of those essential symbols and affirmations that are the lifeblood of the church. Without

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reference to this resource and guide, together with the Scriptures which undergird it, gatherings of Christians can only take on the coloration of the myriad of other voluntary associations sprouting up everywhere. To be sure, individual scholars or spokespersons may momentarily chart an advance or lead a recovery of theological treasures. But in the long run the health of theology requires congregational participation—and vice versa. Ordinary people, hearing the Word preached and responding in words of service, must grapple anew with the implications for their immediate circumstances and then return to the worshipping assembly to realign their insights. It is out of this unending cycle that faith is revivified. Doctrine, rightly understood, is the catalyst across the miles and the generations that helps this to happen.

We have reason for concern, therefore, if the symbolic power of trinitarian faith has been rediscovered by the professionals but not the laypeople. What are the obstacles? Certainly a major one is that our common language for the Trinity has reached an impasse: how shall we address the three-in-one God? The issue of gender language has become affixed to any and all contemporary attempts to reflect on the persons of the divine triunity. And there are good reasons why this is so. But if for theologians, both feminists and traditionalists, this aspect of the trinitarian mystery crowds out all others, it is no wonder that laity see little else at stake in Trinity talk beyond the challenge of inclusive language.

It is of course important that feminist theology has posed this problem of language. We can never go back to our older complacency, supposing that androcentric words are normative. By unmasking millennia of patriarchal bias and its taint at every level of church life, feminist theologians make possible the reappropriation of the wholeness God offers. But from this challenge, as we know, fierce controversy has erupted. Some theologians maintain that Father/Son/Holy Spirit, as the proper names which alone define the one true God, are absolutely essential and irreplaceable (Robert Jenson), and furthermore insist that God "likes his name" (Alvin Kimel). Others treat the three terms as time-conditioned metaphors which are fully negotiable into modern currency, such as Mother, Lover, Friend (Sallie McFague). And many voices offer mediating positions of nonsexist or inclusive terms, either as supplements or replacements to the traditional language.

Interested readers can trace the outlines of the debate elsewhere. In
any case, I am convinced that the feminist challenge must be squarely faced. My point, however, is a different one: the cascade of uncertain consequences about gender language ought not continue to paralyze congregations in thinking about the Trinity.

Nor do I harbor any illusions in this brief article of adding substance to the theologians’ current discussions on the Trinity. It is my purpose, rather, to enable others to join that discussion—namely, the laity. And that cannot happen until we broaden the base, inviting in those who sit in the pews and pay for the roof over our heads. Let us seek ways of reinvigorating the struggles of laypeople to reflect on the triune God. Theology, after all, is for the whole church, and it will be enriched when we can begin to clear away obstacles for church members to speak the Name again, in prayer, praise, and reflection.

The necessary step must be taken by local church leaders. Together we must work towards some gender-inclusive refinement in trinitarian language which can be broadly acceptable and widely used on Sunday mornings. Then at last the whole people of God can again incorporate the triune God in their spirituality. To forward this process, therefore, I offer a suggestion for modest revision of our terminology in Christian education and in public worship. Let us address the persons of the Trinity as “Father/Mother,” “One,” and “Holy Spirit.” And let us do so for, say, six months—so that the experiment continues long enough to test its acceptability. If this proposal be found inadequate, then at any rate let it prompt others to step forward with superior ones. But let the negotiations with our people begin!

Guidelines

First of all, it seems to me that whatever substitutes we choose for the traditional masculine terms for members of the Trinity should attend to three criteria.

1. **Concretion:** trinitarian language should be rooted deeply in human experience. Revisionists today often propose to substitute for Father and Son such broadly functional titles as “creator” and “redeemer.” These are unsatisfactory for at least two reasons. First, because they overlook the dynamic exchange of functions within the triune God (historically called **perichoresis**, the interpenetration of the divine persons within the so-called immanent Trinity). And secondly, because as abstract nouns they simply cannot replace...
adequately the most basic referent we know: the personal language of human relationships. For that, we must turn to biblical imagery and familial metaphors which offer both the necessary flexibility and the most direct analogies to the mystery of the divine identity.

2. **Affect:** in seeking a substitute title for Father or Son, it is as least as important to reproduce the word’s connotations as it is its denotations (however these are presently perceived). How can we replicate today the affect most likely experienced earlier, in the world of the first century? While the word “father” has been patriarchal, always burdened with hierarchical meaning, its undeniable strength was emotional warmth. But that same affect is no longer easily transmitted in a society complicated by varieties of family structures and convulsed by modern forms of alienation. For many modern believers the experiential base has shifted, even disintegrated. So today we need an expanded base, yet without sacrificing a concretion that satisfies.

3. **Ease of liturgical usage:** a revised term should be as unobtrusive as possible, directing attention instead to its referent. That is no easy task. In the case of existing prayer and hymnody it means some effort to retain the same meter and accentuation as is found in the original. The best substitutes will flow smoothly in their context, without disrupting the rhythm of the corporate word in worship.

To my knowledge, no modified language of Trinity meets fully these three guidelines. But let us examine to what extent my proposal may pass muster.

For the first person of the Trinity, some have suggested the gender-free word “parent.” This two-syllable word would be simple and would best satisfy the third guideline—but at great cost (in my opinion) to concretion and affect. Others have suggested various neologisms, but such experiments turn out to be distracting and are rarely suitable for a people at worship. The NCC Inclusive Language Lectionary charts a better course; it retains yet balances the gender references by addressing God as “Father and Mother.” But I would go further; why not shorten this to “Father/Mother”? Admittedly this is quite awkward liturgically, pushing us to slur four syllables rapidly to keep in cadence with the congregation. Unquestionably that runs afoul of the third criterion, but I believe it does score high with the other two. In an age of single-parent or dysfunctional families, the double noun can reach the heart of anyone fortunate enough to have grown up bonding with either parent. True, a
vast majority of single-parent families today are headed by women, and some church members find attractive the feminist suggestion of God as Mother. And there is strong biblical precedence for viewing God through the metaphor of mother as well as other feminine personifications or attributes (see the writings of Virginia Mollencott, especially The Divine Feminine: the Biblical Imagery of God as Female). But on the other hand the double noun could well have a double advantage: it may avoid offending some of the churchfolk scandalized by a simple substitution of maternal for paternal language, while retaining resonance with those hearers whose primary childhood bond was with the father. After all, why must we choose one parent over the other? The address “Father/Mother” can broaden an experiential base to the maximum, without losing the unsurpassed symbolic power of the earlier “Father.”

For the second person of the Trinity, God’s self-giving in incarnation, I propose using One. Its obvious strength is that it best matches the concluding criterion, ease of liturgical usage. It is a single syllable and homophonic to “Son”; only the initial consonant is dropped. Polysyllables would be awkward at best. Some (such as the circumlocution “offspring”) are distant and sterile. Other polysyllables such as “Jesus” are theologically incomplete, since the Galilean person existed only after his Palestinian birth and under its constraints. The monosyllable “Christ,” of course, is a possible alternate, but as derived from the functional title Messiah it is not bound to the Godself prior to Jesus’ earthly life and mission. Strong arguments exist for the Johannine monosyllable “Word,” admittedly; nonetheless I prefer the suggestion of “One.”

To be sure, this gender-free term is austere. It lacks the concretion and affect of a word drawn from family life, and has no apparent filial relation to God. By itself it harkens back to primal being, in the mystic tradition of Plotinus or the earlier philosophies of Plato and his predecessors. To avoid such associations, we should clearly explain to our people that a mental proviso is necessary in using the term. Although unspoken, there should be an implicit adjective qualifying the word—i.e., the “incarnate One,” the “crucified One” (see 1 Cor. 1:23), the “risen One,” or the “One who is to come” (Rev. 1:4, 8; see Rom 5:14, Heb. 10:37). In this way the gospel story is kept as the unmistakable referent for this stark syllable.

On the other hand, even the unadorned syllable “One” is certainly biblical. It conveys the singularity of the “only begotten” modifier
often attached to Son in the text (John 1:13, 18; 3:16f; Heb. 11:17; 1 Jn 4:9), as well as evoking the solemn mystery with which believers hailed the unutterable Tetragrammaton and later the risen Lord. Moreover it would underline an affirmation of particular importance to the modern age: the Christological concentration of most (some would say all) of our knowledge of God through the singular revelation in Jesus. In contrast to a myriad of popular claims to define ultimate reality, from totalitarianism to New Age eclecticism, Christians confess that Jesus Christ is the incarnate one through whom we know God to be God. All other assertions of depicting what is really Real must bow to this claim. If this referent for “One” can be kept in mind by the congregation, uttering the unadorned syllable would become a profound act of worship.

What then about the third person of the Trinity? I propose here no alteration because the Holy Spirit has been less affected by modern controversy. So perhaps it is wise to retain the phrase unchanged. However there are a couple of minor problems. We inherit not one, but two words—Ghost and Spirit—derived from German and Latin respectively. The former is a monosyllable venerable in our liturgical heritage, and the Doxology and many hymn texts continue to require it. But otherwise, whenever possible metrically, the two-syllable “Spirit” is preferable, less likely to mislead untutored minds towards Halloween haunts and fantasies. A second problem remains, however; even the word spirit may seem archaic. How many people nowadays can appreciate what the term meant in yesteryear? If either of these problems are deemed significant, one solution would be to replace Spirit with the monosyllable “Life.” Early church expositions of the doctrine of Trinity, searching for ways of distinguishing the third person from the other two, often stated that the Spirit is the life that binds and flows forth from Father and Son, vivifying the creation and the people of God. Modern interpreters from Carl Jung to Jurgen Moltmann (see his recent The Spirit of Life) have restated the same point. “Life” is widely understood today to mean the all-embracing essence of vitality, which offers a firm point of contact with what Christian tradition has meant by Holy Spirit. So “Holy Life” could be considered as an alternate form of address.

This then is my proposal. But questions remain. Is such a revised formula, “Father/Mother, One, and Holy Spirit [or Life],” sufficiently true to the original? And, if it be so, does that imply the average church on Main Street could adjust to its usage? No final answer to
such questions can be predicted. Since there are no terms, ancient or modern, that can satisfactorily name the triune mystery of God's identity, every alternative must involve a semantic tradeoff. Augustine, the past master of this unavoidable round of musical chairs, kept it in perspective; he cautioned that human language remains inadequate and so we speak of three persons only in order not to remain silent (De Trinitate, V. 9.10).

But that is our dilemma. Sunday by Sunday, as the people of God we encounter both the distinctive Word and the needs of the world. And we dare not remain silent. Yet neither can our naming of the triune God continue to ignore those cultural factors converging to obscure what the triune formula once intended. So let us take our speaking seriously. That means we must discuss with each other our Trinity talk. Let us begin a forum in which others are welcomed—those others who in the midst of far-flung congregations at worship, prayer, and learning have themselves struggled to find words adequate for the triune God.
Luke has long been a favorite Gospel. I grew up listening to a preacher who presented him as the warmest, most humane, and most inclusive of the evangelists. So you can imagine my initial resistance when I read Jane Schaberg’s assessment:

*The Gospel of Luke is an extremely dangerous text, perhaps the most dangerous in the Bible... Even as the Gospel highlights women as included among the followers of Jesus... it deftly portrays them as models of subordinate service, excluded from the power center of the movement and from significant responsibilities.*

My immediate reaction was to start defending Luke. But as I considered Jane Schaberg’s close reading of the biblical text, her attentiveness to how few women there are compared to the number of men, and the stereotypical roles women fill, she convinced me that in many ways I had been fooled by Luke’s artistry. The man, in fact, is promulgating a version of the Gospel that is less liberating than I had previously thought.

The way I responded to Jane Schaberg, defensiveness that later gives way to agreement, is a pattern common to many Christians when...
they encounter a critical judgment of their beloved tradition. As one who was raised from earliest childhood in awe of the Bible, I understand the depth of resistance that can be awakened when someone names the limitations and distortions of what believers were taught is the articulation of truth itself.

But now, living in a time when we see how every writer in every age is shaped by culture, we find our earlier interpretations to be simplistic. Instead of a naive acceptance of the text, we struggle to disentangle what is redemptive from what is oppressive. Jane Schaberg describes the pattern of such interpretation this way:

> Once the negative side of this ambivalent tradition is recognized and worked with, the reader is freed in relation to the text. What is positive and promising in Luke’s Gospel can be explored with enthusiasm and even respect. Reading with new eyes against Luke’s intent may bring to light egalitarian traditions preserved in the sources of the Gospel...?

Schaberg’s hermeneutic shows a biblical scholar participating in the theological task that is rightfully consuming the energies of the church as it moves toward the twenty-first century: how are we to draw upon all that is best in our traditions while purifying them of oppressive elements and responding to the new winds of the Spirit blowing where the Spirit will?

We, of course, are not the first generation of believers to face such a question. When we reinterpret the tradition in light of our peculiar time, we are continuing a process in which Luke himself was engaged. Like Luke, we have our own blinders. Future generations will look back and offer their critique of our distortions and limitations while they indulge in their own.

The ceaseless process of reinterpretation is often threatening to those of a textually centered persuasion. Consider the reaction of Jesus’ hometown congregation when he draws disturbing implications from the ancient stories of the widow at Zarephath and Naaman the Syrian. Jesus’ listeners take him up a hill to throw him over a cliff.

**Warning:** reinterpretation can endanger your life and ministry.

But such a threat did not stop Jesus, and if we would be faithful to Christ and to the ever living and creating Spirit, that threat must not stop us. How can we carry on the interpretation that Jane Schaberg’s insights suggest, how can we begin “reading with new eyes against
Luke’s intent” in order to “bring to light egalitarian traditions preserved in the sources of the Gospel?” One way is to do what Schaberg does so well: a close analysis of the text itself. Exegetical methods alone, however, will never be adequate to suggest the richness of the women’s experienced reality which Luke either ignores or diminishes. That also requires imagination, a willingness to dream and to consider unrecorded possibilities about the past, to play with questions that are evoked by juxtapositions, surprises, hints, and notable absences in the text.

We read the text this way remembering that in the early church there were people who never wanted the gospel reduced to text. They wanted to continue the living oral tradition and were fearful of what might happen once that vital good news was recorded in writing. Now, after centuries of debate about biblical interpretation and the vicious and ungodly wars that have often flowed from such debate, it is time to acknowledge the wisdom of those who wanted to maintain the oral tradition. It is time to recapture something of those fluid realities that never were fixed upon the page, including the ignored, suppressed, and diminished experience of the women. As Margaret Miles has observed, texts have usually been the creation of those who are in control of language, which in turn is a function of their status and power.1 What they write tends to reflect their privileged position, and through most of history they have been men.

Therefore, as part of this article I am going to imagine a documentary that corrects Luke. The interviewees are the women to whom Christ first appeared after the resurrection. In this section of the documentary they concentrate on the passages that follow Epiphany in Year C:

Luke 4:14-21
Luke 6:17-26
(Luke 6:39-49 is optional)

The documentary sounds like the oral histories that were gathered from ex-slaves, mine workers, and other dispossessed persons during the depression of the 1930s. I once heard some of these histories on a public broadcasting station. They were played by a historian who was doing research for a book. The recorded quality was poor and scratchy, as if the microphone had been a tin can.
In the documentary that follows, the women sometimes offer a different version or perspective on the same event, but this is a community of women who share a remarkable group memory of things that were left out. Sometimes their voices sound bitter; but often the tone is sad, as if Luke, faced with an opportunity to tell the vital role that women played in Jesus’ ministry, did not dare do it for fear that the men in the movement, and perhaps even the Roman authorities, would create problems if the women received the full recognition due them.

If the idea of an imagined documentary seems farfetched, the reader should remember two things: first, that Luke himself used some very creative methods to put together his Gospel, including the way he drew upon the songs of the community of the poor and legends about Jesus’ birth to open his account. Secondly, we undertake this exercise in hopes that it will help us to claim afresh “what is positive and promising in Luke’s Gospel.”

The very act of trying to imagine such a documentary has forced me to pay close attention to the text. For when people have been left out of a story in which they had an important part, they are alert to all kinds of details that escape the notice of readers and hearers who assume they know it already. Think of some newsworthy event that you witnessed in real life. When you read about it in the paper or saw it on television, you were aware of all the things that had been left out, the nuance and perspective that no one reporter could ever capture.

Thus, the act of imagining voices Luke ignored becomes a method of listening to the text more closely, to the echoes of the situation from which it arose, and to the selective judgments that Luke made in recording a complex movement of women and men responding to Christ and the Spirit.

The act of imagining makes us aware that the methods of conventional biblical interpretation as shaped by the lectionary are themselves a species of imaginative construction. That seemingly innocent list of lections with their precise numbers and sequence sets up in us a peculiar understanding of scripture, as if it were a shopping catalogue for the assembly of sermons:

Luke 4:14-21
Luke 6:17-26
(Luke 6:39-49 is optional)
What happens to our interpretive process if, instead of listing these individual lections, we observe that over the next five weeks we will read the following portion of the Gospel: Luke 4:14–6:49? The entire process of sermon creation is transformed. Instead of being pericope based, we find ourselves attending to a longer narrative line, to recurring themes, to juxtapositions of one kind of material with another, to the sudden shifts and starts in the text. We realize that the lectionary’s division of the text is itself an interpretive act, having its own strengths but also the great weakness of implying that Luke is a collection of discrete lessons rather than the complex narrative that it is.6

When we consider this substantial block of Luke, we can begin to see threads that elude us when we read only the assigned pericopes week by week. For example, we fail to note the following recurring motifs because they are woven through a larger fabric of the text than the small swatches cut out by the lectionary:
—reports about Jesus spreading quickly (4:14, 37; 5:15)
—the issue of how Jesus is received, sometimes positively, sometimes negatively, sometimes simply with amazement, sometimes in supplication, sometimes with belief (4:15, 22, 28, 32, 34, 40, 41, 42; 5:1, 5, 8, 11, 12, 21, 26, 28; 6:11)
—exorcism of demons, healing of sin, disease or physical limitation (4:35, 39; 5:13, 17, 25, 31; 6:18, 19)
—The place of women at key points in the story, often most obvious by Luke’s notable failure to mention them or to move beyond the briefest phrase about them. For example, what role did women have in bringing Jesus up (4:16)? How did wives, mothers, daughters and sisters react to the men leaving home to follow Jesus (5:11, 28; 6:13-16)? Did they protest, did they support them, did they go along, too? Surely there was some reaction. Luke will later name women who “provided for them out of their means” (8:3). These women must have had some understanding, some commitment to the movement that stirred their generosity. Was it because Jesus called them, too; but Luke plays that down?

Luke does record the healing of Simon’s mother-in-law from a high fever and that afterwards “immediately she rose and served them” (4:39). But did she also listen to the teaching and become a disciple?
—Jesus’ keeping the sabbath and/or challenging certain understandings of the sabbath (4:16, 31; 6:1, 5, 6, 9).
—Jesus praying alone (4:42; 5:16).
—Jesus preaching in synagogues (4:15, 16, 44).
—And there are other themes, too. My list is merely a way of inciting you to return to the text, to read it again and again looking for connections and questions that will never arise by reading it piecemeal.

As we listen to these themes, the narrative begins to sound more like conversation, the remembrance of a group in which stories ebb and flow. One partner in the conversation takes up where another left off; still another returns to an earlier topic. And as we hear these different voices, we arrive at a closer feeling for the oral traditions that Luke and his sources drew upon.

We also begin to hear striking juxtapositions that are often lost because of the arbitrary division of the Gospel into lections. For example, our longer stretch of reading reveals an interesting repeated pattern in 5:15-16 and 6:12. In both sections Jesus withdraws to pray and then returns to action. Notice that 5:15-16 is not part of the assigned lections although it comes within this portion of Luke’s narrative. Eliminating it eliminates Luke’s repeated pattern of withdrawal to pray followed by ministry to others. This textual detail is no small matter. It has consequences for our understanding or misunderstanding of ministry as portrayed by Luke. Without this awareness we may skip from pericope to pericope, giving the impression that Jesus is always on the go, always responding to every human need when he is not. In the face of massive human need (5:15), he withdraws to pray (5:16). We truncate our understanding of Jesus’ healing powers as portrayed by Luke if we lose sight of this repeated thread in the text.

Or take the dramatic juxtaposition of Luke 4:44 and 5:1 that gets lost in the lectionary. In the one verse Jesus is teaching “in the synagogues of Judea”; and in the very next verse he is teaching “by the lake of Gennesaret,” where he soon is sitting in the boat of fishermen who earn their livelihood from such boats. The extreme compression here of synagogue, lakeshore, and commercial setting gives us a striking insight into the word that Jesus is bringing. It is meant for every domain of life: religion, nature, commerce.

Seeking out repeated patterns and juxtapositions which the lectionary ignores could result in a revitalization of your preaching. Such an approach requires a close attention to Luke’s larger structure and insight, something not available by concentrating only on one lection at a time.

This more holistic approach to Luke, or any other biblical writer,
does not mean that you should give up the use of the lectionary. You can still read the appointed lessons for the day, but explain to your congregation that you are going to be unbraiding a rope of stories and themes over the next few weeks. Although you are reading the lections, you will be looking backward and forward to see the complex interweaving of different actions and motifs in the ministry of Jesus.

I never saw these motifs and patterns so clearly until I first listened to the voices of the women correcting Luke on my imagined tape of oral history. It was the women who brought these things to my attention. I have a hunch some preachers and scholars will rest easy with the close attention I have paid to Luke's text but will be disquieted with the women's voices. It is important, however, to remember that it is the conscious cultivation of the imaginative process, particularly in the service of hearing those whom Luke has ignored or slighted, that returns us to the text itself and reminds us that all that was vital and true about the early church is not recorded in the text. Such a reminder saves us from idolizing the text, from granting divine authority to the limitations and distortions recorded by the male writer.

That is enough of my ruminations on what the women told me. I suppose I presented these reflections first because I feared that if I simply gave you the transcript of the tape from the start you might dismiss the whole project out of hand as too subjective, too fanciful. You might never consider the subjectivity and fancifulness that are involved even in the most so-called objective scholarship, the fact that all words and interpretations are products of the gray cells of the mind running their computations on electrical cranial juice, the fact that all knowing is a form of imaginative work.

I find the women much more lively and incisive than my abstract distillations. Their conversation comes so much closer to the spirit of a living community that it strikes me as a necessary complement to well-reasoned textual analysis. Without such imaginative work we may forget the elusive, living reality of the gospel as discussed and lived in a community.

When the remembrances of the women are transcribed to the page of this journal, the text does not look or read like normal prose. It comes out line by line, broken sentences and exclamations, extra spaces indicating a new speaker, with the biblical passage inserted in parentheses. Here is what the women said after reviewing Luke's
work, drawing on the whole thing but giving special attention to Luke 4:14-6:49:

Didn’t surprise a one of us, the way Luke wrote things down, leaving us out most the time. He got it right one place though: Easter. Christ appeared to us first.

A lot of good it did. Not one man believed us. They were always discounting us. Even before the resurrection. For instance, take the story of Jesus starting out his ministry. (4:14-21 and 21-30) To be fair to Luke, the way the lectionary divides it makes no sense at all, stopping the whole drama of the thing right before it turns nasty, as if folks coming a week later are going to remember what turned some of those men into a mob.

That’s true, but Luke himself does his own distorting, and that’s why it’s so hard to understand how fast they turn on Jesus. Luke says, “A report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.” (4:14, 15) Jesus was never praised by everyone. For one thing, people resented the way he welcomed us women. A report doesn’t spread through all the surrounding county when you act like everyone expects. We women did as much as anyone to spread the news about Jesus Christ.

You bet we did. I remember one day coming back from the well. Aaron was always accusing me and the other women of wasting our time in gossip there—gossip just being a husband’s typical way of putting down women’s talk that men can’t control. Yet Aaron was always curious about what news I’d picked up. I know I was the first one told him about Jesus. I didn’t say right away that I heard how women were welcome. Couldn’t risk Aaron’s anger about that. From the day we married, he was always clear about a woman’s place.

But both you and Aaron went out to hear Jesus. Right?

Yes. But it was only because we women all made sure the news was heard. We weren’t going to let this thing go ignored: a man welcoming women in public, talking with them, teaching them, treating them with respect. And at the same time knowing the tradition well enough to turn it against those who used the tradition to attack him and what he was doing.
He even featured a woman as one of his main illustrations in a sermon to his home congregation. The widow at Zarephath. [4:26-27]

And there was another woman in the sermon, too.

There was?

Yes, Luke misses her but she was there. When Jesus told the story about Naaman the Syrian leper, he told how it was an unnamed maid of Israel who got the whole thing started, alerting Naaman's wife to the possibilities of healing. (2 Kings 5:2-3)

That was typical of Jesus' preaching: bringing out of the tradition the people who never got any attention, the women, the forgotten ones who were faithful to God but ignored by the world and by those who prided themselves on their religion.

Too bad Luke didn't follow Jesus' example, especially in remembering the women, when he wrote his Gospel. Where the women made the biggest contributions Luke reverts to general phrases like "a report concerning him went out through all the surrounding country." Sounds like Caesar sent out a proclamation by his couriers. No way! It was us women who made sure the news spread. We talked it up at the wells and the markets. The gospel was gossip before Luke ever dipped his pen in the ink. Luke knew how important we women were to the movement, But he never put it down on paper.

That's why I was against writing it out in the first place. I knew it would create the illusion that the gospel is print instead of a story in your heart you have to tell for the love of it.

Maybe Luke was scared what would happen if he kept us upfront in the story. There were a few things he simply couldn't hide: like our supporting the movement from our own accounts or that we women were the first to know of the resurrection.

No keeping that a secret!

Right. Everyone knew. But the other stuff: our part in seeing that the news got around and Jesus' full acceptance of us. Luke knew that was dangerous stuff. He was no fool. He saw what happened to Jesus himself—nearly thrown off that cliff.

Oh, that mob scene was scary business. Mean. Vicious. Those men turning against Jesus after he preached on women as heroines of the faith.
And once again Luke leaves us women out at the most crucial moment. All those furious men shouting, "Throw him over, throw him over, throw him over!" But us women pulling at our husband's arms, shushing the teenagers who got caught up in the perverse thrill of it, cooling it down enough that Jesus could turn and walk away. Luke writes as if it were all a simple matter of Jesus himself, but anyone ever caught up in a mob scene knows that isn't realistic. No one person, least of all the victim, can stop it. It takes a lot of cooler heads working all together through the crowd. Jesus was saved by women. If only it had worked at his trial.

It couldn't have. Not with Rome involved. Not with a mob that big. You got to remember when he was in his hometown at least there were all of those who knew him personally, especially us women who used to look after one another's little ones and who on that day kept reminding folks this was Mary's and Joseph's son.

Luke says only "Joseph's son."


Typical of men generally. But of course we women would always say to one another, "How's your little one doing?" They were our babies. Jesus, too.

Well, at any rate, we got that mob calmed down. Jesus was shaken. The man's knees were shaking when he walked away from that cliff. After all, he was as human as any of us, and when a crowd nearly throws you over a cliff, you don't forget it. But Luke makes him out like some hero, picturing him walking away like it was not that big a deal, escaping by the skin of his teeth. We women would never have followed some man who was casual about nearly being killed by a mob. That kind of man wouldn't have any feeling for all the victims or near victims of violence. Seeing Jesus shaken confirmed our belief in him; he knows how frightening violence is.

A few weeks after the mob scene we heard through the grapevine he was doing well. He had been to Capernaum and impressed people there with an exorcism in the synagogue. But Luke gives that more play than we would. What cheered us was hearing Simon's mother-in-law, Rachel—why can't Luke remember our names? He's always writing down the men's—that Rachel had not only been healed by Jesus but welcomed with all the men to join in their conversation;
and she had gone next door to get her neighbors, Sarah and Michal; and as they were coming over they told others so that by the time evening came the whole block was filled with people bringing the sick and the demon-possessed. (4:38-41)

That's pretty much how it was everywhere he went.

Yeah, but from the way Luke writes you'd think it was just one day when Jesus taught from the boat because the crowd was so thick. (5:1ff.) At first those fishermen didn't pay any attention. They let him use their boat for a pulpit because they were "washing their nets."

Every-day washing their nets. Not particularly paying attention. Just eavesdropping on the gospel which their wives and women friends already had accepted. Those men didn't show much interest until it turns out Jesus was a better fisherman than the lot of them. Then Luke pictures them, poop like that, taking off to follow him. As if we women hadn't already been following him, saving his neck on the crown of that cliff, making sure the word spread, serving him meals which we didn't begrudge him since he returned the hospitality in the way he accepted us as good as the men. But Luke doesn't get this all down. Instead, he puts the focus on some fishermen who were washing nets while we already had made a commitment to Jesus and the movement.

Even Simon's confession—"Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord"—came some time after his mother-in-law, Rachel, was healed by Jesus. Simon's sin was resisting his wife, Orpha, and her mother when the two of them were encouraging him to believe in Jesus. But you know Simon. Mind of his own. Stubborn. Impetuous. Always one extreme or the other. He was not going to listen to women about religion, he said. Only when that boat filled with fish and started to sink did Simon realize how the women had it right all along.

Even then Luke doesn't get it right. He says, "They left everything and followed him." That is not true. Luke himself later acknowledges that several of us women supported the movement out of our own resources. (8:1-3) The men didn't have to leave everything because we supplied some of what they gave up.

Good thing, too, given the resistance that Jesus started meeting. Forgiving people's sins and healing them on the sabbath—the moral guardians weren't going to let that go unchallenged. We women saw it as a big squabble over nothing, what with all we knew about caring...
for children, who demand your attention on the sabbath as well as any other day. We kept the sabbath best we could. We thanked God for having at least one day a week less hectic than the others, but when Jesus showed some plain commonsense, honoring the intention of the thing without getting tied up in some unbending dogmatic position, he sounded to us like any good sensible mother. If your child is throwing up on the day of rest, you don’t get to rest.

Fact is Jesus healed a number of children on the sabbath—and women, too. Surely that doesn’t surprise anyone listening to this interview, given what they know about Jesus’ teachings and general compassion. But Luke doesn’t get it down. He stacks one story of healing on top of another, but for long stretches at a time all the featured healings are men. When Luke does finally mention Jesus healing a woman, it’s just a phrase or two, like with Simon’s mother-in-law, while the stories of the men being healed are big tales, lots of detail and tension.

Let’s be fair. Luke tells a lot about the healing of the woman bent double.

Sure. He had no choice. It was too dramatic to ignore. Her standing straight up after all those years. But for the most part, Luke just leaves us women space between the lines.

You would think people would pick up on Luke’s omissions if they ever linked all the little details together.

What details?

Those tiny observations in the text that condense great complexities to a few words. Luke casually throws them out and scatters them around in bits and pieces, using them as transitions from one story to the next. If you study them, you will often discover that they reveal a lot of conflict and controversy. For example, in one place Luke tells you, “so much the more the report went abroad concerning him; and great multitudes gathered to hear and to be healed of their infirmities.” (5:15) But then another transition tells you about those “who were filled with fury and discussed with one another what they might do to Jesus” (6:11). If readers want to know what really happened, they need to put two and two together and read between the lines and ask some critical questions, like, for instance, How come the leaders who were so angry about Jesus didn’t make a quick move to silence him or...
get him out of the way? Those little transitions tell you why—because they knew Jesus was wildly popular with the common folk. And—what Luke doesn’t tell you—they knew we women were doing what women have been doing since Pharaoh ordered the killing of male babies, keeping our networks of talk going all the time, on the street, at the well, in the market. We kept the whole movement talked up, not just focused on Jesus but on the kind of community he was announcing and bringing about. No way those men were going to quiet us, and they knew it! And Jesus knew it, too.

If this seems a strange interpretation, something we just made up, you ought to remember Acts while you’re reading Luke’s Gospel. Where do you think people got the idea of selling and holding all in common? We women had started modeling that community spirit in the way we supported the movement while Jesus was among us. He wasn’t embarrassed to receive from us and we weren’t reluctant to give to him because of all he gave us. There was a whole hidden network of support in Jesus’ movement, but Luke keeps it pretty much covered up except when it slips in now and then under his observations about how Jesus’ reputation spread. In fairness to Luke, he might have been reluctant to make much of it for fear of scaring the occupational forces. They were always looking for anything that sniffed of danger to themselves.

Maybe that’s why he strings Jesus’ sayings together. If he connected them too closely with what Jesus was doing, the authorities might have seen how dangerous these teachings were. So instead, Luke gathers Jesus’ sayings as if Jesus spoke them one after another. Remember now: there were a lot of these aphorisms going around the movement, often strung together for easy memory. Some of these sayings we recall Jesus speaking. Others just sounded like him or at least sounded like him to some people.

That’s true. But I still think the sayings don’t seem nearly so powerful when they are all grouped together as when we remember them emerging from different incidents in Jesus’ life. For instance, when Jesus started to set off all that controversy in his hometown and some warned him not to rock the boat, he told them, “Woe to you, when all people speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets.” If I were going to preach on these sayings, I might go through the whole Gospel considering what stories show this or that
teaching in action, in the very way Jesus was relating to people and the things he was doing. It all happened too long ago to fix every teaching to this or that story, but you would be in the spirit of the thing if you considered the ways Jesus embodied these teachings. Because that was what we loved in the man. His teaching was never just gab. It was doing.

That's right! It was doing. That passage from Isaiah he read in his home synagogue, it wasn't some pious thought for him. He did it. All the stories that follow are Luke's way of demonstrating Jesus' sermon on Isaiah's announcement: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me...."

Jesus' living sermon does not quibble over words. It is not a long treatise on this phrase or that. Instead, Jesus sets the meaning straight through what he does.

That was Jesus for you. And Luke in his own limited way got some of it down. But the full force of that liberating spirit working through Jesus would have been much more present if Luke had not ignored us women so much, if he had written as carefully and thoroughly about our contributions to the movement as he did about the men. If only he'd done that.

Yeah, if only.

Notes

2. Ibid., 291.
4. I am indebted to my New Testament colleague Dennis MacDonald for pointing out that one of the reasons for resistance to the early church may have been the challenge that it presented to established family systems.
6. See Eugene L. Lowry, Living with the Lectionary (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992), for a more extensive and lucid discussion of the strengths and gains that come with the lectionary as well as the weaknesses and losses.
The Revised Common Lectionary presents us with readings from Acts different than those we were familiar with in the New Common Lectionary. Although the Lectionary Committee’s process for selection is probably not classified information, as far as the preacher is concerned it might as well be. The mystery surrounding the creation of the lectionary lends the lections a certain givenness. No rationale is given; they are just there. The preacher assumes a relevance in the text, but it is up to him or her to find it.

That process is called interpretation, and two clues of interpretation will be especially important as we look at the lections from Acts. The first is to pay attention to the liturgical season in which they appear. These lections are assigned to Sundays 3 through 7 in Easter, Cycle C. Acts is more commonly associated with the season of Pentecost. To read these passages in Easter is to invite us to interpret the stories in light of the Resurrection. In that context, the lessons from Acts can be seen as vignettes of the community of the Resurrection. We will see how this context shapes the sermon.

A second clue in interpreting the text is to pay attention to the way Luke structures the narrative. Joseph Tyson argues convincingly that while this paying attention to the literary form is important in interpreting any narrative, it is especially important with Acts. The theology of Acts is revealed in the unfolding of the story. Luke propels the story by means of three literary transitions. The first is geographical as the action moves from Jerusalem to Rome.
second is ethnic, as the focus moves from Jew to Gentile. The third is cultic, moving away from Jewish practices such as circumcision to what Paul in his letters will call freedom from the Law. Although it could be classified as cultic, a fourth transition could be seen in the movement from the Christian fidelity to Temple worship in the early chapters (Acts 3:1) to chapter 21, where Paul is finally thrown out of the Temple.

What is revealed in this narrative is a church in transition, guided by the Spirit, becoming the community of the Resurrection for the whole world. The literary form, a series of critical transitions, reveals a theological criterion. The church that is faithful to the apostolic model is open to the changes the Spirit may initiate and so is ready for surprise.

Acts 9:1-20

This story, often entitled “The Conversion of Saul,” is one of the most familiar among Christians and is often used as a model for conversion. It is, most certainly, a model and can be preached as such, especially to challenge Christians who think growing up in the church is the same as maturing in the faith. Mature Christian faith requires an adult commitment to Christ. Saul’s experience reminds us that that transition can knock you off your feet and challenge the way you have been living.

If the preacher chooses to focus on conversion, it will be helpful to point out that Paul’s conversion is only one of several Luke relates in Acts. Luke’s schema is to demonstrate the extraordinary power of the Spirit working through the church. In his gospel, Luke records Jesus’ last words to the disciples as, “You shall be clothed with power from on high” (24:59). The point of Acts is that the promise was fulfilled in unexpected ways. One of the most amazing ways is in the unlikely persons who are being converted. Luke lines them up in sequence (8:9-9:19).

First, Simon Magus in Samaria (8:9-24). There is evidence that Simon had been raised to the status of divinity in Samaria, but Luke domesticates him by making him a magician who was humbled by the greater power of the Apostle, Philip and who, upon hearing the good news of the Kingdom of God, believed and was baptized.

No sooner is Simon Magus converted than Philip is guided by the
Spirit to an Ethiopian, a high official in his queen's government. The depiction of the Ethiopian in a chariot, reading scripture while traveling down the road, presents fascinating parallels to the Emmaus Road story (Luke 24:13-35). Philip interprets the meaning of the scripture and declares that it has been fulfilled in Jesus. The Ethiopian responds by requesting to be baptized on the spot.

The final conversion in the series is Saul's Damascus Road experience. It is saved for last as the greatest evidence of the Spirit's power. Unlike the other two, Saul is introduced prior to his conversion to heighten the expectation. In addition, Saul is confronted by the Resurrected Lord, not by an apostle, which is the source of his own claim to apostolic status. Simon and the Ethiopian will disappear from the text; Saul will soon dominate it as Paul, the apostle.

A value in preaching the conversion of Saul in the context of the narrative's flow is to show that his is only one model of conversion in Acts, not the only one. Simon Magus heard in Philip's preaching what was lacking in his own life. When scripture was interpreted, the Ethiopian found what he was searching for. Saul heard a voice and saw a blinding light.

One could add even a fourth model in Cornelius, the Roman centurion, although Luke uses his story to illustrate another point. It does come, however, on the heels of Paul's story. Cornelius, reminiscent of another Lukan centurion (Luke 7:5), is identified as a "God-fearer" and a good man who through the working of God (preventive grace) was led to the preaching of Peter and came early to faith.

John Newton's hymn, "Amazing Grace," is especially apt in summarizing Luke's understanding of the meaning of conversion. In each case an unlikely person is overwhelmed by the Spirit's power and believes. In Paul's case, Newton's phrase "I once was blind but now I see" is particularly appropriate both literally and metaphorically.

If one considers the liturgical context, examining conversion as a solitary, personal experience is not the only alternative. In Easter, the theme of the Resurrection community is also prominently before us.

In that context, one could interpret the story to reveal that Jesus confronts Saul three times, not just once. The first is in the encounter with Stephen, the first Christian martyr. Notice how Luke draws Stephen's portrait as one who conformed his life to Jesus (7:54-60). As Saul looks on, Stephen, like Jesus, experiences a transfiguration.
(7:56) and a crucifixion in which he repeats Jesus’ words from the cross (7:59-60).

We next meet Saul on the Damascus Road, our lection for the third Sunday in Easter, “still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord” (9:1). While the Damascus Road experience is not to be explained by psychoanalysis, Luke wants us to see that what happened to Paul on the Road to Damascus began when he saw Stephen’s witness in Jerusalem. As Augustine said, “The Church owes Paul to the martyrdom of Stephen.”

If one follows the narrative closely, it is clear that Saul is not converted on the Damascus Road. God got Paul’s attention there. Afterward, he was carried by his companions to Damascus, where the Christian community received him through the offices of Ananias. The description is instructive: “His eyes were opened,” a wonderful metaphor for conversion. “Then he rose and was baptized, and took food and was strengthened” (9:18-19). The sequence suggests the pattern of baptism followed by the eucharist, the anticipatory feast of celebration at the heart of the life of the community of the Resurrection.

Stephen, representing the Jerusalem church, and Ananias, representing the Damascus church, are clearly the agents through which the Spirit converted Saul. Stephen made his death like Jesus’ death and forgave his executioners. Ananias died to self and loved the enemy. Luke wants us to see that Saul became Paul because the Church was the Body of Christ, representing the Lord to the world.

Acts 9:36-43

The lection for this Sunday begins with verse 36, but if verses 32-35 are included in the reading, you will have both stories that construct the bridge between the conversion of Saul and the conversion of Cornelius. For Luke’s schema the stories of Aeneas and Dorcas are part of the transition in the divine plan outlined in the first chapter. “You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all of Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). With Aeneas and Dorcas the Judean phase is completed. With Cornelius the transition is made to turn the mission to “the ends of the earth.”

By healing one man, Aeneas (vv. 32-35), Peter will convert the
whole Plain of Sharon, giving the impression that the Spirit is anxious to complete this phase and get on with it.

So Peter rushes to Joppa, where he meets Tabitha, also known as Dorcas, "a disciple" (Acts 9:36). Perhaps that notation is the reason this pericope was one of those added to the Revised Lectionary. It reveals what few know, and some will be surprised to discover, that women were given the title "disciple."

If the preacher is addressing a congregation assumes that a patriarchal pattern of church leadership is biblically based, the story of Dorcas offers a splendid opportunity to raise consciousness. Other examples, such as Prisca, who appears in Acts (18:1-4) and in Paul's letters (1 Cor. 16:19; Rom. 16:3, 2 Tim. 4:19), would enrich the sermon with the kind of authority Luke takes seriously: the story of those whose lives were patterned after Jesus' life and empowered by the Spirit.

Luke offers Dorcas as one example: "She was full of good works and acts of charity." Research in a commentary will reveal interesting details from which to draw a portrait of Dorcas as a model for contemporary Christians. She was a businesswoman, apparently successful. The mention of the widows is intriguing. Widows made up a class of persons among the poor in that culture. Women widowed could be abandoned and left homeless. The church took the responsibility to care for them, as evidenced in Acts 6:1-6, where it is revealed that the order of "deacon" arose to set aside and consecrate those who had specific responsibility to feed the widows.

Could Dorcas, a disciple, also have been a deacon? Or did she merely take Jesus' command to feed and clothe the poor seriously? It is instructive to note that she helped the poor in the kind of imaginative way so desperately needed in our society—namely, to hire them, train them, and give them dignity through the ability to support themselves.

If one were to pursue this in the sermon, one could lift up contemporary examples such as village banking or the efforts of urban projects to train the unskilled or could bring a prophetic word about the apathy in our nation relative to the plight of a growing underclass who are, like the widows in the ancient world, cut off from society's support systems.

We are awakening to the fact that unemployment is a growing crisis shaped not by seasonal or cyclical changes, as in previous eras, but epochal in nature, part of a worldwide economic revolution. The long
anticipated change brought on by technology has finally made its permanent impact by creating a world economy, most dramatically felt by those in the old industrial world in the shift of unskilled jobs to countries with cheap labor.

One often hears Jesus' words "The poor you will have with you always" uttered as a declaration of resignation. This story suggests that Dorcas and the church at Joppa took Jesus' words as a call to mission.

It is fitting that Peter's last demonstration of the Spirit's power in Judea is a resurrection. The similarity of the miracles in Acts with Jesus' miracles is Luke's evidence that the same Spirit empowers both. Luke lets us know that Dorcas was also called Tabitha, which is the name Peter uses to call her back to life, recalling "Talitha," the word Jesus used in raising Jairus's daughter (Mark 5:41; Luke 8:54).

What a wonderful story for the Church, especially in Easter, the season of Resurrection when we remember that we who know Christ's suffering, who follow him in sacrificial love, will also participate in his resurrection!

Dorcas's resurrection recalls not only Jairus's daughter, but Lazarus as well and the promise of Jesus: "I am the resurrection and the life, [she] who believes in me though she die, yet shall she live" (John 11:25). Dorcas, "full of good works and acts of charity," is not forgotten by her Lord.

The Gospel lesson for this Sunday offers a wonderful supporting text. It is a Good Shepherd passage, where Jesus says, "My sheep hear my voice and I know them, and they follow me; and I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of my hand" (John 10:27-29).

**Acts 11:1-18**

Chapter 10, the conversion of Cornelius, is required reading for understanding this scene. If Acts is the record of transitions, Cornelius is a pivotal story. Chapter 10 is too long to read as a lection in worship. Perhaps 11:1-18 was chosen because it serves as a summary of the incredible event along with the Church's surprising reaction.

What happened was that Peter did what he never imagined he would ever do; he ate with Gentiles and thus broke the Law (10:28). Actually chapter 10 does not state that he ate with Gentiles. It says...
after he baptized Cornelius and his household they invited him to remain with them, and he did. It is at the beginning of chapter 11 with these words "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?" (11:3) that we learn of the scandal.

Later, at the Jerusalem Conference (chapter 15), Paul will argue that Gentiles do not need to adopt Jewish dietary laws to be considered Christians. James, the brother of Jesus, who, by the 15th chapter has assumed sole leadership in the Church, rules in favor of Paul. James's sudden prominence at the Jerusalem Council makes one wonder if the Cornelius incident had something to do with Peter's loss of power.

The Church's reluctance to follow the Spirit's lead can be seen in Galatians 2:1-12. Paul tells the Galatians that he rushed from Jerusalem to tell the Christians at Antioch, an inclusive congregation, that they were now full members of the Church. Peter and Barnabas were also there to join the celebration. When the delegation from the Jerusalem church arrived, they refused to sit at the same table with Gentile Christians; and Peter and Barnabas joined them in segregation. Paul was enraged and "opposed" Peter to his face.

One could preach a series of sermons on the texts in the New Testament that deal with table manners. In the Gospels, Jesus' table guests or hosts are of primary concern to his detractors and to the Evangelist as well. Jesus' parables of the kingdom are frequently banquet parables. In Corinth, table manners are a major issue. Galatians tells us about Antioch, and now here in Acts Peter is called on the carpet for eating with Gentiles.

This text gives the preacher the chance to explore the meaning of the Lord's Supper as the meal at which we demonstrate our unity in Christ. That understanding is encompassed in the "Eucharist," the eschatological meal in which we anticipate his coming in glory when we will all eat at his heavenly banquet. The Gospel lection (John 13:31-35) just happens to be John's version of the Last Supper, at which he gives the disciples the "new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:34).

What constitutes love between our brothers and our sisters? The Jerusalem Council passed a resolution, based on Paul's argument and Peter's testimony, that God loves the Gentiles and they should be part of the Church. They are now our brothers and sisters. The New Testament record seems to reveal the early Church had the same
ambivalence we have with resolutions passed by ecclesiastical bodies. The resolution voted unanimously talks about the unity of all Christians. The practice in the local church looks more like toleration. If you don’t bother us, we won’t bother you.

Race is the issue that refuses to go away. The Church is still embarrassed by its recalcitrance. Our councils have denounced segregation, but the local church demonstrates an awesome reluctance to act on it.

Some suggest these texts dealing with receiving the Gentiles into the Church speak to the current issue of the inclusion of gay and lesbian Christians into the fellowship. The ruling of the Jerusalem Conference that Gentiles need not become Jews to be Christians is sometimes cited as a precedent that homosexuals do not need to become heterosexual to be in the Church. An interesting parallel, especially if one examines the decree as recorded in Acts 15:22-29, where it states they did not have to become Jews but they did have to refrain from idolatry, from eating food offered to idols, and from certain sexual practices that were objectionable to Jews.

Recent councils of the major denominations have all affirmed the presence of gay and lesbian persons in the membership of the Church. But there is that gesture in every church that symbolizes full acceptance, fulfilling the Lord’s command to love one another. Peter, almost in spite of himself, participated in such an act by eating with Gentiles and was reprimanded. His defense is the heart of our text.

First he was convicted by a dream he interpreted as a revelation from God. The essence of the dream was that what is a sacred law in one generation is a barrier to the will of God in another. Secondly, he reached his conclusion about Gentiles not on the basis of inherited prejudices but on personal experience. In other words, he got to know them and observed that they are every bit as Christian as we are. So, “Who was I that I could hinder God?” (v. 17).

One begins to read this story as the account of God using Peter to convert Cornelius. One could end up preaching it as God using Cornelius to convert Peter.

Acts 16:9-15

As a scene in an unfolding narrative, this lection will be better preached by examining its context. We have indicated in discussing
previous lections that Acts is the story of the transitions the Church experienced under the guidance of the Spirit. This passage is immediately preceded by a major transition point, the Jerusalem Council in chapter 15.

The Jerusalem Council was a high point for Paul. He made his appeal to include Gentiles in the Church and he won. Luke reports that “after much debate,” Peter made a convincing speech in favor of the resolution to include Gentiles, a stand we suggested that may have been costly to him. Next Paul and Barnabas reported their work among the Gentiles. In conclusion James ruled that Gentiles could be in the Church without circumcision and obedience to other Levitical rules, but they must refrain from idolatry, unchastity, and food sacrificed to idols.

Paul must have been ecstatic. He had moved the Council to an historic decision, a watershed in the formation of the Church. Barnabas, who addressed the council alongside Paul, must have shared this joy.

With that triumph, one is surprised to read that Paul and Barnabas split up and went their separate ways. According to Luke, who wanted to preserve the portrait of the Church as the harmonious community he set forth in the first two chapters, the issue was John Mark’s behavior, and the parting was amicable. But there is a different picture in Galatians 2:1-14. As outlined in the comment on the previous lection (Acts 11:1-18), both Peter and Barnabas could make speeches in Jerusalem on behalf of fellowship with Gentiles, but when the opposition caught them practicing fellowship at a church supper in Antioch, they got up and left.

If one follows Paul’s account rather than Luke’s, one can see that the joy at Jerusalem was followed by the betrayal at Antioch, an incident so devastating to Paul as to cause him to break partnership with the one who from the beginning had befriended and defended him.

Acts 16:1-5 describes the selection of Timothy to replace Barnabas. Timothy will be Paul’s loyal companion to the end (cf. 2 Tim. 4:9-22). Timothy was a perfect choice in light of the Jerusalem decree. His mother was a Jewish believer; his father a “Greek,” which means Gentile. Paul circumcised Timothy, a detail that has confounded scholars in light of the Jerusalem Council and may be explained by Paul’s mission rationale in 1 Corinthians 9:20. Some scholars believe Luke’s source for the circumcision of Timothy was a rumor circulating...
about Paul, and one that he denied (Gal. 5:1-12), but it suited Luke’s thesis that Paul bent over backward to keep the Law (in this case he had Timothy do it).

Having regrouped with a new associate, Paul finally starts on his journey through Asia Minor. The description in 16:6-8 is written in a pious style, but beneath the religious rhetoric is a picture of frustration. In fact, it appears that Paul’s mission, which looked so hopeful at the Jerusalem Council, after a bitter dispute and false starts is nearly in disarray.

Our text begins, “During the night Paul had a vision” to come to Macedonia. Paul and his companions journey to Macedonia, to the city of Philippi, and to more disappointment.

Paul’s practice when arriving in a city was to head for the synagogue. That is where he would find prospects for evangelism—Jews who looked for the Messiah and Gentiles called “seekers” or “God-fearers,” who were seeking after God. Luke mentions they had to wait in this strange city until the Sabbath. They heard there was a synagogue down by the river. On the Sabbath they checked it out and, to their disappointment, having traveled so far and endured so much, only a few women showed up. That description means that a service could not be held, since the synagogue service was to be conducted by males. In fact, the rabbi doesn’t even show, so Paul, Silas, and Timothy start preaching to the women.

This lection is another added by the Revised Common Lectionary in which women are held up as models for faith. “A certain woman named Lydia, a worshiper of God, was listening to us; she was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer of purple cloth.” (v. 14).

Lydia was not a Jew but one of the Gentile seekers. She was also a wealthy woman, an assumption based on the mention that she was a “dealer of purple cloth.”

She is led to faith in this unpromising encounter, baptized on the spot along with her household; and the church in Philippi is established (cf v. 40). As we know from his Letter to the Philippians, Philippi will be Paul’s favorite church. Notice that it was founded after a severe disappointment and followed by a change of personnel, a series of false starts, and a nearly cancelled meeting.

This passage is consistent with the theme of Acts, that the Christian mission is guided by the Holy Spirit. The preacher could point out that Acts is an illustration of the promise in the Gospel lesson that Jesus will send the Spirit to guide us (John 14:23-29). This lection and
similar passages lead many to assume that providential guidance is simply a matter of waiting for clear signs and unambiguous messages to guide the Christian along certain paths. This passage reveals that the Holy Spirit’s guidance is more easily discerned in retrospect. At the moment, what will later be seen as a great opportunity, sometimes appears as one more disappointment. The call “Come over to Macedonia” proved to be providential, but it had been preceded by false starts in Asia (the eastern region of the empire) and Bithynia.

It is in this pericope that the famous “we” passages are introduced. Speculation on why they are there never stops. It is questionable that the preacher would want to get into the debate in the sermon, except to add color by indicating that this was apparently taken by Luke from an eyewitness account. Unless handled skillfully it would most probably be a distraction.

Acts 16:16-34

This text continues the story of Paul’s first visit to Philippi. No sooner did Paul convert a rich woman than he met a slave girl.

We have suggested that a number of factors determine the interpretation of a text. We have used two consistently; the context of the narrative as a whole (its purpose and literary style), and the immediate context of its place in the narrative’s transitions, as well as the context of the liturgical setting.

A third context, the world in which the sermon will be proclaimed and heard, has been assumed; but this pericope underscores its importance. In previous generations the good news of this text was most likely to have been heard as the miraculous escape from prison by Paul and Silas and the conversion of the jailer. The slave girl would have been incidental to the point of the story, simply the provocation for arrest.

In this postmodern world, with clearer understanding of how systems have held millions of non-Europeans in bondage, eyes are now able to see that there are several liberations revealed in this story. The first is the slave girl, whose pitiful plight is drawn in the style of first-century healing stories. She is possessed by a spirit, a fact that made her an oddity and provided her owners an opportunity to exploit her for their economic gain.

In a scene reminiscent of Jesus’ exorcism (Mark 1:22; 5:1), where the supernatural forces recognize who he is, this spirit can see the
power with which the apostles are blessed and so shouts, to Paul’s annoyance. “These men are slaves of the Most High God.” Paul, demonstrating that the same Spirit is working through him that was in Jesus, charges the spirit “. . . in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her” [v. 18].

What started as a simple exorcism turns out to be a revolutionary act, a type of what today might be called “economic conversion,” the transformation of harmful industry into socially productive and environmentally useful enterprise. In a culture where economic freedom for the few takes precedence over the exploitation of persons or precious resources, such action will produce conflict. Philippa was no exception. A liberated slave is no longer an asset. The owners of this “property” are enraged and attack Paul with charges similar to those heard against Christians of conscience who challenge economic practices in our time: He is charged with subversion, undermining our values and way of life.

Ironically, the charge against Paul and Silas constitutes a genuine Christian credential. “These men . . . are disturbing our city.” The homiletical possibilities inherent in that phrase and its relation to the story of a slave girl’s liberation are obvious.

But this text is resplendent with such opportunities. Paul and Silas are arrested, beaten, and put in jail, “in the innermost cell and . . . their feet in the stocks.” If you have gotten to this passage by reading through all of Acts, you know that when an apostle goes to prison it is so that he can escape from it. Luke wants this escape to be grander than the last, so Paul and Silas are not only in prison but the inner prison and not only the inner prison but in the stocks. It is like Houdini assuring the crowd there is no humanly possible way he can escape this time.

One might make something of the fact that it was while they were singing hymns that the earthquake hit. In California there is an old story about a man who had been taking a bath during an earthquake. He reported to friends, “All I know is that I pulled the plug and the roof caved in.” While the law post hoc ergo propter hoc asserts that because one event follows another it doesn’t mean the first caused the second, one could argue that the singing of our faith, especially in the face of adversity and death, has a power to work miracles of sorts.

But to pursue that would constitute homiletical cleverness, and one need not resort to that with this text. What Luke reveals is much more profound. Once again he uses irony to demonstrate that Paul and Silas, behind bars and in stocks, are free; and the jailer, outside the bars and
possessing the power of the Empire, is the one who is in bondage. The prison break does not liberate Paul and Silas. It is the jailer who is set free by the liberating power of the good news of what God has done for all of us in Christ.

Like Lydia before him, the jailer desires to be baptized on the spot, along with his family. Like Lydia, he also offers hospitality.

In a commentary published in *The Christian Century*, L. Gregory Jones wrote about the complementarity between the Acts narrative and the Gospel for this Sunday, John 17:20-26. It is that part of the Farewell Discourse where Jesus prays that "they may all be one." Jones points out that the prayer for unity is offered for Christians as diverse as those gathered in this text: two Jews, Paul and Silas; a rich businesswoman; Lydia; a freed slave; and a jailer, none of whom would have had anything to do with each other before they met Christ. In fact, their relationship would have been shaped by segregation, animosity, prejudice, and fear. But now, in Christ, they are sisters and brothers, members of a new humanity with the mission to preach liberation from sins, social and personal, and new life in Christ.

Notes

2. *Christian Century* (May 6, 1992), 485

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