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Introduction

Once I am sure there's nothing going on,
I step inside, letting the door thud shut.
Another church: matting, seats, and stone,
And little books... .

Nothing going on. So poet Philip Larkin began his meditation, "Church Going," on the curious attraction of old churches on a nonbeliever. The nonbeliever—one who has cast off the business of belonging to a parish, but who has not ceased to be religious. Paul preached to a group like this in Athens, where he noticed an altar "TO AN UNKNOWN GOD." In the Council of the Areopagus, a group of cultured Greeks (as the writer of Acts puts it, somewhat defensively, "all the Athenians and the resident foreigners had time for nothing except talking or hearing about the latest novelty"), Paul attempted to supply the solution to the agnostic's dilemma. With mixed results. Mr. Larkin, however, has no interest in homilies and divine abstractions. His devotion is to the primitive sense of space, of holy ground, including the village graveyard, which mingles human memories, compulsions, shame, and joy into a seedbed for wisdom.

There is probably deep in each of us a strand of religious devotion that is rooted in the place itself and our history there. This "sacred space" religion may recognize itself as Christian or merely call itself Christian, its power springing from some other barely acknowledged source.

This primal experience of self in the company of saints or ancestors in one special part of God's green earth must surely explain a lot about our church. For if it happens with individuals, it also happens with ethnic and political groups. A church connected to the formation of national identity will have about it the quality of a national religion, even when church and
state are formally held separate. On the other hand, a church that comes along later in one’s national history does not have that quality, and its witness in society will take a different turn—for better or for worse, depending on the society itself.

In this issue, Dennis Campbell and Manfred Marquardt take turns describing the relationship of Methodism to the history of their homelands. And they are very different. Campbell’s history, that of Methodism in North America, encompasses the entire national epic because the Methodist mission began as the nation itself began and prospered as it prospered. It is a brilliant retelling of our North American communal history, and it leads us inexorably to the question of how “mainline” Protestant groups will survive in the next century, having lost our establishment numbers, prestige, and resources.

Marquardt tells the story of the church, including the Methodist Church, in Germany in the latter part of the twentieth century. His view is comprehensive, and for this reason we have elected to include the entire work, which is subdivided into three major sections. To understand the workings of the church we must look at the history of Germany in this time, which is in many ways a series of tragedies: the end of World War I, the events which culminated in the rise of Hitler and the Second World War, Soviet hegemony in East Germany, and now, a complicated and often painful reunification. Marquardt’s narrative also permits us to see European Methodism through the eyes of one of its most influential and theologically gifted leaders. Both these articles would make excellent study pieces for a small group.

There are two more significant voices in this issue, and their contributions should not be slighted because of the dominance of the main topic. Indeed, in writing about abortion, Kathy Rudy has guaranteed herself an audience of readers who aren’t sure they agree, agree somewhat, or disagree passionately with almost every word she writes. A thankless task, to be sure. Still, Rudy’s work is extremely significant because it touches on uniquely United Methodist ways of reflecting. Because of her own history, which she eloquently shares, she is able to communicate with vigor and conviction. We should all do so well.

Finally, but not least, we have a wonderful, gutsy handling of Galatians passages from Jack Albright. Albright’s style is clear and
direct. He's just the sort of person I'd love to have in a sermon preparation group.

I leave you with this good reading—full of stories of hope and pain and recovery. Proper lessons for the approaching spring! May God's peace go with you this season.

Sharon Hels
Methodism has been a dominant cultural reality in the United States throughout much of the history of the nation. Although Methodism was present before the Revolutionary War, the real strength of Methodism becomes evident in the period after the establishment of the new nation. The development of North American Methodism and the development of the new nation coincide; it can be argued that North American culture and North American Methodism so interrelate that it is difficult to separate them.

Christopher Dawson once observed, "In fact every great civilization that exists in the world today has a great religious tradition associated with it, and it is impossible to understand the culture unless we understand the religion that lies behind it." What we have come to call "mainline Protestantism" is that religious tradition for North American culture. Methodism is one major component of that tradition and has been particularly influential in the shaping of North American culture. North American Methodism and North American culture have been inseparably intertwined since their beginnings.
Early American Methodism (1784–1816)

Methodism was present in North America prior to 1784. Early Methodists from England had developed societies in New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and numerous other cities and towns. The coming of Francis Asbury enhanced the growth of Methodism. But for the purposes of this article, I begin at the Christmas Conference of 1784. The Christmas Conference is important to any understanding of Methodism and North American culture because it established several key matters: the Conference chose a name for the new church; it set a method for selecting leadership; it established structure for governance and mission; it provided ordained ministers and superintendents for the church; and it began a pattern of relationship to North American culture.3

In England, Wesley had insisted that Methodism was a reform movement within the established Church of England. Whatever we make of his actions, he claimed that he himself and his Methodist movement never broke from the Church of England. He believed that the Church of England, despite its shortcomings, was properly established and was the best institutional expression of Christianity. He saw his role, and that of his Methodist societies, as seeking renewal of vital holiness within the Church.

In North America, however, Anglican establishments were a casualty of the revolutionary spirit. Much of Anglican leadership left, and the church’s survival was in question. Therefore, Wesley was free to organize Methodism in North America as he saw fit. He sent specific guidelines contained within the Sunday Service book with Thomas Coke. In addition to patterns of worship for Sunday, for sacramental services, and for ordinations, the Sunday Service book set forth a plan of ministry which functioned as a structure for the new church. The plan of ordained ministry included superintendents, elders, and deacons. It can be argued that, although he used the term superintendent, Wesley envisioned Methodism becoming a church with an episcopal structure and playing a role in the new North American nation somewhat comparable to that of the Church of England in Wesley’s native land. I do not mean that Wesley expected Methodism to become an established church, but I do think that the way he thought about church and society was so determined by his own societal setting that he imagined Methodism as a church contributing to the new nation and shaping its cultural values.4
The choice of the name of the church is significant. We know from recollections of the Christmas Conference, and from the Discipline that it created, that the delegates understood the shape of the church Wesley proposed in the Sunday Service to be episcopal. Although he used the term superintendent, the reality was that this was an episcopal office. The Conference decided, therefore, to name the church The Methodist Episcopal Church. Each word is significant. This was to be a “Methodist” church; it was to take its shape from Wesley and the Methodist movement in England and North America. It was to be an “episcopal” church; the structure proposed by Wesley was clearly episcopal, and thus Methodism would be different from congregational or presbyterian churches. It was to be a “church.” I emphasize this because one could imagine early North American Methodists choosing to retain the Wesleyan self-understanding and conceive of themselves as a “society” in opposition to a “church.” In fact, for years they retained images and language appropriate to an informal religious community. By the choice of a name, however, they also declared themselves a “church,” indicating that they were going to play the role of a church in the new nation.

North American Methodism was a “new creation.” The creation of the Methodist Episcopal Church in December of 1784 signaled the beginning of a Methodism distinct from that of its English predecessor. It was a “church,” not a society or movement within a larger church. It was a church with indigenous leadership. Although Wesley specified roles for Coke and Asbury, Asbury’s insistence on being elected to the office of superintendent evidenced sensitivity to the North American mind, and it signaled that Methodism in North America could not, and would not, take its directions from Wesley or any leader in the mother country. The relationship between Methodism and North American culture was to be fundamentally different from that characteristic of Methodism and culture in England.

Francis Asbury’s episcopacy set a pattern and a standard for the mission and ministry of Methodism in North America. The pattern was one of aggressive evangelistic endeavor attentive to the unique reality of North American development and North American mentality. Asbury adapted to the North American context and recognized that a traveling ministry was best suited to the frontier. He was willing to adjust church life to the realities of the difficult conditions in the expanding nation. The itinerant ministry, the Wesleyan theology of grace and freedom, the conviction that the believer was responsible
for participating in shaping his or her salvation, and the specific populist approach to the common person combined to give Methodism special appeal. Methodism was popular because it met the needs of men and women where they were; and it had the itinerant ministry to reach them. North American democratic individualism and Methodist teachings tended to be mutually reinforcing. Methodism enthusiastically embraced its context, even as it sought to make it Christian. Its commitment to “spread scriptural holiness across the land” represented both a critique and an embrace of the society.

The Early Period Before the Civil War (1816—Civil War)

I have chosen 1816 as the beginning of another period of North American Methodism because it is the year of Bishop Asbury’s death. The leadership of Methodism was now no longer in the hands of men born in England but in the hands of persons born in the United States. In the period between 1816 and the Civil War certain patterns were set that became determinative for the Methodist Episcopal Church. The major point is that the church elected to be inclusive and culture-affirming. Two key examples are the reactions to slavery and to the Civil War.

At first, following the leadership of John Wesley himself, Methodism in North America was absolutely opposed to slavery. Wesley’s famous “Thoughts upon Slavery” was written in 1784. Asbury indicated his opposition, and the Christmas Conference specifically forbade it. The Discipline of the church was clear. In regard to slavery, Methodists were admonished to recognize “... a most bounden duty to... extirpate this abomination from among us.” By 1808, however, the General Conference authorized the printing of copies of the Discipline for South Carolina, leaving out reference to slavery. Similar action followed for Georgia and North Carolina. General Conference action in 1816 represents a change of approach. The evil of slavery appears to be past remedy. Now emphasis changes from opposition to attention to the church’s mission to the slaves.

Methodism grew very rapidly in the early years of the nineteenth century. It was a popular religion embracing large numbers of persons in widely diverse circumstances. The church elected not to be sectarian but to work to figure out ways that the greatest number of...
persons could be included as Methodists. There was a definite accommodation to prevailing norms of North American society. Methodism did not set itself against the culture but sought to reform from within.

Later, in the social crisis occasioned by slavery, some Methodists insisted on an absolutist position in opposition, some insisted on an absolutist position in favor, and some sought a middle ground. The various positions were reflective of reactions in the general society. Almost regardless of the section of the country, Methodism and North American culture were difficult to distinguish. The church split before the nation divided; and both the Northern church and the Southern church became major advocates of their respective sides in the Civil War. Northern Bishop Matthew Simpson would talk about “the providence of God as seen in our war.”

Triumphal Methodism: Post-Civil War to 1924

In the years following the Civil War, North American Methodism was increasingly culture-affirming. In both the North and the South, Methodism sought to transform and control North American society. There was tremendous growth in numbers and significant upward mobility in terms of education, economic strength, and societal influence. Methodists built large and impressive church buildings in the major centers of cities. They wanted their denomination to be represented in the avenues of power, because Methodist laymen increasingly played that role themselves.

There was a particular boom in building at the time of the centennial of North American Methodism in 1884. Along with large and impressive “centenary church” buildings came a formalization of worship, the introduction of organs and choirs, longer pastorates, and a more “settled” clergy. Methodist upward mobility included growing wealth, which allowed for the development of church institutions in addition to enhanced facilities for local congregations. These institutions included colleges and universities, schools for ministerial training, orphanages, and hospitals.

The latter part of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century may be the key to understanding the struggle in which North American Methodism is engaged today. It was in this period that Methodist identity with American culture became fully
manifest. Earlier foundations now allowed for the development of significant institutionalization. It is not incorrect to say that the “average” U.S. citizen was a Methodist. In his book Religion and American Culture, George Marsden observes, “Methodism during this period was America’s largest and most typical Protestant denomination. From 1865 to 1920 the Methodist Episcopal Church (Northern) grew from one million to four million and its Southern Methodist counterpart grew from half a million to two million.”

Frederick Norwood calls Methodism the “unofficial national church.”

“Theodore Roosevelt remarked that he ‘would rather address a Methodist audience than any other audience in America’ for ‘the Methodists represent the great middle class and in consequence are the most representative church in America.’”

In their Episcopal Address to the Methodist Episcopal Church General Conference of 1900, the bishops stated that from 1800 to 1900 the ratio of Methodists to the general population went from one in fourteen to one in five. Membership went from 61,000 to more than 6 million. Everything looked very good. The Methodists were experiencing unbridled growth in ministry, new churches and church properties were being built, church literature was available and widely used, benevolences were booming, mission fields expanding, and philanthropies at an all-time high.

One year later, in a statement to the Third Oecumenical Methodist Conference (forerunner of the World Methodist Council), John F. Goucher reported on U.S. Methodism: “About one-third of all the people in the United States look to Methodism for their religious instruction and Christian ministries.” He went on: “While Methodism is in no sense a political organization, its numerical strength and the vital character of its teachings, quickening the perceptions and conscience of its members, purifying morals, diffusing education, determining ideals, and developing character, have made it the most constructive force in our great Republic. The Chief Executive, President McKinley, is a communicant in the Methodist Church; so are many United States Senators and Representatives, the governors of a number of states, and in some states a majority of both houses of Assembly. America and Methodism are two developing world powers so interrelated that to discuss either philosophically requires a discussion of the other.”

Goucher’s virtual equation of Methodism with the national interests of the United States characterized a great deal of thinking about Methodism and the state.
An overwhelming confidence and optimism characterized the church and its leadership at the turn of the twentieth century. The sociologist E. Digby Baltzell comments, “The new century opened on a note of Anglo-Saxon confidence if not arrogance.” The United States was still predominantly Protestant and controlled by persons of European, and especially Northern European, descent. Winthrop Hudson writes, “In 1900 few would have disputed the contention that the United States was a Protestant nation.”

A key example of the way in which Methodism sought to relate to the nation is the movement for the statutory prohibition of beverage alcohol. Methodists were the leaders of the effort to enact laws to prohibit the manufacture and sale of alcohol in the United States. Francis Willard, of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union, was a leading Methodist. Bishop James Cannon devoted almost all his time to the political movement that tried to capture the state legislatures so that they would have the votes to ratify a constitutional amendment. The Volstead Act, the 18th Amendment to the Constitution of the United States, was ratified in 1919. That political act, which sought to impose the moral convictions of Methodists and other mainline Protestants on the general society, suggests the power of the churches and their supposition that they could, and should, control the culture. It is worth pondering the self-conception of Methodism that is reflected in these exertions of authority and efforts at social control.

Post-1924 to the Present

Historians of Christianity in the United States have observed a “second disestablishment” of Protestant Christian America after 1924. The first disestablishment refers to the rejection of established churches in colonial America at the time of the affirmation of the Constitution and in the early years of the new nation. The first disestablishment was intended to introduce genuine diversity of religious expression and equality among the several denominations. The dominant religious community, however, was Protestant, and it can be argued that the United States was in practice a Protestant nation. The second disestablishment refers to the gradual erosion of Protestant hegemony. This was the result of the infusion of significant numbers of persons who were not Protestants, especially Roman Catholics and Jews from Eastern Europe, and the broadening old
conceptions of what it meant to be an American. While at one time there was a tacit assumption that being an American included being a Protestant, by the 1950s Will Herberg could write a book suggesting that to be an American was to be a Protestant, Catholic, or Jew. In subsequent years even that assumption has had to be broadened to include Muslims, Buddhists, and others, including secularists.

This brief historical overview is not intended to tell the full story of North American Methodism. It is intended to suggest that the relationship between Methodism and North American culture has been dynamic. In the earliest period, Methodism was marginal and set over against the dominant and elite culture. Gradually, as the result of extraordinarily rapid growth and because of related upward mobility, Methodists achieved dramatic social, economic, educational, and even political power. By the end of the nineteenth century, Methodism functioned as an unofficial established church. Methodism and North American culture were intertwined. The twentieth century has seen a course reversal. While everything looked wonderful one hundred years ago, in the course of the twentieth century some argue that, along with other major Protestant bodies, Methodism has moved from the mainline to the sideline.

Changing Conditions for Mainline Protestantism


All of these works document a similar story. Mainline Protestantism is no longer dominant. It has lost cultural power. There has been a significant drop in membership. Its social influence has been eroded. The denominations, especially the national bureaucratic manifestations of the denominations, are experiencing significant financial problems. There is great conflict about theological teaching and doctrine, including debates about biblical authority and interpretation. Wrenching debates about homosexuality and the recent
uproar about the Reimagining Conference in Minneapolis held during
November of 1993, which was sponsored by the World Council of
Churches, but heavily supported financially by mainline Protestants
from the United States, are evidence of the divided character of
churches in the United States, including the United Methodist Church.

Mainline Protestantism is facing difficult readjustments, and there
are numerous proposals about what to do. The main point to be made
here is that Protestantism in the United States is confronted by a new
awareness of its place in culture as the twentieth century comes to an
end. It can no longer think of itself as the only, or even the major,
expression of Christianity or of religion in the United States. Some
Protestants, even some mainline Protestants, wish to reassert Christian
hegemony, and efforts to exert Christian influence in the political
arena represent this wish for a less complex social order with
conservative values in control. These efforts will almost surely not be
successful given the realities of contemporary North American life.

We need to remember, of course, that the loss of “establishment” is
not unique to mainline, or liberal, Protestantism in the United States.
We are part of a much larger reality across the world. Paul Johnson in
A History of Christianity observes, “During the past half-century there
has been a rapid and uninterrupted secularization of the West, which
has all but demolished the Augustinian idea of Christianity as a
powerful, physical and institutional presence in the world. Of
Augustine’s city of God on earth, little now remains, except crumbling
walls and fallen towers, effete establishments and patriarchies of
antiquarian rather than intrinsic interest. But of course Christianity
does not depend on a single matrix: hence its durability. The
Augustinian idea of public all-embracing Christianity, once so
compelling, has served its purpose and retreats—perhaps, one day, to
re-emerge in different forms.”

This larger picture of Christianity throughout the world helps to put
the situation of mainline Protestantism into perspective. At the same
time, it is important to understand the contemporary realities, and
realistic prospects, for Protestantism in the United States.

The Contemporary Shape of Religion in the United States

It is useful to consider the shape of religion in the contemporary
United States in order to have a sense of the differences between
Europe and North America, and it will allow me a context in which to offer some suggestions about the possible future of the United Methodist Church in the U.S. and in the global community.

Let us look first at what statistics show about religious preference. A major recent study commissioned by the Graduate School of the City University of New York suggests that the nation is broadly religious and widely diverse. The great majority of U.S. citizens say they are Christians: 60.2 percent are Protestant, 26.2 percent are Roman Catholic. 7.5 percent indicated no religion, 3.7 percent indicated faiths other than Christian, and 2.3 percent declined to answer. Roman Catholics are now the largest single church group in the United States. Then come Baptists, Methodists, and Lutherans.

About one in five U.S. citizens is a Baptist. One person in ten is a United Methodist, compared to 14 percent in 1967. United Methodists are represented throughout all regions of the country, with particular strength in the Midwest, Southeast, and South Central regions. Lutherans represent about 5 percent of the population, Presbyterians 4, and Episcopalians 2. Other Protestants are divided into hundreds of smaller church groupings. Surveys show that while Protestantism still claims a majority of North Americans, their numbers are declining, and they are becoming increasingly fragmented.

Adherents to living world religions other than Christianity make up a small percentage of the population. Judaism, with 1.8 percent, which represents 4.3 million people, is the largest non-Christian group. Some estimates put the number of Jews higher, but not above 5.5 million. The difference may be attributable to those who claim religious identity of Judaism and those who claim no religious identity but are identified culturally as Jews. Muslims represent one-half of 1 percent, which is 1.4 million people. Of those who identify themselves as Muslims, 40 percent are Black. Of the total Black population, however, less than 2 percent is Muslim. There are approximately one million Buddhists, under one-half of 1 percent, and a half million Hindus. Significantly, the survey found that most Asian Americans and most Arab-Americans are Christian, rather than Buddhist, Hindu, or Muslim. The reason for this seems to be that Christians from Arab and Asian countries are more likely to move to the United States than are persons of other faith traditions.

Recent studies of religion in North America suggest several observable patterns. The most obvious is that North Americans remain religious. The growth of Roman Catholicism in the United States is
dramatic. Protestantism remains strong but is changing. The percentage of the population which claims to be Protestant is declining, and the old mainline Protestant churches have declined significantly.

The population of the United States is more diverse. White Protestants make up less of the community, African Americans represent about 10 percent of the population, and the Asian-American and Hispanic populations are growing. There is a great deal of talk now about multiculturalism. What exactly does it mean to say that the U.S. is a multicultural nation? Statistics demonstrate that religious North Americans are overwhelmingly Christian. Muslims and Buddhists in fact represent a very small minority, less than one-half of 1 percent each. I think multiculturalism, therefore, suggests increasing diversity of countries of origin, of language, and of cultural patterns. A nation once dominated by white, European, Protestant culture is now experiencing extraordinary diversity. But at the same time, it is important to note that, thus far, this diversity has been within Christianity for the most part. Challenges to the churches are great, but these challenges are not primarily in relation to other living world religions but in relation to changing patterns within Christianity.

I do not mean to suggest that Christians in the United States are not faced with issues concerning the other living world religions. As we encounter the reality of Islam and Asian religions in the world, and, to a certain extent, in our major cities, we realize that we do not know enough about other religions. Nor do we know how to think in a sophisticated way about the relationship of Christianity to other religions. But the average North American does not encounter significant presence of persons from other faiths—at least not yet.

Perhaps the most challenging reality for Christianity in the United States today is not the presence of other faith traditions but a growing societal conviction that any religion is tolerable as long as it remains personal and individual and does not make claims on the general social order. While at one time Christianity played a public role in shaping moral values and societal norms, today that role is limited as the result of court cases, legislation, and cultural attitudes. Stephen J. Carter, a professor of law at Yale University, recently wrote a book called The Culture of Disbelief, in which he argues that the press, the educational establishment, the government, the courts, and the entertainment media are fostering a negative attitude toward all religion. This may represent the greatest challenge to Christianity, and
to other religions as well, in the United States today. The history of the United States demonstrates that religion has always been a vital, culture shaping reality. This has been so because it has played a significant role in social institutions and the general society. Despite Carter’s negative assessment, this continues to be the case. Professor Barry Kosmin says, “Religion is more important in America than in most industrialized countries. Americans display a greater level of commitment and a greater level of diversity.” If claims about growing multiculturalism relegate religion to a purely personal and individual role, then its significance will be diminished. Dramatic changes are now occurring within all expressions of Christianity in the United States and perhaps especially among mainline Protestants, as the studies cited demonstrate.

The Residual Establishment: The Future of the United Methodist Church

What is to be made of the prospects and realities for the United Methodist Church in North America in the future? We are clearly among the mainline Protestant churches that are experiencing significant change. As our historical overview showed, Methodism was a dominant force in the United States, and thought of itself as such. Some Methodists still have not adjusted to new realities, and actions at General Conference seeking to tell the nation what to do participate in old images about the church and its cultural significance. If it could be argued that in the latter part of the nineteenth century and at the turn of the twentieth century, Methodism played a dominant cultural role in U.S. society, it can now be argued that Methodism is increasingly marginal, as are all of the once-powerful Protestant denominations.

Nevertheless, I think such a conclusion both premature and inaccurate. Considerable strengths endure. Perhaps a useful concept to employ is that of a “residual establishment.” Images and understandings of prior strength are no longer workable, but neither is it the case that the United Methodist Church is insignificant. We are a residual establishment in that many of the institutional realities remain. One need only think of hundreds of thousands of congregations, hundreds of colleges and universities, thirteen theological schools, numerous homes for children and for the aged,
many hospitals, buildings, boards and agencies, programs, publishing interests, and pension funds. I could mention other examples, including billions of dollars in various endowments to support the varied work of the church and its mission. The United Methodist Church has enormous resources that are both opportunities and problems. On the one hand, there is undeniable evidence of membership decline and of less social and cultural influence. On the other, there is continuing vitality in congregations and institutions. These strengths counter the thesis of decline. The real problem is how we are going to think about ourselves. What are we going to do to seize this moment?

Numerous proposals have been set forth for renewal of the United Methodist Church. Let me briefly offer my own typology of some these proposals.

**Try to hang on.** I think this has been the position of the General Conference, at least up until now. This is the approach that suggests that reorganization and bureaucratic restructuring can provide a future for the church. Even now studies are being done about a reorganizing of ministry, about moving the Board of Global Ministries, about a new configuration of general boards and agencies. These efforts are not bad in and of themselves, but perhaps inevitably they do not go to the heart of the matter. It is a difficult thing to say, but at some point we must admit that the leadership of the church is reluctant to change. We know the problems, and perhaps we even know that we cannot go on as before, but we would rather the changes come later than sooner, and we would rather that they involve others and not ourselves. It is like the prayer of the bad little boy: “Lord, change me if you want, but if not, leave me alone, ’cause I’m having a good time.”

I worry that some of the arguments for the “global character” of the United Methodist Church fit under this proposal. Some leaders of the church would like to count on other countries around the world to provide growth for United Methodism as it declines in the United States. If we define ourselves as a world church, we might be able to maintain our image as big, powerful, worldwide, growing, and successful. Let me emphasize that not all efforts to deal with the legitimate global dimensions of United Methodism fit this description, but we need to recognize that there is this aspect to talk of our global character. It can be a dangerous new kind of United Methodist triumphalism.
Reverse the decline and recover the institution. The previous alternative does not seriously believe that reversal is possible. Rather, the attitude is to make the best of the situation. A second alternative proposes to reverse the decline. A great deal has been proclaimed and written about ways that mainline Protestantism, and the United Methodist Church in particular, can turn around the situation I have described. Church-growth strategies propose all manner of techniques for adjusting to changed cultural circumstances. These include unapologetic efforts to build mega-churches, the abandoning of small churches (they are inefficient), and calls for less attention to theology and for greater attention to management models that answer the self-perceived needs of as many people as possible. Some argue that training for ministry needs to go on in the local church (especially in the mega-churches) so that such training can avoid those aspects of theological education thought to be irrelevant to church growth. The conviction of this approach is that decline can be reversed with human effort and that the institutional church can be revived.

Accept our new status, and see it as an honest expression of the true nature of the church. There are those who believe that we should attempt recovery of one aspect of the earliest Wesleyan movement and define ourselves over against the culture. It is clear that for the Methodist movement in England during Wesley's day, and perhaps beyond, one theme was that Methodism stood "over against" the dominant culture, including the Church of England. There was this same impulse in early American Methodism. On the whole, however, I think that early Methodism, whether in England or the United States, was not culture-denying. It sought not to withdraw but to transform and renew. Clearly this was the path taken in North American Methodism, as I suggested in my brief historical overview. There are those who propose, however, that the right response to our changed status in contemporary society is to unapologetically reject the dominant culture and stand as a witness "over against." This stance would result in significant changes in the institutional life of the church and would probably accelerate the decline in membership.

Bring about radical change with new leadership. This proposal suggests that renewal of the church requires empowerment of those who have previously not been among the leaders of the church. The thesis is that the future of the church will depend on its ability to serve and include the diverse peoples increasingly characteristic of North Ameri-
can society, especially Asian Americans, Hispanic Americans, African Americans, and other ethnic minority groups. Few would argue against the view that the church must adjust to the changing demographics of the U.S., especially in regard to multicultural issues. The question is whether ethnic minority leadership can address the realities of mainline Protestantism at the turn of the century any better than anyone else. Is a particular kind of leadership the key to renewal in the church?

**Worry less about the institution and give priority to theology, witness, mission, and ministry.** This alternative proposes to relax about the institutional manifestations of the church and let some of the machinery go. We might neither reject the institution nor maintain it for its own sake. Recognition of the residual establishment allows us to appreciate the incredible gifts that previous generations of believers have given us and challenges us to figure out what to do with these gifts for ministry in our time. This alternative calls for a clear priority of mission and ministry as a result of theological conviction. The real challenges to the church are spiritual, and these challenges are answered by the rebirth of serious worship, sacramental life, and commitment to service.

None of these five alternatives is complete unto itself. Some overlap with others. They are all suggestive. I mention them to demonstrate that serious proposals are being set forth to deal with the situation faced by the United Methodist Church today.

Is there anything that can be learned from the situation of the United Methodist Church in the United States for the United Methodist Church in Europe, or throughout the world? I hope there is. I am sure, however, that there is much to be learned by the church in the United States from experiences of Methodist people in Europe. Let me suggest now several things that I see as possible directions for our future.

**Methodism needs clearly to preach the good news of Jesus Christ without regard to attempts at institutional well-being.** We were formed by Wesleyan theology, and Wesleyan theology is a positive contribution to world Christianity. We must keep the central aim of gospel proclamation always before us. Wesleyan theology has no particular institutional interest, but the interest of communication of a positive gospel to a hurting world is our abiding interest. The Wesleyan movement was born as a minority movement in a context where there was an established Christianity. It was in the United States
where, for unique historical and cultural reasons, that the Wesleyan movement became a dominant institutional expression of Christianity. We, in the United States, need to learn from our Wesleyan brothers and sisters in other parts of the world that a dominant institutional expression is not necessarily what we are called to be. Our primary concern should be the positive preaching of the gospel of grace and freedom. We are called to follow Mr. Wesley: “Offer them Christ.”

Methodism needs to emphasize its connectional character throughout the world, but this connection is, in the first place, to be understood theologically, not institutionally. We are in a time when decentralization is the order of the day. The United Methodist Church cannot maintain huge bureaucratic boards and agencies. At the same time, we need dynamic ministries of cooperation throughout the world. This is one of the special possibilities for United Methodism as a global church in mission. What we mean by global church, however, must be carefully and constantly examined. Global realities have to do with sharing and learning in mission together.

Methodism must give up any thought of cultural dominance and see its role as offering an ecumenically significant presence to Christians throughout the world. I think that this is something that United Methodists in Europe can contribute to the rest of Methodism. The experience of living in countries where Methodism is a minority, where it never was culturally dominant, and where there may be established churches or living in settings decidedly hostile to Christianity, has required European Methodists to choose their identity and to live with ambiguity and commitment. I think Methodists in the United States will increasingly be in this situation. For us it will be new and profoundly challenging. To have brothers and sisters elsewhere in the world who have already experienced this reality can be particularly helpful.

Methodists need always to take the long view and to trust God’s providence. I conclude on a note of optimism and hope. This is not because of any sociological, demographic or historical factors. I think that “decline” is the wrong word and that it offers the wrong image. Toward the end of A History of Christianity Paul Johnson discusses the decline of Christianity in an institutional or establishment sense during the course of the twentieth century. All over the world, by the last quarter of the century, he writes, “Catholicism appeared to have joined Protestantism and Orthodoxy in a posture of decline. Yet it must be asked: Is the expression decline appropriate? If the claims of
Christianity are true, the number of those who publicly acknowledge them is of small importance; if they are not true, the matter is scarcely worth discussing. In religion, quantitative judgments do not apply. What may in the future seem far more significant about this period is the new ecumenical spirit, the offspring of the Second Vatican Council."

My hope and optimism come from my conviction that the church of Jesus Christ is of God and will endure until the end of time. Methodism is one expression of the larger church. Wesleyan theology has particular insights to contribute to the larger church. But, in the end, what matters is the gospel of Jesus Christ. Exactly how the future will turn out, we do not know. But we can be certain that God is in our future, and our hope is that God is not finished with us yet. There is still ministry for the people called Methodist as long as we have breath. Our calling is to be faithful in our response.

Notes

1. This article was first prepared for the International Consultation on the Future of the United Methodist Church in Europe, held in Vienna, Austria, in September, 1994. I was invited by the European Theological Commission to address the topic of the United Methodist Church in the multicultural society of the U.S.A. The intention was to contribute to the consultation by providing a look at Methodism in contemporary North American society. The topic is appropriate because Methodism in Europe is linked closely to U.S. Methodism. Until recently, Methodism in Europe has been little noticed by most in the U.S. There was little real understanding of the vital Christian witness and evangelical commitment of Methodists in Europe. The actual structures of the church, its congregations, and connectional life were not well understood. Its official relationship to the General Conference, the Council of Bishops, and the general boards and agencies was not considered except by those who had direct responsibility for historic relationships or ongoing partnerships. In recent years, however, this has changed. European United Methodists are playing a larger role in the church. Active European United Methodists are significant contributors to the work of commissions, committees, boards, and agencies. I think indigenous European leadership is stronger than ever. Greater attention to the global nature of Christianity, and of Methodism, has caused Methodists to be more interested in the work of the church in Europe. The dramatic events in Eastern Europe, in particular, over the last few years, have heightened the interests of U.S. Methodists in the role of the church in Europe and the opportunities for witness and service. Changing conditions in the United States have made it clear that we have much to learn from United Methodists who have always lived in a cultural context in which they were a minority people, in societies where state churches, other dominant expressions of Christianity, or open and strong opposition to Christian faith have been characteristic. Currently U.S.
Methodists also recognize that the dramatically changing conditions in contemporary Europe may teach us a great deal about how Christianity, and Methodism, may look in the future, especially in relationship to other living world religions. This article grows out of research in progress as part of a major study of United Methodism and American Culture based at Duke University and sponsored by a grant from the Lilly Endowment. I am grateful to Russell Richey for his advice on the first draft of this paper. Our joint work and collaboration initiated the proposal to Lilly for the research project.


9. Episcopal Address, Methodist Episcopal Church General Conference, 1900.


Manfred Marquardt

Adaptation or Resistance: Christian Churches in Germany and Their Policies under Totalitarian Regimes

The memory of those days in the first half of the year 1945 is as vivid in my mind as if it were yesterday. One evening before sunset, my mother—after she had finished her daily work—and I were standing in the stable of my grandfather’s farm. My father and his two brothers were soldiers in the German army. The youngest was missing in Norway, which Hitler’s army had invaded and occupied in a short time; the others were fighting on the Russian front line. My mother and grandparents did not speak about the war when the children were present. But I felt instinctively that something awful was nearing. Although we lived in a little village, we had to seek shelter from Allied bombers flying to Berlin in order to drop their pernicious cargo.

Finally, a rumor began to spread through our village: the Russians are coming. Sometimes the noise of artillery fire could be heard from afar. I had never seen a Russian. There was a Ukrainian man, a forced laborer, working on our farm as long as I was able to remember; but I did not see any relationship between him and the soldiers of the Red Army. For us children, he was a good friend and comrade, to a certain

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extent even a substitute for our father, whom we did not see more often than once or twice a year. The adults spoke of the Russians with anxiety and mostly in an undertone. The childish imagination, superseding our ignorance, produced strange beings, similar to humans but with faces like gas masks, so that they could not be identified, and with big black eyes, mute like fish. When I thought of them coming nearer, I trembled with fear. That fear, of course, had objective reasons and was founded not only in a little child’s anxiety.

That evening as we stood in our stable praying for the lives of our family, my mother took me aside and told me of her plans. Two days later, we left our home in order to escape the Red Army front—ten persons on a covered wagon: my grandparents, my mother and her mother (whose husband had been killed by Polish partisans before the Second World War had begun), my aunt with her two little girls, my brother (less than four years old), my sister (two years old), and I (seven weeks before my fifth birthday). All going northwest. Only three weeks after we set out we were back again. The Red Army had been faster than our two horses; there was no chance to escape. My grandfather, therefore, decided to return home. My mother’s mother died during the trek, and she had to be buried beside the road.

We found our house partly destroyed by artillery shooting, our pantry and cellar plundered, our clothes and dishes stolen. But nine out of the ten who had departed three weeks before had saved their lives. The new future began with the reconstruction of our house. My father did not come back; we were informed some months later by one of his comrades that he had lost his life in East Prussia, which afterwards became a part of the Soviet Union.

From that time on, my life and reflection went in two directions: one parallel to the running of times, the other thinking back on the past. What were the antecedents of these overturning events and developments? Who were the people responsible for all the damage and death, the dimensions of which became visible only by degrees? Who was my father, and what role did he play in this disastrous game? Who sent him to war six months before his first child was born? Our prayers had been heard as far as our own lives were concerned. But this was no longer satisfying for a boy who began to realize that life was more complicated than he had experienced before his flight from home.

I have chosen this perspective of the year 1945 because it allows us to look back to the so-called Third Reich and to look forward to the
situation in Central Europe after the end of the war in that part of the world and after the unconditional surrender of Germany, whose government had started this terrible war that resulted in the death of more than 50 million people. My perspective, of course, is—as I said before—that of a German who was born during the war and who tries to be as honest as possible to those who want to be informed about the fifty years of Central European history lying behind us.

* * *

The Situation under the Nazi Regime

Every epoch in history is rooted in its past. That is true also for the time of Nazi government (1933-1945). It is only by highlighting some of that past that I can shed light on the development which led to the legal establishment of the Nazi rule in Germany.

The experiences and results of the First World War brought about fundamental and revolutionary change within German culture, religion, and politics. The unfortunate connection of throne and altar, meaning the mutual support of the state church and the monarchy, as well as the traditional relation of religion and culture, of belief in God and uncritical patriotism, had come to an end. It is almost impossible for people who have grown up in a democratic society, in which the separation of state and church is a matter of course and political power is under control of the public, to imagine how deeply the German people were shocked by the war itself and its outcome. The German theologian Friedrich Gogarten, who for more than ten years was a friend of Karl Barth, Rudolf Bultmann, and other "dialectical" theologians, expressed the basic attitude of his generation in an article written four years after the end of war:

_The times have fallen apart, and now, time is standing still. For a moment? For eternity? Should we not be able to hear God's word? Should we not see his hand doing his work? That is why we cannot, must not yet go from the one time to the other, [no matter] how strongly it may draw us. The decision must have fallen before. Without this, we cannot do anything whole-heartedly. We are standing between the times. That is an awful human need. For all, which is human, is breaking now and going to ruin. Everything that was, and everything that_
will be. But, if we understand the need to its depth, we will be able to ask for God. . . . Let us in this hour refrain from nothing more than reflections about what we should do now. In this hour we are not faced with our wisdom, but we are faced with God. This hour is not ours. We have no time now. We are standing between the times."

Many of the academic teachers had compromised themselves by supporting the war publicly, uncritical victims of the official propaganda. The German Kaiser had to abdicate, leaving the people without their leader who—according to the conviction of many—was emperor by God’s grace. This vacuum was filled up rather quickly by four political movements:

1. A large part of the population wanted the old system to be restored. “We want our Kaiser to come back” was the popularized version of their objective. Leading churchmen, members of the nobility and of the upper class, and high officers of the army were the pillars of this “congregation.”

2. The Social Democrats and the Catholic Center were prepared to build a new democratic society and to work for an international peace order to overcome the old nationalism in Europe.

3. The Independent Socialists, who later formed the Communist Party, had separated from the Social Democratic Party which—in their opinion—was not radical enough in overthrowing the old structures.

4. The ultra-rightist groups tried to abolish the democratic governments in different towns and provinces by a coup. Hitler himself was involved in such an attempt in Munich; it failed, however, and the führer of the National Socialist Party was sent to prison.

Not all of these movements were identical with political parties; the first national parliament, the so-called Reichstag, had many more larger or smaller factions, which made it difficult to form a coalition strong enough to support the government. Between 1919 and 1933 no government was in charge for a whole legislative period.

George Kennan served in Germany during the late stages of the so-called Weimar republic. He recalls, “Here was a brave experiment in democratic and republican government in a country which had never known anything of this sort before. All the odds were against it. The Weimar Republic had to combat the effects of the bitterness of defeat, the wartime losses, the biological disbalance, the economic disruption, the inflation, the social upheaval, the great spiritual
bewilderment; as well as the vindictiveness and indifference of the Western Allies, the anti-republican prejudice of the army officers' corps, the general lack of any democratic tradition...” And Geyer added: “Such was the tragedy of Weimar.”

Therefore, if we ask, “Why were so many Germans taken in by National Socialism?” we have to take this situation into account. There are many factors, of course, which moved people in the early 1930s to accept or to support Hitler’s party. If we try to identify the most important factors, they might be the following, which had in common the Nazi promise to meet the fundamental needs of the German people:

1. They promised to bring the unstable political and social situation to an end and to replace it with a national order (völkische Ordnung), based also on moral principles. In this endeavor they were supported by conservative Protestants. Gordon Craig described this attitude correctly: “The clergy, long used to regarding the princes as their titular leaders, found it difficult to accept a regime in which the Socialist and Catholic parties played such dominant role, and either held to a stubborn monarchism... or gave their support to nationalist, and implicitly antirepublican, movements.” But “The experience of the Catholics was not much different.”

2. They promised to give back the pride to the German people after the humiliation of the Versailles Treaty. The extremely exaggerated reparation claims and other hardships of this treaty had caused bitterness and nationalistic emotions in Germany, making it a hotbed for the Nazi propaganda.

3. They promised to save the Christian Occident from the Bolshevist threat to the two-thousand-year-old culture. The Führer’s order of the day for the June 22, 1941, the day of the German invasion into Russia, included these phrases: “German soldiers, you have entered into a hard and responsible battle. The fate of Europe, the future of the German Reich, and the existence of our people now are lying in your hands.”

Twenty-three days later, on July 15, President Roosevelt gave orders to the U.S. Navy to open fire without warning on German ships and aircraft. Hitler’s assault upon the Soviet Union had changed the positions of Churchill and Roosevelt towards Stalin almost overnight; Hitler’s former accomplice became their confederate.

4. They promised to end the economic crisis caused by the international—especially North American—depression during the late twen-
ties in the aftermath of the First World War. At its climax there were more than six million jobless people in Germany, more than 30 percent of the working population. Some governments under different leadership had tried to improve the depressing situation, but it became worse rather than better. Only two years after Hitler’s coming into power, the percentage of unemployment had been reduced to 10 percent, little more than two million people.

In his book *Comments on Hitler* (1978) the famous German historian and author Sebastian Haffner cites a speech by Hitler on April 28, 1939, four months and some days before World War II began. In his typical style of self-adulation Hitler boasted that he had overcome the chaos in Germany, restored order, increased production in almost all branches of industry, eliminated unemployment, united the German people politically and morally, destroyed page by page that treaty which, in its 448 articles, included the most shameful oppression ever exacted of peoples and human beings, restored to the Reich the provinces lost in 1919, returned to their fatherland millions of unhappy Germans who had been placed under foreign rule, and restored the thousand-year-old unity of the German living space—all without shedding blood or inflicting the scourge of war upon his own or other peoples, and all by his own efforts, although, only twenty-one years earlier, he had been an unknown worker and soldier. Haffner added that this was nauseating self-adulation, couched in a laughable style, but “it’s all perfectly true—or almost all.”

On the whole, there are many objective reasons for the success of Hitler and his National Socialist Party. But the deepest reason, which underlies all others, was the spiritual, moral, and intellectual confusion during the time following World War I. The different levels of the developments are closely linked, of course. Economic welfare, by covering up the need for spiritual, moral, and intellectual guidance, might have prevented Hitler’s rule. But instead of realizing the kairos and accepting the responsibility of the unclaimed leadership in the society, the Christian churches and their leaders were looking back to—as they thought—“better” times.

**The Christians and Churches under the Nazi Regime**

Hitler’s policy towards the churches was Janus-faced. On the one hand, he presented himself as believing in God. He often appealed to
divine providence as the power by which historical progress was achieved, and he promised to strengthen a "positive Christianity." On the other hand, his personal belief was a mixture of Christian and old Germanic elements, "blood and soil" were looked upon as sources of revelation, the Protestant churches were to be forced to form one united German Evangelical Church, and the Bible had to be "purified" from all Semitic "falsifications." But this side of the double-faced position was hardly to be seen in the first years. Hitler had given information about his ideology in his voluminous book Mein Kampf, yet only a few people had read it. Therefore, the German population in its attitude towards Hitler was divided into two unequal parts: Most Germans "profited materially and psychologically" from the politics of the leader. "The devotion that Hitler won from the Germans by the positive achievements of the years before the war was remarkably resistant to reason and reality." When criticism of any kind was levelled against the Führer, "there was a tendency to argue that he did not know about the matter in question and would not have tolerated if he had." Most church members were part of this majority of the German population. Hitler had gained the support of many Christians after his public declaration of the newly established government's commitment to faith in God and Christ. The answer from the leading men of the EUB (Evangelical Association), including Bishop Umbreit, was a public address to the government which said, "The Evangelical Association, as a German free church connected with our nation and its fate, welcomes joyously the significant change of our fatherland's history. Thankfully we acknowledge the great merits of the government of the Reich in uniting the German nation, the effective way of acting against the destructive power in our country and the resolute struggle against wickedness and demoralization." A smaller portion of the people were critical of Hitler and his rule—in different degrees ranging from not supporting Hitler to fighting against him. All dedicated Communists, of course, were his enemies; we do not know what would have happened if they had won the majority. Many Social Democrats, Centre Party members, and politically unconscious Christians formed the movement of resistance against Hitler; some had reorganized his true nature from the beginning of his public appearance; others became aware of it when the Nazis started their campaign against the Jews and their program of exterminating not only mentally handicapped people, gypsies, and
male homosexuals but any political opponent. But we must keep in mind that the existence and real purpose of the concentration camps were unknown to many people and that secret information about the destruction was hardly accepted as being true because it seemed incredible. Even Willy Brandt in his Norwegian exile did not believe the Secret Service reports that Hitler was burning people in the concentration camps.

Like Franco in Spain and Stalin in the Soviet Union, Hitler was a rather perfect dictator. After coming into power by legal elections in 1933, he asked the parliament for special powers to improve the economic situation in a short time. His demand—give me four years—was answered positively by the non-socialist majority of the Reichstag, which promulgated the so-called Enabling Acts. After four years, the legal opposition against Hitler was practically eliminated, public criticism had become dangerous to life, the Gestapo held the whole population under perfect control, and the system of surveillance included all public and most private spheres of life.

How can a Christian church respond to the almost total superiority of a state with secret and open anti-Christian objectives? In spite of the different reactions of Christians and churches, three different positions were held—if not by all, at least by a large majority of the active church members in the Protestant state churches and free churches: (1) The confession of faith in Christ means a resistance to the universal claim of the state, since this is in conflict with the universal claim of God. (2) The task of the church is to proclaim by word and deed the gospel of God's salvation in Christ. Political motives are not the church's affair, even if political importance attaches to the behavior of Christians and churches. (3) Christians are willing "to be subject to the governing authorities" as long as these authorities are "not a terror to good conduct" (Rom 13:1, 3). In cases of conflict they are obliged to "obey God rather than any human authority" (Acts 5:29). In spite of these clear positions, there are difficulties in applying them to practical life.

Hitler's aim of getting the churches under his control was directed mainly at the church government as well as the churches' social and youth work. As early as three-and-a-half months after his assumption of power, in July 1933, he installed a so-called Reichbischof as head of all Protestant territorial churches; in the same year, all youth organizations were dissolved and their membership forced to join the
Hitler Youth, which became the only officially recognized youth organization. What was the answer of the churches? To the latter, they dissolved their youth organizations and made work with children and young people take place at the local congregation. That meant a reduction of their activities but a preservation of a certain freedom of working for and with the younger generations.

The churches' response to Hitler's attack on their governing bodies is more difficult to give, of course. The German Christians, agents of Hitler's politics within the territorial churches, succeeded in placing Hitler's favorite candidate, the former army chaplain Ludwig Müller, on the episcopal seat. They also won a majority in many parish councils. After this, it was inevitable that the churches would wish to formulate a theological basis for a legitimate (though according to the state laws, illegal) church government. This happened when the first synod of the confessing church on its session in May, 1934, passed the "Theological Declaration" of Barmen (named after the city of Wuppertal-Barmen, where the meeting took place). The second article of this declaration puts it very clearly: "Jesus Christ, as he is God's promise of the forgiveness of all our sins, in the same sense and seriousness he is God's strong claim on our whole lives; through him, we receive the happy liberation from the ungodly obligations of this world in order to freely and thankfully serve his creatures." And it goes on: "We reject the false doctrine that there are areas of our lives in which we do not belong to Jesus Christ, but to other lords."**

On this theological foundation the Confessing Church organized its own church structures, claiming to be the only legitimate German Evangelical Church. Despite state persecution of leading members of the Confessing Church (during which Martin Niemöller was sent to a concentration camp from 1938-45), the arrest of many pastors, and firing of professors (Karl Barth was expelled from his chair of theology in Bonn), Hitler was eventually forced to abandon his attempt to form a Nazified Christian Church. This resistance to Hitler's move against the churches was not an attempt to reverse the political order or to abolish immoral laws by which the Nazis were slowly depriving the civil rights of Jews and other minorities, or to do away with Hitler violently. It was, instead, the faith-born determination to obey God rather than men in the area of ecclesial work in its strict sense, including, for example, a protest against Hitler's program of killing handicapped people. Anything else—as
the fate of Bonhoeffer and the men of 20 July, 1944, demonstrated—would have been a step to self-sacrifice. Bonhoeffer’s decision to join the political resistance did not receive the approval of many church leaders, as can be seen in their unwillingness to put his name on the prayer list of the Confessing Church. The old political conservatism and a widespread abstention from autonomous political activities had caused this strange behavior. “Bonhoeffer was hanged for his role in the resistance.” He was far ahead of his fellow Christians.

What was the position of the free churches during that time? In order to reach a just and adequate judgment we have to take into account some significant differences between the large territorial churches forming the German Evangelical Church (and within its limits the Confessing Church) on the one side and the small free churches on the other. Whereas the membership of the former state churches included more than 50 percent of the German population, the constituency of the four free churches which formed the union of evangelical free churches did not count more than about a half million persons. It was not until 1919 that they were given the legal rights of corporations under public law. Many leading persons of the German Evangelical Church protested sharply against the willingness of the new parliament of the Weimar Republic to grant this status to small religious bodies. The attacks on the “foreign plants”—as they were called by state church pastors because of their origins in the English or North American awakening—did not end with the termination of the close relationship of state and church after World War I. When I was a probationer thirty years ago, I lived in a city where Baptists and EUB members had a cemetery of their own; the Evangelical Church of that city did not allow free church members to be buried in their cemeteries. Before 1919, no free church member was allowed to be a civil servant. And many of the former state church officials had not yet made their peace with the situation.

Given this history, it seems understandable that the connections between the German Evangelical Church and the free churches were still waiting for further development. The Confessing Church decided not to include the free churches in their deliberations and actions. Since the small churches had no members in higher ranks of the state and since their political influence was very small, they had no real influence on public life and were consequently overlooked by Hitler. Nevertheless, there were at least three menaces to the little churches:
(1) to be infiltrated by the German Christian movement, (2) to be
discriminated against because of their international relationship, and
(3) to be forced into the German Evangelical Church. Please allow me
to illustrate these dangers and the answers of the Methodist churches
(Methodist Episcopal Church and Evangelical United Brethren
Church).

In the early months of the Nazi government, a few members of the
Central Germany Annual Conference who tried to introduce the
so-called leader-principle into the Methodist Episcopal Church and to
establish it as a purely German church with a German bishop. They
did not succeed, because the majority of the conference members did
not accept their attempts. In particular, the lay delegates' clear refusal
helped to overcome this early crisis in one of the German conferences.
Perhaps it was this failure which prevented the Nazi sympathizers in
other conferences to try a smaller coup. One of the ministers who
witnessed that crisis published a report and a critical analysis of those
days:

It was the awareness of the early Methodist calling to preach
the gospel, that sinners may be saved and holiness spread over
the land, which helped to stop the penetration of Nazi-ideology
and principles into the Methodist church. The role of the
bishop, in this case of Bishop Louis Nuelsen, was crucial in
this process. The traditional free-church abstention from party
politics caused a fundamental skepticism towards all
tendencies of combining the spiritual task of the church with a
commitment to political functions. And the discipline of the
Methodist church proved to be a helpful instrument in coping
with this blatant attack on an international Christian
fellowship.

The second danger threatening the Methodist Episcopal Church was
not averted in this way. Two-and-a-half years after the assumption of
power by the Nazis, in September 1935, the Central Conference of
Central Europe met in Freudenstadt in the Black Forest. This Central
Conference was one of the three which the General Conference of the
Methodist Episcopal Church had established in 1924, the other two
being the CC of Northern Europe and the CC of Southern Europe. The
CC delegates were surprised by the information of the German
delegation that the annual conferences in Germany had prepared and
submitted to the German government a common constitution and that they intended to form a CC of their own. The Minister of the Interior had approved of this constitution and thus the Methodist Episcopal Church in Germany came into being. The relation to the worldwide church was reduced to the phrase in the Constitution stating that the necessary laws would be promulgated in accordance with the Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church. For the situation of German Methodism this step may have been a kind of alleviation, because it was able to get rid of the “foreign smelling,” as Bishop Nuelsen expressed it in his speech during the constituting assembly in Frankfurt 1936: “The German Methodists can look into the eyes of their clansmen saying: Methodism is German.”[1] But the other annual conferences which belonged to the former CC of Central Europe felt left alone. Methodism in Switzerland, Austria, Hungary, and Yugoslavia had its origins in Germany; many German preachers had invested their lifework in these countries. The majority of the pastors had received their theological training in the common seminary in Germany. The German Methodist Episcopal Church felt strong enough to go its way alone—it was a concession to the political situation in her country. But the wounds suffered in those days are still painful. The recent attempts to form one CC in Europe have tried to overcome this development, but it will take much more common experience and close connections to accomplish this task.

In 1936 a German bishop was elected by the CC in Germany. He was F. O. Melle, the dean of the Theological Seminary in Frankfurt. This name is connected with the German free churches’ fear of being forced into the German Evangelical Church. Bishop Melle tried to motivate the free churches to form a closer union than before in order to get a stronger position vis-à-vis the government. The director of the Baptist Federation in Germany, Paul Schmidt, was a fellow combatant in this endeavor. In 1937, the second Conference for Life and Work was held in Oxford; its main theme was “Church, Community, and State.” The delegation of the German Evangelical Church was not allowed to attend that conference because the government refused the necessary visas. Only the two free church delegates, Melle and Schmidt, received permission to travel to England. When the conference released a statement about the critical situation of the churches in Germany, the two German delegates protested publicly, stating that there was complete freedom in Germany for preaching the gospel, evangelization, for pastoral and social care, as well as for
building new churches. "With our prayers for the government we give thanks to God that in his providence he has sent a Leader, who was given the possibility to save Germany from the threat of Bolshevism and to pull back a people of 67 million from the abyss of desperation caused by the First World War, the Versailles treaty and its consequences."

One can understand the public outcry that was heard not only in Oxford but also in Germany and within the Methodist and Baptist churches. The two upright Christians did not realize what they had done to the ecumenical community and how they had been misused as an instrument of the Nazi government to drive a wedge between the Christian churches. They would have done a better service to the free churches as well as to the ecumenical movement if they had stayed home.

After the war, a few months before his death, Bishop Melle, looking back on the years of his episcopal service, wrote: "It was my principle during that time, that we might behave as God's servants, who must be prepared to render account before God, their conscience, and history. In this sense we have tried to work during the time of crisis." This was correct to a large extent, if we do not take into account the silence of the majority of Christians in face of the Holocaust, the unjust war, the discrimination and persecution of thousands whose crime was a public or even a private critique of the governing regime. As Karl Jaspers expressed it after the end of the war and the Nazi terror: "It is true, we were no heroes, we did not run down the street crying for the Jews. We did not want to commit suicide."

Yet many individuals, Christians and others, showed extraordinary courage by hiding Jews, by assisting endangered persons to leave the country before they were arrested, even by civil disobedience. For example, Bishop Friedrich Wunderlich, an officer in the German army, was responsible for the provisions for the inhabitants of a city in Saxony. One morning during the last weeks of the war he received an order to blast a bridge that was important for the transport of the supplies but also for the advancing Soviet army. The order closed with these words: "The officer who receives but does not execute this order will be sentenced to death, and his family will be exterminated."

Wunderlich, who knew his family to be in a safe place in Frankfurt and himself to be surrounded by fellow officers sharing his conviction about the decline of the Nazi regime, refused to carry out the order; the bridge remained standing and the officer unpunished.
The Situation under the Soviet Regime

If you happen to be a friend of the theater and if you should have the opportunity to attend a performance in the famous Wurttembergisches Staatstheater in Stuttgart, you will find in the foyer a copper tablet engraved with the words of Mr. James F. Byrnes, the Secretary of State of the United States, who gave a speech at the cornerstone ceremony on September 6, 1946. It reads in English and in German as follows:

"... The American People want to return the Government of Germany to the German People. The American People want to help the German People to win their way back to an honorable place among the free and peace-loving nations of the world."

At that time "German military and industrial power had been destroyed and the very structure of German government had totally collapsed. A power vacuum was left in central Europe that was only temporarily filled by American, British, and French armies." The whole country lay in ruins except a couple of smaller villages and a few suburban parts of the large cities. The plan of the new order, which was to be established after the unconditional surrender of Germany, included the extension of the Soviet Union to the west and the installation of governments in Eastern Europe which had to be friendly towards the Soviet Union. The plan also included the conveyance of East German territory to Poland and of West German territory to France; the Ruhr area, which was and is the most important industrial region of Germany; and the Kiel canal, which connects the Baltic Sea and the North Sea, were to be placed under international rule. The remaining parts of Germany were divided into four zones under the administration of the four Allied Powers. The economic design was to completely destroy the industrial basis of Germany by closing the coal mines on the Ruhr and by demolishing or deporting the industrial plants. After May 1945, the Soviet government realized these plans as far as their zone of occupation was concerned. The Western Allies, following their principles of indivisible freedom, indivisible security, and an indivisible world market, had to note (during the Yalta Conference in February 1945 at
the latest) that it was impossible to have both the application of these principles on the European order and the friendship with Stalin’s Soviet Union. The only link between the Western Allies and their Eastern comrade-in-arms was broken: their common enemy Hitler. Now each government followed its own interests. The three Western allies promoted the revitalization of democracy in their occupation zones while the Soviet army helped the German Communists (who either returned from exile or were freed from captivity in concentration camps) to seize power in the Soviet occupation zone and gradually to establish the system of what they called “socialist democracy.”

The Situation after the War

Germany. When the Second World War came to an end in May, 1945, the German people faced the worst catastrophe in its history: lost provinces; cities laid in ruins; hundreds of thousands of expellees, mostly women, children, and elderly people; millions of dead; wounded, captured, and homeless human beings; and worst of all—a mixture of anxiety and hopelessness, a sense of guilt and disorientation in the hearts of many. Would there be a future for this nation, and if so, what could it look like?

The Evangelical United Brethren Church had lost almost five thousand church members out of 33,500. Fifty-three church buildings were destroyed completely, thirty-two were heavily damaged, and forty received minor damage. Twenty-two circuits in the provinces east of the Oder and Neisse rivers were lost, because church members had to leave their homes and to settle in those parts of Germany which had not been conveyed to Poland or the Soviet Union.

The figures for the Methodist Episcopal Church in Germany are the following: more than a quarter of the active ministers were killed as soldiers or civilians; over two thousand lay preachers, Sunday school teachers, and other coworkers did not return home; and 60 percent of the church buildings were completely or heavily destroyed. The murderous war and the Nazi ideology had left behind an economic, spiritual, and moral chaos. The members of our two worldwide churches had to ask themselves how their sisters and brothers in other countries would behave towards them, who had failed in so many...
situations when their faith in Christ and their discipleship had been put to the test.

**Central and Eastern Europe.** A look at the situation after the end of World War II must necessarily include a view of the churches in those countries which—sooner or later—exchanged one oppression for another: the dictatorship of Hitler and his Nazi regime against that of Stalin and the Bolshevist party rule.

There were approximately 150,000 Protestants in Yugoslavia, the majority of the population being either Orthodox, Roman Catholic, or Muslim. Today there are two districts of the United Methodist Church in that country: the North District with 14 congregations of 25 to 100 members each and the South District in Macedonia with 10 congregations of 30 to 500 members each. Before the Second World War the congregations in the North were purely German; after the war many Germans left the country so that the churches there had almost no members. Many small groups of Christians and members of the temperance movement joined the Methodist church, forming new congregations which consisted mostly of Slovak people, one Hungarian and one Macedonian church. They publish two church papers, one in the Slovakian and one in the Serbo-Croatian language.

Bulgaria and Macedonia were both still under Turkish rule in certain of their territories at the beginning of this century. Macedonia itself and its ethnic population has been claimed by both Bulgaria and Greece as integral to themselves. Both are lands dominated in matters of religion by the Orthodox Church. In Macedonia, the Orthodox Church was dominated by the Serbian Orthodox Church. Only recently has the Macedonian Orthodox Church with its own patriarchy been recognized by the world community of Orthodox churches, save the Serbian church.

During the Second World War, the Methodist Episcopal Church in Macedonia was connected with the Bulgarian conference, because Bulgaria as an ally of the German government was allowed to annex Macedonia. Nevertheless, the congregations remained strong and active until after the war when the Communist Party took over. According to the report of the Methodist minister in Skopje, the capital of Macedonia, the years between 1945 and 1960 were the most difficult period of the recent Methodist history. The new rulers intended to build up a state without churches. Since religion—according to Karl Marx—is the opiate of the people, the
churches should disappear completely. On top of that, the Methodist Church was looked upon as a church of the West, and her ministers were accused of working for the West. Church members and some ministers were sent to prison; yet in spite of these persecutions the congregations kept their courage and confidence, being unafraid of the authorities and their oppressive measures.

The said minister of the church in Skopje, remembering his childhood in those years, shared with me his memories: every Monday at school, the Methodist children had to give report of the Sunday school lesson and were punished for attending church by being kept in the whole afternoon. But the children did not stop attending their Sunday school.

After 1960, when Tito broke off relations with the Soviet government, the church’s situation improved. Christians received more freedom, although there was still some control by the state. They were allowed to meet freely in their churches, to print periodicals, and to have contact with churches in the West. Work with young people in particular received a fresh impetus in those years.

The contrasts between this work in the south of Yugoslavia and that among Slovaks in the north is great, both in level of training and in polity. Equally strong is the contrast between the work in Macedonia among rural and less-educated people and that in ethnically related Bulgaria, where many intellectuals have been a part of the church. The Macedonian and Slovakian work may well need special support, supervision, and accompanying personnel in order to demonstrate convincingly the positive potential of our worldwide connection in the face of forces within the connection and without.

It is significant to note that the Methodist Church in Bulgaria has withstood in the most recent phase of its history well over half a century of severe persecution. It continues to survive, despite having been given up for lost at various times in its history by the “mother” church. After World War II the work of all the churches in Bulgaria almost came to an end. The trials, which began after the Communist takeover in 1946, were intended to destroy religion overall but affected primarily the Protestant churches, whereas the Orthodox Church as the national church was still too strong to be attacked. Many Protestant pastors were put in prison. Methodist ministers were looked upon as U.S. spies. Superintendent Zdravko Beslov spent twelve years in prison, and of the more than seventy ministers who were incarcerated only he and sixteen others survived. The churches were forbidden to teach children, and most of the older generations
who were trained in Christian beliefs had died during that time. Church buildings were converted into stores or theaters or ping-pong training centers. A girls' school was taken by the state. The official theory of the state foresaw the end of all the churches not later than the year 2000 A.D., and every effort was made to help fulfill this prophecy. But the most perfidious state tactic was the attempt to destroy the churches from the inside by appointing preachers who did not belong to the Methodist or any other Protestant tradition but were mostly extreme Pentecostals who provoked schisms within the churches. Some of those congregations did not survive. In 1990 the first annual conference after 43 years of separation was held under the leadership of Bishop Heinrich Bolleier, and three elders were ordained. They do not work as full-time pastors but have to earn their living in other professions. What touched me most deeply when I met the late Superintendent Beslov, an old man depending permanently on the assistance of his wife, was the fire burning in his heart and the resoluteness of his dedication to God's kingdom. He made plans for instructing children, training young men and women for the ministry, and regaining church buildings for the congregations as if he were still a young man of thirty. The Methodist Church in Bulgaria has survived the war of extermination by the steadfastness of her members and ministers.

The Methodist Church in Czechoslovakia lost some of her congregations after 1938, when Nazi Germany occupied parts of the country where many Germans were living: Bohemia, Moravia and Sudetenland. For a certain time there were worship services in German and Czech languages; but since much of the Czech population was moving inwards, this cooperation was no longer possible. That Czechoslovakia was a country with a couple of different nations was reflected in the membership and situation of the churches: Ruthenian and Slovak members were served by Hungarian ministers; Superintendent Bartak, who was the chairman of the Prague District, was a U.S. citizen; the majority of the church members belonged to the Czech population, a smaller portion were Slovaks.

When Hitler established a Slovak State in 1939, the inner church exchange and communication became still more difficult, because no Czech minister was allowed to serve in Slovakia. Nevertheless, the church in those hard times was not silent but protested the occupation of Czechoslovakia. "Superintendent Bartak, in the capacity of secretary of the Union of the Protestant Churches, signed an 'Appeal to the
Conscience of Mankind," which was addressed to Christians worldwide. And on October 15, 1938, he himself wrote an open letter to Lord Runciman in which he expressed his protest against the occupation of border areas of the republic, where Czechs were living. . . . Lord Runciman answered Dr. Bartak by trying to explain that he had succeeded in preventing a war. The future led him in a horrible way to see his mistake." After Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor and the American declaration of war on Germany, Reverend Bartak was arrested by the Gestapo, put into prison, later sent to an internment camp in Upper Bavaria, and finally exchanged for an American German. The Methodist church as a so-called "American Church" was under continuous suspicion of being engaged in underground activities. Some church workers and members were imprisoned because they had helped Jews to get out of the country, others because they were of Jewish origin. Some did not return from Nazi prisons but were executed or tortured to death.

Since the Methodist churches in these East and Central European countries were cut off from the mother church in the United States, they also suffered from economic distress. Nevertheless, they did not dismiss their pastors; rather, the members increased their giving, and the headquarters supplemented the money which was still lacking by loans to be repaid after the end of the "thousand years Reich." Despite the hostility between the German and the East European nations, there were signs of Christian fellowship transcending the frontlines of nationality, language, and ideology. This can be illustrated by many an example; let me tell you only one: When the Czech members who had left Bohemia returned to their homes after the end of the war, they found on the walls of their chapel in Litomerice German Bible verses written on panels which had thus preserved the Czech Bible verses written on the wall itself. But on the whole, the work in those places, where it could be renewed, "actually had to be started as a completely new work." Contact was lost with many because they had to move again. Of the others who returned from exile in Bulgaria or Hungary, some created independent congregations. On the other side, there was a widespread spiritual awakening among the young generation, a number of whom decided to study theology. Thus, they created a new generation of pastors who had to face a situation of state-church relations which were regulated by new laws of the Communist rulers.

I take Czechoslovakia as a sample for the living and working conditions of the Protestant churches after WW II. They are described...
shortly and authentically by the former superintendent, Dr. Vilém Schneeberger:

For a period of twenty years, no Methodist bishop could come and act officially as a bishop of the church, e.g. presiding over an annual conference. The church in Czechoslovakia was totally isolated from those in other countries. As far as I know it was only the Czechoslovakian State which paid the salaries of the ministers of all registered Christian churches; but the public church laws had a mostly negative impact in many ways: (a) The churches could not enlarge the agreed number of ministers and parishes; in fact, the state tried to reduce the number. (b) Before a minister was sent into a congregation, the church needed official approval for him from the government. (c) The state had the right to refuse approval even when a minister was transferred from one congregation to another; this made the system of transferring ministers very difficult. (d) The state could dismiss a minister, and the churches could not do much to oppose this decision. (e) The salary paid by the state was reasonable in the first years, but it was not raised for more than thirty years, and the churches were not allowed to add anything to the salary; young men and women were discouraged from entering into the ministry because of this very low salary. (f) Vacant ministerial positions in the congregations had to be filled in thirty days, otherwise the state could refuse to accept a new minister.

Besides these regulations, the state controlled all the finances of the churches...it approved the budget and controlled the expenses. The churches had to submit their financial reports to the state authorities for approval.

What were the consequences of these not only discriminating but also impeding regulations? Evangelistic work was impossible outside the church premises, appointment of additional pastors was very difficult or—depending on the attitude of the so-called “church secretary,” who was the state official for all religious affairs and in any case was a member of the Communist Party—even impossible as was the employment of a foreign minister or the exchange of a Czechoslovakian pastor and a colleague even from another “socialist” country. The church secretaries on the different levels (state, area,
and the Secret Police were responsible for the controlling the churches. Because of the financial control and the policy of the state it was almost impossible for the church to buy new properties.

"In these years," reports Dr. Schneeberger,

the United Methodist Church lost all of its social work, the homes for orphans and aged people. Children were not allowed to come together in the summer camp. In the congregations there were Sunday schools for children, but many parents feared difficulties for the children in the state schools (and there were no other) and in their later life and did not bring or send the children to Sunday school. The Methodist Youth Fellowship had to stop its activities, the only youth organization permitted was the official party-led state organization. Also church publishing almost ceased.\(^{19}\)

After thirty years of existence, the *Christian Advocate* was forbidden, and the church was without any periodical; only a Methodist Hymn Book was permitted to be printed in 1952.

What were the commonalities between Czechoslovakia and the other states with a communist government, the so-called people’s republics? The expectation of the death of any religion was an integral part of any Marxist-Leninist ideology. Nevertheless instead of trusting the regularities of the historical process the Communist rulers did their utmost to restrain the activities of the churches and to apply pressure for people to leave their congregations. Privileges to atheists and injuries to faithful Christians—it was the old and well-proven means of the carrot and the stick which the authorities applied sometimes in a bungling, sometimes in a masterly manner. And this method did not remain unsuccessful. In the first years of the communist domination, about 10 to 20 percent of the members left the Protestant churches. But those who remained faithful became more engaged and more active; they knew the price and were ready to pay.

After the first decade of Soviet superiority in Central and Eastern Europe, there was a time of consolidation within the Warsaw treaty and an amelioration of the living and working conditions of the churches. But that period did not last long. The building of the Berlin Wall and the destruction of the so-called Prague Spring were clear signs of the still prevailing goals of communist power politics.
Reconstruction and New Beginnings

International Relief Actions. The first steps are always decisive for the way we go. The reconstruction of West Germany and of the churches in that country would not have been possible without the unexpected and overwhelming support of people, organizations, and states which a few months earlier were looked upon as enemies of the Germans. The story of these people and their organizations must never be forgotten. Immediately after the end of the war, they started working to save a nation from starvation, freezing, and epidemic diseases as well as from despair and resignation—a nation which had covered large parts of the globe with violence and destruction. This philanthropic endeavor arose mostly from faith in God’s forgiving, reconciling, and redeeming love. Let me start my short description of this “Crusade for Christ,” as it was named by the General Conference meeting in Kansas City before the end of the war, with a little anecdote which you can read in Karl Heinz Voigt’s biography of Bishop Friedrich Wunderlich. Dr. Wunderlich, at that time a discharged soldier and a professor on his way to the seminary in Frankfurt on Main, met a young, well-dressed American soldier in front of a farmhouse. Wunderlich asked: “Are you the commander?” The officer answered, laughing: “I am only the interpreter, but my German is not very good.” And he asked Dr. Wunderlich where he had learned his English, which sounded so familiar to his ears. “Well,” answered the German, “I was a student at Northwestern University in Chicago and at Garrett Biblical Institute.” This answer identified the speaker as a Christian theologian. The American interpreter lay his hand on Wunderlich’s shoulder exclaiming, “My hometown! I am a Methodist studying theology in Evanston.” These men, belonging to armies fighting against each other a couple of days ago, recognized each other as brothers in Christ. Reconciliation and building new bridges were made possible on this common foundation.

The churches in European countries such as Switzerland, Sweden, or Great Britain, in the United States, in Canada, and Australia had decided not to forsake people in need, not to inquire first about guilt and responsibility for the injustices and destructions which had happened because of and during the war. This would be done later, of course. But the first necessity was help for the needy, especially for children and the elderly. Children were invited to spend some weeks in the Swiss mountains. In the seminary, potatoes were counted for
every student, but there were potatoes for each of them. Clothes, linen, and food coming from overseas reached their addressees; a relief organization of the Evangelical churches in Germany was founded in order to distribute the gifts among the poorest, both Christian and non-Christian, Catholic and Protestant. And with those gifts, the recipients felt the friendliness and generosity of fellow human beings whom they did not know either by name or by face but who were closer to them than many of those living on the same street.

It is true that the European Relief Program, the so-called Marshall plan, was of vital importance for the recovery of the economics; but those charities given by persons to persons meant more than just material support in a situation of distress. They were a kind of remedy for the spiritual and mental diseases which a totalitarian regime and a total warfare had caused. The implantation of democracy in a country where the first democratic experiment had failed would have led to another failure without the experience of a global community of humans.

There was another side effect of this international relief: for the first time since the Reformation of the sixteenth century, all Protestant churches were working together in the Relief Organization of the Evangelical churches in Germany. Those who had received help joined hands in order to help others. Ecumenical councils were called into existence in addition to the Union of the Free Churches and the Evangelical Alliance, namely, the Conference of European Churches and the Working Association of Christian Churches in Germany. The fellowship of suffering from Nazi oppression helped form a fellowship of believers from different Christian churches. It was possible to overcome differences that for centuries had separated the churches and their members. A new era of ecumenism began during the time of persecution which changed into minor matters what had been looked upon as essential. The heartbeat of that development was a concentration on God's word, as revealed in Christ Jesus. Congregations were places to hear about and to experience the love of God. The churches received new members—not only those coming from the East but also newly converted people. New congregations came into being in places where none had been before. Church buildings could be repaired or reconstructed, and wooden churches from Scandinavia or the United States offered a provisional home for many a congregation in East and West. The seminaries in Frankfurt and Reutlingen received the first students after the war, and in 1948
Swiss students were allowed to join their German brothers as before the war. Deaconesses were admitted to their homes and hospitals, where they could take up their work again. The publishing houses in Frankfurt and Stuttgart, which had been heavily damaged by bombs and artillery, were rebuilt and resumed their business.

In spite of all the shortages it was a time of fresh confidence in God’s power and of readiness to set out for a new land. It must not be denied that some tried to heal the church and the country by attempting to turn back the time and to return to the fleshpots of Egypt, i.e., to an epoch of close connections between church and state. Some efforts in this direction were successful, especially in West Germany. I will return to this point at a later moment.

Development in East Germany (Soviet Zone, German Democratic Republic [GDR]). After Nazi Germany lost the war, the four Allied Forces of Britain, France, the U.S.A., and the USSR divided the German territory into four zones occupied by their respective armies. The three Western allies promoted the revitalization of democracy in their occupation zones while the Soviet army helped the German Communists seize power in the Soviet occupation zone and gradually establish what they called "socialist democracy." West Germany received benefit from substantial Marshall Plan aid while East Germany struggled to recover from Soviet "reparations." The Soviets had begun plundering Eastern Europe, especially East Germany, of vast amounts of industrial and railroad equipment. "The long-lasting economic imbalance between the two Germanys thus was not simply a matter of capitalistic success and socialist failure; it had much to do with their opposite experience of reconstruction. The Berlin Wall needs to be viewed, at least in part, as a consequence of this lack of economic parity. From the political division of Germany in 1949 until the wall was built in 1961, more than 2,600,000 persons had left East Germany for the increasingly prosperous West Germany, with severe economic consequences for the East. . . ."

Germany was completely in the hands of its conquerors; it had ceased to be the subject of its national history after a time of foreign rule forced upon its neighbors. But here was also "one of the most terrible ironies of the twentieth century. A supremely tough, militant, no-compromise, fight-to-the-finish wartime policy, that of demanding unconditional surrender for the sake (it was said) of an enduring peace, set stage for both the Cold War in Europe and the nuclear arms race." It
was the lack of imagination and planning for future developments (and perhaps a false estimation of Stalin's strategy) that contributed to four decades of dangerous confrontation (1945–1985) before Gorbachev was elected General Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party. Instead of helping to balance and heal the powers of Europe, Germany became instead the fractured center of confrontations between East and West. The Berlin Blockade 1948/49 and the establishment of NATO in 1949 and the Warsaw Pact in 1955 were decisive steps on this way. In 1949, two states were being formed on German territory, divided by the frontier which separated the spheres of influence of the Superpowers: the three Western zones became the Federal Republic of Germany, the Soviet zone became the German Democratic Republic.

Let us turn from high politics to everyday life in East Germany. There are some significant differences between the Nazi dictatorship and the Communist regime, but they have at least two things in common: (1) the strong will to exercise control over the lives of all their citizens in all areas and at all times, and (2) the idea of transforming the values, concepts of living, and philosophy of all people, beginning with but not confined to children at school. The main content of the communist ideology is well known; it is by no means less important to have a look at their methods. The fatal influence of the communist ideology on the education of children is vividly illustrated by the East German author Gerhard Branstner in a modern fable which goes like this:

At a time when the children of animals also had to attend school, the raven was asked to be the teacher of political science. He took the primer in hand and explained to the little ones how positive everything was. Not so much as a tiny cloud was to be seen on the picture he painted of the world. That moment a little mouse, looking out of the window, cried out: Sir, it is raining!

Yet the teacher, still looking into his book, shook his head: There is no rain. But it's raining indeed, the little mouse shouted again. That moment, the teacher wrote a bad mark into his book because of the mouse's bad behavior. That's what happens, he croaked, that's what happens when you look out of the window during classes.
What sounds nice in this parable was bitter reality for many, especially for those who dissented from Communist ideology. Through a period of forty-four years, Christians in East Germany had to witness the truth of God's will and word vis-à-vis a political system that claimed all monopoly of truth.

As in the first phase of National Socialist rule in the years 1933 to 1936, there was some endorsement of political measures by large parts of the population, even Christians, on the following grounds: land reform provided small farms for rural laborers; school reform provided a general school system with equal chances for children of all social levels; and key industrial plants were being nationalized—especially those that had supported Hitler and his party.

*Christians could understand these reforms as right steps towards a more just society. But at the same time one heard of people suddenly disappearing. Who had arrested them and where were they taken? ... Mistrust and fear were growing and church leaders had to speak up.*\(^{24}\)

There was a large discrepancy between official propaganda and the text of the constitution on the one side and the actual political praxis on the other. Although the borders to West Germany were closed at that time, one could still leave the country via Berlin going from East to West Berlin. This was an illegal act, because no citizen of the GDR was allowed to leave the country without written permission by the state authorities. Therefore, those who wanted to emigrate had to leave behind all their goods except those few which one needs for short trips or a visit with relatives in West Berlin.

Many Christians did not see any future for the churches there, for they suffered discrimination, disadvantages, and even persecution by their all-controlling state. In July 1961, about 6,000 people per day were leaving East Germany, until the stream was ended by the wall round West Berlin and the barbed wire and mine fields between East and West Germany. The decision to build the infamous wall in Berlin was born partly out of despair; its purpose was to hinder citizens from leaving their own country. After that scandalous action, every person in East Germany knew that they had to stay and adapt to the given circumstances, whatever that would mean to each of them.

What was the task of the church in that situation? It had to challenge the inhuman implications of the closed border. It had to tell
the government: You do not trust your own people. Some interventions were successful—the authorities allowed retired and handicapped people to travel West or even to leave the country. Church intervention in these cases unmasked the cynical character of the attitude of the Communist government to people: Those who were not able to work did not count. "The claim of those in power to be the advocates of a humanist concept was exposed."25

The Protestant churches began to understand themselves as "churches in socialism," not for or of socialism but in that state which had declared itself to be a socialist one. This term church in socialism was nevertheless highly misunderstood and was indeed misunderstood. Professor Richard Schröder, a theologian and now a leading member of the newly founded Social Democratic Party in East Germany, explained it more precisely, saying that

_in this formula the word socialism is nothing but a description of the societal and political situation in the GDR. Nevertheless the formula as such includes a kind of recognition in three aspects: (1) the recognition of East German society as the place for the Christians and churches in the GDR, (2) the recognition of the socialist state as a state, and (3) the recognition of the geopolitical place of the GDR. It did not include an overall vindication of the status quo by the church. Therefore, others had suggested to speak of the church in the GDR instead of the church in socialism. The church did not intend to be a church against the socialist state, but a church for the people living in that state._

In spite of all their endeavors to come to terms with the authorities, Christians had to live with a sort of everyday guerilla warfare against them.

To illustrate the normal troubles which aggravated the work of the church in East Germany before 1989, let me tell you about an experience which a Methodist minister had. Most of our churches use a showcase in front of their church building to give information about their services and to communicate some gospel truth to those who pass by. One of the ministers, with whom I spend some time during my holidays, wanted to visualize Paul’s advice "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Rom. 12:21) by a picture showing a heart divided into halves, the right one showing a fist and
the left one an open hand. Being very happy to have found this graphic fitting the biblical text so well, the pastor placed the picture into the showcase of his church. Some days later he received a telephone call from the mayor, a member of the Christian Democratic Party. Since the minister had received his appointment to that particular church only a few months ago, the mayor said he wanted to introduce himself and inform the new pastor about the city and its special situation. After a friendly but superficial conversation, the mayor came out with another problem: the local secretary of the Communist Party had given an order to remove that picture from the showcase on the grounds that it was a manifest political provocation. The minister was rather surprised by this interpretation and decided to meet the secretary in order to hear the particulars. “Well, this is quite clear,” replied the secretary. “The fist comes from the east, and the open hand from the west. In reality, the opposite is true. Therefore, you have to rid your showcase of that untruth.”

What should the minister do? It made no sense to reason with that person. Remembering that the party is always right, he decided to beat the party secretary with his own weapons. “This incriminating picture,” he informed the state official, “is the reproduction of a postcard which was printed in the GDR and therefore must have the license of the competent department.” There was a moment of silence followed by those words: “Well, if you will show me the postcard, I shall withdraw my order.” And he had to do so.

This was only a harmless example for the very difficult position of church people vis-à-vis any authority of the state or the Communist Party. Very often the outcome was of different significance and consequence.

Bishop Wunderlich, giving a report on Methodism in West and East Germany to the World Methodist Conference in Oslo 1961, summarized his insights and principles for the ministry of Christians in those times:

This is what we should remember when we feel our responsibility as ministers and laymen to preach Christ to our people: (1) Stay where you are, facing the problems rather than avoiding them. (2) Go straight ahead and preach Christ and His kingdom under all circumstances, even if you have to pay a price. The price, however, can never be to act against your own conscience or to change and adapt the eternal truths
of the New Testament just to present ideologies. It will be necessary to emphasize certain truths, even though they might be unpopular. (3) We should always remember the words of our Lord: Seek ye first the kingdom of God. It always has priority. When we have dissenting political views in our congregation, we have the great responsibility to teach our people and to show them that our Christian belief is not identical with a political creed. Even dissenting brothers should still recognize each other as children of the same Father. (4) A church must never be linked up with a certain form of government, thus becoming nothing but an obedient servant or even tool. The church has the great task to be the conscience of the nation, clarified and sanctified by the Holy Spirit. We take our orders from Christ, who is the King of kings. (5) As citizens we have a right to have our own political convictions. But there is no room for hostility. With regard to our belief in Christ, there is no compromise possible with atheism and dialectical materialism. . . (6) Our task can never be to erect dividing walls of hostility. . . We trust that the spirit of power and love and discipline will enable us to be true and faithful ambassadors for Christ in East and West. (7) We should never overestimate the power of an ideology dominating at present, however strong it might be; we should never underestimate the power of Christ and His kingdom, which will last forever.

This was said more than thirty years ago and has proven to be true.

*   *   *

Understanding God’s Call in the Breakdown of Political Systems

The shock of those who experienced the breakdown of a political system, whose supporters or victims or fellow travelers they had been, was deeper after 1945 than in 1989, when the fall of the Berlin Wall made manifest the collapse of the East German government and the whole Communist power structure.

Not later than 1941, when the so-called Final Solution of the “Jewish question” began to run its deadly course and when mentally handicapped
people—children and adults—were sorted out for the deadly injection, a growing number of Christians realized the diabolic traits of the Nazi regime. Excellent propaganda delivered masterpiece after masterpiece to conceal, minimize, or justify the destructive measures of the death machinery, many of them of a unique perfidy within human history. Despite this, however, watchful citizens, listening perhaps to BBC in spite of the risk of severe punishment, became aware of what was going on in their country and what they themselves would have to expect after an eventual victory of Hitler’s army.

But it was too late for any change through legal action. Some closed their eyes for fear of being arrested, being sent to a concentration camp, or even being executed under existing martial law. Most Germans, except those who followed Hitler for better or worse, were conscience-stricken but felt paralyzed and powerless. “In the active resistance to Hitler,” Gordon Craig resumed, “dedicated churchmen” played “a worthy part.” But all their efforts finally failed.

The New Beginning of the Church after 1945

The dominant feeling in most Christians after the breakdown of the Nazi regime in May, 1945, was a mixture of relief at the shipwreck of Hitler and his mob, of mourning for all the victims of war and terrorism, and of guilt, anxiety, and hope.

The Stuttgart Declaration of October, 1945, was not the first confession of guilt and regret. In 1941, for example, the Board of Missions of the South Germany Annual Conference stated in its official report: “We lament for having expected almost enthusiastically, that the transformation of the political system would foster the life of our churches.” But the declaration which produced a worldwide and mostly positive resonance was that by which the newly elected representatives of the Evangelical Church in Germany, face to face with their brothers and sisters from foreign churches in an ecumenical meeting, confessed openly and publicly: “We accuse ourselves that we did not witness more courageously, pray more faithfully, believe more joyously, love more ardently.”

When, for the first time after the war, the members of the Council of the Germany Central Conference met in Frankfurt on December 5-7, 1945, those who had held a responsible position in the church during the Third Reich decided to publish a word of confession, which
was appreciated by Methodist churches in other countries. Considering all the crimes which had been committed in the name of the German people, they stated: "In God-given solidarity with our nation... we bear the blame and atone for all omissions of persisting prayer, intrepid witnessing and active love. Therefore we are earnestly determined to bear willingly and patiently the sufferings which God has sent us.”

Eighteen months later, when Professor Gordon Rupp visited Methodist churches and conferences in Germany on behalf of the “Christian Reconstruction in Europe” Fund, he referred to the German Methodists’ declaration. As a member of a church that had lost 2,161 church buildings because of German V-weapons and bomber attacks, he added, “Your repentance makes us aware of the guilt we have to take upon ourselves.” These and similar processes of reconciliation, (e.g. in the Evangelical United Brethren Church) built new bridges between the Methodist churches on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. Bishops J. J. Epp and J. S. Stamm, representing the mother church on the first European Central Conference of the EUBC, which never formed a German Central Conference but had remained European, assured the German delegates and members that “in spite of the war the fellowship of faith and the fraternal relationship with the European conferences of our church was persisting continuously.”

There was no word of repentance by Bishop Melle in his message to the first Central Conference Session after the war, which was attended, among others, by Bishops Raymond Wade, Paul Garber and Theodor Arvidson. The often uncritical position towards the Nazi authorities, the addresses to Hitler, the silence in view of the persecution and extermination of the Jews and the agitation against the so-called “bolshievist sponges” should have given sufficient reason for a public acknowledgment of debt.

It is true that there was not much which the Christians could have done against Hitler after he had taken over; no nonviolent action would have overthrown the dictator. But some church leaders had become false prophets. Their attempt at remaining unpolitical had blinded them to the political consequences of this attitude. It is not up to me to throw stones at those brothers and sisters, because I was not in such a difficult position and I do not know what my decisions would have been. Nevertheless, it is our Christian duty to analyze those correlating developments in order to learn how to be faithful, responsible Christians in our societies and political contexts.
There have been some attempts to supersede the crimes of the Third Reich: the so-called denazification in the Western zones of Germany (i.e. an examination of all members of the Nazi party, which was often connected with an early release in spite of criminal offenses), decreed anti-Fascism in the Soviet zone, and a public declaration that the East German government was not the legal successor to the Nazi Germany and therefore was not responsible for any compensation resulting from the injustices of the Hitler government. A few years ago some historians started a new attempt to reduce the guilt of those responsible for the annihilation of hundreds of thousands in Auschwitz and other concentration camps by pointing to allegedly similar institutions in Stalin’s Siberia and even in earlier times of history. But even if one thinks that Auschwitz was not a fundamentally unparalleled system, the aim of this public campaign was questionable and doubtful—to distract the attention from those crimes before all criminals were arrested and sentenced and before all victims (e.g. the gypsies, the homosexuals or those people who, without their consent, were made medical test persons), had received rehabilitation and compensation. It is probably inappropriate to blame a people as a whole for what their rulers have done, but it is by no means inappropriate to expect that they accept their responsibility for the consequences of their government’s politics. The German-Jewish writer Ralph Giordano has spoken of a “Second Guilt” of the German people because so many culprits got off cheaply. I accept this judgment; we must not deride the victims by granting amnesty to the guilty before they have served an adequate sentence or by belittling acts against fundamental human rights. This difficult task is not yet accomplished.

The main thing I have learned from the Nazi period is this: Hitler succeeded in winning the support of normal and decent people by demonizing certain minorities and using them as scapegoats for all the evils which people had to suffer from. He spoke of human beings as rats or insects—useless, undesired, and noxious. By this ideological strategy, for which he used any means of infiltration and hidden persuasion, he swept away the scruples of many about discriminating, disadvantaging, excluding, and persecuting human beings who had not done any wrong. Christians were therefore justified in speaking of the breakdown of the Third Reich as God’s judgment upon it.

This deep upheaval in German church history raised great expectations concerning the beginning of a new era of church
structures and polity. Gordon Craig described this attitude very clearly as far as the territorial churches are concerned: "It was the hope of many Protestants after 1945 that, with all of the old ties with the State broken, their church might make a clean break with its past and begin an era of evangelical freedom, in which the congregations were independent, making their own decisions through their own boards of elders or synods, running their own financial affairs, existing without bishops and elaborate bureaucracies. This was Martin Niemöller's desire when he called after 1945 for a church not of pastors, as in the past, but of 'brotherly organization and brotherly life.' " These desires were not realized as far as the territorial and the Roman Catholic churches are concerned. Instead, it happened (as we notice during the current developments in East Germany after the time of official separation of church and state is over) that the advantages of a close link with the state seemed too palpable to be rejected. State support would provide the financial support for rebuilding and would also give the churches more power than earlier to exert influence on government policy.

It was a completely different matter with the free churches, especially the Baptists and the Methodists. To elect their own delegates and to be free from any structural link with the state was a part of their tradition. They had to pay for that freedom with the renunciation of any financial support for their church life, which is not easy in a country where church taxes, collected by the revenue offices, are normal. Some weeks ago, I applied to the government of Baden Württemberg for support for a new students' hostel which we have to build for our students. The answer was no.

One of the reasons why the large churches gave away their chance to begin a new era is, as I think, the doctrine of the so-called two realms. The idea goes back to Martin Luther, but it received a new shape during the nineteenth century: state and church are two different areas of life; in the church God's word and spirit are the governors; in public life, reason and political power are the rulers. Since the secular order was ordained by God, Christians have to obey and to regard their service to the state as a form of worship. From this doctrine, which at its root says something very important and true, a conservative influence determined the social ethics of many Lutheran churchmen and—combined with the traditional privileges of the church—prevented change from taking place.

From this perspective the small free churches had little to make up for, because democratic traditions were at home with them since the
beginning. On the contrary, perhaps we must again become more aware of the authority which the Spirit of God can give his messengers without leaving behind the authority of the congregation to judge the preaching of those who are in the pulpit.

The Evangelical United Brethren Church and the Methodist Episcopal Church had three priorities in those years after the war:

1. Gathering the church members who had been scattered by war, flight, or expulsion from their homes. Many church buildings had to be repaired or reconstructed; in some places, where there was no church and where people coming from the east were forming a new congregation, they strived to have a meeting place of their own. Thus, the fifties in particular became years of reconstruction in East and West—though under different circumstances, even if the East German government permitted the churches to import material and to receive money from Western churches to support the rebuilding in their country. Many pastors and lay members offered innumerable hours of unpaid help to keep the costs as low as possible. Parallel to these efforts, the refugees had to be lodged and provided with the necessities, and many poor people had to be fed and clothed.

2. New efforts had to be made to integrate the newcomers into the existing churches. They had different ways of living their faith; they spoke a different dialect; and, since they had lost almost all their property, they now belonged to the lower class within the community and the church. In this respect, the itinerant system of the Methodist church proved to be very helpful, for pastors did not automatically belong to the resident part of the congregations; instead, most of them had received appointments to distant places and thus became mediators between the local church and those Christians coming from the East and looking for a new earthly and spiritual home. In addition to these programs the church established a tracing service and a traveling service of its own. The tracing service tried to find those people whose names and home churches were known but whose actual address was unknown. Some of them had settled in places where no Methodist church was near at hand; they were visited by traveling preachers regularly. The church tried to keep contact with those people until they had found either a new spiritual home in another church or the way back to a Methodist church.

3. The third and equally important emphasis was on the evangelistic task. Whether the society was shaped by Marxist atheism, as in
the East, or strongly influenced by capitalistic secularism, the gospel of God's redeeming love by which alone humans can be saved was to be proclaimed on all occasions, convenient or inconvenient. A tent mission and a radio mission began their work. And the people were open to the message, searching after a new meaning for their lives. One report from those years says, "One felt to have stepped back into the times of awakening at the beginnings of the Methodist movement." The decade after the war was the time of the largest growth in membership of the Methodist churches during the twentieth century.

In East Germany, this work had to be done under very difficult circumstances; not only did the government and the local authorities oppose the activities of the churches but many important church institutions were located in West Germany: the publishing house, the theological seminary, the deaconesses' homes, and the bishop's office. Therefore, a new seminary had to be established; it started in 1952 and finished its work in 1991. A new biweekly church paper was published: *Friedensglocke* (bell of peace). The hospitals of the church received a new head office to coordinate their services and assist them in their negotiations and relationship with the public authorities. All of this was connected with smaller or bigger attempts of the Communist Party to restrain or to hinder any activity of the religious bodies of the country.

**Church and Society**

The most important Christian impact on the society was not an official institution or program but a lay movement initiated by an East German nobleman who was compelled to leave his farms beyond the newly established German-Polish border: Reinhold von Thadden-Trieglaff. He was convinced and shared this conviction with others: "Humans need God in order to be able to solve their problems, that is the truth." As a successor to the "Evangelical Weeks" during the Third Reich and in opposition to a clerical misunderstanding of the church, he founded the German Evangelical Kirchentag, a lay movement with biennial meetings, destined to offer a forum for the dialog between church and society and between culture and science, to preach the Word of God, and to make it possible for all who attended the meeting to discuss actual problems in light of Christian faith. Many people unsettled by economic need and lack of orientation gladly accepted this
opportunity. In 1951, 200,000 attended the closing open-air service in Berlin; three years later, 650,000 gathered on the Rosenthal meadows in Leipzig for the same purpose. This gathering was at the same time a strong witness for the desire to overcome the division of their fatherland, since international and national political developments were taking a different direction.

It was not only by this indirect manner that Christians wanted to exert political influence on society as a whole; many of them realized that it was a great mistake to assume that it was possible to remain politically innocent by abstaining from political involvement. They had learned from Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s theology and life that it is in the center of this worldly life where Christ wants us to be and to serve. Christians from different churches came to know each other during their fight against Hitler and the time of their imprisonment. After the war, they decided to form a new political party by which men and women in Christian partnership and being bound only by their conscience were directly engaged in politics: the Christian Democratic Union (CDU). They knew from experience where a government can lead a people if it does not respect freedom of conscience. And they wanted to translate into reality Bonhoeffer’s political legacy: “The question is whether a public order will be realized in Germany, which is related to God’s commandments.”

Gustav Heinemann, the later president of the Federal Republic of Germany and founding member of the CDU, interpreted the task: “The democratic authority, which we have to establish, has to be rooted in God’s order.”

The new “Christian” party was soon being used for a different purpose: to assure ecclesial influence on government policy, the two large churches, the Evangelical Church in Germany and the Roman Catholic Church, collaborated on the formation of the Christian Democratic Union, which became the majority party in the politics of the Bonn republic from 1949 to 1968. The famous Roman Catholic theologian, Father von Nell-Breuning, a specialist in social ethics, added some doubts about the genuine possibility of establishing a Christian party: “Establishing a political party on grounds of the Christian world-view in truth is no establishing of a political party on grounds of a given world-view. It is nothing but the attempt of creating and activating an anti-power against the anti-Christian powers.” And indeed, in the years after 1949, when Konrad Adenauer...
was elected chancellor of the new Federal Republic of Germany, the anti-communist position of the members was a major uniting element within this party. On the other hand, the program of the older Social Democratic party, which had refused to approve of Hitler's Enabling Act, was still anticlerical and Marxist. It became the political platform for many Christians, who, during their time of imprisonment, had learned to respect members of the Social-Democratic party and who were not ready to cooperate with quite a number of former members of the Nazi party who had joined the CDU. For them, the political fight was not that of Christianity against Marxism but—to repeat a famous saying by Gustav Heinemann—that the political involvement of the Christians had to find its foundation in the belief that Christ did not die against Karl Marx or anyone else, but for us all.\(^3\)

In 1958, the new program of the SPD (Social Democratic Party) took into account that quite a number of non-Marxists had become members by declaring democratic socialism to be rooted either in Christian ethics, in humanism, or in classical philosophy. This ideological conversion opened the way for those reform-conscious citizens, including a number of Christians who denied Marxist philosophy; and it created the preconditions for a coalition with the CDU in 1966 and the takeover in 1969.

It was difficult for any Christian in a politically responsible position to differentiate between the constant need to identify that evil which was to be superseded by good, on the one hand, and the simple confrontation of different political conceptions on the other. As early as 1951, Bishop J. W. Ernst Sommer was warning publicly against identifying the battle of the powers of good and evil with, for example, the Korean war.\(^4\) It had to remain a very clear and trustworthy Christian message, that God's love encompasses all people and that none must be excluded from it.

**Christians in a Divided Country**

The strong anti-Communist reserves of many Germans in the West, nourished by Soviet and East German measures such as the blockade of West Berlin in 1948/49 and the bloody suppression of the revolt in 1953, made it difficult to reflect calmly on the best measures for securing peace in Europe. This interior antagonism was institutionalized and carried to extremes by those "giant organized
systems of self-righteousness,” as Herbert Butterfield described them.35 “The effect of the whole situation (was) barbarizing, since both sides (took) the wickedness of the other as the pretext for insults, atrocities, and loathing; and each side (felt) that its own severities are not vicious at all, but simply punitive acts and laudable matters of judgment.”

The incorporation of West Germany into NATO and of East Germany into the Warsaw Pact confirmed the existence of two states on German soil, each a reliable member of opposing political/economic systems. Those treaties had not destroyed the unity of the nation as a cultural and linguistic unit, but time did not work in favor of a legal reunification. In 1958, the German chancellor stated that the security of the Federal Republic of Germany was more endangered and the reunification was farther away than ever. There were chances of peaceful reunification in 1950 and 1952, before the Soviet Union possessed nuclear weapons of their own; but these opportunities were never tested, and we are left with a haunting “what if?” The Evangelical Working Group of the CDU had suggested that the offer from the Soviet Union in 1952 be taken seriously. The Soviet Union offered—and not for the first time—unification, freedom of speech and of the press, free development of economics, national armed forces, admission to the United Nations, a freely elected government, and all this under the condition that Germany did not join any military alliance. But was Stalin to be trusted? Could a united Germany remain neutral without being worn out between the two military blocs? When Adenauer heard of the suggestion from the Protestant representatives of his party, he gave one single comment: “Insignificant.” He was firmly resolved to go on with a complete integration of West Germany into the Western Alliance.

Reconciliation with the Western countries and former military adversaries was completed by the end of the Fifties. But tensions within Europe and in Germany had not been reduced. There was the building of The Berlin Wall in 1961, the oppression of the spring of Prague in 1968, and many incidents on the inner-German border as well as on the streets of West Berlin. Therefore, a new political initiative towards the Eastern states was overdue. Again it was the Evangelical Church which gave the first public indication with the memorandum “On the situation of the expellees and the relationship of the German people to its Eastern neighbors.” The authors of this memorandum and all who supported its message of reconciliation by
acknowledging the existing borders and relinquishing all kinds of violence had to bear many hostilities. The officials of the associations of the expellees and some right-wing politicians spoke of a sellout of Germany and its legal rights. It was very difficult for them to believe that renunciation could lead to benefit.

When Willy Brandt became secretary of state in 1966, it was on this foundation that he started his policies to reduce the existing tensions by negotiating with the Eastern European governments. He was also attacked from many sides, but in the elections of 1972 the majority of the German people approved his politics of reconciliation with the East under concurrent cultivation of the links with the West. The treaties of Warsaw and Moscow and the agreement of the four Allied Powers on the links between the Federal Republic of Germany and West Berlin were the fruits of these endeavors. The situation in Germany and in Europe had been improved on the whole. At the same time, the existence of two independent and sovereign German states had once more been confirmed. Many Germans were convinced that these states would exist longer than the present generation. Just as the division of Germany had been the result of external factors, so would any fundamental change in the relationship between the two parts of the country depend upon the state of world politics. Such change was not foreseeable until 1986, and the German division was looked upon by most of the neighbors as "a part of the European balance of powers that secures peace in Europe."  

In 1969, the congregations of the Evangelical Church in East Germany dissolved their ties with the Evangelical Church in the Federal Republic of Germany and formed their own federation. During these years between 1966 and 1970, the unification of the Methodist Episcopal Church and the Evangelical United Brethren Church in Germany was being translated into reality. In 1968 a united Central Conference of the United Methodist Church was established, but the newly elected bishop was no longer allowed to chair an annual conference session in East Germany. Thus, the annual conference decided to ask the General Conference for the permission to form a Central Conference in the German Democratic Republic. Nevertheless, what Bishop Friedrich Wunderlich said about Methodism in Germany during the World Methodist Conference in 1961 remained true. "We are still one church... (Our delegates) still speak the same language, they still understand each other, they still love each other in unbroken fellowship. They feel their common responsibility as bridge-builders and ministers of reconciliation on
behalf of Christ.” In 1992 the two German Central Conferences with permission of the General Conference formed one Central Conference in Germany with one bishop and four annual conferences.

In the eighties, Christian congregations in East Germany attracted a growing number of young people who began to express their disenchantment with the regime. Just as under the Nazi government, it was only in the churches that freedom of conscience, freedom of thought, and freedom of speech were to be found. The churches were determined to protect criticism and to from admit into their buildings those who wished to avoid being watched over by the state security service. This was not easy because, as we now know, about 25 to 30 percent of the East German population probably have worked for this security service; of course, there had been collaborators in the churches and their administrations. The regime of the Communist Party had created something which is typical in totalitarian states: an atmosphere of almost complete mistrust and a system of mutual watching over. Since the so-called “unofficial contributors” did not know each other, you could never be sure that your neighbor, your colleague, or even your friend was not one of them. The further the atmosphere spread, the stronger was the need for a place with the fresh air of confidence and openness, which was only to be found in very small groups or in the churches, at least many of them. Some charge conferences were afraid of restrictions by the state authorities if they admitted nonconformist groups into their buildings. But on the whole, the pastors were looked upon as being reliable and discreet; many people, who had almost no idea of the essence of the Christian faith, because they were systematically being alienated from Christianity, did know at least that the church was a place where one could go in situations of distress, anxiety, and sorrow.

This service of assistance for all, Christians and Marxists, reflected again what Christians had learned from Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who had emphasized that the church is the Church of Christ only if it exists for others. A concept of pro-existence was being developed which included taking the Communists at their word when they claimed to be the protagonists of justice and peace. One of those Christians wrote: “We had to call a lie a lie, and offer our support for all political actions that would be in the interest of all. This concept was far more difficult to practice than the hibernation policy of the Roman Catholic Church. It forced us to make ever new efforts to discern God’s will and to have ongoing contacts with the state officials, to negotiate with
them and to challenge them.” When the system broke down, only the church representatives were credited with the leadership of the roundtable negotiations by which the new democratic order on all levels of the liberated society was to be prepared.

The Peaceful Revolution

Any revolution which leads to lasting changes within society or a political system needs—besides many external means—a spirit to breathe into it the breath of life. The spirit of the peaceful revolution, or—as an East German writer called it—the revolution of white candles was that of the international peace movement with its numerous forms and actions.

The peace movement had a strong tradition in postwar Germany. Starting with early protests against any kind of German rearmament in the early Fifties, with the so-called Easter marches against nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction and the cultivation of international relations in order to reduce mistrust and fear based on ignorance, disinformation, and prejudice, it found a new global expression in the process for Justice, Peace, and the Integrity of Creation. After the sixth assembly of the World Council of Churches in 1983, this conciliar process also provided an excellent framework for the East German churches to deal with the global Justice, Peace, and the Integrity of Creation concerns; and the national assemblies became a kind of rehearsal for democracy. The papers produced by these assemblies became the major reference papers for the political declarations of the groups promoting radical change in the German Democratic Republic in October and November 1989.

The external condition for this revolutionary change was President Gorbachev’s initiative for Glasnost and Perestroika in the Soviet Union beginning in 1985. At first, the Communist Party in the GDR thought that it could afford not to follow the Soviet Union—for the first time in its history. But they got trapped in their own arrogance. For the people in all so-called socialist countries were calling with growing impatience for Perestroika at home.

In East Germany the revolution of the white candles started at churches where peace prayer services were held. People outside the churches would wait until those inside had finished their weekly peace prayer. When they joined the group outside they were carrying candles
in their hands, which became a significant mark of the demonstrations. If one carries a candle in one hand and cups the flame with the other, one is not able to take up stones and throw them at the police. After the revolution succeeded, Christians found themselves as a kind of attorney for the former persecutors. They tried to protect the human dignity of representatives of the hateful state security who were afraid of acts of revenge and turned to pastors for help. The gospel became credible for people who were not members of any church, because the church had no political or military power and did not long for it.

One of the outstanding leaders of the revolutionary movement, the artist Bärbel Bohley, received the 1991 World Methodist Peace Award for creativity in her struggle, courage in her resistance, and the consistency she maintained through years of political restriction and oppression. She was one of those who did not close their eyes when the realities were very hard. "We did not want to leave our country," Mrs. Bohley said, "but to set our human dignity against the power of the state." And she added, "If you speak of socialism or capitalism, that is the structure. We changed the structure but now we are seeking a new content for our life. We stand not at the end but at the beginning in East and West, North and South." That reminds me of a statement President Gorbachev made in an interview in early 1991 which was proved by his own experience the same year: "The powers of the cold war did not yet surrender. In order to free ourselves from totalitarianism, we need not only political and economic, but also spiritual democracy."

This is where the gospel comes in. "Believing in God and hearing his word we will find paths leading us out of pride, apathy, and selfishness, the abuse of our position in creation and of the gifts entrusted to us." This was our confession in the German conciliar process. And the declaration goes on: "God has not given up his creation. His covenant with Noah holds to this day, despite human unfaithfulness. In Jesus Christ God founded a new covenant, which has overcome the power of evil and death. As we follow Jesus Christ we experience... that God's reconciling and saving love becomes the power which frees us and enables us to take new action... All people are invited to share in God's kingdom, in which he reunites the parted, heals the wounded and awakens the dead to new life."

Those who trusted God's promises—the peace groups with their "swords to ploughshares"—buttons, the small prayer groups, the individuals resisting the poisoning of souls—shared the experience...
that God's word was very near to them. It took away fear when they set out for a demonstration, and it prevented them from using violence. The Word of God is by no means less important for their time since the change, when the past has to be worked through, when the victims meet the perpetrators, when huge problems are to be solved.

The Actual Situation and Its Challenges

All over Europe, east and west, there are four main areas where major problems have to be solved:

1. The financial support of the churches in the east that need to renovate the buildings which were either returned to them by the government or were neglected because of a lack of financial resources. The conferences in Central and Eastern Europe especially are unable to accomplish this tremendous task on their own. They also need support for their publications, for the training of their ministers and the education of lay people, and for the proclamation of the gospel via radio and television, in tent mission and new evangelistic endeavors.

After the opening of the Iron Curtain, the churches were given many new opportunities for building up and cultivating relationships within their church family and with the state authorities. This development was a perceptible burden for the ecumenical life in the eastern countries; tensions were growing especially between the Roman Catholic Church and the Protestant churches, the latter of which had tried to take responsibility for the people in the society who did not belong to the churches, thereby making themselves assailable and vulnerable.

In some countries like Poland or Serbia, the smaller churches have to struggle beside strong national churches for their living space. In East Germany, the former territorial churches very soon fled into the comfortable house of the West German Evangelical Church with all its privileges and possibilities of supporting the poor relatives. Thus, not every church in the east is in the same need as others.

2. Many people are left with an ethical and moral vacuum after decades of Communist indoctrination and practice. Christians have to find a new identity in a liberal society, where nationalism, materialism, and pernicious methods of competition are threatening the people and their community life. History does not know itself, and we do not know
where it will go. In this situation of uncertainty and anxiety Christians have to be messengers of hope and mediators of understanding; they can help people to make sensible and wise use of their freedom and to respect and preserve human rights within their community. A free decision as such is not yet a good decision. The concept of human rights, which is familiar to people in the West, was mocked by the Communist rulers as being privatistic and obsolete. Not only do our different concepts and languages separate us but also our different experiences in the last fifty years. We have to learn to listen and to strive for mutual understanding.

New problems arise especially for the former socialist societies by the migration of people from Eastern European, Asian, and African countries. People in the East lived in closed societies with few strangers. Now they have to provide for refugees, for foreigners asking for political asylum, and for itinerant workers. Many come as tourists and stay, because Germany and other European states have a well-organized public relief system. This causes envy, anxiety, and even hatred.

3. The New House of Europe has to be built with rooms for all nations and groups and even the foreigners who come to us in growing numbers. As a paper drafted in cooperation by American and European Methodists and approved by the 1992 General Conference states:

_We recommend the reconciliation that occurred among the Western European nations during the last four decades. That consensus and harmony can now be extended to the whole of Europe. A totally new situation exists. Freedom to travel allows direct contact between individuals, local churches and groups. The process for change has strengthened by confidence-building measures promoted within the Helsinki process, the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe. Churches in Europe and North America have participated together in that process through the Churches’ Human Rights Program on the Helsinki Final Act._

Ethnic conflicts and fear of hegemony must be overcome by integration and supernationalism. Self-sufficiency and sovereignty are no longer meaningful terms within a compulsory system of interdependence. In this respect the globally organized United Methodist Church can help to create the confidence and the liberty to
cross the borders between nation and culture. Relationships between churches and peoples are becoming increasingly common and can be of exceptional value in Central and Eastern Europe as well as between churches and peoples in Europe and in other parts of the world.

The most important relationship to be developed is the essential understanding that we are all one in the Church of Jesus Christ. It is incumbent on all Christians that this basic promise of the gospel be kept without violation.

4. Not the least important aspect of the new situation is the openness for evangelization. It is now possible to go into streets and public halls to invite people into worship services, to preach in tents and in open-air meetings, to use radio and television for the proclamation of the biblical message and for generally making known that churches and pastors are there to assist anyone with his or her difficulties.

I close with a quote from a paper which was offered to an international consultative conference of the United Methodist Church held in Vienna in May, 1991; its title is “Principles for Methodist Mission Strategy in Europe”:

(1) It is best to work first and foremost in ways which internationalize and broaden attitudes of indigenous Christian churches. (2) It is good for Methodism to create a reality which corresponds to its claim to be a worldwide church, either in a ministry of presence, as in Jerusalem, or by establishing congregations or institutions in countries and provinces where few or none now exist. (3) Methodist values of tolerance and the universal offer of salvation in Jesus Christ to all persons regardless of race, nation, or previous creedal expression are not only appropriate in Central, Western or Eastern Europe, but are indeed urgently needed as leaven in the loaves of political and religious development everywhere. (4) A church which directs Christian feelings of loyalty away from historical forms to eternal divine fellowship experientially knowable in earthly Christian fellowship can help break down nationalist antagonisms. A church which is ecumenical in its foundations and constitution, which never ceases to recall the “Catholic Spirit” of its founder, can do much to encourage existing churches to work to overcome their provincial and earthbound attitudes on the basis of partnership within the host country and worldwide.
Christians and churches will be faithful witnesses to the gospel and true prophets in their countries if they always seek to understand the Scriptures in the light of their experiences, to read the text of their world in the light of the gospel, and to become willingly obedient to the calling which they as individuals and as churches receive from their Lord Jesus Christ.

Notes

9. 1940 Position Paper against the “Euthanasia” Program.
13. Cited from memory.

Notes to Part Two:

15. I wish to thank Dr. James Dwyer as well as the Superintendents and individual pastors from these countries for the following information.


Notes to Part Three:


34. J. W. E. Sommer, *Die Stellung der Gemeinde Jesu zur Weltlage der Gegenwart, [The Effect of the Community of Jesus on the Current World Scene] (Frankfurt/Main: Anker-Verlag, 1951), 5.


Abortion, Grace, and the Wesleyan Quadrilateral

To assert the quadrilateral formula does not conclude an argument; rather it constitutes the beginning point of a long and adventurous process.

Thomas Langford

When I first became a Methodist over ten years ago, I was impressed with the theology expounded in the Wesleyan quadrilateral. As a convert from Catholicism, I felt that this formula, which distributes theological authority to the areas of Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience, helped us escape many of the sexist trappings that accompany a church based solely on tradition. Moreover, the quadrilateral also pushed us to avoid the pitfalls associated with a church that relies solely on Scripture. The quadrilateral, I believed at that time, articulated and defined all of the possible theological authorities and additionally mandated conversation between them.

After practicing my faith as a United Methodist for the last decade and spending almost half that time reading, writing, and thinking about the issue of abortion, I revised much of my thinking about the nature and function of the formula. When I first began to study

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abortion, I thought that surely somewhere in the authorities encapsulated within the quadrilateral there must be some directive, some hint about which direction I, as a Methodist proselyte, should be headed in my assertions, interpretations, and opinions about abortion. The quadrilateral guaranteed faithful thinking, or so I naively thought. What I didn't count on was the fact that every leg of the Wesleyan quadrilateral would present conflicting information and contradicting directives regarding the morality of abortion.

While the Methodist formula may finally be an effective approach for thinking theologically about matters of faith and belief (and on this point a whole history of controversy exists),[2] I suggest that it contains certain limitations for thinking theologically about many contested moral issues such as abortion. The first half of this essay investigates the claims made by Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience regarding the morality of abortion and argues that, taken by themselves, these authorities contain inconclusive data about what we, as Methodists, should believe. In short, they offer us little direct guidance regarding the problems which accompany abortion.

The second half of this essay, however, attempts to recover the quadrilateral from this tangle of indecisiveness. There I will argue that we do not, in fact, need to jettison the quadrilateral at all; we need simply to reinterpret and redescribe how it functions in our life. It is not the case that the quadrilateral theological authorities contain bits and pieces of information that are intended to direct our actions and render us moral. Rather, I will argue, the Wesleyan quadrilateral is a reflection of our moral lives; it is a mosaic not of who we can become but if we are living faithfully, of who we already are. When seen in this light, our everyday lives as Christians and the authorities which reflect them might have a lot to say about the issue of abortion.

Albert Outler’s definition of the quadrilateral is helpful here precisely because, in his rendering, the quadrilateral authorities exist only within the fame of a faithful human life. The rules or laws do not bear down on humanity from the outside but rather develop only inside the context of Christian existence. As Outler describes it:

> [T]he “quadrilateral” requires of a theologian no more than what he or she might reasonably be held accountable for: which is to say, a familiarity with Scripture that is both critical
Outler’s point, I believe, is that the quadrilateral reflects the moral choices and spiritual journeys of a life well and faithfully lived. Thus, it is to these choices and journeys that I will turn in the second half of this essay for clarity about abortion. But first, I investigate what the four authorities have to say directly about the issue.

Revealed in Scripture

Scholars on both sides of the issue agree that the Bible says nothing directly about the morality of abortion. The New Testament especially is silent on the subject. We might find this odd, as many New Testament writers, especially Paul, freely wrote about the moral behavior necessary to the formation of this new creation of people. Moral dictums and platitudes fill the pages of Paul’s letters; yet no mention is made of the procedure we know as abortion.

Commentators who oppose legal abortion suggest that the absence of a particular discussion of abortion indicates that abortion was anathema among early Christians, so much so that it wasn’t even necessary to speak of it. As the prominent church historian of abortion John Noonan writes:

What was unspoken was in its way as important as what was said in reflecting community valuations, attitudes, expectations. It was not necessary in this community to say that a man who protected the state by killing infants was not a good man. It was necessary to say that the first reaction of Joseph to Mary’s unexplained pregnancy was “to put her away”; it was not necessary to say that his first thought was not to procure her an abortion.

Noonan thus reads the lack of mention of abortion as a signal that the early Christians never engaged in the practice. According to him, the first Christians absolutely opposed the use of abortion.
Noonan suggests that although there is a lack of Scriptural text prohibiting abortion, these early Christian interdicts against abortion certainly existed and, as he claims:

*developed in a theological context in which the commands of the Old Testament to love God with all your heart (Deut. 6:5) and to love your neighbor as yourself (Lev. 19:18) were singled out as the two great commandments on which depended “the whole law and the prophets” (Matt. 22:40). The standard for fulfillment of these commandments was set in terms of the sacrifice of man's life for another (John 15:13) and embodied in the self-sacrifice of Jesus. Jesus told the disciples, “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you” (John 15:32). The Christian valuation of life was made in view of this commandment of love.*

In short, the foundation of early Christian life is built, according to Noonan, through these texts that command Christians to value other people, to love others as God has loved them. The early Christians would certainly have extended this agape, Noonan assumes, to unborn babies.

Other readings of the life of the early church, however, lead to radically different conclusions about abortion. According to feminist Christian ethicist Beverly Wildung Harrison, the Scriptures do not speak of abortion not because the practice was so unacceptable that no one needed to address it but rather because it was an accepted, common practice. Harrison, in keeping with the findings of many historians, notes that abortion has been an accepted part of human existence throughout most historical periods. Harrison persuasively argues that the anti-abortion teachings of the patristic period were without doubt produced by thinkers “who also severely denounced any sort of 'sexual permissiveness'—that is, sex for non-procreative purposes.” Abortion is condemned, according to Harrison, not because it violates any notion of the sanctity of life but rather because it functions as a form of birth control. As Harrison states it, “[a]bortion was considered homicide in earlier Christian teaching because nonprocreative sex was.” The effect of Harrison’s argument, I suggest, is to place abortion on the same continuum as birth control. Those Christians who are reticent to condemn birth control are forced, with Harrison’s narrative, to reevaluate their positions on abortion.
Harrison argues that adequate access to birth control and abortion are necessary aspects of women’s liberation. For her, God intends that women have the freedom to control their bodies and their destinies in a measure equivalent to that of men. Harrison thus reads the same texts cited by Noonan above not as pronatal exclamations but rather as messages intended to advance the liberation of all oppressed peoples, including women. “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you” (John 15:32) can only mean that women too should be brought into the dignity and liberation of Christ.12

How can these two readings of Scripture be so different? The answer to this question lies in the presuppositions that each thinker brings to his or her examination of the past. In Harrison’s account, women’s liberation will only be realized when “respect for bodily integrity, or ‘body-right’ [is] understood as a foundational moral claim.”13 It is this grounding, I suggest, that allows Harrison to see a different configuration of texts and events in history than do the historians she criticizes. While anti-abortion readers such as Noonan read prenatal historical texts as supportive of their positions, Harrison, reading from a pro-choice feminist perspective, assumes that texts that affirm the value of life refer primarily to the lives of women, not to the lives of fetuses. Thus Scripture, when read by scholars with differing commitments, can yield differing rules and principles for morality. Even a specific text that supports an anti-abortion assertion in one context can simultaneously support a pro-choice stance in another. The difference is supplied not by the text itself but by the ideological commitments of the text’s readers.

Illumined by Tradition

Several scholars have raised the question of precisely which tradition is intended by the quadrilateral. Certainly, if the quadrilateral is rooted in the writings of Wesley, Wesley himself could not have meant the Methodist tradition, for what came to be known as the Methodist denominations only just began in Wesley’s lifetime.14 The 1988 Disciplinary statement makes it clear that tradition refers to, as Langford states it, “The variety of historical ways the Christian tradition has interpreted Scripture and understood its faith.”15 In short, this authority invokes the presence of the Church’s past, with all the vagueness and ambiguity that accompanies any historical investigation, as a way of directing her members into the future.
The problem with the category of tradition is precisely the same as the problem with scripture. The problem is not that there’s nothing in our Christian past which would give us direction regarding the morality of abortion; it is that many protocols exist which lead us to certain conclusions about abortion. For some, the church is a place that has historically welcomed the stranger and has therefore stood against abortion. The church’s tradition, when viewed from the perspective of the patristic fathers and of such traditionalists as Thomas Aquinas, is a history that avoids the use of abortion, that classifies “abortion,” at varying times for varying reasons, a sin.

But the story of the church’s tradition looks very different from the point of view, for example, of one Christian woman who found herself pregnant with an illegitimate child in the United States of the 1950s. Few Protestant churches would have found the grace to welcome that woman and her child into the church family, as her “sin” challenged the dominant sexual ideology. As a result of this pregnancy (this sin), she would lose not only her church but her family, her job, and her reputation as well. The story she tells of the church’s unfaithfulness begins not with the people who welcomed children, for in her life they were nonexistent. Her church is marked by the lives of the brave ministers who founded and ran the 12,000-member Clergy Consultation Service on Abortion, an underground railroad for women who desperately needed abortions but could find nowhere else to turn. These ministers connected women not only with abortionists but with counseling, money, housing, documentation, and all the other necessities that arose from abortions performed in the dangerous era of pre-Roe United States. It was a frightening thing to have a baby or an illegal abortion, as either decision might change the course of a woman’s life for the worse; those ministers involved in the Clergy Consultation offered safety and freedom in the midst of all that dread and in doing so stand out as heroes within our tradition.

The story of the Christian tradition could be told from any number of other perspectives, highlighting those people, events, and characteristics which we believe should be replicated in today’s world. Stories about our tradition supply not only assurance and verification but inspiration, imaginativeness, and moral instruction as well. When we encounter an account of the past, we open a space to reconfigure our relationship with the present. Consequently, the category of tradition is intended neither to represent accurately the past in all its complexities nor to provide documentable facts of history. Rather,
tradition is meant to be a map for how we live our lives today. The authority of tradition itself does not provide any objective guidance regarding the way we should position ourselves in relation to abortion, because the reconstructions produced by an appeal to tradition are always produced in connection with specific interests and convictions. What is at stake here is not whether any Christians had abortions or whether any Christians welcomed children or whether any Christians helped women get abortions, for all these things undoubtedly happened. What is at stake in the struggle over tradition is the right to be represented in the picture that Christianity draws of itself.

**Confirmed by Reason**

Like the authorities of Scripture and tradition, reason alone doesn’t tell us anything conclusive in relation to abortion. Logic and “common sense” alone do not tell us when life begins, or what value to place on life at various stages of development. There is not one clear point in life where we begin to reason. As a newborn baby, we had no more ability to reason than we did a day or two before when we were still in the womb. Moreover, a two-year-old’s ability to reason is often seriously limited, as anyone who has had to live with one probably knows. At each stage of development a child acquires an increasing ability to figure things out for him or herself and is eventually granted by our society the rights to drive, to drink alcohol, to bear arms, and to vote, privileges granted only as one reaches the “age of reason.”

The hope in our society is that reasonable adults will be properly equipped with the skills necessary to responsibly negotiate these privileges. Responsibility and reason, however, are not necessarily secured by a certain chronological age; indeed, in many cases, they may not come at all. Reason is not something that can be measured, captured, manipulated or predicted. And it is certainly not a character trait that can be used to determine either who should be aborted or how old a woman must be before she can reasonably make a decision about abortion.

**Vivified in Personal Experience**

The final category in the formula, experience, turns out to be just as slippery as reason when it comes to abortion analysis. Certainly,
experience can be used to mean many different things, and as Langford has noted, within the Methodist tradition, experience has encompassed diverse phenomena from eighteenth-century piety to twentieth-century liberationist movements. For the most part, experience is an assertion about the way we perceive the world; it is the data that are produced as we bump up against the things that surround us in our everyday life. When we begin a statement with the statement “in my experience,” we mean to appeal to the information, observations, sensations, and beliefs that have occurred to us. “In my experience, this is a good book, that is a bad restaurant”; such information is the outgrowth of everything we see, hear, and notice. The appeal to experience is meant to invoke the authority that comes with having, knowing, seeing, meeting, undergoing, enjoying, understanding, and suffering through everyday life.

However, in her essay “Experience,” historian Joan Scott questions the function of this authority of experience. She argues that our perception of the world is completely shaped by particular, historical grids of intelligibility which dictate what we see and how we see it. These grids help us to make sense of the world, Scott argues, by rendering certain things as meaningless, valueless, outside the range of intelligibility. Every time we experience the world, we do so from a concrete, contingent perspective, and in so doing, we do not, indeed cannot, experience it from other perspectives. As Scott writes it, “The evidence of experience reproduces rather than contests given ideological systems. The project of making experience visible precludes analysis of the workings of this system and of its historicity; instead it reproduces its terms.”

We stand in some relationship to abortion as a result of our experiences in the world. We may be “for” legal and safe abortion if we have had the experience of an illegal abortion or of knowing someone who had one. We may be “for” abortion if we experience the world as a place where women are able to seek equality in the workplace. Conversely, we may oppose abortion if we have the experience and joy that comes with living with children. We may also be against abortion if we want a child and have lived through the painful experience of not being able to have one. Such experiences have formed us. But, according to Scott’s analysis, appealing to these experiences as justifications for our opinions and attitudes is simply to remain within one, uncontested ideological frame. The statement “in my experience, abortion is wrong (or right)” simply invokes those
experiences which shape our world-view and reproduces the grid
which created the experience. To appeal to experience when claiming
that abortion is wrong (or right) is a tautology: “Abortion is wrong
because I believe it is wrong.” Outside of that system of experience,
the claim makes no sense.

No side of the quadrilateral can point us in a predetermined,
definitive direction for developing our attitudes toward abortion.
Data, information, thoughts, and directives derived from all four
sides of the formula can be and have been used to support both
pro-life and pro-choice positions, as well as a variety of attitudes in
between. It is not the case that the authorities encased in the
quadrilateral lead us nowhere; indeed, the problem is that in and of
themselves, scripture, tradition, reason, and experience can lead us
almost anywhere.

However, rather than understanding these authorities as individually
normative for our opinions on matters such as abortion, we could
understand the quadrilateral as a reflection of a particular “United
Methodist” character. Rather than pitting the quadrilateral authorities
against each other in the abortion debate, we could allow the texture of
the character that we have developed to guide a discussion about
abortion. This unique character is organized around the theme of grace
and reflects the concerns and commitments encased in the
quadrilateral. As Langford aptly describes it,

_Around the grace of God in Jesus Christ, several attendant
commitments form a tight nexus: biblical witness to Jesus
Christ, vital experience of God in Christ as Saviour and
Sanctifier, commitment to human freedom and ethical
discipleship, and the shaping of the church life around
missional responsibility. Together these themes constitute the
nucleus of the Wesleyan tradition, and around these
determinate marks of character the more extended life of the
tradition has taken shape and has been contoured into its
distinctive forms._

Langford’s reformulation upholds the authorities of the quadrilateral
in a way that never loses sight of the central tenet of grace. I suggest
that rather than debating whether abortion is right or wrong, we
United Methodists should be seeking instead to find practices and
conversations which sustain this grace-filled church. These practices should be guided by our overriding commitment to grace rather than by the ammunition we manage to extract from the formula. Instead of fighting about whether abortion is right or wrong, we should be wrangling about what kind of grace-filled world God intends us to live in and what we can do to bring this about.

Abortion and Grace

What remains in this essay, then, is not a conclusive “United Methodist” position on the troubled issue of abortion. Rather, it is a critique of our practices and attitudes which, I hope, will lead us into a more grace-filled church existence. If we are guided by those theological authorities that have formed us—Scripture, tradition, reason and experience—and if we remember that our primary commitment in these conversations is to further the new creation of God’s grace, we can solve the problems associated with abortion in a way that is in keeping with the world that God intends for us.

First, I believe that we must understand that women’s need for abortion stems from the fact that when babies are conceived, we are the ones to carry them within our bodies; when babies are born, we are most often the ones who must alter our lives to meet their needs. In many cases, this situation is unsatisfactory to us. We have come to believe, as a result of cultural shifts of the last thirty years or so, that we ought to have the opportunity to pursue meaningful careers and work outside the home to the same degree as our husbands and brothers. We can become good doctors, lawyers, business women, university professors, and even good ministers; but we cannot do so if we have to carry and care for two or four or eight children. Even if we are lucky enough to afford childcare during the day, we still have to come home to what used to be the full-time job of taking care of the house and kids. Whether we go to a high-powered, high-paying job or to a high school during the day, these responsibilities diminish our capacity to do well at whatever we’re trying to do. This is no longer acceptable. We need access to legal and safe abortion, in the current state of affairs, just to keep ourselves in the game.

The first thing we as Christians can do to prevent abortion, then, is to advocate the development and distribution of birth control. The U.S. medical industry classifies birth control development as a
low-priority need. Indeed, several European countries market birth control devices which are unavailable in the United States due to a lack of interest in testing. In short, birth control is not as profitable for U.S. pharmaceutical companies as abortion is for the U.S. abortion industry. The birth control that is available here is either dangerous to women’s health (the pill and the IUD), doesn’t work very consistently (spermicidal sponges and foams), or is out of the realm of women’s control (condom). For poor, young, or uneducated women, the availability of even these unsatisfactory choices is often at best haphazard. I believe that one thing is undeniably clear: if Christians want to stop abortion, they ought to be working for better birth control. This, of course, is not the case.

However, birth control, of whatever form, often fails. And, for many of us, it fails at precisely the wrong moment, right before we’re due for a promotion, at the beginning of our first year of divinity school, at the end of the eleventh grade or at some other moment where a baby, now, will change everything. At those moments, we have two options: have an abortion and continue on with our plans, our hopes, and our dreams; or have the baby. If we choose the latter, we may have to put high school or divinity school or our careers on hold, hoping to return to them again “someday”; or we may try to juggle everything, and if we’re enormously talented, energetic, and persistent, we might just squeak through. Some current Christian feminist writing on the subject of women suggests that our role as mother is the highest Christian vocation and that we should be happy and honored to forego our careers and educations in order to bear and raise our children. From my point of view, however, such ideas perpetuate and sanction a world that falls far short of the grace-filled world God intends for women. How can we structure a world, then, both where abortion is unnecessary and where we are not forced to bear and care for the children alone?

The story of a six-year-old Cherokee girl named Turtle, the subject of Barbara Kingsolver’s novel *Pigs in Heaven*, offers us insight into this dilemma. Turtle was abused and abandoned by her birth parents at the age of two; a white woman named Taylor who is, above all, an excellent mother, adopts her. Turtle and Taylor lead an idyllic life for four years until a Cherokee lawyer named Annawake Fourkiller discovers that Taylor’s adoption of Turtle was not legal. Even though Annawake understands and sees that Turtle has a healthy home life, she nevertheless initiates legal proceedings to have Turtle returned to
the Cherokee nation. Most people, including some members of the tribe, think that Annawake is crazy; all of Turtle's living relatives are either dead or have disappeared. Who will care for the child? And why take her away from a perfectly happy home to place her in a home that doesn't really want her?

Annawake wants Turtle back inside the Cherokee nation for two reasons. The first has to do with the tribe itself. Even though Turtle was abandoned, by law an Indian child belongs not to its parents but to the whole tribe. "The way the law looks at it, "Annawake explains, "the mother or father doesn't have the right to give the child away. It's like if I tried to give you, I don't know, a piece of the courthouse."^23 The child belongs to the tribe because, according to Annawake,

For this whole century, right up until 1978 when we got the Indian Child Welfare Act, social workers would come in here with no understanding of how our families worked. They would see a child who'd been left with someone outside the nuclear family, and they would call that neglect. To us that is an insane rationale. We don't distinguish between father, uncle, mother, grandmother. We don't think of ourselves as having extended families. We look at you guys and think you have contracted families.

I used to work at the Indian hospital at Claremore, checking people in. Sometimes it would be years before we'd get straight who a kid's mother was, because one aunt or another would bring him in. Maybe the mother was too young, so another family member raised him. It's not a big deal who's the exact mother.

We couldn't understand why they were taking us apart. I've seen babies carried off with no more thought than you'd give a bag of brown sugar you picked up at the market. Just a nice little prize for some family.

Annawake believes that the future of the tribe depends on its ability to keep its children and to teach them the ways of the Cherokee nation. "These were our kids. Thousands of them. We've lost more than a quarter of our living children," says Annawake. "We've been through a holocaust as devastating as what happened to the Jews, and we need to keep what's left of our family together."

The second reason Annawake wants Turtle back, though, is purely for Turtle. As Annawake explains to her boss at the Indian Bureau,
“[When I was in law school], people thought my life was so bleak. And I guess it was, so far from home, hearing the ambulances run by all night to the hospital, somebody cracked up or beat up or old and dumped out by their family, and laws jumping up and down in my head. But I always dreamed about the water in Tenkiller. All those perch down there you could catch, any time, you know? A world of free breakfast, waiting to help you to another day. I've never been without that. Have you?”

“No,” [her boss] admits. Whether or not he knew it, he was always Cherokee. The fish were down there, for him as much as for Annawake.

“Who’s going to tell that little girl who she is?” [Her boss] wants to say, “She will have other things,” but he can’t know this for certain. [Her boss] wears a Seiko watch and looks as Cherokee as Will Rogers or Elvis Presley or the eighty-thousand mixed-blood members of his Nation, yet he knows he isn’t white because he can’t think of one single generalization about white people he knows to be true. He can think of half a dozen about Cherokees: They’re good to their mothers. They know what’s planted in their yards. They give money to their relatives, whether or not they’re going to use it wisely.

Turtle needs to go back to the Cherokees to find a way to explain the color of her skin, the shape of her nose, and the fact that she can’t digest milk without getting a stomachache. She needs an explanation for who she is; she needs to know about the fish in the Tenkiller River.

I feel as if I have a distanced understanding of this need. My own biological mother was a Roman Catholic who turned me over to Frank and Rosamond Rudy, Catholics like herself. I’d like to believe that she did this because, as a Catholic, she saw the world as a place where “family” is more about sharing faith than sharing a household. She knew that I had things to learn about the rosary and various saints and how to live my life, and she knew that I could learn these things only from other Catholics. Even though my political quarrels with the Catholic Church have been severe enough to cause me to leave it, I appreciate every day the world she gave me in that community.

When I was growing up, my father used to take me with him when he went to the Onondaga Indian reservation to buy cigarettes. The
reservation was only about twenty minutes away, but it seemed like a foreign country. One thing that stands out in my mind about the reservation is the speed limit signs. They weren't black and white and square, like ours, but handpainted on wooden planks. Each said, "Speed Limit 15mph," and underneath was painted "Protect our Children." I was always fascinated with the *our* in those signs. Although I was a child, I never was sure the speed limit was intended to protect me because I wasn't an Indian. When I asked my father about it once, he told me not to worry because I was protected by a guardian angel, one of the perks that came along with being a Catholic.

As we Methodists seek out a grace-filled world for ourselves, would it be so hard for us to put up signs in our parking lots and in our hearts that said, "Protect our Children," with the emphasis on *ours*? Our church, after all, isn't that different from the Cherokee nation in the sense that, unless we do something serious about our membership, we too will dwindle away. We haven't lost our kids to outsiders; we've lost them to abortion because nobody except the potential mother is available to take the child to the doctors, to feed him, and to teach her to ride a bike; and that potential mother just couldn't do it.

We will not realize this grace-filled church, however, if we become engaged in any sort of war against pregnant women. We can only make available everything within our means to let them know that they and their babies are welcome while they are in the process of making their decisions. Once a woman makes it to an abortion clinic, our intervention ceases to be an offering of support and becomes harassment. To attempt to stop abortion at the site of an abortion clinic is to enter the problem much too late. We cannot demand that any woman carry a pregnancy to term, even if it is for the sake of "our" children; for to do so is another form of keeping women in their place and denying them full access to the grace-filled world that God and our churches promise. Stated differently, our desire to keep our United Methodist children alive and well in the folds of our church must never happen at the expense of a woman. Our attention on the developing fetus must always recognize that every fetus lives inside a woman. Today, many commentators on the matter speak of "fetal environments" and "child-bearers," language which attempts to erase the fact that a particular woman offers her body for nine months so that another human being can live. Such an action can only be understood as a gift; as United Methodists following a Christian path, I believe that we can never force a woman to make such a choice.
(either by directly prohibiting abortion or by working to make it illegal and unsafe). Rather, we must work so that our United Methodist women who discover themselves to be pregnant will want to carry children they cannot raise in order to return that child into the arms of an open, loving church. If we force women to carry unwanted children against their desires and better judgment, we are not living in the grace-filled world we seek; although we might gain children, we do so at the cost of our women.

I believe that the theological tools and strategies offered to us in the quadrilateral are meant to instruct us not on whether "abortion is right or wrong" but rather on the issue of how to build a church where babies are wanted and women feel safe and respected. Each leg of the quadrilateral alone offers nothing conclusive on the issue of abortion; taken as a whole and read through our desire to be a grace-filled, faithful church, the theology captured by Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience can help us imagine and strive toward a church that recognizes and values both women and children. United Methodists should join together to discuss how to avoid abortion without disregarding the needs and lives of women with unwanted pregnancies. In this respect, I suggest that the quadrilateral stands as an invitation for a different kind of conversation regarding the issue of abortion—that it operates, as Langford claims, as "the beginning point of a long and adventurous process." The quadrilateral can help us to live more faithful Christian lives, but only if we use it wisely.

Notes

1. Whether or not these authorities should be weighted equally is the source of controversy among United Methodist theologians. The initial formulation by Outler in the 1972 Book of Discipline did not order the relationship of the four sides and was subsequently criticized for placing Scripture on equal ground with other authorities. In the 1988 Book of Discipline, the primacy of Scripture is more clearly affirmed. See Thomas Langford, "The United Methodist Quadrilateral: A Theological Task," in Doctrine and Theology in the United Methodist Church, Thomas Langford, ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991), 232-233.

2. The controversy regarding the usefulness of the quadrilateral revolves around two issues. The first calls the pluralistic nature of this approach into question. For a position which defends the pluralism of the quadrilateral, see Albert Outler, "The Wesleyan Quadrilateral—in John Wesley," in Doctrine and Theology in the United Methodist Church, especially page 80, and Albert Outler, "Introduction of the

The second concern regarding the quadrilateral is whether or not this particular formulation is indeed faithful to John Wesley’s articulation of the faith. For positions which suggest that the core or essence of the quadrilateral is found in Wesley’s teachings, see Albert Outler, “The Wesleyan Quadrilateral—In John Wesley,” in Doctrine and Theology in the United Methodist Church, 75-91, and Donald Thorsen, The Wesleyan Quadrilateral: Scripture, Tradition, Reason and Experience as a Model of Evangelical Theology (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing, 1990). For a position which suggests that the quadrilateral “seem[s] to lack a sufficiently clear assertion of the primacy of Scripture in doctrinal and practical reflection,” and therefore does not reflect the historical faith founded by John Wesley, see Ted Campbell, “The ‘Wesleyan Quadrilateral’: The Story of a Modern Methodist Myth,” in Doctrine and Theology in the United Methodist Church, 154-162.


4. Section headings taken from the 1988 Book of Discipline revision of the quadrilateral which claims that it, when rightly articulated, was formed in Wesley’s writings: “Wesley believed that the living core of the Christian faith stands revealed in Scripture, illumined by tradition, vivified in personal experience, and confirmed by reason” (p. 80).

5. One Old Testament text does refer to one type of abortion:

“When people who are fighting injure a pregnant woman so that there is a miscarriage, and yet no further harm follows the one responsible shall be fined what the woman’s husband demands paying as much as the judges determine. If any harm follows, then you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, stripe for stripe” (Exod. 21:22-24).

Problems arise in making the case for an analogy between this (involuntary) abortion and the contemporary procedure. For a history of the moral reasoning surrounding this passage in the Jewish tradition, see Dena Davis, “Abortion in Jewish Thought: A Study in Casuistry,” in Journal of the American Academy of Religion LX, no. 2, (Summer 1992): 313-324. To my thinking, this passage, read alone, cannot lead Christians to any conclusive position regarding abortion.


8. Although writing from a pro-life position, Gorman also notes that abortion was practiced among the early Christians. See Gorman, *Abortion and the Early Christian Church*, 62-65. Gordon attributes these practices to pagan influences.


11. Ibid., 132.

12. Indeed, in a footnote, Harrison criticizes Noonan for twisting the meaning of these texts. She claims that Noonan used texts unrelated to abortion to establish Christian pronatalism and reverence for children as a context for discussion of anti-abortion texts and then fail to isolate the actual logic of these texts against abortion. Thereby, the reader is invited to assume that the line of moral reasoning involved concerns the moral value of fetal life. (*Our Right to Choose*, 290).

Thus, Harrison contends that texts that are used as evidence for anti-abortion positions were never intended to address the issue of abortion.

13. Ibid., 196.

14. Ted Campbell makes the additional point that the word tradition, as it was used in the Reformation and post-Reformation periods, often carried negative connotations, as in something that was corrupt and must be resisted. See Campbell in *Doctrine and Theology in the United Methodist Church*, 160.

15. Langford in *Doctrine and Theology in the United Methodist Church*, 236.

16. The major exceptions to this interdict might have been found in many black churches and in some of the institutions provided by the Roman Catholic Church. For an historical account of these phenomena, see Ricky Solinger, *Wake Up Little Susie: Single Pregnancy and Race before Roe v. Wade* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

17. Several scholars have attempted to make arguments about abortion based solely on reason. For example, see Ronald Dworkin, *Life's Dominion: An Argument about Abortion, Euthanasia, and Individual Freedom* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993). Based on what he calls "common sense," Dworkin argues that although an embryo is sacred from the moment of conception because it has the potential for life, human life should not acquire social rights until birth. In my estimation, this confused thinking arises from the commitment to do analysis from an abstract, untraditioned perspective.

18. Thorson adeptly recounts Wesley's relationship to significant Enlightenment philosophers and argues that Wesley's category of experience is derived from both empirical and intuitive sources. See The *Wesleyan Quadrilateral*, 169-200. I am persuaded by this account and do not mean to imply that Wesley or we perceive the world with no presuppositions; indeed, it is precisely the usefulness of these presuppositions (that is, in seeking the morality of abortion) which I will call into question momentarily.


21. The female condom may provide a solution to these concerns but hasn't as yet become available to major segments of the population.

22. Indeed, many factions of the religious right explicitly condemn the use of birth control. Consider, for example, Randall Terry's position: "I do not believe that people who profess to be followers of the Lord Jesus Christ should use birth control. Birth
control is anti-child. As Christians, we should love children” (Chicago Tribune, 20 October 1991). When the interviewer suggested that Terry’s anti-birth control position “virtually guarantee[s] more single mothers and children in day care,” Terry inimically responded, “I believe that married couples who confess to be followers of the Lord Jesus Christ should leave the number of children they have in the hands of God.” Other factions of the New Christian Right hold similar views against contraception. The U.S. Department of Education’s former official, Gary Bauer, in his “Report to the President from the White House Working Group on the Family” (December 1986), suggested that the most effective method for dealing with unwanted teenage pregnancy is to deny contraceptives to unmarried women. Similar “family” legislation proposed by the New Right attempts to censor all birth control information until marriage. Christian radio psychologist Dr. James Dobson (from “Focus on the Family” fame) even suggests that “contraceptives can ruin a marriage.”

Stand Firm in Freedom: Summer Lections from Galatians

When the churches in Galatia received their letter from the Apostle Paul, they opened it and then had to sit down. You may need to be sitting, too, for this letter deals with Paul’s struggle with justification, with the meaning of the law, with freedom, the cross, grace, and the relationship with the Old Testament. Heavy stuff. Fred Craddock often makes this point by saying that some of Paul’s letters would not get by with only one stamp. It would take maybe $2.50 to mail this letter to those churches in Galatia. We do not know what Paul preached when he first established these congregations, but in this letter he is trying to work out clearly his foundational theological positions in a new situation that has provoked him.

All through the letter, Paul is upset (1:6; 2:11; 3:1; 3:2; 5:12; and 5:21). He expresses his frustration in saying, “I am afraid that my work for you may have been wasted” (4:11), and his frustration and anger seem evident when he says, “I wish I were present with you now and could change my tone, for I am perplexed about you” (4:20). Then he offers advice in 6:1: “My friends, if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness.” Paul’s admonition is one thing, but I do not see a lot of gentleness in this letter. Is this any way for a Christian

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to act or to write to new and young Christians? Don’t Christians build each other up, comfort each other, encourage each other in order to face the present age? Evidently, comfort, encouragement, and thanksgiving do not seem suitable to Paul. There is more at stake than just some organizational problems in the churches of Galatia. There is something that brings pain to Paul when it is exposed.

Victor Furnish rightly positions what is going on. “The occasion for writing this letter is indicated most succinctly in 1:6-7: Paul’s astonishment that the Galatians are turning to a false ‘gospel,’ being ‘bewitched’ (3:1) by troublemakers who seek to pervert the gospel of Christ. Because the gospel is in danger of perversion, and because his opponents in Galatia have spared nothing in attacking him personally, Paul, in responding, is edgy and defensive, frequently to the point of anger.” Paul cannot believe that the Galatians have turned to another gospel so quickly. It is not that they have turned to something dark and sinister but rather that their temptation comes in the form of an alternative that still has something about it that looks appropriate and right. It is both an adding to and a watering down of the faith that was originally given to them.

It is for this reason that I think our focus needs to be on the Galatians. Often we would want to point at the attackers, the opponents of Paul. Were they Judaizers? Were they Jewish Christians from the Jerusalem Church? Were they Jewish Christian Gnostics? We do know that they were confronting those Christians in the churches of Galatia with options that Paul had not presented to them. Paul could not control other alternatives to his presentation of the gospel, but he could take a position that questions what was being offered. His questions, however, were not directed at his opponents; instead, the attention is directed to the people in the churches of Galatia. Why have they not been able to stand firm in the faith?

Our kinship with the Galatians lies in the sense of desperation that seems to clutch all of us. Like our gentile brothers and sisters of old, we are desperate for some kind of meaning in this chaotic world. Our desperation is seen in the number of self-help books, denominational programs, and support groups that flourish throughout our society and the church, whose only goal is to help the individual get through one more day. Our lives are so horizontal that our books, programs, and groups have become law for us. We have to have something more than the gospel.

The key for the Galatians and for us is found in 1:4, where Jesus Christ “gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil
For Paul, the act of freeing us comes from outside of ourselves. It is not what we do in our adherence to the Law or in the act of visibly symbolizing our loyalty to the Torah through circumcision. Paul knows that circumcision and the Torah/Law have a place but that our salvation and freedom does not come from them. Even Paul’s call to be an apostle does not come from the horizontal authority of others but as a revelation from God. The transcendent call and action are decisive for Paul.

Now, I know that we can listen to Paul in Galatians and easily be burdened by dogma. And I am certainly not a purist in the sense that think there is some kind of original and unstained word that Paul received and from which there is to be no deviation. If we did hold to such a position, we would be falling into the Gnostic trap of acquiring and utilizing the right knowledge.

But I do think that Paul speaks across the boundaries of time and cultures to churches in Galatia and in the modern world. Paul did not intend that his letters would enter public domain as they are today, since they were written to Christians who were facing specific issues. Nonetheless, by grace we are allowed to listen in, to look over the shoulder of someone, to read someone else’s mail and realize that our names are on every page. For Paul calls us all to stand firm in the faith that has been given in the witness and testimony that has come to us—and in doing so not to give in to that great tempter, pragmatism, but be willing to invest in the struggle from a theological perspective. The letter to the churches in Galatia gives us all opportunity to struggle with the basic historical, biblical affirmations of the Christian faith in the context of our sermon preparation.

These texts from Galatians in cycle C are truly appropriate for this ordinary time of the year. For during these early summer months we are surrounded by all of the symbols and atmosphere of living in a free country. But our freedom may be strangling us to death. If the letter to the Galatians was Paul’s first draft of the basic theological positions of the gospel (Romans being a more systematic presentation), and if the letter was the Magna Charta of the Reformation, then we need to pay special attention to it. We need to have the ears of Martin Luther, who said, “To it I am as it were in wedlock.” Or as Luther would say later when a friend was trying to collect his works, “If I had my way about it they would republish only those of my books which have doctrine. My Galatians, for instance.”
When we listen to Paul in Galatians, we find one who offers courageous assertions about the gospel in the face of opposition. Can we do any less than struggle and fight and pray as we face our encounter with God’s word?

**Galatians 2:15–21 It’s All Right**

There is an interesting thing about Paul’s letters, especially his letters to the Romans and the Galatians. Only once, and that is in the Letter to the Romans (4:7), does Paul mention forgiveness; and there he is quoting from Psalm 32:1. In the Letter to the Galatians Paul never discusses forgiveness at all. The Gospels and other New Testament epistles have numerous accounts speaking of and portraying forgiveness. But only rarely does Paul allude to this (2 Corinthians, 2; 12; Colossians 1-3; and Ephesians 1), and never in Galatians.

However, in Romans and Galatians there are numerous references to justification. In the verses of our lectionary text Paul mentions some form of justification five times. Certainly Paul was not opposed to the healing aspect of forgiveness, whether God’s forgiveness of us or our forgiveness of each other. After all, Jesus was constantly calling on his followers to be people of forgiveness. Jesus even taught his disciples to pray to be forgiven and to forgive. Obviously Paul did not have access to the Gospel accounts, but he must have been aware of the stories about Jesus. So it is curious that Paul remains silent about forgiveness in the two letters where he expresses the foundations of his theological position.

Let’s look at the environment of the Galatians letter. Those Galatian infants in the faith were being “bewitched” by some other teachers who offered another gospel that included a strict form of legalism. Paul is aware that allegiance to anything, no matter how sincere it is, can be molded into a form of legalism. For legalism provides security of knowing that I am right or wrong without the ambiguity that marks the human predicament. Our major temptation is always to try to maneuver ourselves around that fact. If forgiveness assumes some form of repentance and confession, then cannot our act of confessing become a form of legalism? God has to forgive me because I have confessed; I have repented. We have all heard someone say, “God has forgiven me because I have repented,” or, after inflicting harm on others, “God has forgiven me; why can’t you?” It is as if to say that
because I have confessed and repented, God has to forgive me and you do, too. Is that not an extreme form of legalism? Where is freedom here? Paul is getting to the basics of our trust in God, and that basic position is not what we do but what God has done in forgiving us. This scene is played out not only in the realm of forgiveness but in other areas, too. Does not the church find itself tempted during those financial campaigns to meet the budget to say to the church members to give and they will be blessed? After all, “God loves a cheerful giver.” Paul would respond that you do not give because God will bless you. God blesses you and then you give. We do not give because God needs us to give, or the church needs us to give, but we give because we need to give. Our giving is an act of trust.

Another delicate area in the life of the congregation, and one that is easily prone to legalism, is prayer. Prayer is our relationship with God. It is not something we do for God or for ourselves and salvation. Yet often prayer can become legalistic and a form of works righteousness. Sometime ago, there was a National Prayer Program that published posters stating, “Life is Hard, Pray Harder.” Behind this position is the attempt to think and do something that will transform life. It was a noble attempt to encourage people to be people of prayer, but it smacked of legalism. The fruit of legalism is found in the word *Harder*. Even though we do have a mandate to “pray without ceasing,” this does not mean that we hold the salvation of the world in the efforts of our prayers. We are to pray faithfully. You do not pray to get God in the action. The heart of Paul’s theology is the sovereignty of God. There is only one God and there are no real rivals. There are pretenders; there are even “other gospels,” but there is only one true gospel as far as Paul is concerned.

This brings us to a dual emphasis. First, for Paul the world is so evil and so saturated in rebellion against the one mysterious and gracious God that only this One’s total sovereignty can deal constructively with the world and its inhabitants. Ted Peters paraphrased Reinhold Niebuhur in saying, “At the heart of all sin is the failure to trust God. Sin is our unwillingness to acknowledge our creatureliness and dependence upon the God of grace. We pursue sin in the illusory and vain effort to establish our own lives on an independent and secure basis.” The psalmist knows very well the scope of sin. “Fools say in their heart, ‘There is no God.’ They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds, there is no one who does good” (Psalm 14:1). “For I know my transgression, and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you alone,
have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are justified in your sentence, and blameless when you pass judgement. Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me” (Psalm 51:3–5).

The episode just prior to our text (some scholars consider this to be a unit) points out the vastness of sin’s influence. Paul has just related the happenings at the Jerusalem Council, where the apostles have all shaken hands so as to be in ministry to both Jews and Gentiles. Peter joins the Christians at Antioch at their monthly covered-dish supper and is sitting at the table with Gentiles as they are eating their ribs and sausages. But when some of the representatives of the Jerusalem Church come into the fellowship hall, he gets up and moves to another table. Paul cannot understand this and confronts Peter to his face and calls him a hypocrite. Even Barnabas is led astray, Barnabas who brought Paul into the position of leadership in the gentile mission.

Paul knows that Peter, Barnabas, and the men from Jerusalem are wrong because they have broken the oneness, the unity of life in this world. They are divisive. The cause is sin; the effect is evil. For Paul, the end of this situation indicates that the condition of sin is out of control.

The second point concerning the sovereignty of God is justification, Paul’s major theme in Galatians and Romans. Justification can only take place in the context of God’s total sovereignty, for God is the only one who can make right what is wrong. And at the heart of Paul’s position on justification is not so much how people will be saved as how God seeks to place the Gentiles in the midst of the Kingdom. How do the people outside of the promise and covenant come to share in the promise and covenant? The Gentiles have no credentials, no heritage, and no election, yet for Paul they have been grafted into the foundation of the covenant promise. It is faith/trust that Christ Jesus did die for the world that brings unity and salvation to the world.

Justification is like a legal proceeding, but there is no courtroom like this one. The Judge takes the convicted prisoner’s part and cancels the offense. To be justified is to have the verdict of “just” or “righteous” passed upon one—that one is made innocent. It is divine initiative, and not human effort, that brings this about. Justification does not eliminate the need for good works but instead liberates one for doing them. It is this uniqueness, this folly, this ridiculous, unreasonable position that stands over against the pretense of the law. God’s initiative to justify, to make right what could not be made right
in any other fashion is the heart of Paul’s position. God reckons sinners to be what in life they are not, namely righteous.

The lectionary Gospel text vividly portrays this stance of justification and its relationship to forgiveness. Luke 7:36—8:3 tells of an occasion when Jesus sat at the table with the Pharisees, and a woman of bad reputation fell at Jesus’ feet and washed them. The host, aware of the woman’s low status, wants to divide the table between us and them. Jesus embraces unity with a woman who is justified (“forgiven much”) and who responds to Jesus as the object of her devotion. It is then that he announces to all that her sin is forgiven. Jesus takes the first step in her vindication by accepting her and embracing her so that she can be with him.

The response to God’s initiative of justifying grace is nothing more or less than our applause. In a secular world we applaud performance, so here we applaud the action and aggressiveness of God on our behalf.

It’s all right. God has said so in Jesus Christ.

**Galatians 3:23-29 Something Has Changed**

Change is a two-edged sword for us. There are times when we are frightened about change because something has to die in the process. There is uncertainty in change and that leaves us insecure. But I have noticed in more recent times that to avoid this insecurity we promote a thin layer of change. It is called novelty. “Let’s try something new and see if that will enhance or enrich what is already present.” The church today is attracted to the novel. We are a disposable society that is always looking for something new and different.

The tension that is raised by Paul in his letter to the Galatians is one between law and faith. But we need to know what law is all about. Walter Brueggemann reminds us that we Christians need to reclaim the meaning of law as it is derived from Torah. “Torah means the entire written and cherished normative memory of the community, all the lore and narrative and poetry and song and old liturgy that had formed and shaped and authorized the imagination of the community. In rabbinic sources, moreover, it is later urged that there is also an oral torah alongside what is written... This reading and hearing of the Torah was in fact a communal reappropriation of a core memory...”

We as Christians have often thought of Law/Torah as a set of numbers
with “Thou shalt nots” and “Thou shalt’s” beside them. Torah is how life is supposed to be lived. For example, the Ten Commandments are what God cares about, respect for the holy God and for each other. Paul speaks of the Law as a guardian, as a disciplinarian. The Law grounds our life and gives us perspective on it. Torah is not the source of life, but it is a trustworthy road to take so that we can live responsibly in a fallen world. Thus, the Law has purpose only in the context of sin.

Brueggemann’s definition of Law as collective memory and narrative gives us a clue as to what is happening in this passage. We must know our identity, for there is no health in being merely adrift in life. But our collective memory and story are not the final word. They simply point toward that One behind and in all history and life.

So we come to these striking two words in verse 25: “But now.” You know something of a decisive nature has happened. “But now that faith has come...” (v. 25). Faith in what or whom? Faith in the Law? Not for Paul, since the change of “But now” has come on the scene. Now has come faith. Can we trust the promise made to Abraham? It is interesting that Paul confronts the Galatians by using the example of the beginning of the covenant with Abraham. It is as if Paul is saying, “What if the people from Jerusalem want to entice you in another way? I will beat them at their own game.”

Paul argues that Abraham was said to be righteous by having trusted God’s promise to him. And this faith/trust was before Abraham had been circumcised and before the Law. Thus, for Paul Abraham is the father of the Gentiles as well as the Jews who trust God’s promise. The Torah/Law is given because of the conditions of this fallen world and its need for a disciplinarian and guardian. Paul is back to the condition of radical evil. God’s action, he asserts, is the only effective way of dealing with it. Now Christ has come and the Law still functions to expose and discipline, but Jesus Christ is the Word that God has accepted us. Can the Galatians embrace that Word? Or maybe more pointedly, can we embrace it?

Paul is not advocating abolishing the Law. To take such a view of the Law would produce antinomianism (anti = against; nomios = the law), which Paul also has to address in this letter. To become so rigid in justification by faith as to embrace antinomianism would surely contradict the purpose of the Law. Jesus did not come to abolish the Law but to fulfill it. In Mark 10, Jesus is asked about the Mosaic law concerning a man divorcing a woman. Jesus responds to the Pharisees
the Pharisees in saying the Mosaic law was given because of "your hardness of heart." What is needed is faith/trust in the act of God in Jesus’ death and resurrection as the saving event of history.

The tension here between law and faith is not such that one side has no consideration for the other. Paul, with his stress on justification, affirms the importance of the Law. And the rabbis also point to trusting God in their obedience to the Mosaic Law. So what Paul is objecting to is something else.

What the visitors from Jerusalem were doing in their insistence on circumcision and loyalty to the Torah was adding something else to the redemptive act of Jesus’ death and resurrection. It was an attempt at completing the act that Paul thought was final in itself. For these Jewish Christians, whoever they were, a Christian has faith in what God did in Jesus Christ but must also be circumcised. Paul’s argument is based in the historic Jewish tradition of Abraham’s being a man of faith and trust, and the Law’s being given not to replace the promise or add to it but to equip the faithful for living in the promise.

Paul is disturbed as to how the Galatians could be so foolish, “bewitched” by such a claim (3:1–5). The Law brings no blessing but a curse to those who cannot keep it. But from that curse God has redeemed those who trust Christ (3:4–14). Could the Galatians not understand that the Law is for children in order to keep them in a disciplined order until maturity has come to them? The Galatians are turning their backs on the very gift that is being given to them.

But let us not be too harsh on the Galatians. For not only do we function legalistically in the church at times but we also are guilty of constantly adding to the gospel. We imply in much that we do and say that faith is fine, but you must add other ingredients in order for it to be relevant. Our additions today come from our infatuation with being contemporary, relevant, and novel. It also comes from what we no longer listen to—each other and the Word of God. The Story has taken on such luggage that we no longer recognize the center. Why should we add on to the promise made to Abraham and fulfilled in Jesus Christ?

During the season of Advent, for example, we have so much clutter around in preparation of the birth of new life in Christ that Mary and Joseph could not get into the chancel for the flowers, the wreaths, the candles, the banners, garlands, and so forth. Perhaps our “decorations” reveal our emptiness. Our desperation is also seen in our use of music, as we try to accommodate all musical tastes. The cry is for excitement
in the midst of our being summoned together to hear God's Word interpret our lives.

A second example is the service of Christian marriage. We keep adding more and more to the order of worship with very little sense or continuity and meaning. We have greenery, flowers, candelabras, unity candles, flowers for the mothers, and the presentation of the bride and groom to the congregation; but very few people know the Lord's Prayer that is offered in the service, or why we say it. Most of these additions look good. But we do have to address whether or not what we are doing has any meaning in terms of our covenant-making in the eyes of God. Can our covenant service stand on its own?

There is a difference between communicating and breaking open and merely propping up. We do need to have those words, rituals, symbols, and gestures that communicate the gospel story in worship, in weddings, and in everything else we do. But we need to be sure that those words and actions point to the gospel.

Paul puts the issue in perspective in v. 27 when he speaks about being baptized into Christ Jesus and clothing ourselves in Christ. For he has now addressed the delicate issue at the bottom of all of this frustration, namely, entrance into the faith community. The addition of circumcision and adherence to the Torah distorts our initiation into the Body of Christ. Baptism has already done that for us. Baptism is the promise of God to us and our laying claim to that promise. Baptism is where we are claimed by God as heirs through God's action on our part and our trusting in that action. It is also where we are clothed in Christ (v. 27). Is there not a connection here with the Lucan lectionary text (8:26–39) where Jesus meets the Gerasene demoniac and frees him of the legion of demons so that he is seen “sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed in his right mind” (Luke 8:35). When you have been healed and clothed, you beg to follow Jesus. And the only demand that Jesus lays on him is to “return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you” (Luke 8:39).

The fruit of being justified through God's grace in baptism is unity and not division. The folks from Jerusalem had come to Galatia and brought division. We are all “bewitched” with the division of pluralism that demands more and more be done for life. There is division when everyone and everything must conform to my perspective rather than rest on the love and mercy of God. It is in Galatians 3:28 that we hear not some kind of sociological truth but
rather baptismal affirmation about the saving and unifying work of God’s grace.

Something has changed. God through Christ has accepted us. Believe it! Trust it! Live it in a disciplined life.

**Galatians 5:1, 13–25  Living between Freedom and Discipline**

During this time of the year when we are remembering our national heritage, we may need to listen to Paul speak to the Galatians, “For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters, only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another” (5:13). We rally to Paul’s call to freedom, but we also know that this whole realm of freedom is a tricky one. The whole world covets freedom today as walls come down, violence erupts, tempers flare—all for the sake of freedom. The Enlightenment has reached its zenith. What has been named “modernity” has brought us to affirm, defend, and celebrate our freedom individually and in a selective society.

But there is a word of caution here. Freedom can also divide us. Listen to the slogans that are screamed around us: “Freedom of Choice” is heard on one side of the street, and “Right to Life” on the other side. And the parade that is coming down the middle of the street carries a banner that reads “The Declaration of Independence.” But is our declaring freedom and our being free the same thing? John Locke’s position that the essence of life is in the individual as a slate that is filled with experience and interpreted in reason has led us to a radical state of individual freedom at the cost of any sense of community. Today we function out of a context of freedom to choose who to marry and when to marry, as well as whether or not even to stay married.

And we all know that our obligation to parents and children is eroding at a fast pace. C. K. Barrett reminds us that “the freedom of faith must not be destroyed by legalism; this point Paul has labored throughout the epistle and he has not finished with it yet. The freedom of faith must not be corrupted by license; to this point he now turns, and here he discloses the conflict that lies at the heart of Christian existence.” Paul’s letter faces dual threats from the advocates of the Law in their strict legalism and from the libertines who have no regard
in their freedom for a commandment to love or for any other restraint. These latter ones see their Christian life being like a butterfly, flying around from one flower to another. When Paul writes about being "called to freedom," it is not some loose action with no regard for anyone or anything else. Jesus calls us to freedom, and there is a place for saying "no" in that freedom. The Lucan lectionary text (Luke 9:51-62) has some who volunteer to follow Jesus and some who are called by Jesus. Jesus informs all of them that they will have to say no to some aspects of life. It is in the saying no that Paul will address the ethical behavior of being a Christian. Paul is clear on this point: "Live by the Spirit, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh" (5:16).

In our freedom we have to be able to say no. For to be free is to live with and in the midst of restraints. It seems to be very difficult for the church today to be able to say no. We are in an accommodation mode and thus are unable to respond in truth.

Is it possible that we have been "called to freedom" but have "indulged ourselves" to such an extent that we know nothing of healing, forgiveness, and reconciliation and so but are getting sicker and sicker? We have become a people of multiple choices. Often you will hear someone define a human being not as a creature of God but as someone who has been given the gift of choices. It is interesting how we find it hard to relate to God’s choosing us and see ourselves in the driver’s seat and making the choice. In 5:1 Paul states clearly that "Christ has set us free." We did not free ourselves. In and through the one sent by God as a Son, born of a woman, we have been set free from the elemental spirits of the world (4:3-7), from fear of those who might impose legalistic demands on us (2:12), from false believers (2:4), and from the discrimination that separates us from each other (3:28). Jesus sets us free that we might serve one another, thus being in community.

We are deceived when we think that we are free and find ourselves captured in the realm of selectivity. Are we truly the center of the universe? What happens when we start with the freedom of God? God is free to create; God is free to choose Israel; God is free to free Israel from slavery and bondage. God is free even to surrender freedom (Phil. 2:6-11). In our Gospel lectionary text, Jesus is free to "set his face toward Jerusalem" (Luke 9:51), an expression that spells out both direction and determination. "Fundamental to Paul's understanding and interpretation of God is the conviction that God’s activity manifests his sovereign freedom to the faithful, to himself, and his
commitments. This understanding is rooted deeply in the Old Testament and Judaism. When we affirm the nature of God’s freedom, we can recognize that what God creates is never independent or disassociated from its source. And the popular notion that we are free from everything is not Pauline. We are always in a sphere of power where one has a Lord. Paul says this as a part of his argument about food offered to idols (Romans 14–15). So we are always servants; to God and to each other. We are not servants just to ourselves; these are hard words to a society that is so narcissistic.

Paul spells out this tension in the contrast found in his terms of the Spirit and Flesh (5:16). For Paul’s flesh is not tissue, humanness, or worldliness; rather it is that condition that rebels against God. Flesh and spirit are opposites; they pull in different directions (5:17) and prevent the person from doing what he or she would want to do or know enough to do. Flesh is that rebellious nature in us. So we too must be liberated. We can be deliberate and aggressive in our freedom for the sake of others because we are already justified by God through grace (Rom. 8:1). When we are able to trust (faith) the faithfulness of God, we are in a position to take risks above everything else in life. Our freedom to be for others and to live fully finds its foundation in the freedom and grace of God that accepts and claims us. The Law cannot do this; we know where we belong and to whom we belong.

Victor Furnish paraphrases 5:25 this way: “Since we are utterly dependent on the power and prompting of God’s Spirit, let us live in relationship to his purposes.”

Freedom and obligation go together. Our freedom and our obligation are held together with trust and faith. When we step out in the freedom in which we have been called by Christ Jesus, we do so recognizing the risk and trusting the One that has called us.

Galatians 6:1–16 The Church Is at Stake Here!

In order to understand what is going on in chapter 6, we have to look back just one verse. “Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another” (5:26). The issues of circumcision, devotion to the Torah, and libertinism are evidently dividing the church in Galatia. And division is destructive. Paul has to address that issue with the church in Corinth. Is it not true that when our positions of piety and stances of secularity collide, the church becomes divided?
Paul has already sought to address this issue back in 3:28, where the congregations embraced both slaves and free as one body in Christ Jesus. Despite Paul's ideals, the division was there, as it is present in the church today. Most division today centers on individuals seeking to have their own needs met regardless of the expense to others. Like society, the church can easily become centered on being "user friendly." It has become common to begin our mission as the church with looking for and determining the needs of the people that we seek to engage in the church. There are two dangers in this. First, we have assumed that people know what they need; and second, we think they must be right in their view of what they need. Both positions leave no room for the One who breaks into our midst with both judgment and grace.

For Paul this is the tension between "flesh and spirit." Where is the center that holds everything together? For Protestants at one time it was Scripture alone. For United Methodists, it has been spelled out recently as scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. But something has happened to our source of authority. Scripture has little authority today because we are awash in literary and historical criticism. The dark closets of Christian tradition have all been exposed. We play reason and experience against each other. So where is the center? I sense that the crisis of our authority in faith is everywhere. We are selective in our use of scripture and critical of tradition; we act as if history began with us, and we have few ways to share our thoughts and experience.

I believe that we have come to a time of silence and waiting, and all that is given to us is a faithful witness, a proclamation. To the community of faith in Galatia, who are tempted toward a legalism that has no power and an antinomianism that results in anarchy, Paul has his own proclamation to offer. So he concludes his letter by pulling everything together.

In one sense 6:10 is the end of the letter, or at least the letter that Paul has dictated. Verse 11 is a postscript. So when we look at 6:10 we see how Paul wanted to tie everything up with a testimony and a demand to the Galatians for ethical behavior. That may sound a little strange for Paul the theologian. We might want to think that he would pound them one more time with his thoughts on justification through faith. Yet he pleads for them to "work for the good." We might want to think that Paul is coming on a little on the conservative side in his position of "not giving up" and acting in love. But we have to
remember that Paul believes and writes out of a sense of eschatology ("So then... "). For these last days to be charis (quality) time we must remain firm and act faithfully.

Paul's call to work for the good of all has to be seen in his earlier position on flesh and spirit. If we do not actively engage in being in Christ, the flesh will take over and we are back into our old self-indulgent style. Paul demands that the Galatians love everyone ("work for the good of all"). The familiar Pauline position of universality—of sin, grace, and now the universality of love ties this all together. But Paul also knows that we can get trapped into generality, so he offers the concrete and specific advice to "work for the good of all, especially for those of the family of faith." How often do we become consumed with interest for "all of those other folks" and miss those in our midst who have transgressed? Or how do we deal with the issue when we are the transgressors? I often find that I want to fix the world and do not recognize that I myself need fixing in my sin. For Paul, we are saved by grace, justified as we embrace that saving action in trust, and now must put on the actions of love that have been revealed to us. We do not start off running in order to be loved (legalism), and we do not sit so grace may abound more (antinomianism). No, we hear, trust, and engage in loving all and each one.

But Paul wants to add a postscript to what he has dictated to a scribe. He wants to express his total approval on what has been written. And here he is summing everything up. "I said it once and now will say it again," he would say. The Galatians are not to trust those who come to circumcise them, for they are wanting to add to the statistical report of their success. They have no credibility.

Paul finds the integrity of life in the cross of Christ and in the new creation. He can boast of nothing except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. Others might boast of their faith, their tradition, or their understanding and familiarity with Scripture; but Paul can only boast of the cross of Christ. And the key to this is Paul's understanding of sin: he and the world have been in such a state of alienation from God that only the cross of Christ can bring reconciliation. Paul has died to the world and to himself on the cross of Christ (v. 14). Like him, we can boast of the cross because it is the cross of Christ where God poured out costly grace for the world. Embracing that cross leaves marks on us. Paul carried the "marks of Jesus on his body" (v. 17). He has been tattooed as a slave so he can no longer escape the One to whom he belongs. The cross grafts us into the very nature and source of all of life.
Finally, Paul reveals that neither circumcision nor non-circumcision is anything. “But a new creation is everything” (v. 15). The new creation is a community; it is the community of many. It is not an isolated individual who has a private faith but a church not unlike those in Galatia. We have no personal faith here but a corporate faith of several or many who find peace and mercy together. They are the Israel of God, those chosen out of the world to be a blessing to all the world. The new creation has an aspect of ending, for in the new creation is the end of faith in false gods and an end to reliance on the law, the end of life ruled by the individual, and the end of selfishness. Then comes the new. “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation” (2 Cor. 5:17–18).

The new creation is inclusive not only in terms of gender, economic situation, and ethnic origins but also in terms of the scope of God’s love for all. In both the Galatians and Second Kings (2 Kings 5:1–14) texts we can become aware of the global scope of God’s love as God creates community among individuals. This word is so desperately needed in today’s society of isolation. Paul calls us, the “cocoon generation,” out from our protective security into a world that belongs to God. We do not do this in and of ourselves (legalism), but we receive in trust what God has already done for us. So we bear the marks of God’s love. Our freedom is found in the new creation that has been formed and shaped by God, namely the Church. For Paul has addressed his letter not to individuals but to the “churches of Galatians” (1:2). The Church is at stake here.

Conclusion

Paul’s letter addresses a conflict in the churches of Galatia where a strict form of legalism was being imposed on new converts. There is also evidence that he had to confront the problem of a perversion of freedom in a libertine style of life. Because of these dual threats he expresses disappointment, anger, and frustration at those Christians who were initially responsive to his witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is indeed easy to think that Paul is an angry man who simply wanted to beat those infants in the faith over the head. But we need to notice carefully how Paul ends his letter: “May the grace of our Lord
Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers and sisters” (6:18). To call them his brothers and sisters means that he still stands in community with them. They all belong together. So his judgment is not condemning but healing. It is a call to hold fast, remain firm, do not forsake the gospel given to them.

Notice also the last word of the letter: “Amen.” It is as if Paul has given the benediction and now awaits everyone saying, “Amen.” And we do know that they did say Amen. “The Galatian Churches furnished their quota of the army of martyrs in the Diocletian persecution, and the oldest existing church in the capital still bears the name of its bishop Clement, who perished during the reign of terror.” 8 It was the region of Galatia that Timothy and Gaius, traveling companions with Paul, called home. We can assume that in Paul’s two visits to Galatia and in this major letter, the people there could and did respond to Paul. The candor and frankness of Paul in his correspondence to the Galatians evidently led to a strong relationship with them. Through it they were able to struggle with the meaning of the gospel.

Today in the church we face different challenges. Few people today are dogmatic about circumcision, keeping the sabbath, loving and praying for their enemies, and loving God with their whole heart, mind, soul, and strength. In our age of pluralism and polytheism we are more prone to be laid back, not committed, not involved. Antinomianism prevails in our Western societies. Laws are relative to us. We can only say no to a few things in life.

Has the time come for the Church of Jesus Christ to fast and pray as it listens to God’s word to us in the struggle of Paul with the Galatians? As Paul could struggle with the churches of Galatia in his disappointment and anger, so we can struggle with ourselves and each other. For with Paul we are still a community of sisters and brothers. We share a relationship.

Along with Romans the Epistle to the Galatians enjoys a history of being the launching pad for church reform. Romans gets most of the publicity, but we know that Galatians forms a sort of first draft for Paul’s position to be faithful and stand firm. Today we, too, are being called to faithfulness in the face of the threats to accommodate and sell out. Today, the church is being called to say loudly and clearly, “Amen,” as it reads the correspondence that Paul wrote to the churches of Galatia.
Notes


3. Ibid., ii.


Recommended Reading:


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