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Benjamin E. Mays, Black Colleges, and the Good Life

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Summer, 1995

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It really was a wonderful occasion. Although I had to be there, and at first that counted against it, last year’s BHBM banquet and lecture had all the makings of a revival. On the long road of our common struggle against racism, I consider it something of a milestone.

I bring up the business of the board not to play church society editor but because the visibility of events of this kind—at which the presidents and a few students from each of the eleven historically Black United Methodist colleges were honored and the fabulous Rust College Choir sang—is usually limited. That’s a shame, because there was a gem in the center of this event: a testimony to the educational leadership of Dr. Benjamin E. Mays, given by Samuel DuBois Cook, President of Dillard College in New Orleans. This address had the feeling of a sermon. Dr. Cook did not need to read his lecture any more than the singers from Rust needed to read their notes off the page. If you know where you’re going, why use a map?

Benjamin E. Mays, the legendary president of Morehouse College, had teaching authority, no doubt about it. Dr. Cook set himself the task of describing the legacy of Dr. Mays, including what it was like to be in the presence of this great man, the feelings of deference and respect justly accorded to someone who lived nobly and inspired others to do likewise. I invite you to savor the words of this address. Like biblical poets, Dr. Cook uses repetition, nuance, color, and quotation to create a portrait. The data-gatherers among us can fill in the blanks of his life story later; what you will learn here from Dr. Cook is the essence of that remarkable human being.

Teaching authority is not restricted to outstanding individuals, however. It is part and parcel of the church’s educational task, one that
goes back to the early Church's ranking of teachers just behind apostles and prophets.

The good news conveyed by Russell Richey is that, for United Methodists, the church's teaching authority is not a static entity. Since the days of Mr. Wesley, many groups and individuals have spoken effectively for the Methodist movement. We have had, in effect, a "floating magisterium," despite the formal designation of General Conference as the church's teaching body. Gayle Felton's article underscores that point by showing the individual responsibility for educational leadership in the parish.

Think of all the vividly drawn scenes in the Hebrew Bible where power was granted by God to mortal beings, or transferred from one human being to another. Much room for bungling, waste, and sin here. And yet in all this we see prefigured the responsibility of all Christians to speak clearly to one another of their hopes and fears, to encourage one another and bear each others' burdens. The spiritual dimension of teaching and learning has long been part of the church's educational vision. St. Bernard of Clairvaux expressed it well:

*There are many who seek knowledge for the sake of knowledge; that is curiosity.*

*There are others who desire to know in order that they themselves be known; that is vanity.*

*Others seek knowledge in order to sell it; that is dishonorable.*

*But there are also some who seek knowledge in order to serve and edify others; that is love.*

This issue is full of treasures: Millie Feske's spirited account of the true meaning of theology; Sally Geis's incisive review of current books on power; and Ben Witherington's in-depth reading of Luke. Each of these splendid teachers merits your time and attention. I am happy to share their work with you.

I wish you all the bounty of the summer season!

Sharon Hels
Samuel DuBois Cook

The Wisdom de Profundis of Benjamin E. Mays, Black Colleges, and the Good Life

I would like to thank Dr. Roger Ireson for his rich and prophetic vision of highlighting, lifting up, and dramatizing the eleven historically Black institutions of higher learning related to the United Methodist Church. Invisibility, with all its awesome implications and consequences, is one of the great burdens and crosses that Black colleges and universities have to bear. One is inescapably reminded of Ralph Waldo Ellison's poignant novel, Invisible Man. The pain of invisibility, anonymity, and marginality and the denial of the dignity and beauty of self-identity apply to the Black experience individually, collectively, and institutionally in the New World. "Nobodyness" and "nothingness" are terrible enemies of human dignity and worth and the divine quest for excellence and a better life.

Thus the effort, initiative, and strategy to make our institutions more visible as living and enriching concrete phenomena rather than isolated and distant abstractions within the entire United Methodist Church reflect an inspired and innovative commitment. Let this be only the beginning of a continuing effort, opportunity, and movement to deal with a situation fraught with great urgency, power, significance, vitality, meaning, hope, and redemptive qualities and dimensions. Making our colleges and universities visible is an ecclesiastical imperative, an educational necessity, and an ethical mandate.

Samuel DuBois Cook is President of Dillard University in New Orleans, Louisiana.
On behalf of our colleges and universities, congratulations and
gratitude to the Black College Fund of the Board of Higher Education
and Ministry and the entire United Methodist Church for the generous,
sustained, and increasing support of institutions which are enlarging,
enriching, and deepening educational opportunities for young women
and men. Not only are their lives and destinies at stake, but also the
very quality of life and future of the body politic and society are at
issue. Your investment in young people is ultimately an act of love,
worship, mission, moral responsibility, and commitment to the
kingdom of God.

The Black College Fund is an infinite blessing and a divine
investment in the future of our institutions and in the lives of the
young men and women entrusted to our care. Thanks be to God for the
United Methodist Church.

Finally, congratulations and gratitude to the United Methodist
Church for making its historically Black colleges and universities an
integral part of its mission and ministry. Increased sensitivity to,
appreciation of, and responsibility for its historically Black colleges
and universities are dramatic reminders of the progress of the United
Methodist Church toward genuine inclusiveness and universality. The
Wesleyan tradition in higher education is being made relevant and
meaningful to Black colleges: "Unite the pair so long
disjointed—knowledge and vital piety."

This essay is about values. It is wide-ranging. Explicitly and
implicitly, descriptively and normatively, it is about romance with
the world of higher possibilities. It is about the divine quest for
something higher, nobler, richer, fuller. It is about the Black
experience and the promise of North American life. It is about human
dignity and worth, equality of opportunity, social justice, racism, and
the divine, never-ending struggle for human decency and a more
humane society.

This essay deals with individuals and institutions, ideals and
realities, memory and hope, the “push” of history and the “pull” of
destiny. It is about Black colleges and universities desperately seeking
to come to grips with the “American Dilemma,” responding creatively
to the tragedy and tyranny of racism. It is about social and historical
change and institutional reform. It is about the Good Life. It is about
the Good Society. The Good Life and the Good Society are insep-
arable if for no other reason than the simple fact that the Good Life is possible and achievable only in the Good Society.

Ethical and moral values, vision, and authority constitute the heart and soul of my message. Benjamin Elijah Mays is the Alpha and Omega and the common thread of meaning, coherence, vitality, and Weltanschauung.

The Wisdom de Profundis of Benjamin E. Mays

I am inclined to say (hat Dr. Benjamin E. Mays, whose centennial birthday was August 1, 1994, was ahead of his time. But I have it on good authority, that of Dr. Benjamin E. Mays himself, that I should not:

-No! He was not ahead of his time. No man is ahead of his time. Every man is within his star, each in his time. Each man must respond to the call of God in his lifetime and not in somebody else's time. Jesus had to respond to the call of God in the first century A.D., and not in the twentieth century. He had but one life to live. He couldn't wait. How long do you think Jesus would have had to wait for the constituted authorities to accept him? Twenty-five years? A hundred years? A thousand? He died at thirty-three. He couldn't wait. Paul, Galileo, Copernicus, Martin Luther the Protestant reformer, Gandhi and Nehru couldn't wait for another time. They had to act in their lifetimes. No man is ahead of his time. Abraham, leaving his country in obedience to God's call; Moses, leading a rebellious people to the Promised Land; Jesus, dying on a cross; Galileo, on his knees recanting; Lincoln, dying of an assassin's bullet; Woodrow Wilson, crusading for a League of Nations; Martin Luther King, Jr., dying fighting for justice for garbage collectors—none of these men were ahead of their time. With them the time was always ripe to do that which was right and that which needed to be done.2

Dr. Mays cast a wide net. Internationally known, respected, and admired, he made remarkable and perennial contributions as a minister, educator, prophet, scholar, churchman. President of Morehouse College for twenty-seven distinguished years, president of the Atlanta Board of Education for twelve years, he was a teacher,
author, newspaper columnist, civil and human rights activist, an architect and engineer of the Civil Rights Movement, an orator, mentor, public servant, national and international leader, a motivator, inspirer, and transformer of young people, a social critic, and revolutionary ethicist and moralist. A man of great moral courage, prophetic vision, and humanistic wisdom, he was a hard taskmaster. He demanded much of himself and others, but of himself first and foremost. He was also a gentle soul and a kindly light. He had a passion for excellence, social justice, personal and civic virtue, and human decency.

Born of slave parents who later became sharecroppers, Dr. Mays was the youngest of eight children in rural South Carolina. As was the practice of Blacks in the Old South of his youth, he attended school only four months a year from the third grade up because work on the farm took priority over education. He was twenty-two when he finished high school. And yet he went on, through hard work, sheer determination, and faith in God. He graduated with honors from Bates College, earned membership in Phi Beta Kappa, and received his master's and doctoral degrees from the University of Chicago.

Dr. Mays was born and raised in what he called "respectable poverty." His mother never learned to read or write. His father, when drinking heavily, abused his mother. His father not only failed to support Dr. Mays's thirst for education and nurture his intellectual curiosity but strongly discouraged his educational pursuits. In continuing his education, Dr. Mays defied his father.

The man was multidimensional. His life was dynamic, never static. He combined thought and action, contemplation and the "hustle and bustle" of perpetual motion. He was always on the go, a "mover and shaker," continually on the cutting edge. No one ever thought of him as obsolete or irrelevant. He had an amazing zest for life, a capacity to "shake things up" and knock people out of their complacency. He was morally restless and dissatisfied, turning things inside out and upside down, "comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable." Even in his declining years, when the aging process took its inevitable toll, he was forever young in the ultimate essentials of the human mind, heart, and spirit. When he died in 1984 at the ripe age of eighty-nine, he was still dreaming and aspiring, working on three books, insisting that his best book was yet to be written. The haunting and disturbing voice of higher possibility continued to call and beckon him. He loved that great Negro spiritual: "I Ain't Got Time to Die."
Dr. Mays was paradoxical. This quality was rooted in his appreciation of the full dimensions of the complexities, contradictions, ambiguities, and ambivalences of human existence and relationships. Theologically, he was to the “right.” Socially, he was to the “left.” He stood squarely in the great prophetic tradition of divine judgment, condemnation, transcendent criticism, reward and punishment, and God’s inexhaustible demands, imperatives, mercy, grace, and love. He was always deeply concerned about the weighty and basic issues of the divine-human encounter, such as love, justice, kindness, judgment, responsibility, accountability, and God’s affirmations and negations.

Like Reinhold Niebuhr, Dr. Mays had one foot planted firmly in the tradition of “original sin” of Christian Orthodoxy and like Walter Rauschenbush, the other in the Social Gospel movement, in the theology of Christian liberalism, and the more moderate view of human nature, destiny, and indeterminate possibilities.

A proud Southern Baptist, he was critical of the pietism and individualism of White Southern Baptists, with their absorption in “personal salvation” and sanctimonious irrelevances but their callous indifference to, if not outright repudiation of, the great issues of social justice and racial equality. He also criticized their intolerance, their belief in Biblical literalism and inerrancy, and their not infrequent expressions of religious, racial, and ethnic prejudice and bigotry. Dr. Mays was a champion of ecumenism and a prominent leader in the ecumenical movement. The Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta is no small monument to his profound commitment to ecumenicity in theological education.

Dr. Mays was dismayed by the massive interest of the Southern Baptist Convention in foreign missions and the “saving of souls” in Africa and other distant places while at the same time contributing to the perpetuation of demonic racism and other forms of social injustice and corporate evils at home—even in the Christian churches of the Southern Baptist denomination itself. How could White Southern Baptists be so morally blind, ethically insensitive, and religiously hypocritical? How could they fail to see the relevance and urgency of the Social Gospel and the impact of societal, cultural, and political forces on evangelical piety, missionary individualism, and personal salvation?

Dr. Mays was equally concerned with issues of personal virtue and individual salvation and issues of social redemption, reconciliation,
and regeneration. Indeed, he saw the two dimensions as inseparable, as two sides of the same coin.

“Every critic of the existing order,” said William Ernest Hocking, “is at heart a revolutionary; but worship is the radical and deliberate cult of revolution. The will which has met its god confronts the world with new tables of the law.” Benjamin Elijah Mays, with fierce determination and total self-surrender to the will of God and God’s creative and redemptive love, persistently and courageously confronted various corporate evils, entrenched social wrongs, oppressive systems, institutions, and organizations, institutionalized corruptions, wicked forces, and demonic ideologies, like racism, with unrelenting, aggressive, unyielding, and uncompromising “new tables of the law.” He fought them “tooth and nail” like a tiger. He was always inspired and inspiring. He seemed always in touch, informed, haunted, and driven by the ground, source, end, meaning, and fulfillment of existence and human nature and destiny. What a creative force and boundless vitality for righteousness, justice, nonviolence, reconciliation, tolerance, self-discipline, principle, love, and the kingdom of God!

Benjamin E. Mays was a tough competitor, whether picking cotton or performing other work as a sharecropper; teaching in the classroom, preparing for his studies; washing dishes; on the platform, making spellbinding speeches; writing scholarly or popular books and articles; debating; encountering antagonistic students; engaging adversaries on social, moral, political, religious, or other issues; or practicing his speeches aloud in a Pullman car, hotel room, or elsewhere. He was a perfectionist. He was a tireless worker. In spite of his awesome reputation and peerless performance as an orator, he said that he was always nervous before making a speech and never felt ready. He constantly revised his speeches until the time came to make them. When the time came, he said, he would make the speech.

Dr. Mays was a rebel. But he was also an affirmer. Rebellion, like negation, always involves affirmation. To deny this is to affirm that. To affirm that is to deny this.

Lerone Bennett, Jr., calls Dr. Mays “the last of the great schoolmasters,” placing him in a perceptive historical perspective in the broad sweep of North American higher education and ranking him in the exclusive company of the greatest and most influential educators of the New World—Robert Maynard Hutchins and William Rainey Harper of the University of Chicago, Nicholas Murray Butler of Columbia, and Charles W. Eliot of Harvard, among others.

The list is awe-inspiring and endless. It includes countless anonymous, nameless, and faceless individuals. Such is the harvest of the seeds planted in the rich soil of the garden of human experience, adventure, hopes, fears, dreams, aspirations, longings, and expectations with all the mystery, meaning, and symbolism of the odyssey of humankind.

For generations, Dr. Mays influenced, challenged, and inspired both Whites and Blacks, religionists and secularists, educators and the unlettered, public servants and private individuals, North Americans and Africans, Jews and Gentiles, leaders and followers, corporate executives and students, Southerners and Northerners, “saints and sinners,” the young and the old, power-brokers and the powerless, the
arrogant and the humble, the “high and the mighty” and the least of these, the powerful and the “wretched of the earth.” What a man!

**Moral Authority de profundis**

I believe that the key to understanding and appreciating Dr. Mays—the man, his impact, achievements, contributions, magic, and imperishable legacy—is his moral and ethical authority. In the wholeness of his being, he was the center, instrument, embodiment, symbol, and prophetic voice and vision of moral and ethical values, consciousness, concerns, commitments, creative power, and authority. In his behavior, character, ideals, messages, leadership, speeches, writings, dialogues, decision-making, organizational and institutional life, and personal bearing, moral and ethical impulses and elements were inescapable and exerted a powerful and irresistible influence. Dr. Mays represented weighty, clear-cut, simple, convincing, and persuasive moral and ethical authority and power. This quality is as precious and far-reaching as it is rare.

Dr. Mays had moral charisma. He had ethical magnetism. He spoke with genuine moral power and persuasion. When “Buck Bennie,” as we affectionately called him behind his back, spoke, people of various persuasions listened.

Although he spoke with impeccable and unimpeachable moral authority, there was no touch of authoritarianism, dogma, or coercion in his message, only an inherent persuasiveness about his moral and ethical power and authority. Reflection on his Maysian quality calls to mind an observation by Alfred North Whitehead:

> The creation of the world—said Plato—is the victory of persuasion over force. The worth of men consists in their liability to persuasion. They can persuade and can be persuaded by the disclosure of alternatives, the better and the worse. Civilization is the maintenance of social order, by its own inherent persuasiveness as embodying the nobler alternative.⁴

Thus Dr. Mays’s total life was honeycombed, permeated, and saturated with moral and ethical characteristics in personal, organizational, and institutional terms: integrity, honesty, honor.
decency, goodness, trust, responsibility, truth, nobility, sincerity, forthrightness, justice, openness, purpose, mission, fairness, lofty aspiration, ideals, aims, obligation, conscience, the moral sense, love, forgiveness, brotherhood and sisterhood, equality, reconciliation, peace, nonviolence, healing, compassion, community service, concern for others, respect for the sanctity of human life, excellence, duty, and so forth.

Dr. Mays profoundly understood and constantly emphasized that moral and ethical values are the capstone, centerpiece, and hallmark of leadership, the professions, and civic responsibility and the ultimate test of quality for institutions, organizations, and other collective relationships and interactions.

For Dr. Mays, moral education is vital, urgent, and inescapable, the crowning element and cornerstone of all genuine education, at every level and in all kinds of institutions—public and private, from kindergarten through college and graduate and professional schools. Time and again, he proclaimed and lamented the fact that there is no necessary correlation between knowledge and goodness, learning and ethics, technical information and moral behavior and decision-making, values, and facts. Indeed, the separation of education and morality is fraught with all kinds of dangers and terrible consequences, as Nazi Germany demonstrated with utter clarity and horror.

Dr. Mays was at heart and in the depths of his being a moralist and ethicist. He understood, as so few do, that the essence of the ethical consciousness is the anguished cry of the human heart and spirit for something higher, richer, nobler, fuller. This ethical and moral philosophy was deeply rooted, of course, in Christian theology and faith. He asserted that:

The Christian affirms further that man is dependent upon God for the kind of world that he can build. Christianity declares that the universe is essentially ethical and essentially moral. Just as there are scientific and physical laws by which the universe is governed and by which man must abide, there are ethical and moral laws by which man must regulate his life. . . . Man cannot build the world as he pleases. . . . Man's task is to discover God's laws and base his choices and actions upon them.  

Dr. Mays subjected racism, segregation, Jim Crowism, and discrimination to one of the most rigorous critiques and criticisms in
the literature on the subject. I was struck by the fact that his brilliant
and searching analysis of the 1930s and 1940s, from the transcendent
perspective of the Christian faith, would be considered tough and even
“militant” in many circles today. I wanted to know how he got away
with it. In those days, some Blacks were driven out of town, mobbed,
and lynched for much less. “How did you survive and get away with
such militance?” I asked him. His simple reply was this: “Sam, when
people believe you are sincere, they will forgive you for a lot of
things.” Here is a case of the racist status quo seeing him in terms of
the moral and ethical authority to which I referred above.

Let me cite another example. Dr. Walter Washington, the longtime
president of Alcorn State University in Mississippi, was a great
admirer of Dr. Mays. Dr. Washington said that Dr. Mays always made
great speeches, and he wanted to know his secret. In conversation with
Dr. Mays, he asked, “How do you make outstanding and unforgettable
speeches time after time?” Once again, Dr. Mays’s simple reply was:
“Whenever I give a speech, I believe everything I say.” Sincerity can
carry a lot of moral weight and authority, and Dr. Mays’s sincerity of
mind and heart was inescapable and urgent.

For Benjamin Elijah Mays, a speech was not only art form, a process
of communication between speaker and hearer, delivered with eloquence
and motivational and homiletical skills and power. More deeply, a speech
was a self-revelation of values, longings, and vision emanating from the
depths of one’s being and representing the core of one’s life, beliefs, and
“inward journey.” A speech, therefore, like life itself, is serious business.
It is far more than skillful rhetoric, a manipulated and calculated
presentation to impress and sway the audience, beautiful words,
wonderful cadence and rhythm. An authentic speech is a fundamental
and serious encounter with, and sober reflection on, life’s journey, the
search for meaning, purpose, and mission, an engagement with the
audience, an important dialogue between speaker and listener.

Rabbi David S. Goldstein informs me that in the Midrash there is a
saying: “Words spoken from the heart enter the heart.” Dr. Mays had a
way with the human heart. He conquered.

Dr. Mays was a saint. He lived, moved, and had his being in the
depth dimension and ever-soaring lofty heights of the human
adventure and journey. No wonder he was always talking about high
aims, noble goals of striving, and unattainable ideals! No wonder he
was creatively restless and intolerant of mediocrity, low aims,
complacency, self-satisfaction, and the easy conscience! Small wonder
his life was a romance with the perennial search for the world of higher possibilities. For him, the great pilgrim Negro spiritual expressed one of the most compelling truths of the saga of humankind: "We are climbing Jacob's ladder... Every round goes higher, higher..." This is a commitment to, and love affair with, moral ascension and escalation, a constantly progressing moral development, aspiration, and achievement.

In a profound and powerful lecture on Dr. Mays entitled "The Lingering Legacy of a Rebel," Dr. Julius S. Scott, Jr., demonstrated anew why he is one of "Bennie's Boys" and one of Dr. Mays's most perceptive interpreters and disciples. He observed that:

Benjamin Elijah Mays was a rebel. He carefully chose the title of his autobiography—he was Born to Rebel. "I came out of my mother's womb," he said, "kicking against segregation and discrimination based on race, color, religion, ethnic or national origin." (Born to Rebel, p. 227)

But the genius of his rebellion is that it is basically ethical and moral. His was not a prudent or pragmatic protest, nor was it a dialectic or a strategy for social change. In the vision and the vigor of his rebellion, he articulated and embodied a moral philosophy, born out of deep rejection of racism and inferiority.

The recognition of his moral philosophy is long overdue, and I propose to explicate that position.

Rebels are special people; they inspire confidence; they revive expectations of a better time; they provoke a feeling of transcendence and hope for a society. It has been pointed out, in relation to Dr. Mays, that rebels are important as "visionaries" of renewal. 6

Dr. Scott goes on to say that Dr. Mays was Kantian in his moral and ethical thought. "But Mays was influenced most significantly, in my judgment, by the ethics of duty of Immanuel Kant and Kant's categorical imperative. Mays did not define his philosophical frame of reference, but the rebel philosophy is close to Immanuel Kant's ethics of moral responsibility." 7

North American culture is in the desperate throes of a moral, ethical, and spiritual crisis. It is a crisis of confidence, radical

THE WISDOM DE PROFUNDIS OF BENJAMIN E. MAYS
confusion, aimless wandering, rootlessness, direction, priorities, focus, arrogance, hubris, a strange and baffling mixture of self-doubt and self-certitude, of anger, bitterness, mean-spiritedness, simplistic solutions to complex problems, the search for quick fixes, and endless scapegoating. Retreat, escapism, and fantasy dot the landscape.

This moral, ethical, and spiritual crisis is, in no small part, a reflection of the country's inability to deal with the complexities, ambiguities, and contradictions of the North American current predicament. Thus, in anger various groups seek and find scapegoats and strike out at targeted groups, especially the most vulnerable and powerless. Easy answers are plentiful, attractive, and irresistible.

This moral, ethical, and spiritual crisis is profoundly affecting our basic institutions, attitudes, behavior, and beliefs. There is widespread cynicism about government, politics, public service, ethnic conflict and tension, religious institutions (churches, televangelists), demonic intolerance, corporate corruption (such as insider trading on Wall Street), the breakdown of the family, educational institutions, bigotry and prejudice of various types, illicit drugs, teenage pregnancy, the Watergate syndrome, the savings and loan association scandal, the Iran-Contra or "Iran-gate" corruption, and the dog-eat-dog, law-of-the-jungle mindset and philosophy. Such phenomena indicate that Dr. Mays's message and legacy about moral and ethical values are profoundly timely and timeless, and deeply relevant to the crisis. Watergate, with all of its tragic consequences and implications, is a dramatic reminder of the arrogance of power and the power of arrogance.

I would like to summarize the ethical values and authority de profundis of Dr. Mays in five points.

1. Dr. Mays constantly emphasized the ideal of personal responsibility for our choices, behavior, actions, reactions, and their consequences. We must answer for what we do or fail to do. Try as we may, rationalize as we wish, make excuses as we please; but answer we must. Moral responsibility and accountability are inescapable. As moral agents, we are responsible beings, "It is not your environment, it is you—the quality of your minds, the integrity of your souls, and the determination of your wills—that will decide your future and shape your lives."8

We have a moral responsibility, according to Dr. Mays, not only to pursue excellence in all our striving but to do our very best. We must stretch ourselves and maximize our efforts. Nothing short of our best, he used to say, is worthy of congratulation. "Whatever you do, strive
to do it so well that no man living and no man dead and no man yet to be born could do it better. "^9

We are expected to fulfill our obligations and responsibilities. The environment must be infused, permeated, and saturated with expectations and demands. Hence, he issued the following ringing "charge" to the class of 1961 at Morehouse College:

There is an air of expectancy at Morehouse College. It is expected that the student who enters here will do well. It is also expected that once a man bears the insignia of a Morehouse graduate he will do exceptionally well. We expect nothing less. . . .

May you perform so well that when a man is needed for an important job in your field, your work will be so impressive that the committee of selection will be compelled to examine your credentials. May you forever stand for something noble and high. Let no man dismiss you with a wave of the hand or a shrug of the shoulder.

Never forget that you are a Morehouse man. 10

Moreover, even if an institution or society has failed us, we must not fail that institution or society in the fulfillment of our responsibilities and obligations. If our parents fail us, that does not justify our failing them. The same is true of our Church, school, or other organization or institution. To the class of 1963 at Morehouse, Dr. Mays made the following assertions:

Finally, you have spent four years here. Some things you have liked, some things you have not liked. Being a part of frail humanity, Morehouse is not perfect, although we wish it were.

Whatever your gripes may have been, however much you may have been disappointed in me as your chief executive, in other administrative officers and in members of the faculty, believe me when I tell you that, with the exception of your parents, we at Morehouse are your best friends. When you do well we will be happy and we sing your praise. When you fail, we will be sad. We may have failed you in some ways. But we do not expect you to fail Morehouse. Wherever you go—whether on the land, on the sea, under the sea or in the air—the spirit of
“Dear Old Morehouse” will be your constant companion. Good-bye.11

2. The moral and ethical imperatives, power, and authority of Dr. Mays kept him emphasizing high ideals, lofty aims, noble goals of striving, and the boundless and inexhaustible search for higher possibilities. His idealism is a healthy antidote to the cynical and materialistic culture perilously threatened by greed, avarice, and the glorification of selfishness.

In an age when men are lured by high salaries, I urge you to be more concerned about “a job well done” than you are about the size of the check. The size of the check is important. But a job well done is far more significant. If you want to judge a man’s character examine his work. Does he put mind, heart and soul in his job, giving his best, or does he cheat on the job? A man’s character is revealed in his work. The paycheck will always follow a job well done.12

High ideals, representing the depths of our being, drive us on, haunt us, and make us creatively restless by day and by night, year in and year out. We must be intolerant of complacency, mediocrity, low aims, and self-satisfaction. Indeterminate higher possibilities beckon and drive us. We cannot succumb to preconceived, a priori goals, limitations, and achievements. In every achievement, the voice of higher possibility calls to move us on to another level and plateau, greater heights and peaks. We do not live in a fixed, final, predetermined, closed, circumscribed universe of experience, aspirations, expectations, and achievements. The lid is off. There is no predetermined ceiling. We can cruise the mighty seas of human destiny and engage in the exploration of higher possibilities. So much is unbound, limitless, spontaneous, indeterminate, indefinite, and open to the higher possibilities of the human mind, heart, and spirit. This, in a profound sense, is the ultimate meaning and dimension of the democracy of the human person and selfhood. Thus, Dr. Mays asserts in dazzling terms:

There is no end to progressive movements. There is no satisfaction for the man who aims at the stars and none for him who is being driven on by a sense of urgency. We, here at
Morehouse, are en route to the stars and a kind of divine discontent drives us on. We can allow no sand to burn under our feet while we sit idly by or stand complacently. We shall continue to improve our work.  

And my favorite quotation from Dr. Mays, taken from a soaring address entitled “The Unattainable Ideal”:

*It must be borne in mind that the tragedy in life doesn’t lie in not reaching your goal. The tragedy lies in having no goal to reach. It isn’t a calamity to die with dreams unfulfilled, but it is a calamity not to dream. It is not a disaster to be unable to capture your ideal, but it is a disaster to have no ideal to capture. It is not a disgrace not to reach the stars, but it is a disgrace to have no stars to reach for. Not failure, but low aim is sin.*  

3. Colleges and universities would do well to grasp and cling to the full dimensions of Dr. Mays’s heightened vision, framework, and depth of moral and ethical consciousness, worldview, personal and social responsibility, integrity, honor, discipline, divine imperatives, urgency, and purposes, sense of duty and right, dignity and worth, decency and character, and prophetic vision of the kingdom of God as motive, norm, source, ground, meaning, end, and fulfillment of human existence.

As already indicated, Dr. Mays was deeply committed to moral education. Character-building is a principal mission of education. Dr. Mays never ceased to emphasize the importance of molding character and producing men and women of decency and integrity who would unite knowledge and goodness, means and ends, information and honor, empirical data and ethical insight and underpinnings.

Institutions of higher learning stand under the judgment of the kingdom of God. We must speak “truth to power” and proclaim “thus saith the Lord.” We stand in desperate need of God’s inexhaustible love, mercy, justice, judgment, and healing power.

We in higher education must interpret and uphold our mission and ministry in the context of the kingdom of God and the prophetic tradition and vision. The love of truth is an expression of the love of God, and the search for truth is a rational and experimental inquiry into the order and laws of nature and God.

As apostles and prophets of Christian higher education, we know that education can never be value-free or ethically neutral. On the
contrary, education is intrinsically and instrumentally value laden. Hence, it is especially important in a scientific culture, technological age, computer ethos, “information” syndrome and “explosion,” and post-industrial mentality to constantly ask basic and ultimate questions: education for what? What are the aims, goals, mission, purposes, priorities, normative presuppositions, character, and directions of the education process and product? What is “higher” education and why? What are the criteria of “higher” and “liberal” education within the context of a scientific ontology and naturalistic metaphysics? What is a genuine object of value and how do we distinguish it from a spurious one? What are meaning and criteria of value? What is the relation of fact and value? Do facts have a normative basis and content? Is observation, as Whitehead insisted, selective?

Certain crucial institutions in North American culture such as the Church, the family, and institutions of higher education must recapture their unique moral and ethical foundations, authority, resources, influence, and creative power in order to improve the quality of life and the content of character in the body politic and commonwealth, both individually and collectively. They cannot do so without themselves becoming centers, citadels, and towers of integrity and moral and ethical power and vision. They must regain their savor.

4. Colleges and universities have an obligation to nurture and foster humanistic education concerned with the common good. Education is an enterprise motivated not by “the virtue of selfishness” but by concern with helping others, reaching out to others, community uplift, and civic improvement. Thus, education must be committed to improving the quality of life for all members of the society, and especially the most needy, the most vulnerable, the weak, the disinh erited, the poor, the exploited, the oppressed, the downtrodden, the victims of injustice, degradation, discrimination, and dehumanization. Education should make us more sensitive to the needs, hurts, wounds, injustices, and anguished cries of our neighbors and fellow human beings.

According to a man named Benjamin Elijah Mays, the aim of education, from the Christian perspective, “should be to glorify God and to serve mankind.”

There are selfish reasons inherent in the pursuit of education, but they are neither sufficient nor final. Dr. Mays asserted that:
Education is not designed merely to lift one above his fellows, but rather its purpose is to equip man to help his fellows—to elevate the masses, the less fortunate. For if one has a better mind than his fellows, more wealth than his fellows, is more favorably circumstanced than his fellows, has a better opportunity to develop than his fellows, he is obligated to use his skills in the interest of the common good. To use education for the common good is mandatory because trained minds are rare—only a small percentage of the total population of the world is college trained. And to whom much is given, much is required.

Furthermore, man can fulfill his true destiny in this life only in proportion as his skills are used in the service of mankind. A surgeon’s skill will keep him from being pushed around, but the real purpose of surgery is to relieve human suffering and to extend life—not money alone and not mere social security. An engineer’s knowledge will give him prestige and social standing in the community, but his engineering skills are given him to build roads and bridges, skyscrapers and cables, provide systems of communication, transportation, and electric power to the end that civilization may be advanced and human life made more enjoyable. A lawyer’s skill may give him respect among his neighbors, but the main purpose of law should be to extend the reign of justice, not only among the economically secure but among the lowly and the poverty-stricken. Political office does bring power and prestige, but the main purpose of education in government and skill in politics is to launch programs designed to raise the economic level of the people, to abolish disease, to educate the masses, and to extend freedom to each and every citizen. For after all, we are what we are by God’s grace, by the gift of our fellows or by sheer luck, and maybe all three. No man can choose the country into which he is born. No man can choose the culture and economic environment into which he is born. No man can choose the quality of his mind. Perhaps it will always be a minority that can boast sufficient ability to benefit by a college or university education. If so, the more brilliant mind is a gift of God and not of man. The brilliant mind is not of its own creation; so if we rise above our fellows, let us give the glory to God and the people.
Social change must be a major goal and commitment of colleges and universities to make life better for all members of the body politic. Adjustment to the status quo, with all its inequities, injustices, social evils, and oppressive characteristics, is not a worthy aim of education. Social and historical change and institutional reform are the educational imperatives and moral commands.

Social change is to be brought about mainly through the preparation of leadership with vision, honor, integrity, and commitment to the common good and public interest. The leadership of graduates is crucial, but also the leadership of students, faculty, staff, trustees, and other constituencies is necessary.

5. In terms of Dr. Mays’s prophetic emphasis on moral and ethical ideals, authority, and power, integrity is of the highest moment. Integrity is perhaps the key. Dr. Mays was tireless in talking and writing about the supreme importance of maintaining the integrity of one’s soul. Powerful, unforgettable, and perennially haunting, challenging, disturbing, and watchful, it is forever etched in the consciousness, conscience, and ultimate being and saga of every genuine and authentic Maysian disciple. It makes for an uneasy conscience in seeking to negotiate the treacherous slopes of life’s journey.

By integrity Dr. Mays means far more than wholeness. He means much more than moral trustworthiness and honor. He means being steadfast, honest, true, and faithful to ideals, principles, beliefs, standards, and core values of selfhood—the moral centrality of one’s essence and being. One should never be cowed or seduced into the compromising, abandonment, retreat from, or betrayal of ideals, principles, character, or ultimate moral, ethical, or spiritual values and commitments—whatever the price, temptations, inducements, rewards, insidious pressures, “successes,” or consequences, positive or negative.

A central theme, divine imperative, and anguished cry of Dr. Mays’s rich, long, productive, and noble life was “Never sell your soul.”

He included this in his “Challenge to the Graduating Class of 1958,” as he constantly said to generations of Morehouse students and other audiences throughout the length and breadth of North America and beyond.

Wherever you go, whatever you do, whatever you say, you will carry in your personality the mark of this college. And
never forget that it is expected of Morehouse men that they make their mark in the world—and an honorable mark.

Achieve success, achieve fame, acquire wealth if you can, but whatever you do, seek at all times to maintain the integrity of your soul. Die poor if need be, die unknown, unhonored, and unsung if need be, die in chains if necessary, but never sell your soul for that which you know is wrong. Compromise if you must, but always in the direction of the ideal. Never compromise the principle. Keep your soul inviolate—therein lies true freedom.

Integrity involves an impregnable moral wall and encirclement. It means that we must stand for something high, noble, and decent. We must stand up and be counted. We must stick by our ethical commitment to the core values and principles of our lives—values and principles we live by and for—whatever the consequences, conditions, "politics," or delights, fruits, and trappings of power, privilege, and advantage. We must do what we think is morally right and leave the consequences to God. We must never worry about recognition, honors, awards, or rewards. Virtue is its own reward. Integrity is its own reward and justification.

Integrity is the quintessence and citadel of selfhood, character, and our ethical being. It is a hard doctrine and ideal to live and come by.

Benjamin E. Mays and Black Colleges and Universities

In a real sense, our discussion of the wisdom de profundis of Benjamin E. Mays was, at heart, a commentary on Black colleges and universities. Dr. Mays is the quintessential representative of this universe of institutions. While no one can claim that he was "the father" of Black higher education, few would deny that he was not only the peerless and fearless scholarly and eloquent champion, spokesman, defender, interpreter, model, and apostle but also the most prophetic voice and brilliant philosopher of Black colleges. In both oral and written forms and appealing to a variety of audiences and institutions throughout the land, Dr. Mays labored long, hard, powerfully, heroically, responsibly, and prophetically to advance and enhance the cause of Black colleges. Only Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. DuBois exceeded Dr. Mays in influence, if not significance, as a Black educator. And in terms of
lasting and universal influence and impact, the jury is still out. After all, Martin Luther King, Jr., called Dr. Mays his “spiritual mentor.” And Dr. Mays’s multidimensionality cannot be ignored. And, besides, he stood on the strong and broad shoulders of Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. DuBois.

In the roots of his being, Dr. Mays loved Black colleges and had a profound and enduring faith in them and their magnificent, rich, and unique history, legacy, contribution, potential, and future.

He never wavered in his belief in Black colleges. Even in the early fledgling days of the Civil Rights Movement, in the aftermath of the historic Brown v. Board of Education decision of 1954, when “integration” was viewed in general as a one-way rather than a two-way street involving Whites going to Black institutions as well as Blacks attending White institutions, Dr. Mays never lost faith or heart. On the contrary, he was speaking and writing about the survival and role of Black colleges in a desegregated and integrated society. His was the wise and prophetic voice telling Black colleges that they must be quality institutions and instruments of academic excellence and integrity in order to meet the challenges and competition of a post de jure segregated society.

During the period, there were substantial confusion, misunderstanding, and disagreements on the direction and agenda of “The Movement” and the meaning and criteria of key terms such as integration and desegregation. There was widespread talk, even among certain Blacks, about the closing of Black colleges or their merger (really, submerger) with White colleges, since they were beginning, under the court orders and other coercive pressures, to admit Black students, if only in token numbers. Many North Americans were claiming that Black colleges had lost their legitimacy, mission, and raison d’être. They had outlived their usefulness, lost their utility, and become a relic of a past “gone with the wind” of historical and social change. Many argued—and still do—that, of all things, Black colleges were perpetuating segregation and racism. How ironic! How contradictory! How absurd and nonsensical!

But Benjamin E. Mays was not convinced. He would not be beguiled. Above all, he clearly understood the blatantly racist assumptions and presuppositions inherent in the argument.

To the contrary, he was convinced that the “doubting Thomases” were completely wrong in their analyses, assumptions, and conclusions about Black colleges. The real task was to continually and
dramatically improve and upgrade Black colleges by providing them with sufficient financial and other resources to ensure their survival, stability, continuity, viability, progress, and competitive position.

History has fully vindicated the prophetic vision and judgment of Benjamin E. Mays concerning Black colleges and universities. Begotten, inherited, transmitted, and perpetuated—somehow—from the slave community were an intuitive robust belief and boundless faith in the efficacy of education as a means of survival, self-improvement, self-knowledge, self-understanding, freedom, liberation, responsible citizenship, self-protection, leadership, upward social and occupational mobility, progress, dignity, and self-esteem.18

By some strange process, self-help and self-reliance, thrift and industry became pillars and cornerstones of the quest for education and training by ex-slaves. During the existence of the institutions of slavery, all the main forces of history and culture, including the criminal justice system and stringent social codes, profoundly militated against the literacy of Blacks with brutal and coercive sanctions, penalties, and vengeance. It was a crime to teach slaves to read and write.

But the love of learning cannot be torn from the human breast. Human curiosity cannot be eliminated. The love of knowledge and the search for truth can be stifled, stunted, and inordinately weakened but never completely extinguished or wiped out. Seething, fermenting, hidden, and buried beneath the surface, they lurk and await opportunities to reassert themselves and burst forth. Fortunately, in the post-Civil War Era, Black elementary, normal, high schools, and colleges were, in general, founded by religious denominations, agencies, and institutions.

Dr. Mays, in his philosophy of education, brilliantly built on the foundations of his Black educational ancestors and White allies. He knew what had to be done to facilitate educational progress, social change, institutional reform, and a better life. Dr. Mays developed what Lerone Bennett, Jr., called "the pedagogy of the oppressed." Hence, according to Bennett: "No Mays, no King. . . . No Mays, no Black pedagogy of excellence and liberation, no liberator, and no lighthouse in our lives."19

Again, according to Bennett, perhaps the foremost interpreter, disciple, and perpetuator of the Mays legacy and spirit: "The pedagogy of the deed, the pedagogy of the liberated zone, the pedagogy of the spirit, the pedagogy of stewardship and excellence

THE WISDOM DE PROFUNDIS OF BENJAMIN E. MAYS
and the will: This is, in part, the legacy of Benjamin Elijah Mays, who was born, he said, to rebel and who calls us today to the four tasks that the unfinished rebellion puts on our agenda.20

Black colleges, and especially Black colleges related to The United Methodist Church must make academic excellence their highest priority. Academic excellence must be their lodestar, guiding light, and chief reason for being. There is no substitute for excellence.

However, apart from this primordial and foremost mission, Black colleges have significant special missions and unique purposes which they have served faithfully for more than a century and which they must continue to serve with great fidelity.

First, I want to deal comprehensively with a critical question. Black colleges face many persistent questions and problems. A constant question is the legitimacy and justification of their very existence. Why Black colleges? It is a question we confront night and day, year in and year out. To begin, it is an outright racist question, pure and simple. It has as much moral weight and logical validity as its counterpart: Why White colleges? The two questions are on the same level and have an identity of merit and justifiability.

I want, however, to come to grips and deal with a peculiar assumption representing a great irony and paradox of history and culture. Of all things, Black colleges are constantly accused of fostering segregation, “reverse racism,” “reverse discrimination,” and “preferential treatment” for Blacks. What a scandalous and almost obscene perspective, accusation, assumption, and presupposition! How shameful and illogical! How anti-historical! How blind to the compelling facts of history and culture!

For more than a century, Black colleges have been models of integration, democracy, desegregation, equality of opportunity, free enterprise, pluralism, and the free and open society in education. The principles and presuppositions of the closed society, caste system, and anti-democratic social order which exclude and deny equal opportunities to some human beings on such a priori and arbitrary grounds as race, creed, color, sex, nationality, or ethnicity are as foreign to the traditions, legacy, and commitments of Black colleges as they are to the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution of the United States, the moral imperatives of a free society, the promise of U.S. life, and the religious and ethical principles of the Judeo-Christian faith.

Integration has been in the bloodstream and in the very depths of the heart, soul, and being of Black institutions of higher learning.
Indeed, Black colleges were the U.S.'s original affirmative action and equal opportunity employers. Integration in Black institutions of higher learning has been a deep, pervasive, and abiding tradition, reality, ideal, principle, and motive.

Perhaps the proudest and most distinctive tradition of Black colleges has been the profound and compelling commitment to genuine human diversity. They have been multiracial, multicultural, multireligious, multinational, and multiregional. They have reflected the richness, beauty, power, and creativity of human difference and the beautiful blend of unity and diversity, individuality and human community, the one and the many, particularism and universalism. Black colleges have been terribly faithful to the ultimate freedom of the human mind and spirit, the crowning glory of life of the mind—not the White or the Black mind, the Northern mind or the Southern mind, the Oriental mind or the Occidental mind, the Jewish mind or the Gentile mind, the Protestant mind or the Catholic mind—but life of the mind, the sense of wonder, and free and equal participation in the divine enterprise of learning by all who hunger and thirst for knowledge.

For unique historical, ethical, intellectual, philosophical, and spiritual reasons, the tradition and spirit of integration and democracy are infinitely deeper, stronger, more authentic, more self-perpetuating, pervasive, compelling, and more "natural" in Black colleges and universities than in their White counterparts. Integration is an integral part of the worldview, philosophical framework, and cultural milieu of Black institutions of higher learning. The reason is very simple: integration has been a vital part of their collective experience and institutional life; they have generally known nothing else. And they take great pride—sometimes excessive and unwarranted pride—in the tradition and ethos of integration.

Black colleges have never been segregating or segregated. Their doors of employment, admission, governance, promotion, and reward have always been open and free beyond race, class, religion, ethnicity, and nationality. For Black colleges, in their innermost being, integration has been a way of life and a road to enrichment and fulfillment, affecting, governing, and presiding over the whole order, process, and substance of institutional life and being.

Integration in Black colleges has not been a matter of historical accident, legal mandate, injunction or constitutional law, reluctant accommodation or adjustment to objective reality, reflection of
self-serving expectation of immediate tangible benefits or intangible rewards, tokenism, formalism, or narrow selectivity of relevance and application. Deep commitments and ultimate values have been involved. Integration, to Black colleges, has been a matter of principle, the basic commitments of the human mind and spirit, the great and imperishable ethical and religious tradition of the “natural,” “higher,” or “divine” law rooted in the nature of reality, the constitution of the universe.

Of immense and enduring significance is the persuasive fact that, within the Black college experience, firmament and legacy, integration has been profoundly normative—that is, deemed right, proper, and a worthy goal and standard of institutional, group, and personal behavior. It has been perceived as always morally necessary and humanistically desirable, as vital to the educational process, experience, philosophy, environment, product, and mission, with far-reaching consequences for the quality of culture, U.S. civilization, human relations, and individual and collective life.

Thus, for Black institutions of higher education, when spawned in the fiery furnace and beautiful agony of the post-Civil War and Reconstruction eras, integration has been a deeply cherished ideal, goal, and structure of meaning revealing something of the higher possibilities of a truly multiracial society and continental democracy. It has been an urgent matter, form, and content of the imperatives of a deeply felt and envisioned common life across racial frontiers, involving mutuality, equality, and the sharing of the totality of power, experience, value, and purpose—the very meaning, direction, heart, mission, philosophy, inner life, and inward journey of the human mind and spirit. Integration in Black higher education has been the affirmation and experience not simply of this or that particularity or aspect of experience but of the basic conditions, experience, hopes, aspirations, and beauty of the common life and shared meaning and value. It has meant, in substance and ultimately, the divine quest for the Beloved Community of all humankind.

This great humanistic and social tradition reflects the religious and ethical impulses that informed and inspired the founding of Black colleges. Church-related in their inception, they embodied the Judeo-Christian religious and moral principles. Integration, in this context, was a mirror of the kingdom of God—the kingdom not of this world but which should inform, prompt, guide, and transform this world. So Black colleges, at their best, have been a microcosm of the Beloved Community—the kingdom of God, reflecting the fatherhood
of God and the brotherhood of all humankind, regardless of race, sex, creed, color, nationality, or ethnicity.

One of the most neglected and unknown, morally and socially heroic stories of North American democracy is that of racial integration in the Black college experience. It is a dramatic reminder of the potential force, power, and persistence of moral ideals and principles in the affairs of the body social. In every serious historical study of Black institutions of higher learning, the deep and continuous role of interracialism occupies a prominent place.

So, in terms of the matriculation of students, faculty, boards of trustees, visiting speakers and other persons and participants and administration, Black colleges have a strong, deep, and continuing tradition of, and commitment to, integration. Integration has involved not a restricted area or narrow dimension but the total life and process of Black institutions of higher learning.

Second, through the commitment to and the pursuit and achievement of academic excellence, life of the mind, reverence for learning, and the sense of wonder, Black colleges and universities have enriched and advanced the professions by producing outstanding and contributing individuals in every area—education, public service, medicine, dentistry, allied health, the ministry, science, engineering, architecture, journalism, business, entertainment, sports, social work, computer science, information science, art, military science, diplomacy, community activism, civic leadership, law, the judiciary, literature, scholarship, publishing, etc. Meager financial resources has been a severely limiting factor, but it has not prevented striking contributions and achievements. This has been something of a miracle. What could have been done with adequate financial and other resources is mind-boggling. As Dr. Mays once said, so few have contributed so much to so many with so little.

Third, Black colleges are caring, nurturing, sensitive, and supportive institutions and environments. We care deeply about our students, their abilities and promise, their fears and hopes, their aspirations and expectations, their dreams and disappointments, their inward journey and professional and occupational reach and destiny. This vision permeates and saturates the climate of our institutions. Long ago, Plato asserted a relationship between love and learning. We believe in our students and their rendezvous with destiny.

Black colleges are perhaps the foremost key to the translation of the hopes, dreams, and aspirations of Black youth into reality. In this
sense, Black colleges are divine institutions, agents, instruments, avenues, superhighways, transmitters, and fulfillers of the American dream.

Fourth, Black colleges are sources and means of Black empowerment, leadership in various forms and dimensions, exemplary role models, and catalysts and vehicles of social and historical change and institutional reform. It is no accident that the chief leaders of the Civil Rights movement are primarily the product of Black colleges.

Fifth, Black colleges have always been deeply committed to the values of equity, access, and diversity—issues that other institutions of higher learning are just beginning to recognize, appreciate, and come to terms with.

Sixth, Black colleges are the custodians, bearers, guardians, and interpreters of the Black experience, heritage, pride, self-esteem, dignity, beauty, culture, sense of self, and pilgrimage in the larger context of North American society.

Seventh, perhaps because of their essentially religious origins, evolution, ethos, impulses, orientation, structure of meaning, and framework of value, Black colleges have been and are community-service oriented, deeply committed not only to self-improvement and individual growth, development, achievement, and contributions but also, community uplift, civic improvement, societal betterment, self-sacrifice, social responsibility, and the common good. Thus W. E. B. DuBois conceptualized about the “Talented Tenth” and Daniel C. Thompson advanced the idea of the “Black Elite.” Both are reminiscent of Jefferson’s “natural aristocracy.” Benjamin Elijah Mays proclaimed from the vantage point of biblical faith: “To whom much is given, much is required.”

Contemporary parlance talks the language of “giving something back” to the community. It is a noble idea and ideal. But such humanism and idealism are deeply rooted in the consciousness, ethos, moral foundation, ethical vision, and worldview of Black colleges and universities.

The conclusion is inescapable that Black colleges and universities are indeed a national resource, treasure, and rich inheritance of U.S. pluralism, diversity, and multiculturalism.

The United Methodist Church can take special pride and joy in its Black colleges.
Conclusion: A Note on Benjamin E. Mays and the Good Life

From time immemorial, philosophers and other thinkers have discoursed on the ideal of the Good Life, just as they have debated moral categories and values such as the nature, meaning, criteria, and conditions of goodness, justice, beauty, truth, love, etc. The absence of agreement has been a strength, not a weakness, in private discourse and public dialogue about human affairs and objects of human knowledge and value and striving. The lack of final answers is a blessing, not a curse. The dialogue must go on. The deep beauty is that we, all of us, can participate in the ongoing, vibrant, and exciting discussion. Finality eludes humankind. We are all men and women, not God. What a great blessing, privilege, and joy it is to be able to have our say as rational and moral creatures and participants in the open-ended, never-ending, exciting, meaningful, and enriching conversation! Authoritarianism is the best proof of our fallibility and frailties.

Is the Good Life to be found in Stoicism, hedonism, materialism, utilitarianism, asceticism, puritanism, humanism, idealism, secularism, naturalism, transcendentalism, nihilism, or other philosophical systems? Is it to be found in Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Moslem, Shintoism, or other religions?

To my knowledge, Dr. Mays never addressed the question of the Good Life directly. It would have been simple and easy for him to say, as a Christian theologian, philosopher, and educator, that the Good Life is to be found in self-surrender to the will of God and in the glorification of God and service to humankind. But such was not Dr. Mays's method and mentality. Perhaps that approach would have been too simple and easy for him.

Dr. Mays approached the matter indirectly in terms of the quest for happiness. Generally speaking, we all want to be “happy,” whatever that means. He knew that, overall, we will do almost anything to be what we perceive as “happy.” Materialistic pursuits are a common and widespread reflection of the desire and quest for happiness. Illicit drugs, with their mindless quest for a “high” and their treacherous and elusive escapism from life’s troubles, their cheap, perilous, and deadly flight to a world of tragic fantasy, offer us a glimpse at the horror and nightmare of a vain, quick-fix, self-defeating search for “happiness.” Dr. Mays faced the issue in a deeply moving address entitled “Where May Happiness Be Found?”
Admitting that happiness “cannot be adequately defined,” he mentioned assertions by great minds—Plato, Aristotle, Socrates, Pascal, Locke, Kant—about happiness.

Characteristically and naturally, Dr. Mays put the matter in his overall conceptual scheme of wisdom de profundis. He argued that happiness is “an unworthy goal” and that it is not important “that people be happy.” In typical Maysian method and spirit, he asked if Moses, Socrates, Jesus, and Gandhi were happy.

If happiness is to be found, he said, it will be found as a by-product of other moral endeavors, enterprises, and actions.

If happiness is to be found, it will be found in noble endeavor, endeavor that gives satisfaction and is beneficial to mankind. It will be found in struggling, in toiling, and in accomplishing something worthwhile. Happiness, if it is to be found, will be found in a job well done, however lowly the job. . . . The man who does nothing worthwhile can hardly be happy.

If happiness is to be found, it will be found in pursuing and accomplishing something worthwhile, and the quest must be continuous—no complacency and no satisfaction. . . .

If happiness is to be found, it will be found in noble living. A man lives nobly when he has an honest conscience, when he can say: The community is better off because I gave my best to it. I did not exploit people for my personal gain. I lived nobly as a teacher because I gave my students the best I had. I didn’t cheat on the job. I prepared daily, I read, I knew my subject, I wrote articles, I wrote books. I did not cheat my students. I lived nobly as a physician because I never used my skill to deceive people. This is another way of saying that I was honest in serving the people.

If happiness is to be found, it will be found when we live more for others than we do for ourselves. . . . The selfish man can never find it.

Finally, if happiness is to be found, it will be found in the right attitude toward all mankind. For if one man is better than another, it is largely accidental. . . . We are what we are by accident, by fate, or by God’s grace.
The destiny of every man is the same. We are born, we live a little while, we get sick or grow old and we die. No time for arrogance and none for pride. . . .

If happiness is to be found, it will be found in pursuing and accomplishing worthwhile things, in noble living, in living more for other than for ourselves, in holding the right attitude toward all mankind.

These are the paths that may lead to happiness.21

Notes

3. Man and the State, (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University, 1926), 431.
7. Ibid.
9. Ibid., p. 4.
12. Ibid.
14. Mayes, Disturbed about Man, 120.
16. Ibid. 6.

20. Ibid., 10.

21. Mayes, Disturbed about Man, 76, 77, 78.
The following queries were proposed to every preacher:
1. Ought not the authority of Mr. Wesley and that conference, to extend to the preachers and people in America, as well as in Great Britain and Ireland? 
   Ans. Yes.
2. Ought not the doctrine and discipline of the Methodists, as contained in the minutes, to be the sole rule of our conduct, who labour in the connexion with Mr. Wesley, in America? 
   Ans. Yes.  

1808
The General Conference shall have full power to make rules and regulations for our Church, under the following limitations and restrictions, viz.: 
1. The General Conference shall not revoke, alter, or change our Articles of Religion, nor establish any new standards or rules of doctrine contrary to our present existing and established standards of doctrine.  

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The General Conference shall have full legislative power over all matters distinctively connectional, and in the exercise of this power shall have authority as follows: . . .

15. To enact such other legislation as may be necessary, subject to the limitations and restrictions of the Constitution of the Church.

III. Restrictive Rules.

16. Article I.—The General Conference shall not revoke, alter, or change our Articles of Religion or establish any new standards or rules of doctrine contrary to our present existing and established standards of doctrine.

Article II.—The General Conference shall not revoke, alter, or change our Confession of Faith. 4

Speaking for the Church.—No person, no paper, no organization, has the authority to speak officially for The United Methodist Church, this right having been reserved exclusively to the General Conference under the Constitution. 5

The General Conference . . . is the supreme governing and lawmaking body of United Methodism. 6

General Conference holds the teaching office in United Methodism. It is the final authority and officially speaks for the Church. 7

This essay reflects on the teaching office in the history of Episcopal Methodism. 8 This may seem, as the preceding quotations should suggest, a rather unpromising venture. What history is there to tell? After all, on this point as perhaps on virtually none other, Methodism has spoken with great precision and finality. Conference, and particularly General Conference, is supreme. Whatever the issue of the day, to General Conference (since 1792) has Methodism looked for a definitive statement of its position. Since 1792, General Conference has occupied the teaching office. What history is there to write? Would it not suffice to say that this precept has no history but has been quadrennially reproclaimed? 9

Subject to the limitations of the 1808 Restrictive Rules, General Conference does occupy, as closely perhaps as an agent in any Protestant church can occupy, what Catholicism has understood as the magisterium, the teaching office, the supreme doctrinal authority of the church. 10 To employ that rubric is, to be sure, to exaggerate the
authority that any human vessel can occupy and perhaps inappropriately qualify the Protestant belief in the sovereignty of the Word and the priesthood of believers. So one can speak only metaphorically of a Methodist teaching office. Yet, insofar as Methodists can be said to have a teaching office, is that not clearly General Conference? Is not that where such teaching authority as does exist is lodged?

Well, perhaps. For a variety of reasons that will become clearer as we proceed, General Conference’s actual exercise of the teaching office has been less clear, unambiguous, and uncontested than the theory would suggest. General Conferences after all come into being, sit for a short period, revise the Discipline, legislate, perhaps issue a pastoral address, and then disappear for four years. If for no other reason, that four-year interim—the quadrennium that has such magical value in Methodist calendars—leaves, and has left, time and space for others to exercise the teaching office

through transmission,
in interim capacity,
by execution,
through interpretation,
in application,
even in preparation for General Conference itself.

Over the years, various agents of/claimants to General Conference’s teaching function have, to some degree at least, encroached upon and perhaps even threatened General Conference’s authority. Beyond those infringements of General Conference’s teaching office that in theory or appearance respect its authority lie other efforts to connive at authority that can only be seen as a clear effort to displace General Conference and to exercise the teaching office in Methodism.

In addition, from the very start teaching belonged in a special way also to the episcopal office, indeed to the ministerial office generally. And the episcopal claim to teaching authority has from time to time been reasserted perhaps no more vigorously than at present. Here, too, the Discipline notwithstanding, the actual exercise of the teaching role may be somewhat different than envisioned.

Our concern, then, is with the actual exercise of the office, the intellectual leadership of the movement, General Conference’s delegation of its authority, the effectual tutelage of the people called Methodist. Who or what addressed the church, the whole church?
Who or what posed the questions for the church's consideration? Who or what called to mind the bearing of scripture or tradition on the issue? Who or what elicited conversation and debate and brought various constituencies into dialogue? Who or what worked towards consensus, compromise, resolution? And who then educated the church on the question as resolved? Who really taught the church?

To appreciate the present exercise of the teaching office, we need to review its history.

The Teaching Office in Early Methodism

Methodism might be permitted some unclarity about the nature of the teaching office. After all, deeply imbedded in its memory is the realization that in early Methodism, the teaching office rested firmly, unequivocally, definitely on Mr. Wesley. He constituted the intellectual and theological center of the movement. Deliberately and self-consciously he dedicated himself and the movement to instruction. Wesley embodied that teaching role. Doubtless much that passes for Wesleyan teaching originated elsewhere, as we seem to learn with every new Heitzenrater publication. And yet, it comes to us through Mr. Wesley's pen, and that is what constitutes the teaching office.

In thinking about this role, we naturally revert to those deposits of Wesley's teaching, The Large Minutes, Explanatory Notes on the New Testament, Standard Sermons, and for Americans, Wesley's modified version of the Anglican Articles of Religion, all of which came to us from Wesley. The controversy over the present standards reinforces that focus. These deposits of Wesley's teaching are, of course, very important, absolutely decisive. Yet we should not lose sight of the underlying factor that makes them decisive: namely, that Wesley consistently taught, that he did very little that did not have some teaching purpose, that virtually the entire Wesleyan system evidences his teaching role, and that he exercised his teaching office in so much of what he did. His correspondence, tracts, republications, sermons, controversial and apologetical pieces, magazine, schools, classes and societies, rules, republished libraries, encouragement to families and societies to create libraries, Sunday schools, conference sessions, training and supervision of his assistants and helpers—indeed the entire
system—betray a remarkable drive to educate his people in the faith, to identify the heart of the Christian gospel, to teach the faith.

Even where that authority and function was in some sense formally shared, as in conference, we know all too well that Mr. Wesley exercised the teaching role. Thomas Neely put it succinctly:

*But let it not be supposed that the Conferences which Mr. Wesley called had any governing power. The members discussed, but Mr. Wesley decided. They debated, but he determined. Mr. Wesley was the government; and, though he invited the preachers to confer with him, he did not propose to abandon any of his original power. They had a voice by his permission, but he reserved the right to direct.*

As Neely suggests, Wesley’s voice had political (polity) as well as instructional force; eventually British as well as North American Methodists had to decide how that voice in both senses would be cared for and whether both aspects would be cared for in the same office. At any rate, Methodists are aware of Mr. Wesley’s authority and (though they might not put it this way) that he embodied the teaching office. We know that it was highly concentrated, personified, intensified.

**Early American Methodism**

After Wesley, would American Methodism also have the voice highly concentrated in the person of Wesley’s assistant or of the superintendents or have it exercised by conference? And would the instructional and political voice—the teaching and polity functions—coincide? The Christmas Conference of 1784 addressed this issue but did not entirely resolve it. To be sure, the groundwork for conference’s supremacy was laid by Asbury’s maneuver for a conference to receive and act on Mr. Wesley’s acts and documents, as well as by the actual role that the Christmas conference played in establishing a superintendency and episcopal government and its exercise of authority over Wesley’s *Large Minutes* in altering and adopting them as a *Discipline*. Behind those symbolic acts lay a decade of American governance and legislation through conference, a pattern that at Fluvanna had brought Methodism very close to
presbyterial style conference authority. During that period, however, the movement experienced also firm, autocratic guidance at the hand of Mr. Wesley’s appointed assistants. In 1784, American Methodism stood poised between two principles of authority, one fairly broadly shared, the other highly focused and personalized. Which would it be—a sovereign conference or a personified center?

Ambiguity prevailed. The Christmas Conference received directives and documents from Wesley, the designations of Thomas Coke and Francis Asbury as superintendents, and provisions for the life and work of an independent church. But it also acted to confirm those by elections and adoptions. Which had more force: the fact that Wesley made provision for the church and specified its leadership or the fact that the conference acted in acceptance and approval? Where was the supreme power to be located, in superintendency or in conference? And more to the point of our inquiry, where was the intellectual leadership of the movement to be lodged? At virtually every turn, the Christmas Conference left that question unanswered.

The Episcopal Teaching Office

There is no question that Thomas Coke prepared and conducted himself to exercise the intellectual leadership of American Methodism—studying on shipboard the texts that bore on church order, carefully crafting sermons that would lay the groundwork for a Methodist “episcopal” self-understanding, conducting a planning session for the Christmas Conference, speaking eloquently on the conference floor, advocating the establishment of an academic institution, preaching throughout the connection, championing antislavery—in so many ways providing ideas for the new American church. But how were these efforts received? Would conference and American Methodism consent to Coke’s embodying the teaching office?

If that question could have been distinguished from the issue of Coke’s authority as a whole—that is, if the teaching office could be distinguished from the appointive and administrative powers of the superintendency and if Coke’s authority could be distinguished from Wesley’s—then American Methodists might have answered differently than they did.
They actually attempted to resolve the matter by appeal to Mr. Wesley’s authority. In the Discipline, the Christmas Conference pledged the new church to Methodist unity:

_During the Life of the Rev. Mr. Wesley, we acknowledge ourselves his Sons in the Gospel, ready in Matters belonging to Church-Government, to obey his Commands._

That pledge, like the acquiescence in Coke’s leadership, proved more than the Americans could actually concede. By 1787, when a letter from Wesley summoned the Americans into conference and selected two new superintendents, Richard Whatcoat for the U.S. and Freeborn Garrettson for Nova Scotia, conference found Wesley’s exercise of authority unacceptable and stripped the preceding acknowledgment from the Discipline. Conference did not assent to Wesley’s nominations; it also acted to curtail Coke’s authority. The Minutes asked

_Quest. 1. Who are the Superintendents of our church for the United States?_  
_An. Thomas Coke, (when present in the States) and Francis Asbury._

A direct line runs from this action, through the experiment with and repudiation of the Council, to the 1808 constitutional provision for General Conference plenary authority. American Methodists resisted governing authority when it preempted a legitimate place for conference’s participation and assent. The constitutional resolution seems clear; 1808 indeed settled that. But how would the church care for its intellectual leadership, for doctrinal authority? Could and would conference distinguish between the teaching and governing authority? Indeed, it could, and it did so particularly with respect to Wesley. Even as it resisted Mr. Wesley’s governing hand, American Methodism honored his intellectual leadership. Throughout this period, Americans respected both the formal provisions for Wesley’s teaching, _The Large Minutes_, (Discipline), _Explanatory Notes on the New Testament_, _Standard Sermons_, and _The Articles of Religion_ (which came to them from Wesley’s hand) and the entirety of the Wesleyan teaching as mediated in Wesley’s writings and their own preaching. In a quite real sense, Wesley continued to exercise the
teaching office in American Methodism both while he lived and long thereafter.

Nor did the bishops (superintendents) give up on the teaching role. Coke found himself chastised, notably on the matter of antislavery preaching, but continued to press for the intellectual development of the movement, especially for schools. In their frequent reference to him as “the Doctor” or “Doctor Coke,” American Methodists at once deferred to Coke and gave bemused and somewhat judgmental opinions of Coke’s efforts and effectiveness. Such appellations suggest both some actual authority and the American church’s wariness of and resistance to it.

Asbury in a Teaching Role?

Asbury was another matter. Unlike Coke, Asbury, who was really ill-equipped for the task, struggled to lead the movement intellectually and succeeded. Yes, succeeded. His teaching authority may come as a surprise, for we generally evaluate his work in other terms. Yet intellectual leadership constituted, in my judgment, an important aspect of his role. His most successful teaching activities are lost to us—namely his sermons and prayers, his statements in conference, his conversations, and especially his talks with horseback companions. Asbury taught, as most early Methodists taught, in a seminar of the road. He exercised the teaching office in oral fashion. Unfortunately, the dimensions of this can only be inferred from notations of texts in his journal, from the concerns which prompt his Letters, from the chance comment that his companions record at the end of the day. There we see that Asbury exercised the teaching office orally; we have access to very little of its character.

Asbury had his hand in ventures that remain on record. The most important, though perhaps not immediately obvious, teaching instrument was his journal. The earliest parts appeared in serial form in the short-lived American Arminian Magazine in 1789 and 1790. They were published in separate form again in 1802; in 1810, he gave attention to the preparation of yet another edition. Something of what he expected from this publication can be inferred from his frequent entries while editing, as for instance in 1798:

I have well considered my journal: it is inelegant; yet it conveys much information of the state of religion and country.
It is well suited to common readers; the wise need it not. I have a desire that my journals should be published, at least after my death, if not before.\textsuperscript{22}

Two more publications for which Asbury should receive some credit are the \textit{Arminian Magazine}, in which his journal initially appeared, and the second effort that American Methodists made at a journal, \textit{The Methodist Magazine}, which also lasted but two years, 1797 and 1798. More important than the few Asbury letters contained therein was the effort itself—to create an intellectual medium for the movement. In this, as in so much of his leadership, Asbury modeled himself after Wesley. He wanted the American movement to have a literary medium and a literature.

Asbury took an active interest in other publishing possibilities, including for instance, an American version of Wesley's works.\textsuperscript{23} Asbury’s broader concern for publication is especially evident in his letters to John Dickins and Ezekiel Cooper, the book agents. Asbury played a vital part in Methodism’s early publishing, particularly in suggesting items that ought to be printed. He bears at least partial responsibility for the publications that early Methodism generated for itself.\textsuperscript{24}

Asbury even produced some of the literature himself. In these efforts, we can see something of what he took to be the special needs of the American Methodists. One concern was for an American hymnody, so he put out his own version, the \textit{Hymn Book}.\textsuperscript{25} Asbury also resorted to print to deal with the threats to the unity of the movement. He had worked for some time on a volume that would heal Methodism’s wounds and entitled it graphically \textit{The Causes, Evils, and Cures of Heart and Church Divisions, Extracted from the Works of Mr. Jeremiah Burroughs and Mr. Richard Baxter}.\textsuperscript{26} It eventually appeared in time to address the James O’Kelly schism.

Perhaps the most self-evident exercise of the teaching office came in 1798. In that year, Asbury (with Coke) issued an annotated version of the \textit{Discipline},\textsuperscript{27} an endeavor to instruct the Methodist faithful through and about Methodist belief and practice. In many respects the immediate precedent to the 1972 and 1988 “Doctrinal Standards,” this \textit{Discipline} had been prompted, like Asbury’s volume on schism, by division, in this case the O’Kelly movement. The explanations, which were rendered in smaller type, frequently exceeded the section explained. For instance, the half page of Disciplinary statement on the
episcopacy received seven-and-a-half pages of commentary. Where appropriate, the commentary adduced scriptural warrant, appeal to tradition or the example of Wesley. This experiment was not to be repeated, however. The General Conference of 1800 did not like the idea or the result as much as the conference of 1796 had.

One more illustration of Asbury’s publishing: Asbury endeavored at various points and through several media to provide Methodism with a self-portrait, a way of understanding itself. He called these efforts history. One that actually appeared began with his directives to the presiding elders to give him reports of their districts and the religious state and events therein.

Once in a year all the presiding elders ought to write to the Episcopacy, to collect into a focus the work of God, for the press, and I wish the preachers of [today] would write a brief of their conviction, conversion and call to preach and where they had laboured. I will select all the most spiritual parts of letters to print and to keep a history of what God is doing in the South. . . .

Would the presiding elders write to me one letter only of the state of the work, I should rejoice and the city preachers also of the cities. We could give great personal information to the conference and individuals of the work of God.28

The resulting volume, now quite rare, Asbury called Extracts of Letters Containing Some Account of the Work of God Since the Year 1800.29

Finally, Asbury addressed himself to Methodism in his valedictory statements.30 In such formal last statements, as well as in the immediacy of his journals, Asbury sought to shape the mind of Methodism. He thereby gave genuine intellectual leadership to the Methodist movement. His teaching authority may have been crudely exercised, but he gave it his best, and he claimed the connection’s attention. He did so, obviously, during the very period in which General Conference came to define itself as the formal teaching authority of Methodism. But General Conferences came and went every four years. Asbury moved daily so as to traverse the length and breadth of Methodism, and his practical efforts set the terms for later successful exercise of the teaching office.
The Episcopacy, a Footnote

Intellectually more gifted persons would follow Asbury to the episcopal office; yet not until our own day has the episcopacy successfully reclaimed the teaching authority vested in him. One important reason for this was that Methodism discovered some other ways to structure the teaching office. But it was also the case that never thereafter were the superintendency and the teaching function concentrated and personified as they had been in Wesley and Asbury. This is so despite the fact that later bishops actually had better vehicles with which to exercise the teaching office. McKendree, for instance, initiated the episcopal address to General Conference which would, down to our own day, set denominational agendas and constitute an important dimension of Methodism’s teaching office.

Beginning with John Emory, some would be elected to the episcopacy because of their intellectual gifts. And they used them. In a real sense, they endeavored individually to sustain a teaching function. Bishops wrote apologetics, histories, biographies, constitutional interpretations, theology, guides to the Discipline. Despite all that literary production, after Asbury’s death the office shifted to other shoulders. The shift resulted in part from the bishops’ having other burdens to bear; in part from the plurality of the office—the several bishops in place of the one Asbury; in part from their increasingly regional deployment and orientation; and in part from their separation from one another. For a variety of reasons, the bishops and particularly the collectivity of the episcopacy became less effective at teaching than a succession of persons who ostensibly worked under them.

The Book Agents, Stewards and Editors

From the very start, the bishops selected as book agents persons dedicated and committed to the life of the mind. Gradually these appointees discovered the intellectual potential of the position and assumed genuine leadership of the movement. In time, Wesley’s mantle would fall on their shoulders. The agent or steward gradually became his successor as teacher-through-publication. John Dickins, Ezekiel Cooper, John Wilson, Daniel Hitt, and Joshua Soule, each played an important role in building a
small-scale distribution and reprint business into a national media empire, the Methodist Book Concern.32

Under Soule, in particular, the Concern took the step that actualized the teaching potential of the office. Soule began (or relaunched) The Methodist Magazine, the first of a number of serials through which he and his successors would turn from being publishers into being editors. They thereby achieved a voice, one which became really the voice of Methodism. The editors possessed what the episcopacy lacked, namely, a medium through which to be heard on a regular and consistent basis, across the entire connection, at the same time. In the great age of the serial, the editors became the great spokespersons to and for the church.

Soule’s successor, Nathan Bangs, who became editor of The Methodist Magazine in 1820, discovered the potential of that voice. Bangs transformed the magazine from being a mere vehicle for republication of British items, a Methodist Reader’s Digest, into a genuinely American medium. In the process, his teaching, his ideas, and his opinions gave shape to American Methodism. This enlarged role doubtless had much to do with the controversy into which The Methodist Magazine was soon pressed.

The reform movement of the 1820s had established its own medium: the Wesleyan Repository, later titled Mutual Rights.33 The denomination needed a channel of official response. The impulses that divided the church—the cries for democracy that eventuated in the Methodist Protestant Church, the controversies with the Episcopalians and Congregationalists, and eventually the slavery and sectional crises—created a teaching office. Controversy made the editor and his vehicle, The Methodist Magazine and later The Christian Advocate, an essential and powerful force in the church. The editors became figures to be reckoned with, and certainly Bangs was. His power had something to do with the circumstances, but it had as much to do with his recognition of the potential in the teaching office.

Bangs was an initiator, a go-getter, and an entrepreneur, what that age knew as a booster. Sustaining the active book publishing role of the Book Concern, he launched in 1823 the Youth’s Instructor and Guardian, an instructional magazine for children; in the years thereafter he moved into tracts, Sunday school literature and Bibles. In 1826 he consolidated several regional papers into what would become a national voice to the laity, the Christian Advocate. When he yielded the office of book agent to John Emory, Bangs continued as editor of the Advocate.
The potential in the medium soon generated regional Advocates, including important papers like Zion's Herald, The Western Christian Advocate, and the Nashville Advocate. The agents launched other ventures—Sunday school Advocates, The Ladies Repository, missions magazines—to tap the differentiated Methodist reading public. The church witnessed a virtual explosion of popular media and sustained, at the same time, the serious scholarly endeavor The Methodist Review or Methodist Quarterly Review. And when the church split, literary media typically played a role in the division and found themselves the voice of the new entities. German Methodism also had its important papers and magazines.34

While the editors were no more a united voice than the bishops, their voice was readily accessible. By virtue of their election to the office, they constituted something of an official voice. Despite their plurality, in the decades leading up to and following the Civil War, the editors effectively spoke to and for the church. Beginning with Bangs, they saw themselves as the church’s defenders. They wrote the apologetics and the histories that delineated the church’s position. At the helm of Advocate or Methodist Review sat those whom we today regard as the Methodist theologians of the mid-nineteenth century—Nathan Bangs, John McClintock, Daniel D. Whedon, Daniel Curry of the Review; Bangs, Thomas E. Bond, George Peck, Abel Stevens, Curry and James M. Buckley of the Advocate, Thomas O. Summers, Albert T. Bledsoe, J. W. Hinton and J. J. Tigert of the Southern Review,35 H. N. McTyeire and Summers of the Nashville Advocate; and William Nast of Der Christliche Apologete.36 The church(es) obviously expected leadership from the persons it put in the editorial positions. Those persons rendered that service. It should come as no surprise that the church moved such individuals from this position to the episcopacy and into theological education.

Across the connection others who aspired to or exercised leadership also found the press vital. Reformers, critics, other voices sought the media. So through the Guide to Christian Perfection, later Guide to Holiness, the first great Methodist woman theologian, Phoebe Palmer, found a national audience.37 At a later period, one of the great theologians of Black Methodism, Henry McNeal Turner of the A.M.E. Church, would exercise his intellectual leadership through a journal, the Southern Recorder.
National Platforms

The denominational press helped foster a national reading audience, one increasingly open to the larger world that magazines and papers mediated. In the mid-nineteenth century and continuing into the latter part of the century, various other agencies bid for Methodist attention. In so doing, each carried some portion of Methodism's teaching office. Each had a platform.

One that would continue to gain power over the century was the network of reform movements and voluntary societies, each typically dedicated to a special cause, that with its own literature, paper, agents and national structure, knitted Methodists together. The mission societies, both those bearing the denominational name alone (male) and those qualified by "female" or "women's," proved remarkably adept at this. For much of the rest of the century, they focused the church's attention, efforts, and resources on evangelization and expansion, at home and abroad. Women as well as men rose to prominence as teachers—mentoring through example, writing, editing, speaking, organizing. Reform efforts also, notably abolition organizations and particularly the temperance crusade, mobilized support through instructional campaigns. Persons like Frances Willard became tutors to the church and indeed the nation. Eventually, such voluntary organizations stabilized as the internal structure of the denomination and then transformed their teaching into board and agency roles.

The Sunday school constituted a second platform, a related network with rather obvious responsibilities for the transmission of the faith. Its orientation towards youth may lead us to dismiss it as an aspect of Methodism's teaching office. Initially, it did little more than publish literature for the Sunday schools, but even in that it made Methodism a national school. Over time, the church discovered the potential of the Sunday school to act as a medium for the whole church and as a creator, not just a transmitter, of doctrine. Key in this development was John Heyl Vincent, who assumed the leadership of the Methodist Sunday School Union in 1866. In a variety of initiatives over the rest of the century, he transformed the Sunday school into the shaper of Methodist lay life. Through teacher's institutes, loose-leaf lessons, the Sunday-School Journal, the international lesson plan, particularly the Chautauqua Sunday-School Teachers Assembly, and itinerating and correspondence versions of Chautauqua, Vincent transformed
Methodism into a gigantic classroom. By the end of the century the
Sunday school claimed the intellectual leadership of the church as its
teachers and writers. Through this complex system, the Sunday school
quite literally both taught and shaped the church. This was a social
construction of reality—the church organized around an evangelical
and missionary educational enterprise run essentially on
correspondence principles.

Ministers were also shaped by a third platform, another great
correspondence school, employing the principles of the Sunday
school: the Course of Study. Initially administered by the bishops
through the annual conferences, General Conference made it in 1844 a
uniform four-year program of study. As the only approved pathway
into the ministry, the course quite literally shaped the mind of the
Methodist ministry. Unlike the teaching agents already discussed, the
course did not really formulate doctrine or generate literature. Yet by
the selection process, by the identification of a normative Methodist
posture—Wesley, Fletcher, Watson, Miley, Sheldon,
Knudson—Methodism itself underwent change. In that limited
sense, the course did define doctrine.

The Seminaries

In the twentieth century and through more theologically constructive
efforts, three agencies would vie for the teaching office. They were the
seminaries that succeeded to the course of study’s role; the boards and
agencies into which the publishing, missions, and educational efforts
of the prior century institutionalized their offices; and the college of
bishops which, after two unifications and particularly that of 1968,
found a voice with which to teach the church.

The seminaries and colleges with which the church dotted the land
garnered Methodism’s intellectual elite from the start. There is a
difference, however, between placing the intelligentsia in schools and
in actually recognizing the schools as the intellectual center and
official voice of the church. The former came easily; the latter shaping
role emerged gradually as the seminaries maneuvered to monopolize
ministerial education, as seminary teachers published the volumes that
the church read, as the church came to look to the seminaries for
doctrine, and as seminary deans and faculty assumed church
leadership. In the latter part of the nineteenth century, the church
located its theologians at Boston, Drew, and Garrett in the North and at Vanderbilt in the South. John Miley at Drew, Miner Raymond at Garrett, Borden Parker Bowne at Boston, and Thomas O. Summers and John J. Tigert at Vanderbilt wrote the systematic and philosophical statements that defined Methodist theology. They were the first of several generations of seminary theologians who had or gained a national platform. To the seminary, then, rather than to the editors, the church turned for authoritative statement of the faith. And the church increasingly put its ministerial candidates in their hands. Seminary rather than Course of Study gradually became the normal route to ordination.

That latter function obviously continues to this day and remains normative. But otherwise, the seminary’s premier place as the teaching authority has been eclipsed. That may seem a surprising statement given the role that Albert Outler played in the 1968/1972 Discipline and that Thomas Langford played in the 1988. Their prominence, however, had more to do with their individual effectiveness as political actors at General Conference than in the deference that the church paid to the seminaries. Sometime around the 1939 unification and the period of Neo-orthodoxy, the seminaries lost their place as the teaching office.

The reasons for this are many and complex and really beyond our purposes here. But we should note the irony that seminaries claimed public attention even as their ecclesiastical constituencies lost interest. It was during this period that U.S. seminaries gained national prominence as intellectual centers, spoke on matters of national social policy, took their ethical and theological posture with great seriousness, became research facilities, and began to turn out Ph.D.s in numbers. The seminaries continued to perform a teaching office, but it ceased to be the church’s teaching office. Seminaries lost sight of their prior audience; they lost sight of the fact that their teaching office was for the church. Faculty increasingly wrote for one another and with such specialization and technicality that laity and even ministers had difficulty in following. Theology differentiated itself into technical academic disciplines and professional societies. The seminary turned away from the church; the church turned a deaf ear to the seminary. So Bishop Garber could denounce the school of which he had been dean as “un-Methodist.”

Within The Methodist Church and later within United Methodism, the number and competition of the seminaries doubtless played a role as well. No one seminary claimed quite the dominant position that
Boston had enjoyed initially in the North and Vanderbilt in the South. The multiplication of seminaries muffled and divided the seminary's voice in Methodism. Recently even the Ministerial Educational Fund may be a contributing factor, since it necessitates an essentially financial and promotional relationship between the schools and the church. At any rate, in the middle decades of the twentieth century the church increasingly attended to other theological voices.

The Organizational Revolution

Some may find difficulty in taking seriously the teaching authority of the national boards; of late, the boards and agencies have become to some extent the whipping boy for the church. Strident voices suggest that the church does not need bureaucracy and shouldn't ever have built it, or so goes a frequent refrain. Many view the managerial or organizational revolution that occurred across U.S. society around the turn of the century as a misfortune and tragedy for the church. This mood, apparently widespread across the church, makes life difficult and budgets slim for the boards. And the reaction does not confine itself to the national level; conference agencies and conference budgets also take their hits. A powerful current of localism, of congregationalism, is sweeping the connection. It may be difficult to make credible the role the boards and agencies played in earlier decades as teachers of the church.

In the early twentieth century, however, both laity and clergy saw in business organization a creative way in which the church could structure itself for its life and work. In the effort to make the church effective in its mission, these reformers sought to make the church work. They adapted techniques being used in the national corporate world: scientific management, professional leadership, coordinating structures, business procedures of finance and promotion, a sophisticated nation-to-conference-to congregation communication system, modern media. The actors in this drama were not small-minded robber barons but the great heroes and leaders of Methodism's witness: the missionary and ecumenical leaders like John R. Mott, the social reformers like Francis J. McConnell and Frank Mason North, the deaconess leaders like Lucy Rider Meyer and Belle Harris Bennett. It was on behalf of the great causes—the social gospel, ecumenism, temperance, pacifism, labor rights, race
relations, education, missions—that the boards and agencies emerged.\textsuperscript{45} By the 1920s, if not before, they had become the effective leadership of the church and played increasingly a teaching role.

Bureaucracies are not typically known as tutors. What gave a teaching dimension to these enterprises? In part their purposive character. They emerged as vehicles for embodying a message and conveying it to the church. They bore and expressed some compelling cause—missions, temperance, education. Also essential to their effectiveness was the church’s willingness to structure itself top to bottom along the lines established on the national level. The principle is now so well established, so much a part of operating assumptions, that we scarcely even think about it. We assume that at every level—national, jurisdictional, conference, congregational—the denomination must have a uniform structure of finance and administration, council on ministries, church and society, discipleship, missions, higher education, archives and history, Christian unity, religion and race, education. However, such linked organizational structure emerged gradually over the nineteenth century. So structured, of course, the boards and agencies had a channel into every local church. Each strove to use that channel to educate the Methodist faithful on its cause or purpose.

The teaching office that resulted differed from but drew upon that exercised through earlier instruments. Obviously, it lacked the cohesion possible when the office centered on Asbury. Yet the agencies sought the leadership that he had once exercised over national Methodist policy. The boards depended heavily upon publication but had a far more programmatic and less editorial and opinion-shaping character than the nineteenth-century editors. They made good use of many of the instrumentalities developed by the several platforms of the mid-nineteenth century but gave them a polished and professional form. motive, for instance, far excelled any publication that the church had aimed at the youth market. The boards did not typically compete with the seminaries by issuing systematic theology, but in their own way they shaped an ecumenical, social, expansive theological posture for the church. Though not self-consciously systematic, this theology had a remarkable inner coherence.\textsuperscript{46} And the boards mediated it to the churches—weekly, diffusely, energetically, on a massive scale, through innumerable publications—and so set agenda for the church. So, in lumbering
fashion, they defined its belief, conveyed it to the faithful, and formed the church.

That teaching system communicated effectively for much of this century. It no longer does. The church lacks a general circulation magazine, and its effort to produce an electronic substitute, "Catch the Spirit" seems doomed. The national Advocate has, in a sense, gone into independent (but friendly) hands. The many churchwide media serve markets, sectors, professions or interests. Though the national machinery continues to run at high speed, it almost seems out of gear. The wheels at the local level don't want to mesh, keep the pace or even follow the direction set on national levels. The system doesn't work, but the reasons for this are not entirely clear. Part of the blame lies outside the church. The sixties and post-sixties revolt against Washington effectively discredited national organizations, including ecclesial ones. Bureaucracy cannot be trusted, we were told. Some of that distrust derives from the social crises associated with race, war, and poverty. The boards and agencies took high-profile leadership in problems that have proved to be intractable. They have suffered in the confusion over directions. Like other mainline denominations, their programs and their communications have been eclipsed by "hotter" media. Television, both commercial and religious, orients North Americans to a personal reality, not a structural one.

The changes, strains, and conflicts in U.S. society have found their way into the churches. But the churches, really all the so-called mainstream denominations, have their own set of problems. Despite a number of efforts over the past fifteen years to kick the church back into gear, the faithful do not seem to be responding. They really cannot, because the organizational grammar, the infrastructure for action, is in collapse. This is particularly obvious in the youth and college networks from which the church once recruited its leadership and built its agencies. That constituency now belongs to the para-church outfits. Beyond that, the purposes that had once generated enthusiasm and constituency for boards and agencies have themselves faltered. Missions is the most obvious illustration and the key casualty. The evangelization of the world in this generation no longer energizes the church.

The most successful teaching organizations within the church actually function to criticize the church and its practices. COSROW, Religion and Race, Good News, the several ethnic caucuses—"struggle groups," as one analyst terms them—seem...
more effectual as teachers than the program agencies. At least, information now flows more effectively along these other channels. However, if these groups serve to unite and communicate with those who share a perspective, they also function to alienate those who do not and thus to divide the church. The struggle groups are effective in teaching, but not in teaching the whole church, only a part. Recognizing the leadership gap, the episcopacy has sought to reclaim a national teaching function.

**A Teaching Episcopacy**

The bishops have reclaimed national leadership. Their initiative has been a long time in developing. Ambiguous incentives derived from the 1939 union; in some ways, the polity that emerged in 1939 actually accelerated the momentum towards a diocesan episcopacy. Considerable blame could be attributed to the jurisdictional structure. By electing and deploying bishops on that regional basis, the church effectively imaged the bishops as sectional leaders. The bishops' efforts to reduce the number of conferences they serve and to lengthen their tenure have also given them a diocesan cast.

On the other hand, the 1939 union provided a structural foundation for episcopal leadership. The southern church brought into union the principle of an effective college of bishops. Its successor, the Council of Bishops, gave the episcopacy a structural cohesion, a vehicle through which to act collectively on behalf of the whole church. The Council did not immediately reclaim national leadership. It has taken some time for the Council to overcome two centuries of centrifugal, parochial, and regional inertias. One hurdle, perhaps a fairly high one, was the essential social character of their unity. The bishops made themselves into a great family; they had come to use their gatherings for social and peer-support functions. They became a family of regional superintendents. In reclaiming the teaching office, the bishops have had to develop the will to work together, the patterns of work that would give them a united voice, the discipline to labor as a magisterium.

Stimuli to concerted action were various. The 1968 union was one. The faltering of other leadership, particularly that of the boards and agencies, was perhaps another. The U.S. National Conference of Catholic Bishops modelled what might be achieved. The Methodist
bishops enjoyed success with various initiatives, including pastoral letters. Internal structures, particularly a Committee on Episcopal Initiatives for Ministry and Mission, focused the Council's growing resolve to act collectively. And finally, the sense of crisis in the church over faltering programs and declining membership doubtless also had a role.

The bishops, therefore, reclaimed something of the mantle of Wesley and Asbury. They did so dramatically with In Defense of Creation: The Nuclear Crisis and a Just Peace. The entire process—from the hearings and gathering of opinion in its preparation, to first release, to formal presentation, to the mandated reading in its pastoral letter form, to the study of the larger statement in the congregations—represents an incredibly important experiment in episcopal exercise of the teaching office. Whatever one thinks of the actual posture, the document and the claim made on the church with it brought the bishops into a new relationship with the faithful. Here, really for the first time in almost 200 years, the bishops in united fashion gave theological leadership to the church. Something of the same process yielded the 1990 statement Vital Congregations—Faithful Disciples. Vision for the Church by The Council of Bishops of The United Methodist Church. In this way the bishops bid to reclaim Asbury's and Wesley's mantle and exercise the teaching office. They now have the resolve, the leadership and the internal structures to act with something of the unity that the episcopacy could when it was, in effect, one person.

General Conference and the Teaching Office

Ironically, just as the Council of Bishops rediscovered the magisterium and mechanisms for staking its claim thereon, General Conference found ways to make good on its own constitutional authority.

Here, too, the critical date seems to be 1968. The merger of that year prompted self-consciousness about authority, belief, and witness. One aspect of that was attention to constitutional questions, including the issue as to what are the doctrinal standards. This essay takes less interest in the resolution of the ensuing debate than in the fact the question was raised and the debate happened. Here it is important to underscore the exercise of General Conference's authority. Perhaps...
symbolic was *The Book of Resolutions* with which, beginning in 1968, General Conference spoke to the church. Yet those documents, valuable as they are, have had at best a quite modest impact and represent a one-stroke statement. Far more important was the creation of the Study Commission on Doctrine and Standards and its product, the statement for the 1972 *Discipline*. In and through that document, General Conference spoke to the church in a particularly powerful way. It was not the most controversial statement that the church has made in recent years. At one level, it represented little more than what General Conference has always done, namely recast the *Discipline*. However, as a theological and teaching exercise, it differed markedly from prior efforts (as we note below). Further, it set precedents for other study commissions, which have sustained that teaching role, including particularly the sequel “Committee on Our Theological Task,” authorized by the 1984 General Conference. The Study Commission prepared the draft that, as revised, went into the 1988 *Discipline*. The statement on “Social Principles” and the process that brought it into being could also be cited, as also the baptism study and the long series of study commissions on ministry. The study commission functions effectively, then, to carry out important discovery and teaching responsibilities. Of special note were these two that produced the 1972 and 1988 doctrinal statements. Several points about them and their products in particular deserve remark:

1. The 1972 and 1988 statements have been read, particularly by the church’s leadership, and read as authoritative. The status of the 1972 and 1988 statements, as annotations on our doctrinal standards, gave them a peculiar privilege. Like the marginalia of the Scofield Bible or perhaps the more recent Serendipity Bible, the statement actually upstaged the standards. The statements bear comparison with Asbury and Coke’s annotation of the 1798 *Discipline*. It is worth recalling that the church never let Asbury and Coke repeat that effort; the annotations had preempted the standards.

2. The two doctrinal statements present themselves and their claims in a remarkably confident tone. On key matters, such as pluralism, the quadrilateral, what constitute doctrinal standards, and the distinction between doctrine and theology, the statements seemed to be speaking *ex cathedra*.

3. The authority of such points and indeed the statements as a whole gained wide currency, even adherence. My own sense of that is quite vivid. In my twenty years of reading theology of ministry papers
written by graduating seminarians and recently in reading theology statements prepared by ministerial candidates for the Board of Ordained Ministry, I recall few who missed the opportunity to expand upon these distinctive formulations (as for instance, the quadrilateral), often indeed favoring those over the doctrine they interpreted, because of their prominence, clarity, and confident tone.

4. Obviously, across the church those renderings of our theological posture, particularly that of 1972, produced controversy and opposition as well as adherence. Petitions to the 1984 General Conference even called for the second study commission. This is really the key point, that the 1972 statement elicited a conversation between General Conference and the Methodist people, a conversation on doctrinal matters.

5. The process that followed, actually with three major study commissions, gave General Conference a mechanism with which to think with the church, ongoing committees with lines out to the church, and bodies set up to listen and gather insight. The process was followed again in anticipation of the 1992 General Conference and with similar effect—though with highly controversial matters, such as sexuality, speaking with and listening to the church can become highly politicized. Perhaps, however, teaching in a huge church must have a political edge to it. At any rate, the entire procedure of gathering in opinion, reporting out tentative drafts for comments, conducting hearings and consultations, eliciting media coverage, establishing great groups or other listening structures, receiving various declarations and technical opinions, and finally referring to General Conference can engage and has engaged the church in theological dialogue. General Conference sustains that theological activity in its own legislative committee and plenary action.

6. The 1988 statement actually goes a considerable way towards describing and thereby sanctioning the very process by which it was produced, the dialogue between General Conference and those it represented. This seems the intent, tenor and thrust of the entire section “Our Theological Task” (par. 69). We are invited into theological reflection understood as

critical and constructive,
individual and communal,
contextual and incarnational,
practical.

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That ongoing reflective and renewing activity is grounded in the crucial theological distinction, central to the statement, namely that between doctrine and theology. Doctrine as the received witness to, in, and of the faith takes and requires expression in the life of the community. That expression—the “testing, renewal, elaboration, and application of our doctrinal perspectives”\(^{58}\)—is a shared theological obligation. Hence, General Conference does that in such ongoing, structured relation to the United Methodist faithful.

Given such an understanding, General Conference fittingly acted as had the bishops with their pastoral letter. It mandated study of the 1988 statement, the new annotations, which like the 1972 statement, come to us as a teaching document. Finally, General Conference established its committee as a permanent body. In these ways, General Conference found a way of exercising its teaching office in the interim.

Conclusions

In the process by which both the 1972 and 1988 statements came into being and the manner in which they are presented to the church, General Conference discovered an ongoing mechanism by which to sustain its constitutionally given teaching functions. The study commissions have proved essential. Though hardly a new venture or more obviously linked to General Conference than any other aspect of our connection, they nevertheless have behaved in a more attentive and responsive way to both the United Methodist people and General Conference itself. Whether over time they will evolve into something with a separate life and operate—as did Asbury, the editors, the platforms of the nineteenth century, the seminaries, the boards and agencies, or the Council of Bishops—as teaching authorities in their own right, we surely cannot know. However, at present they and this statement represent an interesting Methodist experiment.

The question ahead of us, I suppose, is whether Methodism can and will really attend to two teaching authorities—the Council of Bishops and General Conference through its study committees.\(^{59}\) We clearly need national leadership and, in particular, a teaching or intellectual leadership. The cry for that reverberates throughout the denomination. The church stands at one of those points of structural ferment and possibility. Who or what will emerge in leadership? How will the church configure itself so as to respond to that
leadership. Key to our movement ahead will be effective national leadership, the exercise of the teaching office.

Notes

1. This essay was given in lecture form, initially at "The John Wesley Theological Institute" (Illinois) and later for the United Methodist Historical Society. It benefits from the suggestions and criticisms made at those gatherings. It also profits from suggestions made by William B. Lawrence and McMurry S. Richey.


3. The Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church (1808), 14-15.


5. Para. 610.1, The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church (1988), 301; The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church (1992), 295-96. 610.2 continues: "Any individual member called to testify before a legislative body to represent The United Methodist Church shall be allowed to do so only by reading, without elaboration, the resolutions and positions adopted by the General Conference of The United Methodist Church." 1988: 301; 1992: 296.


8. This study limits its concerns to one Methodist tradition and explores tensions around General Conference authority in the Methodist Episcopal Church, Methodist Church and United Methodist Church.

9. This paper gives General Conference’s actual exercise of the teaching office less attention than it deserves. Its purpose is to explore other agencies of Methodist teaching. All during its existence, General Conference has found ways to speak to and for the church. Obviously, it did so forcefully by its quadrennial revision of the Discipline; by legislation; by authorizing catechisms, hymnbooks, liturgies, and the like; by the various offices and agencies it established (which we will examine); by its stipulation of and initial control over the course of study (about which more later); and by direct efforts to speak to the Methodist people through pastoral letters. On the last see especially Kenneth E. Rowe, "Pastorals for the People: Pastorals in the Methodist Tradition," Scholarship, Sacraments and Service. Historical Studies in the Protestant Tradition. Essays in Honor of Bard Thompson. ed. Daniel B. Clendenin and W. David Buschart (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1990), 123-46.

10. For a careful delineation of the doctrine of the magisterium, see the article of that title by Karl Rahner in Encyclopedia of Theology: The Concise Sacramentum Mundi, 123-46.
ed. Karl Rahner (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), 871-80. See also Lumen Gentium, The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, of Vatican II.

11. A related and interesting investigation would examine the national or centralizing principle in Methodism. What is it that functions to effect or make connectionalism? Here, too, we would look at a succession of agents: conference, bishop(s) and elders, bishop(s), General Conference, the book agents or editors, the seminaries, the boards and agencies, the caucuses and then again the bishops.


15. The disciplinary discussion itself, though it focuses on what Wesley left us rather than on the manner and fact of his leaving it, by its repeated evocation of Wesley clearly registers his teaching function.


In reflecting on the actions of Wesley (and of Coke, who actually summoned the preachers to a place different from that earlier announced), Thomas Ware observed: Mr. Wesley had been in the habit of calling his preachers together, not to legislate, but to confer . . . but the right to decide all questions he reserved to himself. This he deemed the more excellent way; and as we had volunteered and pledged ourselves to obey, he instructed the doctor, conformably to his own usage, to put as few questions to vote as possible, saying, "If you, brother Asbury, and brother Whatcoat are agreed, it is enough." To place the
power of deciding all questions discussed, or nearly all, in the hands of the superintendents, was what could never be introduced among us.


20. JLFA, II, for April 5, 1802, 332-33. Asbury complained that he did not get a chance to edit and correct the copy before it was printed.

21. JLFA, III, 426, letter to Nelson Reed, March 22, 1810. Asbury noted that he had spent five or six days reviewing and correcting 1,000 pages of his journal. "Every thing personal, geographical, and prolix will go out, the most spiritual and historical parts will be reserved." See Elmer T. Clark's "Introduction," I, xv-xvii, for discussion of editions of the Journal.

22. JLFA, II, 153, for Feb. 6, 1798.

23. JLFA, III, 323, letter to Ezekiel Cooper, July 26, 1805.


25. JLFA, III, 232-33, letter to Ezekiel Cooper, the book agent, Dec. 31, 1801. There he spoke about his several publishing ventures. The preface to the hymnal appears in III, 397-98. For Asbury's personal efforts in its creation, see entries in II, 554, for Aug. 1807; 558 for Oct. 25, 1807; 559 for Nov. 4, 6, 1807.


28. JLFA, III, 199, letter to George Roberts, Feb. 4, 1801. Compare a letter two days later to Thomas Morrell, III, 202:

> You will favour me with a letter to Norfolk, the last of March. If the presiding elders, in the cities and towns and country would give once a year circumstantial accounts of the work, I would annually of Methodism, like Prince's History for a select collection of original papers.

29. New York, 1805. The subtitle read "Written by the Preachers and Members of the Methodist Episcopal Church to their Bishops."

30. See JLFA, II, 739-40, for Aug. 1, 1813; III, 475-92, for Aug. 5, 1813; II, 744, for Oct. 29, 1813; *Methodist History*, I, 56-58, for Sept. 29, 1815; and JLFA, III, for Jan. 8, 1816.


33. The full title was *The Mutual Rights of the Ministers and Members of the Methodist Episcopal Church*. The concerns voiced in this vehicle—lay representation, the rights of local preachers, election of presiding elders, abusive power of the

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episcopacy—found considerable support. The reform efforts eventually divided the church and eventuated in the Methodist Protestant Church.

34. Particularly notable were William Nast’s Der Christliche Apologiste of the MEC, the Religious Telescope of the UB, Der Christliche Botschafter and Evangelical Messenger of the EK. On the role of the latter two see J. Bruce Behney and Paul H. Eller, The History of the Evangelical United Brethren Church (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979), particularly the subsections “Publications” in chapters V and following.

35. Bledsoe’s Southern Review, was not an official magazine of the MECS but nevertheless functioned in lieu of one.

36. For their place and roles in Methodist theological development, see Thomas A. Langford, Practical Divinity (Nashville: Abingdon, 1983), chapters IV and V. Striking is the absence of such a powerhouse at the helm of the Methodist Protestant during this period.


38. See L. Dale Patterson, “The Ministerial Mind of American Methodism: The Course of Study for the Ministry of the Methodist Episcopal Church, the Methodist Episcopal Church, South and the Methodist Protestant Church, 1876-1920” (Ph.D. dissertation, Drew University, 1984).


40. On these developments see Gerald O. McCulloh, Ministerial Education in the American Methodist Movement (Nashville: United Methodist Board of Higher Education and Ministry, 1980).

41. At present, there does seem to be a disposition to rethink this, a disposition registered in the Commissions to Study the Ministry and in formal and informal conversations among those who worry whether in years ahead we will have sufficient numbers of clergy and/or whether smaller congregations, communities, and circuits can continue to afford seminary-trained professionals.

42. I am happy to say that in the last few years, the seminaries have labored mightily to correct this situation and to pay more deliberate attention to the church.

43. In their several books, my colleagues, Paul Mickey, Will Willimon, and the late Robert Wilson have offered penetrating criticisms of United Methodist bureaucracy.

44. This is reflected in the tendency to think of ministry in parish terms, a long popular perception of both laity and clergy, now codified in the Discipline’s handling of those once termed special as appointments beyond the local church. Wesley’s “the world is my parish” becomes, as the quip puts it, “my parish is the world.” A congregational impression of the church may also be gathered from the bishops’ statement, Vital Congregations—Faithful Disciples. Vision for the Church by The Council of Bishops of The United Methodist Church (Nashville: Graded Press, 1990), though that would doubtless not have been their intention.


46. The most powerful expression of its complex inner structure is to be found in the four-volume study executed by faculty from Boston University School of Theology on behalf of the Board of Social and Economic Relations of The Methodist Church. The volumes of this “Methodism and Society” project—MESTA, “The Methodist Church in Social Thought and Action”—(Nashville: Abingdon, 1961-62) were entitled Methodism and Society in Historical Perspective; Methodism and Society in the Twentieth Century; Methodism and Society in Theological Perspective; and Methodism and Society: Guidelines for Strategy. Georgia Harkness compressed the four into a one-volume paperback, The Methodist Church in Social Thought and Action—A Summary (New York and Nashville: Abingdon, 1964).

47. See the listing in The 1993 United Methodist Directory and Index of Resources (Nashville: Cokesbury, 1993), 85-86. Included are Newscape, Quarterly Review, and Circuit Rider, which reach the ministers; New World Outlook and Response, which cover missions; The Interpreter, which treats program and resources for church leadership at all levels; several Spanish-language items; others aimed at age levels; still others covering special interests in worship, social action, spirituality, rural ministries, and so forth.


51. In addition to several committees that now guide the Council, the bishops draw on the theological expertise of one general agency, the General Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns. For illustration of how the bishops have used that expertise, see John Deschner, “United Methodist’s Basic Eccumenical Policy,” in Ecumenical & Interreligious Perspectives: Globalization in Theological Education (Nashville: QR Books, 1992), 45-57, and in Perspectives on American Methodism, ed. Russell E. Richey, Kenneth E. Rowe and Jean Miller Schmidt (Nashville: Kingswood/Abingdon, 1993).

52. See Note 13.


54. The processes that yielded The United Methodist Hymnal and The United Methodist Book of Worship, though similar and clearly also functioning to teach, seem to belong somewhat less completely to General Conference and so are not discussed here.

55. While I credit the work of this committee to General Conference, I do recognize that it was appointed by the Council of Bishops and hence might be construed as, in some sense, a dimension of that body’s teaching authority.

57. On that process, see Thomas A. Langford, "Conciliar Theology: A Report," *Doctrine and Theology in The United Methodist Church*, ed. Thomas A. Langford, 176-85. It might also be noted that the general agencies can and do also make use of the study commission and of related inquiries that have a teaching as well as a discovery value. At this writing, both BHEM and GCOM are conducting major studies committed to visioning for the 21st century, "Agenda 21" and "The Connectional Issues Studies." The latter, incidentally, was authorized by General Conference.


59. William Lawrence suggests, "Prospects for the Council may be more promising since the Council can refine, disseminate and otherwise control the teaching product which it generates. The General Conference Commissions, on the other hand, could labor in open forums, respond to political pressures, then fail in General Conference itself to carry their hard work to successful adoption."
Challenges to the Teaching Ministry in the Contemporary Church

A 1990 Search Institute study of six mainline denominations concluded that “. . . effective Christian education is the most powerful single influence congregations have on maturity of faith.” This statement should be emblazoned above the entrance to every church building, etched into the desk of every minister, and writ large across the lecture notes of every professor teaching in a theological school.

Studies reveal with disturbing clarity that many churches are not engaging their people in meaningful educational experiences. This is especially true for older youth and adults. While at least 60 percent of elementary-age children participate in formal Christian education, only slightly more than half of junior high and slightly more than a third of senior high youth are so involved. As adults, only 28 percent participate. The average adult churchgoer spends between eleven and twenty hours a year in religious educational endeavors other than worship. These figures reveal the perseverance of the old myth that Christian education is a ministry of the church for children. But even with the most effective of programs, can youngsters possibly be taught

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in their first twelve years all that they will need for lifetimes of Christian discipleship? It is a fallacy to believe that children can be properly educated while the adults who shape their lives are themselves biblically and theologically illiterate. With average longevity into the eighth decade of life and the growing preponderance of elderly persons in the population, there is greater opportunity and necessity than in the past to address the teaching ministry of the church to adults.

The crisis in our churches is starkly apparent. In most mainline denominations, the reality behind the brave talk of efforts toward membership growth is the acute need to staunch a continuing precipitous decline. The need is not simply to bring persons into active participation in the church or even into commitment to lives of Christian discipleship. The compelling demand is for life-shaping teaching about what Christians believe and how Christians live. Only those who have learned to be Christian through both instruction and incorporation can constitute transformed communities of faith and witness which will be the agents of redemptive change in the social order. In this endeavor, Christian education is essential as a foundational structure, motivating thrust, and sustaining nurture. There is grave doubt that Christian education in local churches will be improved until colleges and theological schools, denominational hierarchies and ordained ministers, professional Christian educators and laypersons in congregations all get concerned about the problem and motivated to address it.

If theological schools are to contribute to the solution rather than to the perpetuation of the problem, they will have to modify their focus. The emphasis needs to be shifted from simply what the schools can teach their own students to what these students are being prepared to teach in the church. Graduate professional education for ministry should be a rigorous academic program which grounds its graduates deeply in the traditional disciplines of biblical, theological, and historical studies. Without a learned ministry there will be an ignorant and impotent church. But there is a vast difference between what ministers may know and what they are able to teach. Requiring theological graduates to attain higher levels of knowledge in the academic disciplines will not in itself result in increased effectiveness in their ministries. Mastery of the biblical languages augmented by Latin may produce more competent scholars, but will it yield ministers who can effectively apply biblical truth to the lives of their
parishioners? Eloquence in expounding theories of theodicy may be intellectually satisfying, but will it enable ministers to respond to the anguished questions of grieving parents who watch a child die? Understanding the issues which have caused ecclesiastical schisms in the past may be laudable, but will it equip ministers to deal with conflicts which threaten their own congregations? Both depth and breadth of knowledge in the academic disciplines of theological education are imperative, and the church suffers from their deficiency. But what does it profit the church when its ministers know much but are able to teach little? Learning is not enough for those who are being prepared to lead; the capacity to teach is also essential. It is ineffectual, unreasonable, and ultimately unfaithful to the mandate of the gospel to train ministers and other professional church leaders in ways that leave them incapable of conveying their knowledge of the faith to the persons whom they serve.

Much attention is currently being given to the recovery of the church's teaching office and the crucial role of the pastor in the educational program. If pastors are to accept and fulfill that responsibility, they will first have to acknowledge that their teaching role extends far beyond sermons from the pulpit. No minister has ever preached so well as to be able to communicate all of Christian belief and practice in twenty minutes a week. Theological schools must emphasize the importance of the teaching ministry and teach those who are being prepared for ministerial leadership the high significance of Christian education in the life of the church. To do this students need to be made aware of their ministerial responsibility as teachers and motivated to undertake this role faithfully, and then they should be taught what and how to teach. To start with, courses in Christian education should be required as a part of the basic curriculum. What message about the teaching ministry is being conveyed by theological schools that require courses in other ministerial skills such as preaching, worship leadership, pastoral care, administration, and neglect to require teaching? Even worse, students preparing for professional ministry are frequently counseled away from Christian education courses, being told implicitly and too often explicitly that such courses are of little value.

But even the minimum of one or two required or elective courses in Christian education, as important as they are, cannot adequately equip ministers to fulfill their teaching office. Every academic course should give attention to how the material being learned can then be
effectively communicated to lay persons. If its students graduate unable to utilize their academic knowledge effectively in their congregational leadership, the theological school has failed in its central responsibility. By and large, United Methodist churches today have the kind of Christian education programs that theological schools have prepared ministers to lead. The record is not a good one.

Denominational hierarchies also bear their share of responsibility for the general deficiency in the teaching office. Both the perceptions and practice of various aspects of ministry are shaped by the attitudes and actions of leaders and the policies and programs emphasized by governing bodies. The 1988 General Conference took one small step in the right direction when it added the requirement that clergy present “a plan and outline for teaching a book or books of the Bible” for admission to both probationary and full annual conference membership. This single requirement has already had noticeable impact upon United Methodist seminarians’ interest in how to teach. But denominational leaders could do more to stress the importance of the teaching office and to motivate ministerial students to prepare themselves to exercise it competently. The United Methodist Church requires that candidates for ordination study the denomination’s history, theology, and polity. Most annual conferences impose further educational requirements which commonly include courses in preaching and worship leadership. In addition, many conferences stipulate study in other fields; in recent years, clinical pastoral education has become a widespread requirement. What does it say about the priorities of denominational leadership when there are no comparable mandates in the area of the teaching ministry?

All judicatories with the power to mandate qualifications for ordination should demand that their candidates receive preparation in Christian education. Such a demand would be both potent symbol and practical enabling. Ministers already serving congregations need continuing education opportunities to acquire or enhance competency in teaching. Denominational leaders can mandate such in-service training; they can insist upon accountability in the work of the teaching ministry; perhaps most significantly, they can lead through the power of setting good examples. Just as laypersons tend to judge the importance of various aspects of the church’s program by the degree and enthusiasm of their pastor’s involvement, ministers commonly allocate their time and energy according to the explicit statements and implicit values of their general church leadership.
Ordained ministers will recognize the importance of the teaching ministry when bishops and district superintendents make it a priority.

Most pastors will serve throughout their ministerial careers as the chief Christian educators in their congregations. In almost all small and in many medium-sized churches, the ordained minister may comprise the entire professional staff and is even more likely to be the only person with theological training. Increasingly, however, churches that are able to afford the expense are hiring additional persons as directors of Christian education, program directors, or coordinators of ministries to certain age groups—usually children and youth. Such persons may provide rich resources, but they also pose a variety of interesting challenges in the teaching ministry. One such challenge is in the working relationship between pastor and professional Christian educator. Successful teaching ministries in local churches so served are dependent upon attitudes of respect rather than condescension and working situations of mutuality rather than hierarchy. Much of what actually occurs in local churches can be traced back to the theological school. It is there that individuals who are preparing for ordained ministry must be sensitized to the equal validity of the calling to diaconal ministry and professional educational leadership.

Unfortunately, the current reality is too often that these other forms of ministry are disparaged, and faculty and peers attempt to dissuade those who have chosen to respond to this call. Women are asked why they do not seek to become “real” ministers since the opportunity is now open to them; men are questioned as to why they would choose a ministry stereotypically associated with women. Through both the failure to acknowledge their presence and overt depreciation of their vocation, persons preparing for educational ministry are identified as second-class citizens in the theological school community. No wonder that it is very difficult for ordained pastors and professional educators to work together in local churches in ways which most effectively utilize the talents and training of both in the teaching ministry.

The effort to incorporate professional Christian educators more fully into the church’s ministry faces still other challenges. First, there is the question of ecclesiastical status. The United Methodist Church is currently studying the diaconate to decide whether these persons should be ordained, consecrated, or lay ministers. In the realities of ecclesiastical power structures, decisions about status will be crucial in determining how such persons will be able to serve in the teaching ministry.
ministry. Closely related is the question of appropriate training and certification requirements for persons who are to be professional educational leaders in the church. Should such persons be required to attain the Master of Divinity degree, with or without a concentration in education; a Master of Religious (or Christian) Education degree; a master’s degree in other fields; a bachelor’s degree in education or some other area; short-term courses in selected subjects taught under the auspices of a college or theological school? All of these options and perhaps others are currently being employed.

One key to enhanced respect for Christian educators on the part of ordained ministers is parity of education. If persons preparing for various ministries in the church have studied and worked together, taken the same courses and met the same standards, shared in dealing with the realities of field education experiences, then mutual understanding and appreciation are fostered. Professional preparation is also connected significantly to the issue of ecclesiastical status, although other factors must be considered as well. Ordination to ministry is usually contingent upon certain levels of academic achievement. The issues of required professional training and appropriate church office must be considered in tandem.

More important than issues of staff relationships and church office is the need for those who would devote themselves to the teaching ministry of the church to be adequately prepared. Alternative programs of study may be suitable for persons who will serve the church as professionals in the areas of music, administration, health care, communications, and some other fields. But professional Christian educators need graduate theological education. Those who are to be responsible for teaching the beliefs and practices of Christianity to others need to be themselves taught as extensively and as profoundly as possible. In many churches where they are on staff, Christian educators have the primary responsibility for determining what is to be taught, who will teach and what training those teachers will receive, what curriculum materials will be used, and what will be the relationship between the Christian education program and the rest of congregational life. Especially in dealing with children and youth, and often with adults, the professional educator is in a position of influence exceeding that of even the pastor. It is incumbent upon such persons not only to possess the competencies needed to administer a program of activities and the personal attributes desirable to work successfully with people but also to have a comprehensive
understanding of what Christians believe and how Christians live. The ability to teach effectively and to enable others to do so is requisite, but those abilities are secondary to the primary and indispensable imperative that Christian educators know what it means to be disciples of Christ in the contemporary world. As the old Southern aphorism puts it, “You can no more teach what you don’t know than you can come back from where you ain’t been!” Christian educators can be optimally grounded in the faith, both experientially and academically, through a graduate theological education. That education will involve more than cognitive learning in biblical, theological, historical studies, although these are essential. It will involve more than the cultivation of skills and the honing of talents, although these are necessary. Such an educational experience over a period of years places persons in formative communities of faith and learning where they are shaped by the ethos of commitment and preparation to leadership in the church. Through interactions with faculty, staff, and fellow students, they learn what ministry in the church entails and are molded into the kind of persons who are equipped to be effectual in that vocation.

Practical problems complicate the career trajectory of persons who have prepared themselves for professional educational ministry by acquiring graduate theological training. One is the obvious matter of the years of study and the expenses—usually debts—inured in such a process. Denominations need to take more seriously their obligation to provide financially for those who are meeting the requirements for service to the church in all aspects of ministry. For Christian educators, this problem is compounded by the frequent failure of local congregations and their pastors to recognize and appreciate the richness of knowledge and skills that a theologically trained educator possesses. When congregations begin a search for someone to lead their educational programs, they do not always perceive the relevance and advantages of theological training. This produces a real dilemma for those who have invested substantial effort and money in acquiring a graduate professional degree and then find themselves competing in the job market with those whose credentials and experiences are quite different. Someone who is “good with youth” or can “organize our children’s program” is not necessarily competent to interpret and teach the Christian faith. Indeed, local congregations too often are persuaded not by sound credentials but by the lower compensation package for which a less qualified person can be employed. Pastors may condone such inappropriate criteria because of their own lack of
appreciation for the significance of the teaching ministry and sometimes their discomfiture in sharing the ministry of the church with another theologically trained staff member.

Theological schools, denominational policy makers and agencies, ministers, and professional Christian educators all share responsibility for the teaching ministry. The present state of that ministry is widely characterized as deplorable. Many churchgoing persons have a very simplistic understanding of the Bible and a deeply confused conception of what their faith means in the realities of their secular lives. The Search Institute study attempted to measure the faith maturity of members of six major denominations in terms of the dual dimensions of relationship to God and active commitment to service and reform in society. While quibbles and questions can be raised about the details of this study, the conclusions are unequivocal: 1) most youth and adults within the churches lack mature faith to undergird and inform their daily living, and 2) the most potent congregational influence on the development of faith and commitment is participation in an effective program of Christian education. These findings should challenge those within the church, and especially those who claim to shape and lead it, to analyze and evaluate, to recommit and reform, to recover an authentic appreciation for the teaching office—and to seek diligently for ways to revitalize it.

Notes


3. Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki has written a very thought-provoking article on this subject in Quarterly Review (Summer, 1993): 3-17. I share her concerns without agreeing with all of her proposed solutions.


6. These comments are based upon the experiences of my own students and confirmed by conversation with colleagues at other theological schools.

7. Benson and Eklin.
Millicent C. Feske

Christian Theology as the Practice of Hope

Recently I announced to my husband that I was going to do something that would have been unthinkable for me only a few short months ago: I was going to stop listening to the morning or evening news or reading anything in the newspaper except the "Entertainment" section. "It doesn't make any difference," I said. "It's too depressing. I don't want to know anymore." My declaration, I believe, represented a perception that no matter who is in political office, no matter what programs are put forward, no matter what individual or community efforts we make, the overall result seems to be the same: initial enthusiasm and anticipation followed all too soon by a suffocating sense that change is nigh unto impossible, being bogged down by political backstabbing, rumor-mongering, ill-informed analysis, and the complexities of human impatience and inadequacies. That I was able to keep my vow for all of thirty-six hours is a testimony to the fact that I have not yet abandoned all hope. But the incident has stayed with me nevertheless. And I doubt that I am alone in this perspective; rather, it seems to be tied to a general sense of communal malaise that has settled upon and continues to fester in the national psyche.

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In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the sudden, unexpected disintegration of totalitarian rule in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union and the release of Nelson Mandela in South Africa engendered a surge of hope. At the end of a century that witnessed massive public suffering engineered by human hatred, here was evidence that perhaps we had finally learned something—something about how to live together, how to resist without violence, how to negotiate, what might happen if we were patient enough to work and watch and wait. Half a decade later, it appears that we were wrong and there is nothing to be done about it.

The reforms of the Soviet Union seem about to unravel; in those areas that have thrown off totalitarian rule, ethnic and anti-Semitic violence contained for many decades has reerupted. The harsh reality of rebuilding the lives of millions of Black South Africans has replaced the jubilation of Mandela’s inauguration. At home our infrastructure and our basic social institutions like public schools crumble as we systematically dismantle social and economic programs that really were winning the war on poverty. For both the middle class and society’s most vulnerable—the very young, the elderly, and the poor—the future seems increasingly at risk. And all around us the planet is being slowly but surely poisoned—becoming unfit for our children and our children’s children. We protest; but our heart is not in it. The possibility of substantive change seems distant and thin. We withdraw into our separate and narcissistic lives without resisting, without hope.

Sharon Welch has written eloquently of the destruction of hope in the United States. She is concerned with the death of compassion and resistance, with the loss of community and imagination. She and other theologians ask if there is a connection between the fantastic wreckage of the twentieth century and what she calls the “cultured despair” of the U.S. middle class. Welch seeks sources that testify to the perseverance of resistance but fears the pervasiveness of our capacity for “psychic destructiveness”—our apathy, our paralysis, the incapacitation of our hope.

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At the opening of his volume, Faith in History and Society, German theologian Johannes Metz cites 1 Peter 3:15: “Always be prepared to make a defence to anyone who calls you to account for the hope that is
"Any Christian theology, then," Metz writes, "can be defined, at least in its task and intention, as a defence of hope." One wonders. While faith is a work of God, theology is all too surely a human endeavor—a fragile bridge of words seeking to say how it is that God and the world are related and how it is that we are or might be shaped, sustained, and transformed by that relation; how, indeed, we might be saved. Theology has always been expert at speaking of the hope that lies beyond the exigencies of human life, the discourse of eternity, the hope for safe haven within the realm of God. But a message of heavenly peace and divine purpose that might have brought comfort to those of former times is no longer adequate for us. We are the children of modernity. And we know that history—for good or for ill—lies in our hands, however much those hands pray to the Creator. Theology may continue to speak wisely and well of the eternal rest to come, but it is not enough. If theology is to be a defense of our hope, now, it must be a language that can banish the despair that haunts us (even as we seek to ignore it) about the possibility of transformation in human history, in human social structures and human lives.

What can so esoteric a discourse as theology offer to a world as weary and as cynical as ours? In a sermon to the Louisiana Conference of the United Methodist Church, now-retired Bishop Leontine Kelly pointed out that the Christian theology of the time did not even have the power to resist World War II fascism, much less stop it. This raises the question again for us: Does Christian theology have anything to say and, if so, does its speaking have any power to effect positive change? In other words, does it offer us any real hope? For theology has only the tool of language—even if that language be words of God and about God—to stand in the face of encroaching despair. Can something as fragile and fragmentary, as oft-mistaken and misbegotten as theology, not only articulate hope but actually engender it?

My simplest answer to this question would be a quiet, if unqualified, yes. And I would suggest that there are at least four strategies, each having to do with a different kind of language, that theology employs to resist apathy and defend hope in our time. The remainder of this essay will be devoted to discussing them, identified in these four ways. First, theology is a language of a practical aesthetics. Second, theology requires the language of dangerous memory. Third, it uses the language of vision and desire. And fourth, it presents language about the horizon of mystery.
As totalitarian regimes in Central and Eastern Europe toppled one after the other in the winter of 1989-90, the *New York Times* columnist John Russell noted that it was the artist who had “been chipping away ever since World War II at the monolithic political structure.” In the case of Romania, he wrote, “When did Ceausescu realize that the jig was up? When he heard the voice of Mircea Dinescu, the dissident poet, on the Bucharest radio.” Russell continued, “Ceausescu must have thought that, at the very least, he had silenced him. And then, on the radio that he had controlled so tightly and for so long, what did he hear but Dinescu, speaking as a free spirit? Then and only then, it is said, did Ceausescu weep.”

Theology is not only analytics. It is also art—the poetry of a community that attempts to express the ineffable in broken, human terms. Yet theology as an aesthetic endeavor, like the plays and poems and prose of resisting dissidents in the Eastern Bloc, was not and is not merely an intellectual amusement or a compelling distraction. It is also highly practical, an embodied political activity. That is to say, it is an activity which both shapes and is shaped by the *polis*, that is, by the community (in this case) of believers.

The church has long considered the relation between theology as artful language and its “entry in social relations.” St. Augustine was perhaps the first theologian to speak of the connection between language and human social being. As modern linguistic study has taught us, we each are born into the language of our communities; indeed, we are created by it. Although the boundaries of any language are inherently fluid and flexible, the dominant shape of a community’s discourse carries tremendous power to mold and to form its members and to engender concrete effects—for good or for ill—in human history. Or as Gustavo Gutiérrez has written, “One of the best ways to refute a particular theology is to look at its practical consequences, not at its intellectual arguments.” The language of theology, like that of art, is officially marginalized in our secular time. Yet, historically it has held (and presently it maintains) an immense power to persuade, to spin its narratives, to sing its songs, to wrestle with language in ways that bear the power either to hurt or to heal. Simply consider the authority engendered when the stories of Jesus can be equated with a particular contemporary project. These narratives are language that carries great weight among those who count themselves his followers.
Or remember the centuries-long practice of the church in Latin America of shaping theological discourse to serve the oligarchy, which in turn rewarded it (the church) with influence and wealth. That on many fronts that decision has been radically reversed is a testimony to and a recognition of the power of the theological as political, practical aesthetics. Rebecca Chopp has put it succinctly:

I contend that the only way to consider practical theology is to look at theology quite practically, in how it reflects and secures a certain form and function of religion in our culture, and how a new theology may depend upon a quite practical fact: relating a new theological substance to a new theological subject that speaks to a new experience and role of Christianity in history.  

A second kind of theological language which can engender hope in our time is what Metz has called the language of “dangerous memory.” Metz has argued that history, including Christian history, has been written by the victors; that is, by those with the social, educational, and political wherewithal to record and promote their version of any story. Language, by its very nature, is a limiting activity. By saying certain things, one does not say others. By attending to one perspective, others will remain unheard. By attempting to align itself with a so-called political innocence, claims Metz, mainstream Christian theology has suppressed certain memories, certain knowledges, certain stories of resistance and hope which are now irrupting from the margins and fissures of our dominant histories. The particular memory to which Metz refers is the dangerous memory of Jesus—a memory of him as one who sided with those who suffered history rather than recorded it. This historical memory of suffering requires that theology submit its language to a peculiar and unusual arbiter and “press[es] us to change ourselves in accordance with [it].” It requires that we ask of those who have suffered history: How do you see things? What would you have us do? What words best bear witness to your story? Which perpetuate your pain? Such arbitration Metz considers to be the necessary task of winning the votes of the dead, by relocating the center of credibility and appropriateness in theology with those whose lives have been snuffed out in the carnage wreaked by the twentieth-century. Theology must be adjudicated by what he calls “the authority of those who
This historical memory of suffering is, for Metz, a basis for a discourse of hope and transformation. And it, too, is reminiscent of the words of John Russell on art, one of whose functions, he says, "is to restore to us the whole of human history in optimum condition. In the face of fragmentation and alienation, it restores our identity, reactivates our memory and gives us precisely the reorientation that we sometimes need. In so doing, he says, art works "to bind up the wounds of those who have suffered long and greatly."16 As art here, so, too, an analogy for theology. Anamnesis—remembering—has always been a primary task for theology and the church. What is changed is whose memory, and why.

A third type of theological language for our task of practicing hope is the language of vision and desire. It is crucial that we tell the stories of resistance and of suffering, the narratives of those on the underside of the dominant theological discourses. But this is not enough. For the task of remembering is preliminary to the task of transformation, which is the attempt to construct a theological language that will engender a new kind of human community and a new type of theological subject. Gutiérrez asks us, How is it possible to speak of a God of love to people who do not even know they are human?17 Such is the suffering of the vast majority of the Latin American people. And so for them it is not enough to recount the memory of oppression. It is also requisite to speak of a new world, a utopia, to dream wild dreams and see great visions, to imagine that which does not yet exist but might in order to have a reason simply to keep on living. Sharon Welch reminds us that the stifling of imagination and the attitude of cultured despair are only middle-class options. They are not real possibilities for the poor. To them, speaking of a place where there will be no more tears and no more hunger is not the language of the apocalyptic fringe but a simple tactic of survival. For it is not enough to identify words and practices that imprison and demean us. We must also name the possibilities and dream the dreams that emancipate and transform.18 Thus do the disenfranchised reenvision and revise the world. And thus do they speak hope for all of us from their position on the social and economic and theological margins of our times.

The utopian visions of the poor of Latin America are not the only ways in which theology articulates hope as anticipatory desire. Perhaps more than anyone of his theological generation, Karl Rahner has used the vocabulary of human desire as a way to express the dwelling at all times of God among us and before us. The desire to
make sense of things, says Rahner, is the desire for God. It is an anticipatory experience of God just as theology, in its attempts to be coherent and credible to our experiences, is an encounter with the presence of the Divine. In a third twist on this type of anticipatory theological language, Chopp has written that one of the most hopeful signs in the North American middle-class churches is the desire of its people for community. They have sensed that the church is one of the few places where community may still be possible, where the languages of love, connection, compassion, and joy are still permissible, if not common, parlance. The hunger of parishioners for words of strength and wisdom, for those with whom they can share their dreams and their worries, for knowledge of many Christian traditions, for simple human kindness—these things bespeak not only the present poverty of our culture but also the possibility of new ways of being human together.

These first three of our theological strategies deal with the partial, each beginning with one particular piece of the whole that appears to be fruitful for the theological task of defending the possibility of hope in our time. The last strategy is mediated through the partial, but it more explicitly tries to identify the whole: the language of theology which speaks of the horizon of mystery. And perhaps this is the most profound basis upon which we are able to rest any claims to Christian hope in our time. Michael Buckley, interpreting the thought of Karl Rahner, writes, “Mystery is not that which I cannot know. Mystery is that which I cannot exhaust.” For Rahner, God is the infinitely receding but ever-present horizon of self-knowledge and social knowledge, which we experience only in and through the particulars of our concrete everyday lives. Indeed, if it were not for this horizon, suggests Rahner, we would not even exist, in the sense of being aware of ourselves as unique and distinguishable creatures from each other and from the world. Rahner’s understanding of human access to knowledge of the divine is rather like a white stick figure which is placed against a white background. We are not aware that it is there—that it existst—that it stands out (indeed it does not) unless the background is of a different hue. So, too, he explains, it is only because of God’s gracing of nature (that is, of us and our world) by surrounding, enveloping and undergirding it, by being both over against it and extending it to us and for us that we stand out and are given existence—are given being at all. Thus, while our human existence is always limited, being time and space and culture-bound, it
is also always offered the hope-filled, unlimited possibility of transcendence, reaching continually for the new horizon, which is God's unlimited, inexhaustible, but graceful and hospitable self mediated through the limited structures of the created world.

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Now, all of this is fragmentary, partial, and highly incomplete. Such are the limits of the brief exploratory essay. But such is also the nature of theology as a human endeavor, seeking to express hope about God in history as manifest in human lives and in the social relations of our world. To recognize this partiality as part and parcel of the human possibility of hope is a final task that requires our attention.

In her discussion of the seesaw of the middle-class U.S. between "cultured despair" and persevering hope, Sharon Welch names several crucial impediments to conversion and creative theological and social strategies. I believe the most damaging of these is the belief that responsible and effective theologizing and praxis are somehow those thoughts and actions which are perfect, correct, and final, rather than the ones that are possible at the time. Welch, a white, middle-class, highly-educated North American, has gleaned much for her study from reading the writing of women from African-American communities. To seek answers among the oppressed themselves is an expression of humility and an act of solidarity. It is to ask of them the question of hope and survival and to believe one can learn from their experience. From a community that has had to exercise the resources of resistance and hope within extremely constricted boundaries, where little or no control of their own was usually possible, and where defeat was frequent and harsh, Welch learns herself and teaches others that responsible and effective theological thought and its accompanying action do not mean the certain achievement of desired ends or the completion of an entire coherent system. Rather, it means the creation of a matrix within which further gestures of hope are still possible. According to her, the measure of a theology's worth is neither its correspondence to the dominant historical norm nor its adherence to a contemporary one but the contribution such a theological position, statement, or strategy will make to the imagination, courage, and hope of the existing community. If we make a careful study of movements of hope and resistance, she reminds us, we will find that their gains have been fragmentary, uneven and always ambiguous. But they have
been real gains, as judged by their ability to sustain continued faith and practice.

Now, this can be a cause for despair. Or it can be a statement of theological maturity. Rahner has written beautifully that our humanity within the life of God presses upon us our limits and our frailties. But because our only existence is graced existence, these fragments, these ambiguities, these earthen vessels are also the actual and only stuff for the incarnation and experiencing of that grace in our world, in our lives. “Maturity,” Welch writes, “is the acceptance, not that life is unfair, but that the creation of fairness is the task of generations, that work for justice is not incidental to one’s life, but is an essential aspect of affirming the delight and wonder of being alive.” The hope to which Christians are called and to which we direct our diverse and varied theological strategies, then, is a learned hope, one for which we continually develop languages which help to create the conditions for the sustenance of resistance to and transformation of all that would cripple life or destroy it.

During my years teaching at Perkins School of Theology, a young theologian came to the campus to interview for a position on our faculty. Gathered in the lecture hall, we came to judge her—to decide her fitness to practice theology among us. But it was she who brought us a word of judgment and of grace for those who had ears to hear it. “I teach because I hope,” she said. Very simple words. “I do what I do because I hope.” How long had it been since we had thought of this? Can any of us be sustained to do our work of ministry without being reminded of it, even daily? In a similar vein speaks the prophet Habakkuk: “The vision awaits its time; it hastens to the end—it will not lie. If it seems slow, wait for it. It will surely come, it will not delay”(2:3b).

In a world where perseverance vies with despair, where hope is being systematically destroyed and compassion is dismantled rather than enabled, the word of 1 Peter to Christians is still this: “Always be prepared to make a defence to anyone who calls you to account for the hope that is in you.” The resources theology has to lend to this task are neither feeble nor few. But like all human languages, they are ambiguous and partial. There is danger in this but also grace; imperfection but also real possibility. It is not everything, but it is something. It is not the whole of the realm of God, but it does not have to be. To cite William Willimon, “Christ did not come to teach us to love each other. He came to establish the condition and context where,
for poor souls like us, love is possible.” Theology is not a theoretical finished product; it is a living, changing practice of our Christian hope.

Notes

4. Bishop Leontine Kelly, sermon to the Louisiana Annual Conference, First United Methodist Church, Shreveport, Louisiana (June 1991).
8. Ibid. 104.
11. See, for example, Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 88ff.
12. See, for example, Ibid., 81, 88.
14. Metz often refers to the dead victims of modern atrocities as necessarily subjects (that is, speakers and arbiters) of any contemporary Christian theology. See Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 60, 74, and 128.
18. For a discussion of theology as the language of “emancipatory transformation,” see Chopp, *The Power to Speak*.


22. Welch, Feminist Ethic, 70.

Perhaps the most neglected of all the seasons of the church year is Kingdomtide. In fact, it is not even observed by some churches that simply prolong the season of Pentecost until Advent. This is unfortunate since there is a place for focusing not merely on what created the church (the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost) but on the ongoing work of God and God’s people in proclaiming and bringing in the Kingdom, the divine saving activity of God on earth.

Our lessons for five Sundays of Kingdomtide focus on three chapters in the Gospel of Luke—Luke 17–19. There is a certain interconnectedness in these texts, as over and over again they touch on the way that Jesus reached out to the outcast and ostracized of Jewish society—women, tax collectors, Samaritans, the diseased. Over and over again these texts show that the salvation that Jesus brought had not only physical and spiritual dimensions but also social dimensions—breaking down barriers between Samaritans and Jews, sinners and the “righteous,” the diseased and the well. These texts reveal Jesus to have been a radical reformer who seems to have rejected some of the laws of clean and unclean in order to reach those
who most needed him. They reveal a Jesus who was the champion of the underdog and the marginalized, but also who even fellowshipped with the well-to-do such as a Zacchaeus.

The studies that follow are intended to help the minister or teacher focus on the essential meaning of each of these texts and their theological, ethical, and social implications. Again and again these passages raise questions about the objectives of modern ministry, and whether we, like Jesus, should especially direct our attentions to the least, the last, and the lost. Again and again they cause us to ask what does it mean to be saved, to be a disciple, to be faithful to the end.

At the end of the discussion of all these texts the reader will find a brief bibliography to give further aid in preparing to preach or teach this material. Good sermons are the result of carefully studying the text in its original historical and literary settings and then working to bridge from the original setting of the material to our own contemporary setting. What the text meant is still what it means today, though, of course, it may have fruitful applications and significance that Luke never thought of when he wrote his Gospel.

I have concentrated on the meaning of the text in its original setting because it is my conviction that we must begin where the text begins. Applications should arise out of the original meaning of the text, not be read into the text as if it were some sort of inkblot without distinctive features. The dictum of J. Bengel is worth repeating: "Apply the whole of the text to yourself, apply the whole of yourself to the text."

October 8: Luke 17:5–10

The material found in these verses is not all of a piece. Verses 5–6 reflect an isolated saying of Jesus, and verses 7–10 are a separate tradition altogether. In these circumstances, it would be well to decide which of these two traditions one wishes to preach on and concentrate on one or the other, since there is no obvious connection between them.

The material found in Luke 17:5-6 is Q material which is found in a somewhat different form in Matthew 17:20. Since the image of a mulberry tree being uprooted and planted in the sea seems strange if not impossible, scholars are inclined to suggest that the Matthean form of the saying, which speaks of moving mountains, is closer to Jesus’
original words. On the other hand, Jesus often said paradoxical things, and it is at least equally possible that Jesus meant to suggest that with a little real faith even the seemingly impossible (planting a tree in the sea) becomes possible.

The mustard seed was, of course, one of the smallest seeds known in Palestine (cf. Luke 13:9), and so the contrast here is between small, even miniscule, but muscular faith and the huge results that can come from having such a faith, even in small quantities. Notice that Jesus does not in fact do what the disciples request (i.e. increase their faith); rather, he speaks to them about what even a little "mustard seed faith" can accomplish. The issue is not the quantity but the quality or character of the faith one has. The issue is—Did the disciples have the right stuff?

It is striking that Jesus compares both the Kingdom and true faith to the mustard seed (compare Luke 13:18-19 to 17:5-6). This is all the more striking since it seems likely that Jesus is talking about a weed that farmers did not plant or cultivate in Palestine but in fact wanted out of their garden. Pliny, a first-century Roman writer, in his *Natural History* 19:170-71, says that mustard grew entirely wild, was pungent, and like many another hearty weed tended to take over land where it was not wanted, a sort of ancient equivalent of kudzu. In short, the Kingdom and Kingdom faith were pungent and powerful things with the potential to do difficult and even dangerous things—growing where it was not wanted, indeed even where it was thought impossible, and taking over domesticated turf.

The material in Luke 17:7-10 is unique to Luke's Gospel and is meant to help disciples understand the frame of mind they should take about the tasks of discipleship. This parable draws on the relationship between a master and his slaves (a popular theme in Luke; see 12:35-40, 42-48; 13:25-27; 14:16-24; 16:1-13). The analogy suggests that disciples have unconditional allegiance and indebtedness to Christ; and when they do what he requires, they should understand that this is a matter of fulfilling an obligation, not earning a reward.

That God treats us better than we have earned or merited is a reflection of the divine character, not our accomplishments. Furthermore, none of us are indispensable to God's plans. God could as easily accomplish what God wants to accomplish using others. There may also be an implied suggestion that if we are really to model the divine character, we will do over and above what we are required
to do, just as God goes beyond being fair or just to being merciful and compassionate (as in the parable of the talents).

October 15: Luke 17:11–19

The familiar story of the cleansing of the ten lepers is a story found only in Luke’s Gospel and is a paradigm of the way Jesus dealt with those who were literally cast out from their own society—lepers. It is not at all certain that the disease these people had was the same as modern leprosy, since the Greek term *leprōs* could refer to a variety of skin conditions, including ordinary skin fungus. Whatever may have been the extent of their ailment, because they had a contagious skin disease they were to live apart from normal Jewish society, and when they came near to others they were to cry out, “unclean, unclean!” This was because their physical “uncleanliness” made them also ritually unclean according to Jewish law (see Lev. 13–14). One can easily imagine not only the physical but also the psychological effects of being forced to live apart from normal society, including members of one’s own family that were not contaminated. In addition to this, the frequent association in Jewish society of sickness or suffering with sin (cf. Luke 13:1–5; John 9:1–2) also led such persons to be suspected of being morally aberrant as well.

The geographical description in verse 11 has been much debated as to its accuracy, but for our purposes it is sufficient to note that it serves the purpose of explaining why Jesus may have encountered a mixed group of Jewish and Samaritan lepers. He was traveling in an area where such overlap was not unexpected.

Notice that verse 12 is careful to mention that the lepers stood apart from Jesus, in accord with the Jewish ritual requirements; and they cried out to Jesus from afar, “Have mercy on us!” They knew and kept their proper distance. The story says nothing about Jesus healing them on the spot, nor is there any word from Jesus about their condition. Rather, he sends them off to the priests, which apparently was his standard procedure in dealing with lepers, following the requirements of the Mosaic law (Luke 5:14 and par. to Lev. 14:2–4). The function of sending them to the priests was so that they could get a bill of good health from the proper authorities, the ones most concerned with matters of ritual purity, and so be reintegrated into normal Jewish society.
Since it may well be that your congregation does not understand the differences between Jews and Samaritans, a bit of background information is in order. Samaritans were descendants of the northern tribes of Israel as they were reconstituted after Assyria conquered the land in 722–21 B.C.E. It was the view of many, if not most, Judean and apparently also Galilean Jews that these Jews were half-breeds, having intermarried with their conquerors and thus not full-blooded Jews, an issue which the Samaritans disputed.

Samaritans were also thought of as apostate and unclean because of one or more of the following facts: 1) they only accepted the Pentateuch as their Holy Scriptures; 2) they believed that Mt. Gerizim in Samaria, not Mt. Zion in Jerusalem, was the mountain God had set apart for proper sacrifices and worship; 3) they did not observe the laws of clean and unclean in the same way that other Jews did, hence their houses, vessels, women, and even their entire territory was considered unclean by most Judean Jews (see John 4:9). In addition, there had been ongoing fratricidal conflicts between Jews and Samaritans before, during, and after Jesus’ day. The end result of all this is that there was considerable ethnic prejudice against Samaritans on the part of Judean and Galilean Jews, and vice versa, even though there is no evidence that the Samaritans actually ever adopted the belief systems of the Assyrian conquerors. It is this background which must be kept steadily in view when one reads stories like the one in John 4 or the parable in Luke 10:25–37 or our own text in Luke 17:11–19.

We are told in verse 14b that all ten lepers were healed as they went to see the priests, but that only one of them, when he saw he was healed turned back, praising God with a loud voice, and prostrated himself at Jesus’ feet in thanksgiving for his healing. At verse 16 it is noted that he was a Samaritan (apparently unlike the other nine) and yet only he comes back to give thanks. Jesus asks rhetorically if the other nine were not also cleansed and also where they were. Notice that at verse 18 Jesus calls this Samaritan a “foreigner,” thus identifying himself with Judean and Galilean Jews.

The story concludes at verse 19 with Jesus’ command for the man to get up and go since “your faith has saved you.” Here the use of the verb σῴσσο (to save) certainly includes the notion of physical healing, though it may not be limited to that notion. It is true that the common meaning of the term saved in the Graeco-Roman world was not “being given the gift of eternal life” but rather “being kept safe, being
rescued, being delivered, or being healed." This is the end pagans and others regularly prayed or sacrificed to their gods for. Luke, however, as Luke 2:30-32; 15:19-31 and many other texts show, has a broader concept of salvation than mere mundane help or health, since he associates salvation with the inbreaking of God's final eschatological kingdom in the ministry of Jesus.

It is probable then that verse 19 means more than that "your faith has made you well," though it certainly includes and perhaps especially alludes to that sense of being "saved." The gratitude and praising of God by the Samaritan leper and his falling at Jesus' feet is meant to be seen as an example of the proper response to Jesus, the bringer of salvation in all the senses of that term. Thus, the story is about more than just the cleansing of a diseased body; it is about the proper response to Jesus the healer. As is true elsewhere in the Gospel tradition and is especially emphasized by Luke (cf. Luke 7:50), a person's faith or trust in God and/or Jesus plays a role in their healing. Thus, Jesus' concluding words stress that salvation proclaimed and offered and salvation received are not identical. We must trust in and accept the work God does in our life. The proper response to grace is gratitude, like that of the Samaritan.


If it has been some time since you have preached on the parables, it will be useful to remind your congregation about the the nature of this sort of material. It is a mistake to think of or treat parables as mere illustrations to be used in preaching—rather they are Jesus' preferred form of public proclamation in and of themselves.

A mashal (meshalim in the plural) is a form of figurative speech which has come to be rendered in Greek parabolos (hence our English word parable). This form of speaking is indebted not only to the Israelite wisdom tradition (e.g., Proverbs, Ecclesiastes) but also to the prophetic tradition’s use of narrative to instruct (for example, 2 Sam. 12:1-7). The problem for us is that when we use the term parable today we almost always think immediately of short pithy stories, when in fact a mashal or parabolos in Jesus’ day could include a one-line figurative saying ("physician heal thyself") a paradox or riddle ("it is as easy for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle...") an extended analogy ("it is like one who puts his hand to the plow...").
a brief illustrative story as we find in Luke 18:1–8, or even a primitive allegory (cf. Mark 4, the parable of the Sower). It is a mistake either to assume that Jesus’ narrative parables could include only one main point or to assume they were always full-blown allegories in which every major character or action stands for something outside the story. On the whole, Jesus’ narrative parables seem closer to the former than to the latter, especially when we are dealing with a story that intends to argue “from the lesser to the greater” as in Luke 18:1–8.

While Mark’s parables tend to have to do with things (seeds, leaven, bushes, fruit, and the like), Luke’s tend to fall into the category of example stories, dealing with people and their life experiences. I suspect this is the reason that many through the ages have found them more approachable and easier to understand than the material in Mark (e.g., the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10 or Lost Sheep in Luke 15).

In dealing with Luke 18:1–8 several key points need to be kept in mind. First, Luke uses this parable as an illustration of perseverance in prayer (cf. 18:1), but the parable itself may have been originally more broadly directed to the issue of perseverance in the faith (which no doubt includes persevering in prayer) until the Son of Man comes (cf. 18:8). You will need to make a decision about whether you are going to focus on the parable itself or on the specific and appropriate way Luke has used it.

Secondly, one must avoid the pitfall of assuming that Jesus is arguing that God in a variety of ways is like the obdurate and wicked judge. In a “from the lesser to the greater” argument the point is if even such a rascal as this corrupt judge in the end vindicates the woman, how much more will God, who is basically unlike this judge, do so. The human judge in the story is unjust; God is not. The point of the analogy is that both in the end provide vindication of the oppressed.

Thirdly, a little knowledge about the Jewish system of justice in small towns is in order. The story presupposes that the woman’s adversary has already come to the court, in some fashion bribed the judge, and made off with her property. The woman is crying out not for a just judgment in a matter that is simply under dispute but rather for vindication in a matter in which she has already been wronged by her adversary (vs. 3). The defendants in this sort of system of justice usually had to speak for themselves; it was the plaintiff who might hire a lawyer to get his way.
The use of the masculine pronoun in the previous sentence is deliberate. Throughout the Graeco-Roman world justice systems tended to be highly sensitive to issues of social status and gender. That is, a well-to-do person was much more likely to be able to afford a lawyer and obtain a verdict than a poor person was; and a man was certainly more likely to be able to obtain justice than a woman was, not least because a woman's word of testimony was considered very suspect in many parts of the ancient male-dominated world. The fact that this woman gets justice is extraordinary and goes against the grain of the bias of a patriarchal culture.

The woman in this story obtains justice by her persistence, by repeatedly going to the court and bothering the judge. There is irony in this because we are told at the beginning that this judge neither fears God nor respects human beings, and yet verse 5 shows he does have a weak or vulnerable spot— he has an ego and cares about how he appears in public in his courtroom. The key verb in verse 5 could be translated “lest she treat me severely,” or it could mean “lest she wear me out.” The point is probably that the judge has a sense of honor and shame, and in a male-dominated culture he would be shamed if he appeared weak in public and caved into the woman simply because she wore him out. Hence, he will give her justice before things get that far. One commentator even takes the verb to mean “lest she treat me severely” and envisions the woman coming and giving the judge a black eye—a form of public shaming that he would definitely want to avoid. In either case, the point is that, having been touched in his tender spot, the judge vindicates the woman before things get totally out of hand.

The woman is portrayed in this story as a model of a disciple in a situation where believers were in the minority and not in control of the power structures of the day and were therefore frequently subject to oppression in various forms. The parable's message is that God and God alone will provide that ultimate and complete form of justice or vindication for which an oppressed person longs, and will do so with dispatch. There is some debate as to whether the Greek in verse 8 means God will do it soon (a matter of timing) or God will do it quickly (a matter of the manner or mode of God's action); it is probably the latter.

Verse 8b gives a new twist at the end of the tale. Up to this point the story has been about whether a just God will be faithful and vindicate the chosen and oppressed. Jesus now turns around and suggests by
means of a rhetorical question that the real issue is whether the Son of Man will find faith on earth when he comes. Thus, a story about God’s faithfulness in the end suddenly becomes a story that raises questions about perseverance in the faith until the end. This is why, when I have preached this story, I have called it “The Obstinate Widow and the Obdurate Judge,” for in truth it is not only about God’s right behavior but about ours.


Before dealing with this parable, it will be helpful to review what I have said in the first three paragraphs on the lesson from October 22. When one preaches this particular parable about the Pharisee and the tax collector, it could be called “Humble Pie and Just Desserts,” for verse 9 encourages us to read the story as being about a contrast between self-righteousness and repentant humility before God.

A word of caution is in order if one is going to preach on this particular text, for in the past it has frequently been used by Christians in anti-Semitic fashion to caricature all Pharisees, and indeed all Jews. Frankly, Jesus could never have intended such a reading—not just because he was a Jew but because there are Pharisees in the Jesus tradition who are not portrayed in such a strongly negative light (see John 3:1–2). One should concentrate on the individual character flaws depicted that represent a familiar type of person in this parable and not on the fact that the label Pharisee appears in the story.

It is also good to bear in mind that, as so often happens in Wisdom literature, the contrast between the two characters is exaggerated in order to make a point. Usually, human beings are a more complex mixture of good and bad than is the case with the Pharisee and the tax collector.

I would also stress that this story is not about hypocrisy. That is, it is not about saying one thing and doing another. The Pharisee in this parable is morally upright, very pious (fasting twice a week); he tithed a full tenth of his gross income, not merely his net income. Like Paul, when he reflected on his life as a Pharisee, this man could say that if he was simply measured by the Mosaic legal standards he was “blameless” (Phil. 3:6), which did not then mean “perfect” any more than it does today when someone says, “I’ve never broken the law.” In short, the Pharisee is portrayed as a solid citizen, someone most ministers would be happy to have in their congregations! What, then, is the problem?
Perhaps in part the issue here is ethics, the need to be merciful and compassionate, to go above and beyond the requirements of the law, not just in its ritual requirements but in its larger intent. I suspect, however, that the real issue here has to do not merely with blamelessness under the law but with what value one places on and what trust one places in one’s own rectitude. The Pharisee goes away “unjustified” by God because he trusts in his own righteousness, whereas the tax collector trusts in God alone, knowing he cannot measure up to God’s ultimate standards.

The point here then is in whom one places one’s ultimate trust. This parable does not encourage us to recite North American clichés like “God helps those who help themselves,” but rather it urges us to believe that when all is said and done it is God who justifies, or sets us in right relationship with the divine. We cannot achieve this lofty status or standing for ourselves.

The problem with self-righteousness in fallen human beings, as verse 9 suggests, is that it almost inevitably leads to treating with contempt others who appear to fall below one’s standards. In other words, it leads to the insidious game of comparing and contrasting oneself with other human beings, even though none of us is omniscient; none of us knows all of what others think, feel, or are in their heart of hearts. Only God has this sort of knowledge; this is why only God is a suitable judge of humankind. Self-righteousness also leads to a mentality which finds it necessary to put others down in order to feel exalted or justified, a habit that is made easier by our tendency to be more understanding of our own flaws than of those of others, our infinite capacity for self-justification.

Tax collectors in Jesus’ society were seen as traitors or oppressors or both because they either worked for the enemy (the Romans) or collected tolls and land-use fees for the wealthy in Jewish society, contributing to the increasing marginalization of the poor or nearly poor. Either way they were seen as violators of God’s standards of righteousness for God’s people. To make matters worse, in order to make a living the tax collector was allowed and indeed forced to resort to extortion, collecting more than was owed, so that those who dispensed the right to collect taxes wouldn’t have to pay the tax collector! Generally speaking, the Romans and the landowners did not care how much was extorted as long as they got the amount of funds the tax collector agreed to gather for them.

One of the questions that this parable raises for us, since it contrasts two human beings, is our point of identification with the figures in the
text. Do we see ourselves as more like the Pharisee in the text or more like the tax collector or like neither? More to the point, do we understand that if God were to judge us on the basis of what was truly just and loving, all of us would fall short of the divine requirements?

While the Pharisee in the story is meant to be seen as a bad example of trusting in one’s own righteousness, the tax collector should not be seen as an example of self-loathing. The tax collector is seen as a positive model in that he realizes his sin and shortcomings and so can only throw himself on the mercy of God. The opposite of self-righteousness is not self-loathing but rather a true and sober self-understanding, a realizing that “all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.”

Sometimes, in their zeal to emphasize the uniqueness of Jesus’ teaching, New Testament scholars have too strongly contrasted the essential message of Jesus with that of Paul. They have seen the apostle’s teaching as a fall from the primordial grace of the words of the Master. I am convinced this is a mistake, precisely because we have parables like this one which suggest that Jesus also stressed the idea of justification by grace through trust in God.

In the end, this parable reminds us that Jesus preached a message that suggested that as the Divine saving activity of God was breaking into human history (God’s dominion), the world of what appeared to be good and what appeared to be bad would be turned upside down. A counterorder wisdom would be preached that spoke of the humble being exalted and the self-inflated being deflated, of the notorious sinner being justified and the formally just being allowed to go away unapproved. It is a message that suggests that God’s vision of good and evil is far more complex than we might imagine, and it might even involve the opposite of what we conventionally might call good or evil. In such circumstances the only safe thing to do is to trust in God, and “not rely on one’s own insight.”

November 5: Luke 19:1-10

If we have emphasized the role of the tax collector in preaching on Luke 18:9-14 on October 29, we may well wish to take a different tack when we preach on Luke 19:1-10 on this Sunday, or perhaps build on what was said the previous Sunday. The danger in dealing with this story is that it is too familiar; certain assumptions, whether warranted or unwarranted, will be made about it. For instance, the
story is usually read as a story of a dramatic conversion or change of heart in response to Jesus’ gracious presence. This is likely an incorrect conclusion, as we shall see.

Zacchaeus is characterized at the outset of the story as a wealthy chief tax collector. Since Luke repeatedly associates both tax collecting and wealth with sin, sinners, unrighteousness, and exclusion from God’s kingdom (as in Luke 7:34; 18:11; 12:13–21; 16:19–31), it is not surprising that Luke 19:1–10 has been read in this fashion as well. That Zacchaeus was a chief tax or toll collector means that he had other collectors under him whom he supervised. He was all the more despised for his position of authority and is called in the story a “sinner” by “all” the townspeople who witnessed this episode.

The conclusion of the story as well may suggest that Zacchaeus had need of salvation and was lost in some sense (vss. 9–10). The question is—saved in what sense, and from what? It is not clear whether we are to take verse 10 as a word of Jesus, or as Luke’s concluding comment on the Son of Man and the significance of the story for his own audience (see Luke 18:8), or as a general conclusion for the whole section.

The behavior of Zacchaeus strongly suggests that he is very eager to see and get near to Jesus. Ignoring the fact that climbing a sycamore tree would have appeared to be undignified behavior for a well-to-do person, Zacchaeus does what he can to see Jesus. Notice, too, that Zacchaeus is said to be eager to welcome Jesus into his own home. It has sometimes been asked whether verse 3 suggests that Zacchaeus is short of stature or whether Jesus is, but the word order of the Greek text surely suggests the former.

It is striking that there are no physical descriptions of Jesus’ size or appearance anywhere in the Gospels, but such was not always characteristic of ancient biographical and historical works, unlike their modern counterparts. While our culture stresses that “image is everything” and that we should “dress for success,” the Gospel writers were interested only in the content of Jesus’ character, not in his outward physical appearance.

In the ancient world, customs of hospitality and dining reflected in microcosm the larger values of the society. Whom one dined with, when and where, and what one ate on the occasion, all reflected the concerns about honor and maintenance of status hierarchies. In short, whom one ate with symbolized whom one accepted as friends or found acceptable as companions. In an honor-and-shame culture like
first-century Palestinian Judaism, there were some people with whom one simply did not eat. Such people were outcasts because of their behavior or their physical condition or their occupation or some combination of the three. In this story it is the first and third of these factors that causes Zacchaeus to be called a sinner.

It is a striking fact about Jesus’ ministry that he practiced open fellowship with any and all sorts of people, from the poor and oppressed to the well-to-do and oppressors, from the notable to the notorious, from the righteous to the sinners. Jesus did not care for a societal system that tried to separate him from the very people who most needed his presence and fellowship—the least, the last, and the lost.

This approach was not just a matter of rejecting a system of ritual purity that made the ill or unclean outcasts, but it also involved rejecting a kind of moralizing and scapegoating approach to society that set up clear distinctions and separation between “sinners” and holy ones, when in fact all had fallen short of God’s requirements.

The crucial verse in this whole story is verse 8. First of all, it should be noted that Zacchaeus’ words do not come after Jesus has shared the gospel with him or during or after a meal Jesus shared with him. Rather, they come while Zacchaeus is standing outdoors with Jesus and the crowd, and his words are in all likelihood to be seen as a rebuttal to what the crowd has grumbled about. They call Zacchaeus a sinner; Zacchaeus responds as follows, addressing his comments to Jesus: “Look, half of my possessions I give to the poor (the Greek text has a present-tense verb, not a future [will give] one), and if anyone is defrauded of anything, I give back (again a present tense not a future tense) fourfold.” In other words, there is nothing in this story to suggest that Zacchaeus is saying this in response to some conversion encounter with Jesus over dinner, nor is he making a confession of sin. He is the head tax collector—if he discovers anyone has been defrauded, he makes sure they are repaid fourfold (probably following the law found in Exod. 22:1). He is already acting in a way that makes him a good Israelite and undeserving of the label “notorious sinner” placed on him by the townsfolk.

What, then, are we to make of Jesus’ reply “Today salvation has come to this household, because he too is a son of Abraham”? What we see here is Jesus’ endorsement of Zacchaeus’s fairness, which reflects the kind of character one would expect of a true Israelite. He is one who is eager to see and welcome Jesus and is no doubt open to his proclamation of the inbreaking reign of God. By taking
Zacchaeus's side in this Jesus is once again depicted as the champion of the outcast and those falsely maligned. In other words, Jesus' actions here comport with his teaching in the parable of the Pharisee and tax collector found in Luke 18:9–14, where he sets up a tax collector as one who rightly responds to God. Salvation in this text will refer to Zacchaeus's deliverance from stereotypes that stigmatize and isolate him from fellowship, including table fellowship, with other Jews.

Verse 10, then, may be seen as a conclusion for the whole journey narrative (9:51–19:27), not the Zacchaeus story in particular. Luke 19:10 especially recapitulates the whole of chapter 15. Unlike some, Jesus does not condemn the lost or outcasts of society. Instead of pointing a finger, he stretches out a hand to lift them up and place them again into positive relationships with fellow Jews.

Bibliography


Church Perceptions of Power


Power, like happiness, is something persons have no trouble recognizing when they feel its influence but a great deal of trouble defining when they try to talk about it. Despite nearly a century of analysis, theorists have yet to construct a definition of power that is universally understood and accepted. Those who write about power usually begin by explaining which of several currently popular definitions they wish to use. Fortunately, there is a bit more agreement on what power does than on what it is. A number of well-accepted assumptions guide contemporary social analysts and have implications for how church leaders think about power. Two major ones are:

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1. Within any social institution, the distribution and use of power among members determines decisions about program priorities, the allocation of resources and the deployment of personnel. In a time when leaders in mainline churches are experiencing a failure of confidence in the validity of their historic program priorities, when funds seem to be shrinking and jobs seem uncertain, it should be no surprise that much is being said and written about power. Two underlying, if unspoken, questions mainline church folks need answer to are: How can we use the power we have more effectively? How do we reclaim some of the power and authority we seem to have lost?

2. A no institution exists in isolation from the culture within which it operates. We live in a time when traditional authority is being questioned in every arena. We are also inheritors of the cultural foment that began with the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s, life and work exemplify the merger of religious and political concerns about the relationships between the powerful and the powerless in U.S. society.

Many, if not most, contemporary critiques of the uses and abuses of power in the church reflect larger cultural concerns about the imbalance of power among segments of the population based on race, gender, or class. More recently writings are appearing challenging the imbalance of power between clergy and laity.

While these generalities about church writings on power are helpful, they do not solve the definition problem. This fuzziness accounts, at least in part, for my dilemma when asked to develop a coherent review of three new books on power recently published by Abingdon Press. The books are written from widely divergent perspectives on the life of the church, and each addresses a different aspect of power and its use.

In order to give this review of three disparate books coherency, I have chosen to ground my summary within a framework developed by Robert Wuthnow and elaborated by Jackson W. Carroll. This typology identifies three areas in which significant changes are taking place in the "symbolic markers and boundaries that define the religious leader's status and role, especially in relation to the legitimation, distribution and exercise of authority."

1. A redefinition of the "sacredly masculine" image of the ordained leader.
2. A breaking down of the markers that have separated clergy from laity through emphasis on the ministry of "the whole people of God."
3. A redefinition of the clergy's authority as interpreters of religious truth under the impact of “high” or “late” modernity.

After considering the format and content of each book, I shall return to the Wuthnow and Carroll framework and locate each author's work in relation to the significant changes within the church.

Robert Schnase's *Ambition in Ministry* focuses on the individual pastor and her or his personal response to the ways power is used in the profession of ministry. In *The Power of the Cross* Sally B. Purvis rejects a definition of power she finds operative in the church, power as control. She seeks to define the foundations for a truly Christian community in a feminist ethic that defines legitimate power as power of life, or power of the cross as she interprets it. Martha Ellen Stortz's *Pastor Power* defines useful power in three ways: power over, power within and power with. After establishing her framework she provides case studies of pastors using or misusing these different kinds of power in local church settings.

The most traditional of the three is Robert Schnase’s *Ambition and Ministry*. Schnase writes from his social location as the senior pastor of First United Methodist Church, McAllen, Texas. I doubt seriously that he meant to write an insider's book; however, with each chapter I read my conviction grew that this book was written primarily for Anglo male pastors. It focuses on the needs of pastors whose early socialization gives them reason to assume they should be able to reach the “top.” This image of pastor does not fit many white women or persons of color.

The book opens with a story about a pastor named Joe who dreams of serving a big-city church. Schnase seems to assume that the “normal” pastor, like Joe, is probably worried that he may be too ambitious. No consideration is given to the body of literature that suggests that the traditional socialization of women as “helpmates in the church” tends to make struggles with ambition a gender-specific struggle. Even today it is difficult for many women pastors to accept themselves or be accepted by others if they exhibit traits that might be considered ambitious. There is also no acknowledgement of the rage felt by many non-Anglo pastors that they will be either passed over or advanced as token representatives of their “group” rather than dealt with on their own merits.

Nevertheless, this practical little book offers many specific suggestions and may well be useful to individual local church pastors, particularly to white males. It may also serve as a good study book for
clergy cluster groups whose membership includes women and men
and is racially diverse. If such a group uses the “Questions for Further
Reflection” found at the end of each chapter, some of the questions
may evoke interesting dialogue. Think of the answers a diverse group
could give to the question, “Why is it so difficult to talk about
ambition within a clergy group?”

Schnase writes from a psychological/individualistic perspective as
opposed to an organizational perspective. Chapter 1 focuses on
ambivalence. Is it unchristian to be ambitious? Answer: not
necessarily. Good and bad examples of ambitious pastors are given.
Chapter 2 concentrates on individualism and competition. It includes
a number of useful observations such as “The search for self-validation,
when it finds its source and end in achievement, never rests secure”
(p. 25). Chapter 3, “Ardent Desires and Deadly Appetites,” is a
moralistic description of sloth, pride, greed and other characteristics
traditionally defined by the church as sins. Here they are labeled as
“ambition misdirected” (p. 42). Another fairly prosaic chapter
describes “Influence Peddlers and Mathematical Magicians.”

Occasionally passion and personal conviction enliven the text. In a
chapter called “Bodies and Bucks,” Schnase discusses the hazards of a
market-driven ministry. His commentary is delivered with an
emotional impact achievable only by a person who has “been there.”
He speaks of the stresses that plague persons socialized into the
traditional male role of domination and success. He writes as one who
has felt pain as he struggled with the moral implications of evaluating
ministry by the church growth standards.

In the final chapter Schnase writes as a practical theologian rather
than as a church psychologist, and here he is at his best. He offers his
most creative answer to the book’s initial question: Is it legitimate for
a Christian minister to be ambitious? I could not help wondering
whether material from Walter Brueggemann’s *Power, Providence
and Personality: Biblical Insight into Life and Ministry* might not have
strengthened this section. Brueggemann helps Christians recall the
ways in which those who went before, including Saul and David,
struggled with these same issues.

Without benefit of outside sources Schnase discusses his own
interpretation of grace. “We do not work to serve our greatest needs;
we work because our deepest needs are satisfied” (p. 108). At another
point he describes conflicts that arise between dimensions of the role
played by a person defined as pastor. “We have a life. We have a faith.
We have a calling as a pastor. Each individual must find ways to integrate these dimensions of role into the creation of a healthy whole person whose professional goals are informed by faith goals and balanced by life goals" (pp. 116-117).

To move from a discussion of Robert Schnase's book to a discussion of Sally B. Purvis's *The Power of the Cross* is like switching channels from "I Love Lucy" to "Murphy Brown." Both programs have, at one time or another, been widely accepted as cultural commentaries on the life of North American women. Other than that, they have almost nothing in common. The books by Schnase and Purvis have almost nothing in common either, except that they are both cultural commentaries on the use of power in the church. Schnase's view of the church is traditional, Purvis's view is radical.

This radicalism is both Purvis's strength and weakness. It is valuable when it cuts her free from tradition and allows her to think in fresh ways, to create an unconventional image of a Christian community. It is less valuable when, by divorcing herself from the traditional, she also divorces herself from the nuts and bolts of the institution we call the church and from the diverse group of persons who call themselves Christians and serve the church in professional roles. The good news is that she offers a new vision; the bad news is that she offers no practical guidelines about how to get from where we are to where she wants us to be. If her community is to exist, somebody will have to draw the architectural plans in greater detail.

In the first two chapters Purvis establishes two definitions of power and assigns absolute value to each. Power as control is bad. Power as life is good. Initially she discusses power as control and contends that it "cannot function as the basis for a Christian ethic of community without deep and violent self-contradiction" (p. 21). To develop her definition of power as life she draws heavily on the work of Carter Heyward and rejects the suggestion that an analysis of power should be purely cognitive. She relies on intuition and experience as well. She further contends that St. Paul and Carter Heyward "engaged in a similar enterprise: the task of reshaping Christian community around an understanding of power as the power of life. . . . For both power is relational, incarnational and generative of new forms of human connection and community." The power of the cross is understood to be the power of "a life-giving force stronger than violence and death imposed and supported by religious and political 'powers' " (pp. 48-49).
After establishing definitions and value judgements, she categorizes four dimensions of power: interpersonal, institutional, cultural and theological, and then describes how power of control or power of life can be exercised in each dimension. In my judgment Purvis overstates her case to the point of becoming dogmatic rather than analytic—a common problem for critics who feel deep personal anger over what they have experienced in the past. Many readers will be able to identify with her anger at the repression and abuse that occurs when power of control is used in various areas of life (which she calls "dimensions") such as families, churches, society. Furthermore, theological language is sometimes used to bolster domination and exploitation.

But, Purvis’s objections to abuse of power are so potent they carry her argument to extremes. Her suggestion that human interactions should be free of structured management and control seems forced and even inaccurate to her own understandings. For example, as an illustration of power well used she suggests the image of a loving parent, spontaneous and nurturing. Her example of parenthood is a mother who dissolves into laughter when her best attempts to organize the play of four-year-olds fails. The example fits her thesis well; play should be spontaneous, uncontrolled, and joyful. However there is more to parenting than play. It may be difficult for those of us who have parented babies, toddlers, and adolescents to believe that one can parent responsibly without providing structure and boundaries. Nurture involves protection, and protection is “power over” whether we want to call it that or not.

To her credit she is not naive about what she is advocating and anticipates criticism of her absolutistic stand. She suggests that Christians, beginning with Paul, understood that some would believe it was folly to live by the power of the cross.

What is the understanding of power against which the power of the cross would appear to be folly? It is, of course, a conception of power as control, of force, of efficacy over others. The cross represented for Paul and represents for us utter lack of control, the inversion of force, a deep and astounding failure to achieve one's own ends, if we understand success to be characterized by victory even at the price of violence. (p. 74)
Purvis grants that living one's life in the way she advocates requires changes in the way human beings are socialized and that most of us living today will need to be resocialized to live in a community based on the power of the cross. Finally, she admits that none of the Christian communities founded in Paul's time were ever quite able to do what she is advocating. Yet she remains convinced this is the essential stance for a truly Christian community: "We join many early Christians in remaining lost, confused, somehow disappointed by the gospel if what they and we want from it is better control, more power to manipulate ourselves, each other, and God" (p. 77).

Not until the last chapter does Purvis address the classic feminist criticisms of the cross as a symbol of faith that should be rejected because it has for so long been used to glorify suffering. For Purvis, the meaning of the cross is neither violence nor suffering. "Fundamentally the cross represents the astonishing reality that God's power is not controlling. . . . Just as the cross is not a violent symbol, so also it is not a passive one. . . . It shows us a God who will not let violence win because God does not engage in that particular contest."

She contends that the cross neither justifies nor denies suffering. "Suffering is a by-product of love. That is a fact, a terrible, horrible, never justifiable fact, but a fact nonetheless" (p. 88). She concludes that we must accept some facts about human behavior as terrible without trying to make them into something we wish they could be. She is right that it is unrealistic to assume we live in a world free of suffering. But this is a strange statement to make at the end of a book that tends to ignore other realities of human behavior.

How exciting it would be to hear Purvis debate Martha Stortz, the other feminist author whose work is reviewed here. Stortz, who also defines herself as a feminist, introduces her book by setting forth some foundational assumptions. One of them is that "power over" or power as control is a legitimate form of power that can be used for good as well as for evil. "I am concerned with the . . . popular tendency to dismiss all discussion of 'power over' as oppressive and domineering."

A few sentences later she contends that "an initial assumption among feminists that all discussion of power was patriarchal has dissipated, and provocative work currently being done on power by feminist authors of various disciplines has been most formative in this work."

Stortz begins by describing a scene in an all-night coffee shop where "a gentrified neighborhood . . . meets the more serious urban landscape of the city." The clientele is racially and economically
mixed. Stortz is drinking coffee with her co-teacher in a seminary class that is supposed to integrate academic learning and real world pastoral ministry. She is the academic on the team; her co-teacher is a black male clergyperson. Both of them have experienced power primarily as domination and oppression. "Now that we each had power, we were loathe to replicate those past histories for the students in our group, but [were] absolutely clueless about any alternatives" (p. 8).

The contrast between Purvis's approach and Stortz's approach is striking in a number of ways. They work from different theological perspectives and different value assumptions about power. Purvis is interested in creating a new social order for the Christian community. Stortz is interested in how to work effectively within the church community we have here and now. However, Stortz says, her work is not a recipe book on ways to use power in churches. "Probably this book is for those who love to eat rather than those who love to cook (though) those who love to cook may be tempted to use it as a recipe book . . . these observations are not intended to be so directive" (p. 9).

After laying out her basic assumptions and definitions of power, Stortz devotes most of her text to three case studies and commentary about them. In part the flexibility and interactive nature of her work flow from her adoption of "Michel Foucault's understanding of power as something that 'circulates' and that people and institutions simultaneously both exercise and are affected by." Her intent is "to examine three ways that power circulates in churches." She defines the three ways as the circulation of power over, power within and power with (pp. 9-10) Her theoretical perspective on power makes it possible for her to consider the leadership roles of laity as well as the leadership roles of clergy. Her primary method of presentation is case study and commentary with a chapter devoted to each type of power circulation.

The book is difficult to review because the text is so rich. Her introductory chapter on definitions and characteristics of power is one of the most complete I have encountered. Initially she uses a typology of power as commodity, capacity, and relationship. She illustrates each characteristic and shows how it is exemplified in local parish life. For example, power as a commodity is something external to the individual that can be accumulated like money and land and persons who possess it often wield significant influence.

In her next analytic scheme she describes the powers of leadership and suggests the pastor or congregational leader has power to do three tasks:
1. Define a situation.
2. Name those involved in it.
3. Delineate space.

Since Stortz writes as a careful scholar, I assume this typology is her own. At first I found the delineation of space a curious matter on which to place such importance. However, as I read the case studies about local parish life I realized that she is absolutely right.

The third and final analytic scheme Stortz discusses in her introduction is a description of power that exercises itself on a leader.

1. Authority: the power of legitimation and legitimating institutions.
2. Community: the power of those who are being led.

Here Stortz displays a keen understanding of the reciprocal nature of power in leadership. Her comments about authority are astute. Using ordination as her example she describes the types of promises that are made during this ritual. Some are made between the person and to the office to which the person is called. Some are made between the person and the community to be served. Some are made between the person and God. “Promise making creates the fragile tendrils of connection that hold communities together—often in spite of themselves. Hannah Arendt reminds us that promise making always stands firmly against a human tendency toward unpredictability” (p. 34). Moving from a discussion of authority to a discussion of community, Stortz contends that “there is no power outside community; there is only tyranny. Power is not an individual possession, but a group phenomenon” (p. 36).

This comprehensive introduction prepares the reader to make the most of the three case studies and anticipate major themes within the commentary. One case study involves a seminary student who is dismissed from his job as choir director when he introduces contemporary music for the service. The next tells the story of two women, one a pillar of the church and the other a newly appointed clergyperson. The final study describes the way a seminary student revitalized a weekday morning prayer group only to visit a year later and find the group had fallen back into its old rut. In her commentary on the first case, Stortz discusses power over as sovereign, parental, and bureaucratic and weaves theory into her analysis of the relationship between the student and the senior pastor, the student and the congregation.

The commentary on the power dynamic between the laywoman and the new woman pastor is another story without winners and losers,
though both women are frustrated. The example gives Stortz a chance to discuss various dimensions of charismatic leadership, which both women possess, and authority, which the pastor possesses in greater degree than the laywoman. The story about the student whose program blossomed and faded is the most complicated and subtle of the three. Here Stortz illustrates "how difficult shared power is to choreograph" (p. 107). Like many theorists she likens power to friendship and points out that friends are persons we choose to associate with, persons with whom we have something in common. Then she raises a difficult question for those of us who want to rely on this kind of power in local church settings: Will "power with" work among persons who are not friends? As she points out, we choose our friends but not those sitting next to us in the church pew.

These case studies of power at work in local churches may leave the reader ambivalent. One comes away wiser in understanding the ways power circulates in churches. One also comes away knowing that there is no neat list of rules or theoretical constructs that can be applied in order to "make power work right." Church life, along with all the rest of life, is messy and unpredictable. As Stortz reminds us at the end, there is always a divine dynamic at work in any encounter; furthermore, questions about power have no answers without specific situations.

Now that we have looked at the individual books, let us return to the Wuthnow list of changes in the church and consider all three books in light of those changes. The contrast between Schnase and the feminist books reminds us that changes in the masculine image of the ordained leader do not happen to everyone in the same way or at the same rate. The contrast between the images of leader provided by Purvis and Stortz reminds us that the changes taking place will not create homogeneity of definition.

Feminists may be distressed that Schnase can publish a book in 1993 that does not seem to challenge the "sacredly masculine" image of the ordained leaders. Yet the book reminds us that there is value in understanding a traditional perspective which is well articulated. It also reminds us that a large part of the church still accepts the image of ministry portrayed in the book, an image of the pastor as a man who exercises "power over" as sovereign, parent, and bureaucratic administrator.

The good news for feminists is that Purvis, too, can be accepted in 1993 and that her challenge to the sacredly masculine is being taken seriously. Her work speaks as well to Wuthnow's other two changes.
Surely her definition of power and her vision of community break down barriers between clergy and laity as she speaks to the “whole people of God.” Her scholarship is an example of the “high” or “late” modernity which the framework identifies as a significant change for the contemporary church.

Stortz’s work, like Purvis’s, addresses all three changes but in very different ways. For the number of persons who are currently interested in developing a new paradigm for church life Stortz offers a book that will help local church leadership move into the future. Her work may become as popular as John Harris’s Stress, Power and Ministry,12 which has been reprinted during seven different years. Both books are practical, address situations in which local church clergy find themselves, and deal with the interplay between laity and clergy. The existence of three such diverse perspectives each of which accurately represents contemporary thinking about power in the church suggests that Wuthnow and Carroll are right. Significant changes are taking place in the boundaries that define the religious leader’s status and role, especially in relation to the legitimation, distribution, and exercise of authority.

Notes


2. Feminist commentators on power are so numerous that it is difficult to choose which ones to mention. This abbreviated list only hints at the current body of literature and the variety of issues it addresses. Rebecca Chopp, The Power to Speak: Feminism, Language and God (New York: Crossroad, 1989); Carter Heyward, Touching Our Strength: The Erotic as Power and the Love of God (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989); Nel Noddings, Women and Evil (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989); Letty M. Rusell, Growth in Partnership (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981).


4. See Cecelia Hahn, Growing in Authority: Relinquishing Control (Washington, D.C.: Alban Institute, 1994); Stanley Menking and Barbara Wendland, God’s Partners...


10. The quotation is found on page 10. Her note (p. 131) on the statement cites almost a dozen authors beginning with Hannah Arendt in 1958 and moving through the works of authors such as Starhawk, Adrienne Rich, Haunani-Kay Trask, Mariana Valverde, and ending with Anna Case-Winters’s work.


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