Children and the Poor
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Quarterly Review

A Journal of Theological Resources for Ministry

Volume 17, Number 4

QR

A Publication of The United Methodist Publishing House
and the United Methodist Board of Higher Education and Ministry
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Having recently read Joan Brady’s harrowing novel, *Theory of War*, I was puzzled at first to discover that the eminent child psychiatrist Robert Coles (in a recent issue of *Lingua Franca*) considered it the best book he’d read on the family in several years. Lots of interesting sociological studies on this topic have been written lately, so his choice of a novel was the first twist. To explain his choice, he commented that storytelling helps you get the feel for family life and its rhythms, and that is undoubtedly true. But what a story this is! It is based on historical fact: in 1865 a tobacco farmer in Kansas paid $15 for a child, the author’s grandfather, “Jonathan” was the son of a poor white Confederate soldier who could not afford to keep him. So he sold him. Once the money changed hands, the father left and the boy became a commodity, no different from the livestock or the farmer equipment. The townspeople referred to him as the “boughten boy” and pitied him. Life on the farm was hard for everyone but merciless for Jonathan. After twelve years he escaped on a train headed west for Denver. By then the memory of being nothing and nobody had turned him into a simmering pot of rage and frenzied activity. He took up a number of occupations (including a stint as a Methodist circuit rider). He married and had four children. But the family could not protect itself from their father’s inner demons. Brady saw this story as the touchstone for her family’s numerous griefs, which seemed to move with them from one generation to the next.

It occurs to me now that Coles, renowned for his work with disadvantaged children, might also have responded to Brady’s novel because it puts the desperate suffering of one child at the center of a family’s inner spirit. *Theory of War*, like the more relentless storytelling of Frank McCourt in *Angela’s Ashes*, presents childhood as a battleground which only the courageous and the fortunate survive.
Brady’s additional insight is that even the bravest and the luckiest do not emerge unscathed, and their families bear the lasting consequences.

We can see the same dynamic at work in Ted Jennings’s article, “Children and the Poor,” which was an address to the United Methodist Council of Bishops in connection with their Children and Poverty Initiative. In joining the plight of children to that of the poor in the Christian tradition, Jennings rereads the Christian story with the children in the middle of it, rather than off to one side as a separate issue. In fact, it is the orphan, the unclaimed child, who is the touchstone for our obedience to God’s most fundamental demand for justice and love of neighbor—the effects of which, once again, will be passed on from generation to generation.

And how do things stand with our church family? In reporting on the theological assumptions of the Confessing Movement, Rebekah Miles takes on a challenging descriptive task: to represent fairly the inner dynamics of a young and vital movement that has set itself at odds with status quo United Methodism, whether liberal, complacent, or merely confused. Miles’s goal is not to move us to see one side or the other as more justified, although her analysis falls chiefly on the Confessing Movement. Instead, it is to explore the avenues, alleyways, and dead ends that lead us toward what she calls “Christian conference.” Wesley is offered as an authority in this context, not as the trump card in debate, but as the model for how to be a Christian in tough pastoral situations in order to, metaphorically speaking, keep the family together for mutual support and challenge. May Christian conference ever triumph over “Mad Methodist disease”!

The two following articles take us to another mode of expressing the essence of our faith: the sacraments, our active participation in the reality of God’s presence on earth. Hoyt Hickman’s explication of the Lord’s Supper ritual can be likened to a short course in music education: you don’t need the theory to make the experience real, but the experience is so much richer when your head is working together with your heart. Knowledge of the basic pattern of the Eucharist is fundamental, as well as a sense of the profoundly scriptural nature of the language. This article would make a great introduction to the Lord’s Supper in a local church study group (or an ace up the sleeve in a pastor’s confirmation class). Then, I would recommend a slow, careful read of Joerg Rieger’s article on Wesley and the sacraments to get an idea of how the sacraments fit into a larger, distinctively Wesleyan picture of Christian vocation in the world. He makes a fine, closely reasoned case for the ultimate joining of forces between
"orthodox" and "liberal" theological voices in the church. His rationale? Merely this: that if orthodox and liberal do not communicate, both will end up leaving the modern self, with its moods and its appetites, unexamined and completely in charge. All we have to do is look back at the history of the twentieth century to see that this is something we cannot afford.

Your Christmas essay this year comes from the pen of Andrew Reichert, who links cosmos and conservation in a reflection on the love of God's creation. There is a great theme being developed here: how the world viewed from a distance can put us directly in touch with the inner mysteries of change, hope, and the need for prayer. That is a gift in itself. But I have to confess it was the opening scene that got me—the scratchy, impossibly remote voice from an astronaut in Apollo 8, a person of science and the world of the precise, yet one who at that moment was in the grip of awe and wonder, and who paused to praise his creator with the words of Genesis 1. (It reminded me of the equally powerful use of scripture at the memorial service for the Challenger crew a little more than a decade ago: "God is our refuge and strength/a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change...")

Finally, we have a delightful study of lections from the Hebrew Bible by Rebecca Abts Wright. As she notes, the spirit of Marcion is alive and well in the church. Lots of Christians have no idea of the vitality and spiritual force of these ancient texts, and would rather have the stories tidied up and taught to children only. But Wright both carefully explores the nuances of Hebrew and brings sharp pastoral sensibilities to these passages. The result is something that could make you dig out your old Hebrew grammar and get to work... or at least plant the seed of interest in the original. Happily, there is a shortcut, at least for the Pentateuch: Everett Fox's new translation, "The Torah" (Schocken, 1996). Let us hope he is hard at work on the prophets.

I wish you a Merry Christmas, with the prayer that we will commit ourselves to love, protect, and guide all the children in our community. And that we will continue to offer ourselves, adopted children that we are, to God.

Sharon Hels
Children and the Poor: Toward the Spiritual Renewal of the United Methodist Church

Children and the Poor: Toward the Spiritual Renewal of the United Methodist Church," which the Council of Bishops has adopted to undergird the partnership with children and the poor, reminds the church of the urgency of this theme by recalling the plight of the poor and of children in the world today. On an unprecedented scale the idols of this world demand human sacrifice: the holocaust of children and the impoverished. Yet this sacrifice is not only an abomination to God but is within the power of the prosperous of the world to abolish. And you are issuing to the church a trumpet call to be transformed, to be the faithful and unwavering witness to the way of God in the world, even when this means the transformation of all that we are and do as a church.

This work is informed by the voices of those who labor in partnership with the children and the poor, telling us what is possible and what is needed. It is clear that there is much to do, and much that

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we are being called to do, and much that the spirit of God is
empowering us to do.

But often when we focus our attention upon the issues of material
impoverishment we will hear a protest from those who say that we
have forgotten the issues of spiritual poverty. They speak as if material
and spiritual poverty were completely different and unrelated themes.
We, too, often act as if our concern for the humiliated and violated of
the earth were something alongside of or even in competition with our
commitment to the God of the Bible, to the One who comes to us in
Christ Jesus to announce and enact the in-breaking of the divine reign
of justice and generosity and joy.

It is as if we could speak of our commitment to this God without
speaking of our relationship to the neighbor in need; as if we could
speak of the forces that impoverish people materially without
speaking of our relationship to the God of the prophets and the
apostles; as if there could ever be an authentic spirituality which was
not an imitation of the God who takes the side of the violated and
humiliated, the impoverished and marginalized.

Because this misunderstanding is so widespread in the church, I
want to spend some time addressing the biblical connection between
concern for the impoverished and vulnerable and concern for the
spiritual poverty of our own day and world.

In other contexts I have emphasized the importance of a commitment
to the poor for our Wesleyan heritage. I have tried to show that, for
Wesley, the partnership with the poor and the vulnerable was not a
peripheral matter but the heart of the revival of true religion that he
sought to foster and to direct among the people called Methodist.

But attention to the Bible, which Wesley held to be the basis of his
own theology and practice, may help to clarify how Wesley could
suppose that any religious movement—however fervently evangelical,
however meticulously organized—that lacked this commitment to and
solidarity with the impoverished and vulnerable had the form, but
certainly not the spiritual power, of true religion.

Imitators of God

At stake in our concern for the children and the poor is not simply one
or another aspect of social outreach, an optional program or emphasis,
a quadrennial preoccupation perhaps, or missional priority. At stake
here is the authenticity of our faith, the nature of the God whom we worship, the very truth of the gospel.

In the letter to the church in Ephesus the writer, whom many suppose to be Paul, exhorts the congregation as follows:

*Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.* (5:1-2)

To imitate God. To love as Christ loved us. That is the astonishing call and claim of the apostle.

Too often our theology becomes dry and sterile because we do not see the connection between our reflection on the nature of God or our reflection upon the person and nature of Christ and the imperatives of the gospel. From the beginning to the end of his ministry John Wesley called for the full restoration of the image and likeness of God, that is, for the people called Methodist to be the reflection and representatives of the God who is disclosed in the words of the Bible and in the word made flesh in Jesus of Nazareth.

To be imitators of God—who is that possible? The apostle gives us the decisive clue: it is to be like beloved children, like children who are loved.

When I was just entering my teens, my parents were divorced. My littlest brother was only one-year-old. Somehow despite my own confusion and bewilderment I was able to show him the love he needed, and as he grew he tried in a number of ways to imitate me. Later, when I would come home from college, there would be a little six-year-old hanging around who spoke in an astonishingly deep voice. You’d hear him outside playing with his friends but speaking with a voice that could not possibly come from one so young: “Hey, you guys, let’s play ball.” It came naturally, as it does to all kids: to imitate those whose love we cherish, whether in voice or putting on boots ten sizes too large. Children imitate the ones they love, the ones who have loved them.

For the writer of Ephesians, that is what the life of faith is said to be: we are to be like little kids, imitating the one who loves us, mimicking in our own way the astonishing love that has found us and befriended us and adopted us.

Is our life an imitation of God?

Or perhaps it would be better to ask, Which God does our life imitate? Is it a God who is an arbitrary despot who makes use of the
world as fodder for the sake of ambition? Is it a God who is far away and deaf to the suffering of the world? Is it God who is only self-preoccupied with ideas of divine perfection and beatitude, and for whom everything else is but a dream? Is it a God who threatens and excludes; is it an abusive God?

What does the way we live, in church and out, say about the nature of God? Which God do we imitate? Which God do we truly worship with our lives as well as our tongues? To which God are we loyal in our living every day among the violated and humiliated of the earth?

The question is whether our spirituality drives us further away from the God of the Bible or draws us nearer to the One who has drawn near to us in Christ Jesus. For this God is the God who stands with the violated and humiliated of the earth, with the impoverished and marginalized.

Exodus

So let us remind ourselves that the God whom we seek to honor and praise, to reflect and represent is precisely the God who hears the cry of the impoverished and violated.

Although there are many passages of scripture that illumine for us the character of the God we worship, perhaps the most definitive is one from the third chapter of Exodus. This text is central for understanding the nature of the God we worship because in it we have the disclosure of the divine name: YHWH, which means not only “I am who I am” but “I will be who I will be,” and “I will be the one who is.” God’s very being, God’s innermost essence, is disclosed in the name which is given to Moses. So near does this approach the very essence of the holy God that Israel adopted the custom of never pronouncing this name, for it was felt to be an encroachment upon the holiness of God—the pure fire at the center of the heart of the universe.

YHWH: I am who I am; I am who is with you; the very hidden being of God. Disclosed here to Moses upon the mountain where the flame at the heart of the universe breaks forth into speaking. Yet what is the meaning of this disclosure? Of this revelation of the heart and being of the Holy One?

We are left in no doubt. It is precisely that this One whose name is disclosed here is the One who has heard the cry of the slaves in Egypt.
God is moved to disclose Godself here because God has heard the cry of an afflicted people.

I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings. (3:7)

The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. (3:9)

Notice what is disclosed concerning the Holy One. God has seen their misery, has heard their cry, indeed knows their suffering.

It is because God has heard the cry of the afflicted and oppressed that God now reveals Godself to Moses, now discloses the very heart of the divine being. God is a God who takes note of human misery. God is a God who knows intimately and deeply the suffering of the violated and humiliated. God is the God who hears and who heeds the cry of those who suffer injustice, who groan under the burden of Pharaoh’s imperial ambitions.

God is disclosed then not as one who sides with the powerful and the affluent, not with the prestigious and the prosperous, God does not attend to the aspirations of those who seek wealth and power, dominion and honor. The God that Moses meets beside the flaming bush is the God who hears the cry of the suffering and the dispossessed, of the impoverished who pay the price in sweat and blood for the prosperity and the power of others.

This is astonishing news for those who groan under the burden of others’ ambitions. For certainly it is always true that those who acquire power and prosperity claim that they are blessed by God, that God is on their side, and that God favors them. By display of impressive temples and rituals they reassure themselves that God is on their side and tell the poor that they are poor because God does not favor them, that the poor must be content with their lot, accept their misery; for they grumble and complain in rebellion not only against the economic and political order of the world but also against the divine order and mandate, the divine will and law.

But now we hear that God is on the side of those who cry out against their affliction, that God hears their cries, that God knows their suffering—and, moreover, that God heeds it. God determines to set the slave and prisoner free, to set at naught the ambitions of Pharaoh and to give wholeness and healing to the violated and humiliated of
I have given heed to you and to what has been done to you in Egypt. I declare that I will bring you up out of the misery of Egypt ... a land flowing with milk and honey. (3:16-17)

The being of God is to be disclosed in the action of God—the action that delivers those who cry out from the bondage of their taskmaster and that establishes them in a land where wholeness flows from justice. This is why God discloses Godself: in order to accomplish the divine aim and goal; and that aim and goal is the rescue, the liberation, the redemption of the impoverished, the violated, and the abused.

The God we worship is at heart and center the God who hears and heeds the cry of the poor. Certainly this is good news for those who still toil in the slaveocracy of Pharaoh's Egypt as it was many centuries later for those who toiled in the slaveocracy of the American colonies and later of the United States.

(Not seventy yards from where I am standing are the slave quarters of this old plantation. They are "gussied up" now, like garden cottages. But who can imagine the cries of affliction that rose from this place? And who heard those cries? Not the Methodist Church. When this plantation was purchased as a retreat center for Methodists, those who worked here were subjected to the humiliations and violations of Jim Crow laws. Who heard their cries of affliction? Not the Methodist Church. Can it be, that here in this place God is giving the people called Methodist one more chance?)

We know that the Hebrew people were indeed delivered from their bondage and affliction as immigrant laborers at the bottom of Pharaoh's economic and social pyramid. The divine self-disclosure effected the divine will. The cry of the poor was answered.

The Law

But what about when the slaves are free? Are they now simply the liberated people, free to enjoy their liberty in any way that seems good to them? Or does liberation also entail commitment and responsibility?

When the people thus delivered were themselves confronted with the divine will in the law and the prophets, they were reminded again
and again that the One who delivered them from affliction demanded that they live out compassion toward all who were most vulnerable: the widow, the orphan, the immigrant laborer. If they were to honor this God, it could be only by imitating this God’s compassion for the poor and the vulnerable.

What has Moses to say to the people when they have escaped the clutches of Pharaoh?

_You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. You shall not abuse any widow or orphan. If you do abuse them, when they cry out to me, I will surely heed their cry; my wrath will burn, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children orphans._ (Exod. 22:21-24)

The one who heard the cry of the vulnerable and the violated in Egypt hears the same cry among the people who have been set free. And the voice of the divine will is as implacable to the chosen people as it had been to Pharaoh. How is it possible that those who were themselves immigrants should turn their backs upon new immigrants? How is it possible that those who once were violated should themselves be heedless of the cries of the violated in their midst?

Again and again the divine voice rumbles through the history of the chosen people:

_So now, O Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you? Only to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments of the Lord your God and his decrees that I am commanding you today, for your own well-being. Although heaven and the heaven of heavens belong to the Lord your God, the earth with all that is in it, yet the Lord set his heart in love on your ancestors alone and chose you, their descendants after them, out of all the peoples, as it is today. Circumcise, then, the foreskin of your heart, and do not be stubborn any longer. For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, ... who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land._
of Egypt. You shall fear the Lord your God; him alone you shall worship; to him you shall hold fast, and by his name you shall swear. (Deut. 10:12-20)

This passage first recalls the gracious election by which YHWH has chosen this people to be God's own people. The basis of all that is said is divine grace, the unmerited generosity and love of God: "The Lord set his heart in love on your ancestors alone and chose you, their descendants after them, out of all the peoples." It is precisely this gracious love which expresses the sovereign will not just of any God but precisely of this God who has heard the cry of the violated and enslaved immigrant laborers of Pharaoh's empire.

Thus to truly belong to this God is "to walk in all his ways . . . and to keep the commandments of the Lord your God." It is to bear the mark not only of outward circumcision but of a consecrated heart. And here already sounds the promise of a "circumcision of the heart." This is a promise that Paul will extend even to the Gentiles, who are called into loyalty to this same God through the life and death and resurrection of Jesus, his son, our Lord.

Moreover, to belong to this God is to cleave to the one who "executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the stranger . . ." Again God is defined as the One who executes justice for the widow, orphan, and stranger. God is not defined in terms of abstract holiness, or omnipotence, or omniscience but rather is defined by this relation to the vulnerable. In the Bible it is a question of the holiness, justice, mercy, power, and so forth of precisely this God, the one who defends the vulnerable. Any other god is an idol, and this includes the God of the philosophers and of the theologians and of the church.

Again and again Israel was to forget that its election depended on this covenant, whereby those who had themselves been delivered from violence and violation are now summoned to be the defenders of the vulnerable—of impoverished women and children and of immigrant workers and refugees, of migrant farm workers and day laborers. It was always possible to forget that the worship of YHWH was not the worship of an anonymous supreme being or of a petty oriental despot who could be cajoled with solemn ceremony. For this reason the same God who spoke through the law of Moses speaks continually to the people of Israel through the prophets.

Thus when Israel itself became prosperous and powerful the prophets thundered from the heart of the divine being: I don't want
your worship in temple and ritual—I want justice for the poor, the oppressed and needy. In the very first oracle of Isaiah we hear:

When you come to appear before me, who asked this from your hand? Trample my courts no more; bringing offerings is futile; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and sabbath and calling of convocation—I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity. Your new moons and appointed festivals my soul hates; they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them. When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow. (1:12-17)

In common with all the eighth-century prophets (Amos, Hosea, and Micah), Isaiah warns the people of God that YHWH is not interested in the religious pieties and practices of an unjust people: religious observance, however fervent, cannot substitute for justice. Thus:

remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good,
sseek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.

Nor was Isaiah content to stick to general principles; he spoke the truth to power:

Your princes are rebels and companions of thieves. Everyone loves a bribe and runs after gifts. They do not defend the orphan, and the widow's cause does not come before them. (1:23)

Note that the princes are the political leaders who have allied themselves with wealth and power. As friends of the prosperous they are in Old Testament terms "companions of thieves." As such they are
oblivious to the needs of the poor women and children. Because of that, they are rebels, that is, rebels against God, the true king. For the prince must imitate the one who has true and legitimate authority. And this legitimate authority is defined in terms of commitment to the cause of widows, orphans, the poor.

Ah, you who make iniquitous decrees, who write oppressive statutes, to turn aside the needy from justice and to rob the poor of my people of their right, that widows may be your spoil, and that you may make the orphans your prey! What will you do on the day of punishment? ... For all this his anger has not turned away. (10:1-4)

The legislative process (decrees, statutes) favors the prosperous and therefore injures poor women and children. We don’t have to go far today to find confirmation of the alliance between political power and economic privilege. But Isaiah knows that this is truly godless politics, no matter how it dresses itself in the robes of piety.

This same theme is echoed in the prophets of the sixth century. Let me give you an illustration from Jeremiah:

[Scoundrels among my people] have grown fat and sleek. They know no limits in deeds of wickedness; they do not judge the cause of the orphan, to make it prosper, and they do not defend the rights of the needy. Shall I not punish them for these things? says the Lord. (5:28-29)

Thus says the Lord: Act with justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor anyone who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the alien, the orphan, and the widow. ... (22:3)

Whether it be the prophets of the eighth or the sixth or even the fifth century, the people of God were warned that the compassionate heart of God was a consuming fire; that those who turn a deaf ear to the cry of the impoverished turn a deaf ear to God; and that the power and prosperity of Israel was forfeit if they did not give heed to the suffering of those who were violated and humiliated and afflicted.
The Praise of God

Now this word of warning from the prophets addressed to those with power and privilege often has an ominous and threatening character, for it is the word of the God who stands with the vulnerable and the violated. It is no less severe addressed to the powerful of Israel than it is when addressed to the powerful of Egypt. But the psalms of Israel testify to the fact that this God was also the object of rejoicing and praise. The divine love, which kindles into wrath when the vulnerable are violated or their plight is ignored, is still the divine love which awakens joyous praise. Hear just two of the psalms that recall God's gracious love for the vulnerable:

Sing to God, sing praises to his name; lift up a song to him who rides upon the clouds—his name is the LORD—be exultant before him.

Father of orphans and protector of widows is God in his holy habitation. God gives the desolate a home to live in; he leads out the prisoners to prosperity, but the rebellious live in a parched land. (Ps. 68:4-6)

Again the essential defining character of the God of the Bible, whereby this God is distinguished from other gods, is precisely this God's connection to the vulnerable, to the poor, to orphans.

Praise the Lord!
Praise the Lord, O my soul!
I will praise the Lord as long as I live; I will sing praises to my God all my life long.
Do not put your trust in princes, in mortals, in whom there is no help.
When their breath departs, they return to the earth; on that day their plans perish.
Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord their God, who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them; who keeps faith forever; who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry.
The Lord sets the prisoners free; the Lord opens the eyes of the blind.
The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down; the Lord loves the righteous.
The Lord watches over the strangers; he upholds the orphan and the widow, but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.

The Lord will reign forever, your God, O Zion, for all generations.
Praise the Lord! (Psalm 146)

Can we join in this hymn of praise? Is it good news for us that God is father of orphans, defender of widows, lover of immigrants, champion of the impoverished? For we are none of these. Yet it may be that we may become their friends and companions and, therefore, those who rejoice in the steadfast love of this God for all who are violated and humiliated.

The Hebrew Bible is traditionally divided into three parts: the Law, the Prophets and the Writings, especially the psalms. From each of these we have heard testimony that the God of the Bible is utterly committed to the welfare of the impoverished and marginalized and that this commitment takes the concrete form of defending impoverished women and children and immigrants.

Jesus

And do we suppose that the one who is the Abba of Jesus is some other God than the one who speaks through the Law and the Prophets and is praised in the psalms?

For in the fullness of time God sent forth from God's own heart the only Son both to announce and to enact the divine will and way. The word of God spoken of old becomes flesh and dwells among us.

Recall how his mother, the fierce peasant girl of Galilee, rejoiced in the tidings of his birth:

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.

He has helped his servant Israel in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever. (Luke 1:52-55)

The One who sided with the afflicted and the violated does so again
in person and in flesh. For he is born as one of the homeless in a strange town, and he will spend his life as one who has nowhere to lay his head.

He will be adopted by the kindness of Joseph, who refuses to send away the pregnant teenage girl but takes her in, though the child she carries is not his own, and gives the boy his name and protection.

In his childhood Jesus becomes an alien and a refugee, fleeing the violence of his homeland as his ancestors had so many centuries ago and as so many of the world’s children do today. And perhaps also he suffered the heartlessness of the prosperous as aliens even in this wealthy land do today—because the church that calls itself by his name is silent in the face of draconian legislation that seeks to punish immigrants for the anxiety of the affluent, that makes children pay the price of their parent’s misery.

If I wish to be loyal to the gospel of Jesus Christ, then I cannot invent another, a different, gospel for myself but I must attend carefully to this strange word—a word I would not have invented or dreamed up to fit my own imaginary or real needs but a word that comes from God through God’s son, Jesus Christ, a word that is good news to the poor.

Jesus himself makes this very clear. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus’ inaugural sermon sets forth his platform in clear and unmistakable terms. Recall the words that Jesus reads from the prophet Isaiah:

*The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.*

(Luke 4:18-19)

And he adds: “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” That this is Jesus’ own program of action, his platform of mission and ministry, is made clear by the next few chapters of Luke’s narrative; so that when the disciples of John come to him in 7:18 to ask whether he is the long-awaited One who will inaugurate the reign and rule of God, he says to them:

*Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news*

CHILDREN AND THE POOR
brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me. (7:22-23)

All that Jesus has said and done, then, falls within the brackets of “good news to the poor.” It is this which he has been commissioned to announce. It is this which his mission seeks to accomplish. Indeed, if we are attentive to the mission and ministry of Jesus, we will see that the phrase good news to the poor characterizes all that he says and does.

For it is the way of the God he calls “Abba” to take always the side of the poor and wretched. In Egypt this God hears the cry of the slaves of Pharaoh, not the prayers of Pharaoh’s priests. It is the humiliated and despised whose cry God hears, the violated rather than the secure or the powerful.

This same God has thundered through the voice of the prophets who condemn the prosperous and the powerful for turning away from the cry of the poor. This is the God who rejects the worship of the rich and calls instead for justice to the poor, the widow, the orphan, the immigrant laborer. Should it be astonishing, then, that when God comes to take up flesh among us it is not as one of the powerful or influential, but as one who is born on the road and who has no place to lay his head?

For the most part his ministry is not near the centers of power and influence but among the peasants and the unemployed and poor laborers of the towns and villages of Galilee. Wherever Jesus goes he attracts a crowd of the poor and the despised who bear his words gladly. He not only speaks to them but he also treats their afflictions of mind and body. For the coming of God’s reign means that all is made whole again.

Jesus and Children

We see this as well in his commitment to the abandoned children of the villages and towns of Galilee, nobody’s children, children of the street.

People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, “Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to
such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.” And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them. (Mark 10:13-16)

The coming of the reign of God is here identified with the needs of children. It is for them that the reign of justice and generosity and joy is especially directed.

The rage of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark is directed against his own followers, who have concluded that the reign of God is for adults and who therefore seek to separate the children from Jesus. Jesus will have none of this. Again we are told that the reign of God especially concerns these most vulnerable yet most hopeful of human beings.

Today we hear a good bit of talk about children both in the church and in the public arena, and this is good. But both in our churches and in politics there is often a fatal confusion about which children have priority. Often what we have in mind are simply our own children, the children of our own family or of families like ours, our own church family or church families like ours, our neighborhood or neighborhoods like ours. Even here there is much that can and should be improved and altered, so that we are not governed by an insatiable appetite for our own welfare but take into account that of those who as yet have no voice of their own.

But the witness of the Bible is absolutely unequivocal on this: the concern of God is above all for those who are or seem to be nobody’s children and the children of nobodies. We must beware of making a concern for children into an extension of our own self-interest, into a way to preserve our own status and privilege. For this is open defiance of the One who is defender of the widow and the fatherless, the One who loves the immigrant and the impoverished.

At the end of his mission and ministry Jesus gives final instruction to the disciples. And the very last parable recorded in the Gospel of Matthew, the parable of the Great Judgment (Matt. 25:31-46), underlines the whole point of Jesus’ mission and ministry. For he warns those who hear him that their standing before God is not determined by their belief in Christian doctrine or by their association with the Christian community. Rather, it is whether they have fed the hungry and clothed the naked.

That God judges the world, every person and nation, on the basis of our response to the poor, the destitute, the humiliated of the earth—is this not good news to the poor?
Cross and Resurrection

The one who lives his life as one of the poor, who acts as one who befriends the afflicted and the violated, the one who announces the coming of the reign of justice and generosity and joy, this one not only lives in solidarity with the suffering and the aspirations of the impoverished and violated, he also dies as one of them.

He is treated as the world still treats those who stand with the violated and humiliated. He is mocked and tortured. He is executed among bandits. Like the multitudes of those who are humiliated and afflicted, he dies before his time, violently and alone. And on his lips as he dies is heard the cry of all those who suffer the greed of the prosperous, the violence of the powerful, the indifference of the respectable. On his lips we hear the ancient cry of the afflicted and violated, the cry that is like an anvil chorus rising to the sky with each turning of the earth beneath the sun. “My God, my God why hast thou forsaken me?”

This is the cry of the impoverished, the violated, and the afflicted upon the lips of God made flesh—who now not only hears this cry but speaks it as well.

But it is not the end. For the one who was thus afflicted and violated is met again by his disciples. When they meet him they don’t recognize him. Mary of Magdala thinks he is a nobody, a grave digger in the cemetery. The two who walk to Emmaus think he is an ignorant vagrant who has not heard the news of what has happened in Jerusalem. The disciples on the boat think he is a beachcomber who passes his time watching other men work.

He returns. As one of the nobodies, as nobody important.

Untill they recognize him. And their hearts are filled with joy.

Good news to the poor: this is not a minor theme of the gospel. It is the beginning and the goal of Jesus’ ministry. It is the test of our relationship to God, the norm of the spirit-filled community. We dare not put this theme aside in order to turn to things we may suppose are more important to ourselves, more relevant to our own situation. For this is the very heart and center of the gospel of God, the good news concerning Jesus Christ. It is, from first to last, good news to the poor.

Now, my friends, to say that the gospel is good news to the poor is to say that it is not good news to the rich and powerful, not directly or immediately or in the same way.

That is why the respectable and the powerful, with very few exceptions, turned against Jesus, rejected his message and his
teaching, denounced him as a blasphemer, arrested and tortured him, and finally executed him.

It is true that sometimes the influential come to Jesus as well. When they do come to him, however, they come to him as one of the poor—risking their position and influence in order to ask the help of one who was rejected by the respectable and the influential. Jairus, the ruler of the synagogue, comes to him for his dying daughter; and a centurion comes for Jesus’ help with the paralyzed youth that he loves. In coming to Jesus for help they risk their position and power because of their love for one who is in need. And it is this that Jesus calls their faith, faith that makes whole.

There were others: Joseph of Arimethea, who, though belonging (according to Mark) to the council that condemned Jesus, nevertheless after Jesus’ death gave a place for his body to be buried; and the centurion who executed him yet was also the first to acclaim him as Son of God. They are exceptions. Their initial opposition to him is transformed by his death into risky faithfulness. For Joseph cannot side with the one the Council condemned and expect to keep his position and influence. And the centurion cannot acclaim Jesus as Son of God and remain loyal to the emperor in whose name Jesus was executed as a subversive.

Yes, it is possible to hear the gospel as good news even if we are not among the poor and despised—but it is not easy. Jesus said that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for one who has possessions to enter into the reign of God. It is not easy to turn away from prosperity and privilege and live in solidarity with the poor. Not easy. With men, he says, it is impossible. But with the power of God it is possible. It takes the power of God to raise the dead. It takes the power of God for us to hear and heed the gospel as good news if we are not among the poor. It takes the power of divine love that makes us imitators of the one who befriended the impoverished and the marginalized.

All of this may help us to understand how it was that Wesley set such store by the fact that his own movement was consciously and deliberately directed to the poor and outcast of England. And it may help us to understand how he would take it as a special sign of divine favor that in his day, as in no other since the time of the apostles, “the poor hear good news.”
Acts of the Apostles

As Wesley noted, this truth was not lost on the early church. Notice the description of the Pentecostal community of believers from Acts:

All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. (Acts 2:44-45)

Would not the existence of this sort of community be good news to the poor? And if we should forget the point, the author of Acts reminds us the very next time that the community is described as filled with the Spirit.

Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. . . . There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. (Acts 4:32, 34-35).

Wesley would maintain that wherever the power of God, the Spirit of God, the love of God was poured out upon the people of God, the natural and necessary consequence of this would be that the community of faith would replicate in its life this same model of generosity, and so experience the same Pentecostal joy.

Paul

Nor should we suppose that this fundamental feature of the gospel was lost on Paul.

In Galatians Paul writes that the only condition that he accepted from the Council of Jerusalem was that the mission to the Gentiles should remember the poor; and, he adds, "[i]t was actually what I was eager to do" (Gal. 2:10). The very condition of possibility by which the gospel is extended to the Gentiles—and so at length to us as well—is that the poor should be remembered.

This remembering of the poor consists of more than Paul's efforts to collect money from the Gentile churches in order to be in solidarity
with the outreach to the poor of the Jerusalem community (the same community that made distribution to the poor the hallmark of its Pentecostal reality). Rather, this also becomes for Paul the very pattern of Christian existence.

We have already heard the words of Ephesians in which we are reminded to be imitators of God as beloved children. But for Paul this also had a christological focus. Thus in 2 Corinthians he could remind the church:

> For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for our sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich. (2 Cor. 8:9)

The imitation of the God who comes to us in Christ Jesus becomes concrete in the manifest generosity of those who engage in solidarity with the poor. This pattern is used again by Paul in Philippians when he reminds his congregation of the example of Christ Jesus:

> who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness
> And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on the cross. (Phil. 2:6-8)

The point of this recollection of the pattern of the activity of God in Christ is not simply to make a christological point but to summon the recipients of this gospel to an imitation of the same pattern. For Paul prefaces the Philippians hymn by saying:

> Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus... (Phil 2:4-5).

If we are not to reduce talk of God in Christ to a mere empty dogmatic abstraction, then we must see the pattern of the divine activity as a claim upon those who would be loyal to the one who comes to us in Christ Jesus.
Spiritual Renewal

And now, as Wesley used to say, to apply. Perhaps by now it will have occurred to you that there is a close, indeed, intimate connection between the plight of the impoverished and our relationship to God.

The Spiritual Hunger of Our Youth. Resistance to an emphasis upon impoverished children is often the result of an understandable perplexity concerning our own young people.

We must beware of making this concern for our own children into a disguise for our own corporate self-preoccupation. We must beware of the temptation to substitute our own family values for the values of the reign of God—in which it is precisely not just our children but the children of nobodies and nobody's children who are at the heart of the message of the Bible, at the center of Jesus' embrace.

But having said that, we must also acknowledge that there is a crisis among even the children we know best. I believe this crisis is intimately linked to our forgetfulness of the impoverished and the vulnerable, the violated and the abused.

It is said that all too often confirmation serves not as preparation for full participation in the life of the community of faith but as graduation from any participation at all. Over the last three decades, all mainline denominations have experienced a decline in the number of youth involved in the life of the church. It was then that the churches became alarmed at the reckless idealism of their own youth, who had launched out into the civil rights movement, the antiwar movement, and other movements for social and cultural transformation. Worried that these young people raised too many questions and acted too impetuously, the churches independently acted to suppress the youth movement in the church.

In consequence, we have been willing to offer our young people no more compelling vision than that of participating as junior partners in the work of institutional self-preservation. To their intrepid, idealistic impulses we offer the possibility of sitting on committees. And when they are not particularly excited by this prospect, we become concerned to "meet their needs" in order to lure them back into the fold of our institutions and so offer them a spiritual narcissism that only mirrors the material narcissism of the culture.

To be sure, sometimes we challenge them. But too often this challenge takes the form only of a kind of nagging moralism about sex
and drugs, smoking and drinking, at most holding out the prospect of becoming our own mirror images. We are simply reactive; we do nothing that either evokes or nurtures the burning idealism natural to youth.

Thus, we are perplexed about our own children. They are awash in a culture that summons them to aspire to nothing more serious than another pair of Levis or Nikes or the latest CDs. If there is nothing important to do, why not distract themselves, drift and perhaps even despair? A recent report from Fordham University indicates that the suicide rate for teens has doubled in the last twenty-five years.

The spiritual malaise of young people can be addressed only by a call to exit our cultural hall of mirrors and enter into commitment to others, based on the hope and prospect of changing the world. You here know this. Many of you found yourselves challenged to employ youthful idealism in the transformation of the world. Many of you heard this call in your MYFs or in youth rallies or weeks at youth camp or in the Methodist Student Movement.

Provided it is more than another piece of paper, the challenge to turn to the needs of children and the poor which the Council of Bishops has adopted is precisely what is needed to counter the self-preoccupation that afflicts our youth in a society of consumption and narcissism. For here at last we can issue a call to a world-transforming mission worthy of their energy, their hopes, and their yearning for significance and purpose.

The Spiritual Crisis of the Impoverished. When we focus attention on the material impoverishment of people, we are reminded that there is, as well, a deep spiritual need among the poor. Of course, this is true. Who can doubt that the humiliations and violations that are the daily lot of the impoverished take a toll upon them?

Wesley understood this well from his constant acquaintance with the poor, as we can see in his sermon “Heaviness through Manifold Temptations”:

God pronounced it as a curse upon man, that he should earn [bread] “by the sweat of his brow.” But how many are there in this Christian country, that toil, and labour and sweat, and have it not at last, but struggle with weariness and hunger together? Is it not worse for one, after a hard day’s labour, to come back to a poor, cold, dirty, uncomfortable lodging, and to
find there not even the food which is needful to repair his wasted strength? You that live at ease in the earth, that want nothing but eyes to see, ears to hear, and hearts to understand how well God hath dealt with you,—is it not worse to seek bread day by day, and find none? perhaps to find the comfort also of five or six children crying for what he has not to give! Were it not that he is restrained by an unseen hand, would he not soon "curse God and die?" O want of bread! want of bread! Who can tell what this means unless he hath felt it himself? (Works [Jackson], VI, p. 96)

For many of the world’s poor there is a new reality that may provoke even a deeper crisis of faith. For in affluent nations like this, as well as in poorer nations throughout the world, the impoverished are daily exposed to the media messages that abundant life consists of the consumption and accumulation of goods. Yet for all too many the access to this abundance is like an ever-receding horizon. Some seek shortcuts through the means offered to them. Certainly the most striking example of entrepreneurial spirit in our time, in the culture of greed, is the trafficking in drugs. The habits of economic consumption are mirrored in the consumption of those drugs that promise instant happiness. The drug culture is not an aberration in the U.S.; it is the very image and likeness of this society. No amount of exhortation to just say no or locking up those who hear and heed the social and economic messages of our culture will even so much as put a dent in this devastating reality.

Cornel West, the foremost Christian philosopher in the United States, has pointed to the meaninglessness, lovelessness, and hopelessness that are the hallmarks of the culture of impoverishment. Where there is no prospect of fundamental transformation of the social and economic reality that humiliates and violates the impoverished, there is no discernible meaning to life and no value that can be assigned to life. The culture of death reigns supreme.

How could those who are violated and afflicted imagine that their plight is of intimate concern to a God who loves them if they are daily and hourly confronted by the indifference of those who claim to speak for God, of those who claim to be the visible body of Christ in the world?

It is our institutionalized indifference that speaks far louder than our platitudes about the gospel. If those whom the poor can see neither
know nor take deeply to heart the meaninglessness, lovelessness, and hopelessness of their plight, how shall they suppose that God—whom they do not see—does indeed hear their cry, know their suffering, and promise the transformation of the rule of death into the dominion of life both abundant and everlasting?

And how shall we presume to offer them Christ if our words and deeds and our indifference daily confirm that there is no God, that God is the great hidden One in the sky who neither hears nor heeds, who neither cares nor suffers, still less the one who seals with Christ's own blood an unwavering commitment to the inauguration of the reign of justice and generosity and joy?

The Spiritual Hunger of the World. And who can doubt that our world is perishing for want of that which God has promised to be and to do? The wicked prosper and the impoverished are afflicted and humiliated with impunity.

Take the culture of prosperous societies like this or the prosperous classes of poorer nations. The distance between prosperous and impoverished grows every year. Our society rewards those who are heartless and punishes those who are vulnerable. The anxieties of the so-called middle class are directed to resentment not of those who plunge them into anxiety but toward those who are most vulnerable. This nation's problems are due to teenage girls (like the mother of our Lord) who are pregnant before marriage or to single mothers who are told they must work for slave wages and are then blamed for not properly raising their children.

Thus the budget deficit of the wealthiest nation on earth will be reduced by scapegoating the children of welfare.

We insist that people work, yet refuse to insist that they be able through work to earn a living. You must work, but we will not guarantee that those who work have the means to put a roof over their heads or feed their children or get minimum health care. Why then, are we appalled that some feel that work is not a remedy or that some imagine that the business of providing drugs for the prosperous provides a better opportunity for escape from the vicious circles of impoverishment?

We insist that those who come to our nation seeking a chance at dignity will receive neither health care nor education. Laws are introduced to make the children of immigrants pay the price for the misery of their parents. However we make it appear reasonable to ourselves, is this not open defiance of God?
Meanwhile, this and other prosperous societies (and even the prosperous of the poorest societies) feel a spiritual rootlessness, a constant need to fill a spiritual void left by the lack of love, the lack of justice, the lack of generosity. They pursue every spiritual fad to quench this emptiness: crystals, pyramids, astrology, channeling, whatever. Wesley maintained that those who will not believe the Bible will believe anything. The spiritual gullibility of our age is due to a restless flight from the God who is found among the poor and the vulnerable. It is a flight from the voice of the one who calls us out of our narcissistic self-preoccupation into solidarity with the least of these. We will not heed the voice of God, so we must make up gods to please ourselves. But the void that is left when humanity rejects the way of God cannot be filled by the baals of consumerism, the cults of self-preservation, or the molochs of greed, violence, and indifference upon whose altars the children of the earth are daily sacrificed.

Whether we turn again to the God who heard the cry of the violated and humiliated, whether we imitate the Christ who lives and dies among the impoverished and marginalized, whether we turn wholeheartedly to children and the poor, these determine whether or not we can address a world that is perishing with the good news of the coming of the reign of justice and generosity and joy.

The Spiritual Renewal of the Church. My friends, the call to commitment to children and the poor, to the vulnerable and the violated is at the same time a call to the spiritual renewal of the church.

We will not find spiritual renewal when we seek God where God does not promise to be. We will not find spiritual renewal by trying to follow Jesus where he does not go. It is not necessary to climb up to heaven or to burrow into inwardness or to huddle beneath a steeple or to form another commission.

For God is as near and as vulnerable as the violated and humiliated. And whenever we turn to these, the least of these, we find that there is another who is our companion, one we didn't recognize at first, one we thought was a nobody, one who looks us in the eye and, smiling, calls us by name. And welcomes us as companions in his ministry and mission in all the Galilees of our world.

And then in truth we are reborn; then in truth we are renewed—and are filled with the joy of the firstborn of God’s new creation, the adopted daughters and sons of God, unto whom alone be the glory.
Rebekah Miles

The Faith behind the Confession: 
Postmodern Assumptions behind the United Methodist Confessing Movement

Is thine heart right, as my heart is with thy heart? . . . If it be, give me thine hand.” For generations Methodists have drawn on a sermon by John Wesley that repeated this passage from 2 Kings (v. 15b, KJV) as its refrain. Whenever Methodists and other Wesleyans have encountered in-fighting and theological conflict, someone usually pops up to remind the combatants of the oneness of the heart that overcomes doctrinal division, asking, as Wesley did, “Is thine heart right, as my heart is with thy heart? . . . If it be, give me thine hand.”

United Methodists today face another controversy. Arguments surrounding the recent United Methodist Confessing Movement have been as rancorous as those found in previous generations of warm-hearted Methodists. And, like Methodists of former times, representatives of both sides in the confessing debate have appealed to the oneness of heart that overcomes division.

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In 1994 and 1995 a coalition of conservative and moderate United Methodists, from old-fashioned evangelicals to the "postmodern paleo-orthodox," joined together in Atlanta to confess their faith and to form the United Methodist Confessing Movement. While this organization has parallels in the confessing groups of other mainline denominations, it is a distinct and independent body. Its members challenge fellow United Methodists to repudiate false teachings, to adhere to the doctrinal standards of the United Methodist Church, and to confess that Jesus Christ is the "one and only savior of the world" whose atoning death makes redemption possible.

Christology has been the centerpiece of the movement. Speaking of this christological center, Barbara Brokhoff, a speaker at the 1995 conference, noted, "When we are away from our center we sound like cackling witches." The movement not only repudiates teachings which deny central claims about Christ, but also expresses its intent to hold nonconfessors accountable. Its harshest criticisms have been targeted at liberal beliefs within the church.

The closing speaker of the 1995 conference, Bishop William Cannon, described the dangers of heretical teachings: "This is what we welcome in our denomination today under the title of pluralism and what we glorify as theological diversity. [They] were anathema to our forebears." Thomas Oden, reflecting on liberal elements in the church, claimed, "We are here to challenge the ideologues and schismatic dividers of the church. We are not dividers or dissenters. We are the assenters and confessors."

Liberals responded in kind, criticizing the confessors as schismatic, narrow, divisive, and authoritarian. The confessors countercharged, insisting that the liberals were the more narrow, divisive, and schismatic. In public forums and informal conversations, participants moved quickly into camps and proceeded to fire volleys of insults. Confessing Pharisees. Heretics. Heretic Hunters. Narrow-minded chauvinist. Pagans. Witch Hunters. Cultural Accommodationists. Spiritual Terrorists. Re-Imaginers. Before long, United Methodists were witnessing an old-fashioned family fight.

Family fights are nothing new to Methodism. And in this fight, as in many others before it, United Methodists on all sides interspersed their blows with the familiar refrain, "Is your heart right with my heart as mine is to yours? If it is, give me your hand." I suspect that some of us could as truthfully have said, "Is your position right with my position? If not, let me give you my fist."
Though this debate is filled with multiple calls for Christian conference, there’s been remarkably little actual conference. Given the combative style of debate, that is no great surprise. I have come to think about the United Methodist tendency to name-call, polarize, and dismiss as a kind of sickness. I call it the Mad Methodist Disease. This disease is highly contagious. In the middle of this research, in which I was trying to show the ultimate wrongheadedness of all the other positions, I realized that I too had been infected. While shadow boxing around my office—first with the left leaning camp, then with the right leaning camp—I suddenly realized that there was only one significant difference between me and the folks in these divided camps. I was mad at more people.

This Methodist Madness turned out to be a crucial clue in my research and argument. The Confessing Movement and the subsequent controversy presented me with two distinct sets of questions that were ultimately intertwined. The first set of questions are related directly to the debate’s combative, Mad Methodist style. I asked, Why isn’t the Confessing Movement’s call for theological renewal and doctrinal orthodoxy evoking more Christian conference and less polarization? Why are United Methodists on the left and the right unable to call for Christian conference without indulging themselves in the bad habit of name-calling?

Second, I began to wonder about what appeared to me as an unusual alliance in the ranks of the United Methodist Confessing Movement and the similar confessing groups of other mainline denominations. Namely, what are conservative Wesleyan evangelicals and postmodern traditionalists—groups with highly contrasting assumptions, agendas, and claims—doing together in a coalition? And, more important, how does this unusual coalition shape their confession? As I looked further, I began to wonder if these two sets of questions might be connected. Might there be something about this coalition between postmoderns and evangelicals that undermines the possibility (or at least the likelihood) of Christian conference? More to the point, is there something about certain postmodern arguments that make them highly uncongenial to Wesleyan models of faith and discourse?

I will argue here that the particular call of the United Methodist Confessing Movement for a return to theological orthodoxy and to Wesleyan doctrinal standards is shaped by postmodern traditionalist notions of theological discourse and tradition that are deeply
unWesleyan. I am not suggesting, as others have, that their call is unWesleyan because Wesley rose above particular disputes over doctrine or because he was focused on the state of the heart rather than on particular belief. In fact, Wesley was quite adamant about right belief and doctrine. It was Wesley who said that unsettledness or indifference in matters of doctrine was "the spawn of hell." 12

Instead, I am arguing that the postmodern influence on the Confessing Movement, including its turn to a fixed notion of tradition and its strong reaction against the modern appeal to any common human experience, leaves it with a position that is ultimately incoherent and unproductive. It is incoherent because it issues a highly unWesleyan call for a return to Wesley. The Confessors, working out of a distinctively late twentieth-century reading of tradition and human nature, urge a return to the tradition of Wesley, who happened to have a very different reading of tradition and human nature. It is largely unproductive because it undermines Christian conference. In the end, the confessors' suspicion of so-called modern claims about common human experience and reason undermine the Christian conference they claim to seek. 13

Before I can make this argument, I must describe postmodernity, highlighting the version of one of the Confessing Movement leaders—Tom Oden's "postmodern paleo-orthodoxy." I will then outline themes that cut across confessing movements in various denominations and focus more closely on the United Methodist Confessing Movement. A central point of these descriptions is to note the traces of postmodernism within the confessing groups. Only then will I examine more closely the problems of incoherence and nonproductivity inherent in a postmodern call to Wesleyan orthodoxy. To respond to these problems, I will look to John Wesley as a resource for the contemporary debate. Finally, I will return to the familiar text from 2 Kings for a second look at both the passage and the current conflict.

Defining Postmodernity and Postmodern Paleo-Orthodoxy

At its most basic level, postmodernism has its roots in a disillusionment with modernism. 14 Modern optimism about human achievement, common at the end of the last century, has been tempered by the human brutalities of our century. Facile assumptions about common human experience have been softened by the
challenging reality of multicultural experience. Modern confidence in reason has been replaced by postmodern suspicion of it. Many philosophers and theologians question the very existence of any pure or unembedded human reason or experience. They claim that all reason and human experience are fully shaped and misshapen by culture. Though postmodernists begin from this shared rejection of common reason or experience, they move constructively in different directions. On one side, postmodern radicals are highly suspicious of the dominant traditions, which they criticize for promoting the interests of the powerful. Consequently, the remedy is interaction with many traditions so that one at least realizes the limits of one's own perspective and perhaps finds resources for new pragmatic and piecemeal approaches. On the other side, the postmodern traditionalists (or postliberals) call for an immersion in a culturally specific tradition of rationality. Given the limits of human reason and the constructed nature of human culture, true conversation and understanding are possible only within specific traditions or "grammars," as they like to call them. One learns and is formed by the language, assumptions, and practices of one's tradition. We have no access as humans to a truth that transcends particular traditions and that is shared by all humans. Though they end up in very different places, both groups of postmodernists, the radical and traditionalist, share a common reaction against modernism. Both reject any pure, unencumbered reason or common human experience.

Tom Oden, a founder, principal writer, and chair of the drafting committee of the United Methodist Confessing Movement, advocates his own brand of postmodern traditionalism, which he dubs "postmodern paleo-orthodoxy." Oden, like other postmodern traditionalists, rejects the liberal appeal to experience and calls for a return to the traditions and narratives of Christianity, particularly its first five centuries. In his study of classical Christian texts, he searches for "that which has been believed everywhere, always and by all." When asked, "What is Orthodoxy?" Oden draws on the five-finger exercise of sixteenth-century Anglican, Lancelot Andrewes. Orthodoxy is "one canon, two testaments, three creeds (the Apostles', Nicene, and Athanasian), four (ecumenical) councils, five centuries along with the Fathers of that period." For Oden, the theology hammered out in the first five centuries should be authoritative for Christians today. But Oden complains that many in contemporary "liberated" churches have turned away from
the ancient truths of Christian faith to become “canonical text disfigurers” who are “doctrinally imaginative, liturgically experimental, disciplinarily nonjudgmental, politically correct,multiculturally tolerant, morally broadminded, ethically situationalist and above all sexually permissive.”

Criticizing the heretical nature of the “liberated” church, Oden likens these Christians to “an interloper who steals property” and “must be caught and charged. They have engaged in the theft of church property. The stolen property must be reclaimed and the thieves brought to justice.”

The struggle to bring the thieves to justice and reclaim stolen property is a struggle against contemporary heresies and on behalf of the orthodoxy of the first five centuries. Embracing the title “Heresy Hunter,” which was given him by his critics, Oden charges that for the “doctrinally experimental inclusive church” of today, the charge of heresy is unthinkable, except in one instance. “No heresy of any kind any longer exists within this pliable, smiling ecclesial ethos—except, perhaps, for offenses against inclusivism.”

Like other postmodern traditionalists, Oden’s rejection of liberalism and turn to tradition is accompanied by a suspicion of liberal appeals to experience.

Common Themes of Confessing Movements

One of the most interesting dynamics of the mainline confessing movements is the crucial role of postmodern traditionalists like Thomas Oden. Confessing movements have arisen in the 1990s within several mainline denominations, including the United Church of Christ’s Confessing Christ group, the United Methodist Confessing Movement, and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) Confessing Christ conference. In addition, the Anglican group SEAD (Scholarly Engagement with Anglican Doctrine) and the Lutheran-dominated Pro Ecclesia have similar themes.

These varied moderate coalitions of traditionalist and postmodernists call for conference on classical Christian theology and for a confession of central creeds and doctrines. Though the mainline confessing groups are quite different in style and emphasis, there are broad similarities that are outlined here as a composite portrait. Many of these similarities are common to postmodern traditionalism.

1. The confessing groups respond to what they see as a theological and doctrinal crisis. They argue that the church has turned away from
or forgotten its central teachings. They often speak of theological "amnesia." The same amnesia language is seen in other United Methodist documents as well as those of the Disciples of Christ and United Church of Christ. They begin, then, by rejecting indifference to, ignorance of, and antagonism toward doctrine and classical Christian faith found in some quarters of mainline Christianity.

2. The leaders of these groups typically reject the modern or liberal focus on so-called private and experientially based faith and theology. They question the liberal reliance on reason and experience as primary or ultimate norms for faith. The irony here is that the United Methodist Confessing Movement pushes this suspicion further than the other groups, even the Lutherans, who normally are more critical than Wesleyans of appeals to experience and reason. Carl Braaten, a Lutheran traditionalist, is making much more positive claims about reason and experience than the confessing Wesleyans Oden and William Abraham. In fact, Abraham argues that Scripture is not just the primary but the only source for the theological claims of faith. We see here a reversal of typical Lutheran and Wesleyan positions.

3. Like other postmodern traditionalists, these confessing groups tend to turn primarily to traditions and ancient communities as authorities for theology. They call for an affirmation or confession of core Christian beliefs from the tradition. This tradition could consist of creeds and councils, Scripture, the first five centuries, Reformation documents, and particular denominational sources. For example, the United Methodist Church turns to Wesley's Standard Sermons and the Articles of Religion and the United Church of Christ turns to its constitution. The recovery and formation of identity from these traditional sources is a common theme.

4. Christology is the central theological issue. These movements draw on the classic christological formulations of the creeds. They also reemphasize the doctrine of the Trinity and call for the use of the traditional Trinitarian language—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Their rhetoric, especially in the United Methodist statements but also in Disciples of Christ speeches, often rejects controversial feminist arguments about Christ.

5. With their rejection of modernism and turn to tradition, it is no surprise that these groups are often led by postmodernists. The leadership is usually an interesting mix of old-line denominational conservatives (such as Wesleyan evangelicals or conservative
Lutherans) and postmodern narrativists or traditionalists—Yalies and Asburians, folks from Duke or Drew alongside others from more conservative denominational seminaries and renewal groups. The confessing movements are often led by a pair or triumvirate that includes a theologian in a seminary and a leading church person as well as this mix of postmodernists and traditionalists—Gabriel Fackre and Frederick Trost of the United Church of Christ; Tom Oden, Maxie Dunnam, and the late Bishop William Cannon of the United Methodist Church; and Steve Sprinkle and Erv Crain in the Disciples of Christ. These groups and their members are informally connected. They know each other. They read many of the same books. They sometime use the same language and offer similar criticisms, arguments, and proposals. Familiar words like amnesia, story, dark ages, crisis, and Barmen Declaration are scattered throughout the various movements and other postmodern writings. The leaders are also a part of the same organizations. One of the early predecessor groups was Pro Ecclesia—an ecumenical group and journal that is largely Lutheran. The founders, Carl Braaten and Robert Jenson, formed the group in response to their dissatisfaction with Lutheran theological education. If you look on the board, you see this same alliance of traditionalists and postmodernists—Carl Braaten and Robert Jenson as well as George Lindbeck, William Placher, and Stanley Hauerwas. The Pro Ecclesia board also includes Tom Oden and Gabriel Fackre, who went on to lead the United Methodist and United Church of Christ confessing groups.

In addition to the overlap of confessing leaders on the Pro Ecclesia board, one-third of the Pro Ecclesia board is on Tom Oden’s list of leading paleo-orthodox postmodernists. Thus, these groups are strongly influenced by postmodern voices, they are made up of a coalition of postmodernists and more traditional denominational conservatives, and they form a network of overlapping interests and conversations.

6. Many of the members of these groups see themselves as centrists and are careful to distinguish themselves from the older, conservative renewal groups found in each denomination (Good News, Disciple Renewal, United Church of Christ Renewal, etc.). The renewal groups are culturally and politically conservative caucuses with broad agendas of institutional and moral reform. The confessional groups, by contrast, tend to have somewhat different (if overlapping) constituencies and a more specifically theological aim. Some of the group leaders explicitly distance themselves from the renewal groups.
and their politically and culturally conservative agendas. (Indeed, some of the leaders of these confessing movements are politically moderate or to the left on certain issues.)

The confessing groups, then, tend to focus more narrowly on theological issues. Some critics informally suggest that this theological focus is a strategic move designed to make their political position more palatable. The critics imply that there is an underlying political agenda that stands behind a theological front. But as I talked with the organizers, read their letters to each other, and listened to their speeches, I was struck by the passionate commitment to the Christian faith and to theology itself. Many of the confessors seem to have been sincere in their desire to keep the theological issues from being taken over by the political polarization.

But for all the attempts and good intentions of these groups to avoid political hot-button issues, they have had only mixed success. Once they began talking about Trinitarian language debates, baptismal formulas, and inclusive language, the game was up. And as soon as they began criticizing feminist arguments about the maleness of Jesus and the atonement, politicization was unavoidable. Like it or not, we live in a time of institutional crises; tensions are high and power is at stake. We confess and argue in the context of a broader cultural conflict. This has been particularly true for the United Methodist Confessing Movement, which has taken on a more explicitly political emphasis than the other denominational movements. But none of these confessing movements (or comparable movements on the left) are free from the influences of these cultural conflicts and patterns.

In summary, for all their differences, these confessing groups share similar arguments, similar postmodern/evangelical coalitions, similar enemies, a similar call to return to the traditions, and a similar language. They also present observers with a similar puzzle. I will explore this puzzle more fully in the context of the United Methodist Confessing Movement.

**The United Methodist Confessing Movement**

The puzzling aspects of these movements come to focus with the United Methodist Confessing Movement, arguably the most controversial of the confessing groups. In early 1994, a few months after the feminist Re-Imagining Conference, "a Bishop, a preacher.
and a theologian" (Bishop William Cannon, Maxie Dunnam, and Thomas Oden) invited leading United Methodist conservatives to participate in a “Consultation on the Future of the United Methodist Church.” Meeting in Atlanta in early April 1994, members of the consultations mourned the loss of theological integrity in United Methodism and called for a confession of classical Christian claims about Christ as well as a renewed allegiance to the United Methodist doctrinal standards. Contrasting the Re-Imagining Conference in Minneapolis and the Confessing Consultation in Atlanta, one speaker referred to a “tale of two cities.”

They likened themselves to the confessing church of Nazi Germany, whose Barmen declaration had been ratified, sixty years to the month before. An “Invitation to the Church” was ratified by members of the consultation which included lay and clergy, evangelicals and postmoderns, and representatives from the Good News Movement, the Institute for Religion and Democracy, and the evangelical John Wesley Fellows organization (of which I am a fellow). This invitation was then publicized and sent to United Methodists across the country.

The “invitation” insisted that United Methodists had been “distracted by false gospels” and had abandoned “the truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ as revealed in Scripture and asserted in the classic Christian tradition and historic ecumenical creeds.” The nature and work of Christ (particularly in the atonement) was the focus of their criticism. In response, they called for a return to “the doctrinal standards of our church” as “essential unchangeable truths of our tradition” and invited others to join them in a Confessing Movement. They also challenged the United Methodist bishops to hold the church accountable to the historical standards of doctrine of the United Methodist Church.

Both this invitation and subsequent documents were written by a drafting committee whose members included Tom Oden (the chair-person and a self-identified postmodernist), Les Longden (Oden’s former doctoral student at Drew and a primary drafter), Billy Abraham, and Mark Horst (a Yale graduate). A month after the invitation was ratified, the drafting committee distributed a pamphlet entitled “What Is the Confessing Movement within the United Methodist Church?” Describing “the present crisis,” they criticized those in the church who “treat theology as a matter of personal experimentation... who have used the umbrellas of pluralism and inclusiveness to support an agenda of theological relativism,” who lead others to “imagine that...
anything goes in United Methodist theology," who "exchange the
historic faith for political, therapeutic, sexual- or gender-based
ideologies with religion veneers," and who "elevate their private
experience to the position of judge and arbiter of Christian faith."
Describing their own counter position within "the richness of classical
Christian teaching," they call for a reaffirmation of the "Church’s
ancient ecumenical faith in Wesleyan terms" and for close adherence
and accountability to the United Methodist doctrinal standards.40

Over the next year, the drafting committee wrote a confessing
statement which was ratified unanimously in April 1995 by over 900
people attending the national United Methodist Confessing
Conference in Atlanta.41 At the conference, speakers continued their
criticism of those who deny orthodox Christian teachings. William
Abraham defended the Confessing Movement by describing the
"narrow agenda" of the other side, those who "have imposed on us the
requirement of a vapid and procedural pluralism" and who "insist that
theology is essentially the expression of our own personal experience
or of our favored interest group." The Confessing Movement, he said,
is a necessary response to "those who want to remake or reimage the
faith in ways which repudiate the great classical doctrines."42

The document ratified by the conference reiterates the claims of the
erlier statements. At the heart of the confession are a series of claims
about Jesus Christ as Son, Savior, and Lord. Under each of these three
headings the drafting team includes confessions ("We confess . . .")
and repudiations ("We repudiate . . ."). The drafters take the formula
of confession and repudiation from the Barmen Declaration of the
German Confessing Church Movement. The United Methodist
Confessors repudiate claims that "the maleness of Jesus disqualifies
him," contentions "that God can be fully known apart of Jesus Christ,"
and teachings that question the atonement and resurrection. They also
repudiate both the "misuse" of inclusiveness and tolerance as well as
practices that "rebel against the Lordship of Jesus Christ." These
practices include "pagan ritual," "sexual promiscuity," "homosexual-
ity," "racial and gender prejudice," and abortion.

They added a zinger to the confession in the last paragraphs,
vowing to support those United Methodist "groups, programs and
publications that further this confession" and to "challenge and hold
accountable those that undermine this confession." In conference
speeches, supporting documents, and later proposals, the movement
called for bishops and ordination committees to hold the churches and
pastors accountable to United Methodist standards of doctrine. The extent of the desired accountability is broad. They call for reform at many levels: in the local church; in small groups of pastors; in greater oversight by bishops; in boards of Ordained Ministry; in the formation of catechisms; through seminary reform and accountability; and by changing membership, confirmation, and baptismal liturgies. The Confessing Movement then issued a series of tracts that spelled out these changes in greater detail. For example, in a discussion of theological education, they criticized the prominence of "theological fads" and objected that evangelical seminarians "come to study God, yet find that much of what they study is pop psychology or comparative sociology or Marxist class analysis or political partisanship." Those seminaries approved by the United Methodist Church, the Confessors added, "may be less accountable to Wesleyan teaching and more overtly hostile to our doctrinal standards" than seminaries without approval. Speaking of the seminaries, the confessors "stand ready to contest" those in the "teaching office" who oppose the United Methodist doctrinal standards.

By doctrinal standards, the confessors mean the Articles of Religion, the General Rules, the Confession of Faith, Wesley's Standard Sermons and his Notes on the New Testament. They note that all ministers are required by the Discipline of the United Methodist Church to preach and maintain them. At the 1996 General Conference and in annual conference sessions, motions sponsored by members of the Confessing Movement called for measures by which ordained ministers could be held accountable to these standards. The practical recommendations of the movement also extend into worship. In addition to rejecting "pagan ritual," the confessors call for measures that would "protect the church against the exaggerated efforts at inclusive language which deny ecumenical trine teaching in the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit."

The Confessing Movement continues to meet, organize, and issue position papers. In January of 1997 they gathered to name an executive director, Patricia Miller. Individuals in annual conferences have formed smaller organizations and sponsored legislation. As in other confessing organizations, the leadership is attempting to broaden their base by forming and strengthening local movements which are being given greater billing in the organization. Speaking about the January 1997 meeting, John Ed Mathison, one of the Confessing Movement leaders, said, "We came without a specific plan for the
future of the Confessing Movement, but the Holy Spirit gave direction through the people of the grass roots. Organizing in this fashion is a sure sign of our long-term commitment to doctrinal and missional renewal in the church. The focus on smaller local groups is also a way to fulfill their goal of encouraging widespread conference about doctrine and theology.

I was particularly struck, in the speeches and documents, as well as in the early drafts, by the influence of postmodern issues and categories within the movement. The movement is led and the documents written by people who use the language and arguments of postmodernity. They operate out of a more fixed notion of Christian tradition. Like many other postmodern traditionalists, they criticize liberalism, particularly appeals to human experience, reason, tolerance, pluralism, and inclusivity. In their criticism of the excesses of liberalism and modernity, they undercut central claims of Christian tradition, particularly Wesleyan tradition.

I was also struck by the rancor of the debate. Opposition to the movement has been strong. As we saw above, critics on the left have responded by claiming that the Confessors are divisive, unWesleyan, authoritarian, schismatic, and narrow. The Confessors responded by claiming that their liberal opponents are the ones who are narrow, intolerant, and divisive. The critics of the Confessing Movement, they say, are the real schismatics. The Confessing Movement took out an advertisement in denominational papers which countered their critics. They organized their response around paragraphs entitled “Who Narrows?” “Who Silences?” and “Who Divides?” According to the advertisement, the Confessors were not the culprits.

We are not afraid to answer the charges against us because they are untrue. . . . Our critics say we are imposing a narrow doctrinal agenda upon the church. We ask: Which is the more narrow agenda? That which reduces doctrine to the personal experiences of individuals or interest groups? Or that which regards doctrine as an attempt to describe the mystery of the Triune God . . . ? Our critics say that we are dividing the church by making fundamentalist, intolerant, doctrinaire demands. We ask: Which theology is more unifying to the church? That which claims to be inclusive and pluralistic while launching intolerant attacks on those who are committed to the
classical doctrines of the faith? Or that which confesses that Jesus Christ is the center...?" 46

What Is Wrong with This Picture?

This paper began with a puzzle I faced as I read about the United Methodist Confessing Movement and its critics. There was something odd and unsettling about this controversy. It wasn’t simply the level of conflict and acrimony—that’s old news for Wesleyan churches and even for the Christian church as a whole. We’ve been duking it out from the start. Rather, something seemed out of kilter at a deeper level.

When I was a girl, my favorite feature from a popular children’s magazine was called “What Is Wrong with This Picture?” A drawing that looks normal at first glance reveals oddities on closer examination. A trout sunbathes on the school house roof. A dog walks a man on a leash. The moon is tangled up in the branches of a red oak. As I read about the Confessing Movement controversy, I began to ask myself, “What is wrong with this picture?” What are all these old-fashioned Wesleyan evangelicals from Asbury and the Good News Movement doing with these postmodernists from Yale, Duke, and Drew? How could Wesleyan evangelicals, who have always affirmed the older Wesleyan beliefs about human experience, reason, and the truth, suddenly be writing theological statements with postmodernists? More to the point, how can postmoderns, who begin with a rejection of broad claims about common human experience, shared reason, and the human capacity to know moral and theological truth, call for a return to Wesley, who made all sorts of broad claims about common human experience, shared reason, and the human capacity to know moral and theological truth? 47 What is wrong with this picture?

In addition, I still had questions about the style of the debate. Why is this conversation going nowhere? Neither left nor right seemed to take each other’s position seriously or engage in real conversation. 48 I began to wonder if the different parts of my puzzle were related. Was there a connection between the polarized and often nonproductive nature of the debate and the postmodern influence on the movement?

As the Confessing Movements affirm the postmodern rejection of modernism and liberalism and turn to a more fixed notion of Wesleyan tradition, its call becomes incoherent and unproductive. As it rejects modern claims about common human experience and shared reason, it...
undercuts Wesley's claims and older Christian claims about our shared human nature and reason. This presents two problems. First, the Confessors base their call for a return to Wesleyan traditions in an argument that contradicts Wesley. Wesley made broad claims about human experience. These are not so much liberal claims based in the Enlightenment but theological claims based in Scripture. They were not simply modern claims, but Christian claims. Second, by this move (the turn away from our common nature and reason), they also undermine the conditions that make conference, including Christian conference, possible. If we don’t share common experience and capacities (by virtue of God’s creating, restoring, and transforming grace), what is the basis for any common understanding and conference? Lacking a common nature and experience, we could more easily rely on the fixed texts of the first five centuries as to try to understand our next-door neighbor or the person sitting in the pew beside us.

The odd part is that among the Confessors we find Wesleyans beginning with certain fundamental philosophical presuppositions that lead them to return to Wesley, who had opposing fundamental philosophical presuppositions. When Lutherans offer sharp criticisms of reason and experience and call for a return to the spirit of Luther, we aren’t so taken aback. Agree or not, it has its own internal logic. But when the philosophical presuppositions of the callers clash with the tradition to which they call us, we can’t help but notice the lapse of logic and coherence. That is the something that is wrong with this picture.

Though the point of this paper is to analyze the arguments on the Confessors, it is important to add that the left is not free from fault. I’ve seen a comparable problem of undermining conference from many statements on the left. They do not respond to the serious questions raised by the Confessors. In addition to the rancorous rhetoric, liberal responses tend to assert the value of tolerance or inclusivity as if they were self-evident, without giving a Christian rationale. They fail to give the theological underpinning that would make specifically Christian conference possible. They need to support their claims about tolerance and inclusivity with the language and arguments not just of liberalism, but of the older traditions from which liberalism emerged—our shared Christian traditions and language.

Ironically, both sides are calling on a shared Wesleyan heritage without using it fully. Liberals tend to assert liberal arguments without
giving theological arguments from heritage. Postmoderns tend to assert some Wesleyan arguments while ignoring and even contradicting Wesley's larger perspective on human nature. Ironically, the focus of these contemporary movements, whether liberal or postmodern, neglects key features in the tradition. They both turn the fight into a distinctly modern conflict rather than a distinctly Christian one. This is particularly ironic, given the Confessors' distrust of all things modern.

Wesley as Resource for Christian Conference in the Current Debate

The Confessing Movement calls for a return to Wesley. Yet, as I have suggested, the form of their call (the fixed notion of tradition and the rejection of appeals to reason and experience) has undermined both central Wesleyan claims and the likelihood of Christian conference. As we attempt to think through the problems presented by the Confessing Movement controversy, what help can we find from John Wesley?

How can Wesley, a product of eighteenth-century England, be a resource for this setting, particularly for the intersection between evangelicals and postmoderns? He is certainly not an obvious resource for postmodern debates — particularly because of his optimism about reason and experience. Both postmodern traditionalists and radicals would reject Wesley's affirmation of common human experience or the shared capacity of reason that can lead to general, universal knowledge of God, moral life, and human nature. This claim is anathema to postmodernism. At the same time, many liberals will not be happy with Wesley's insistence on total depravity, the primacy of Scripture, and the importance of right doctrine.

In spite of the substantial disagreements, I find several factors in Wesley's understanding of reason and experience that are fitting for our discussion. A turn to Wesley is helpful as it yields the very thing both Confessors and liberals shy away from—a distinctively theological argument about common human experience and our shared human capacity for reason. Wesley provides a corrective to each side.

First, Wesley's appeal to common human experience, reason, and other capacities is not ultimately based in cultural or sociological investigation or liberal or modern arguments. In the end, these
claims are theological. For Wesley, the ground of our common experiences and capacities (including reason) is God. Through God’s grace (shown in creation, restoration, transforming presence, etc.), we have common capacities and experience. His insistence on common human experience and reason is not simply an empirical claim that is grounded in previous observation and that can, therefore, be disproved by new observation. It is a claim of faith. Wesley’s theology reminds Christians that even if the anthropological or cultural data points to extreme differences in human experience, we ground claims about our common experience in God’s creating, restoring, and transforming grace. And if one does believe that we share common nature and capacities through God’s creation, restoration, and continuing presence, then that shared nature is a legitimate ground for further moral and theological claims. It provides a foundation for moral claims that many postmodernists have foregone. It is a realist or naturalist claim about shared human reason and experience that is grounded in faith as much as it is in clear-cut anthropological evidence.

Wesley’s usefulness in this debate extends beyond his theologically and scripturally based confidence in human capacities. He can also serve as a basis for talk about the limits of these human capacities. The most illuminating contribution comes not when he speaks of the extent of reason but when he focuses on its limits. Within postmodernity, the denial of modern confidence in reason has prompted a sense of crisis. The loss of confidence in reason, in human access to truth, can lead to resignation, chaos, or entrenchment. Postmodernists have offered several remedies for this problem. According to the radical postmodernists on the left, we should respond to the limits of our own traditions by turning to the voices of people from other traditions. For some of the traditionalist postmodernists, like the Confessors, we respond to the limits of our reason by relying on the language of our own tradition. Though Wesley valued Christian conference, was open to the hearing of other perspectives, and clearly called for faithfulness to our traditions, these were not the primary remedies when he came upon reason’s limits in pastoral situations.

What did Wesley do when he ran into the limits of human reason? When he saw that human reasoning was leading someone astray, he cautioned them to turn from “evil” or “idle” reasoning to a simple trust in God. In these pastoral situations, he did not normally say “rely on your pastor,” “turn to the first five centuries,” “trust in the creeds,” “read the doctrinal standards,” “listen to the voices of
marginalized people," or even "turn to Scripture." Wesley's remedy was to turn to God in childlike trust. In coming up against the limits of reason, we are driven to God. But, ironically, this remedy does not end with simple resignation to our limited knowledge and reason. Trusting in God when our reason is limited is not the end of reason and knowledge but the beginning. Out of our limits, through the power of God's grace, our spiritual senses are opened and we have not less knowledge but more. The limits are themselves therapeutic; they are a means of divine grace, driving us toward God and ultimately toward greater spiritual knowledge. Reason's limits do not lead to despair or to a return to a fixed tradition or to the hearing of many voices from different cultures. Reason's limits can lead to trust in God, becoming not an occasion for despair but a means of grace.

This model offers us a very different alternative to the two common options of postmodernity. As we face postmodern claims about the limits of reason, we have not only the options of the postmodern traditionalists and radicals but also the option offered by Wesley in these pastoral situations. Perhaps human limits are not occasions for despair or for overreliance on fixed traditions or other finite human voices but occasions for a recognition of our finitude and a trust in the transforming presence and power of God's grace. This presence transcends and goes beyond human knowledge. It also makes human knowledge possible.

"Is Thine Heart Right, As My Heart Is with Thy Heart?"

In the passage from 2 Kings which opened this paper, King Jehu asks Jehonadab, a man of a different party and opinion, "Is thine heart right, as my heart is with thy heart? . . . If it be, give me thine hand." John Wesley turns to this passage to encourage unity and civility among Christians. He admonishes his hearers to overlook differences of opinion, worship, or denomination. Many Methodists have drawn on this passage and sermon to suggest that differences in doctrine and theology don't matter enough to divide Christians. We can find unity in our love for each other, in our hearts. But Wesley means something quite different. Our hearts being right doesn't just mean that we love each other or God. It means that we believe certain things about God, Christ, and neighbor and that we live out of those beliefs. On central judgments about doctrine, Wesley wrote in this same sermon that Christians should be as "fixed as the sun."
The 2 Kings text is particularly appropriate to our discussion not only because it was important to Wesley or because it concerns doctrine or because it is used in this church fight and others. It is appropriate because the passage and its context are as disturbing— even more disturbing—than the family fight in which United Methodists now find themselves. The 2 Kings passage comes from a brutal story. In chapters 9 and 10 immediately preceding this beloved quotation, Jehu, at the leading of the prophet Elisha, becomes king and proceeds to kill off his rivals and everyone remotely connected with them. Jehu shoots King Joram in the back, orders that Jezebel be thrown out a window, commands that King Ahaziah be shot as he flees, and arranges for old King Ahab’s seventy sons be decapitated. Even worse, King Jehu also arranges to avoid taking the blame for the slaughter of the seventy. He then proceeds to hunt down and massacre the remainder of Ahab’s and Ahaziah’s family, friends, and priests. Going down the road between massacres, King Jehu runs into Jehonadab, a man of another rival party. Looking down from his chariot, King Jehu speaks the words so beloved by Methodist peacemakers: “Is thine heart right, as my heart is with thy heart? . . . If it be, give me thine hand.” Considering the fate of those who had recently opposed King Jehu, it is hardly surprising that Jehonadab is suddenly overtaken by a spirit of conciliation and gives Jehu his hand. And, in addition to saving his skin (and head), perhaps Jehonadab also saw a chance to form an alliance that would benefit his own party. King Jehu pulls Jehonadab into his chariot, saying, “Come with me, and see my zeal for the LORD” (10:16). And off they drive together looking for more stragglers from Ahab’s party to slaughter.

What an irony that this passage, set in the midst of a horribly violent conflict, is used by Methodists to promote unity and tolerance! These words from 2 Kings are less about a religious union of hearts by the power of the Spirit than they are about a political union of might based on the power of violence. The hand offered was bloody; the hand given joined in the blood bath. And the assassinated kings, Ahaziah and Joram, were little better. They had killed others to get and keep their thrones. As jarring as the story is and as sharp a contrast as it offers to what we have come to expect of these familiar words, the story is somehow fitting to our present circumstances. I can no longer say or hear these beloved Methodist words without remembering the complicity of the main players in the 2 Kings story. This passage says more about our oneness in sin than our oneness in faith. All of our coalitions and
movements are formed in the context of human sin. All of the hands offered and all of the hands received are bloody. All of the hearts — right or wrong — are sullied.

You might think that I am suggesting that the postmodern and evangelical confessing coalition is the equivalent to the violent Jehu/Jehonadab combination ready to massacre the liberals or that both radical liberals and postmoderns are caught up in despicable violence. While these groups have been caught up in the conflict, that is not what I found so striking. The greatest revelation for me was that the violence and division cast a broader net, catching up most of us who care about the church. It caught not only Confessors and radical liberals but also moderate liberals and moderate conservatives. It certainly caught me. All of us are Jehu. All of us are Jehonadab.

Writing this article, I’ve wondered if we wouldn’t be better off to stop the fighting and more humbly accept our limits, ignorance, and sin. Critics of John Wesley’s practical theology (Calvinists, no doubt), charge that Wesley is a bad advertisement for doing theology on horseback. Perhaps we Methodists are a bad advertisement for doing theology in a fight. On the other hand, that’s the way theology is usually done. The creeds and councils to which we turn were born in struggle. The Scriptures from which we read and live bear the marks of conflict. The standards of denominations were worked out, and are still being worked out, in disagreement and controversy. What can we do but struggle on?

A favorite psalm stayed in my mind as I reflected on the controversy surrounding the Confessing Movement. “He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord has them in derision” (2:4). Looking on our foolish struggles, God must surely laugh. We also trust and hope that God reveals and that God forgives—even those of us who lose ourselves in the battle. “Is thine heart right, as my heart is with thy heart? . . . If it be, give me thine hand.”

Notes

1. An earlier version of this paper was given at a session of the Wesleyan Studies Group entitled “Doctrinal Developments in North American Wesleyanism,” the annual meeting of the America Academy of Religion, New Orleans, 25 November, 1996.
2. See “Catholic Spirit,” Sermon 39, The Works of John Wesley, Bicentennial Edition, Vol. 2 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1944), 81-95. The sermon text is 2 Kings 10:13b. I quote the translation that Wesley used. He changed the words slightly throughout the sermon. At the end of this article, I return to this passage to offer an alternate reading.


4. I will define the terms postmodern and postmodern paleo-orthodox below.


8. Bishop William Cannon, Closing Lecture, United Methodist Confessing Conference, Atlanta (April 1995), Cassette Tapes (Ames, OK: Audio Enterprises). Cannon's lecture is a wide-ranging discussion of theology and cultural problems. He criticized the use of Native American prayers in United Methodist worship, rejected attempts to use non-English languages in the public schools, and continued the larger attack on liberal pluralism and tolerance. He received his loudest applause and cheers with this line: "With the New Testament, proclamation is emphasized, not dialogue and diversity. The Apostles were not interested in what people thought."


11. Many of the arguments from the left also failed to further the likelihood of Christian conference. While this paper focuses primarily on the United Methodist Confessors, I will also include below a brief analysis of the problems on the left.


13. I have changed this title a dozen times to fit changes in argument. The first title, "The Faith behind the Confession: The Influence of Tom Oden's Postmodern Philosophy on the United Methodist Confessing Movement," was my favorite stage of the argument because I had an interesting and quotable opponent. At the time, I was reading Oden's Requiem: A Lament in Three Movements (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), and considered changing the title to "Why Tom Oden Should Stop Crying" or "Torn on the Lights, the Requiem's Over." As I read the charges and countercharges from the various sides and became increasingly perplexed by them, the title became autobiographical, reflecting the limits of my own understanding. I called it "Confessing Confusion." Finally, I returned to the original title, "The Faith behind the Confession." But recognizing the Confessing Movement's multiple influences and sources, not just Oden, I simply dropped the subtitle to give myself a little more room and the Confessing Movement a little fairer hearing.

14. For an introduction to postmodernism, see William Placher, Unapologetic Theology (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989); Stanley J. Grenz, A

15. Segments of the preceding two paragraphs are included in my chapter on Wesley’s use of reason in Wesley and the Quadrilateral: Renewing the Conversation (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997). The co-authors are Steve Gunter, Randy Maddox, Scott Jonen, Ted Campbell, and Rebekah Miles.


17. The brackets are Oden’s. The Fathers of the first five centuries that are authoritative for the church, according to Oden, are “Athanasius, basil, Gregory of Nazianzus, and John Chrysostom in the East and Ambrose, Augustine, Jerome, and Gregory the Great in the West.” Oden uses this five-finger exercise in several places. See for example, Thomas C. Oden and Christopher A. Hall, “Back to the Fathers,” Christianity Today vol. 34, no. 13 (24 Sept., 1990), 29.


19. Ibid.


21. For further discussion of these various movements see Gabriel Fackre, “The Church of the Center”, William J. Abraham, “A Quest for Renewal in Contemporary Christianity”; and Douglas Jacobson, “Re-Purposing a Sloppy Center with Grace.” See Note 5 for further references.

22. This composite sketch is based on rough similarities and is, therefore, not an exact portrait of any one group.


24. The literature and conversations are peppered with personal accounts or horror stories that focus on this antagonism to orthodox theology, doctrine, and creed. They recount tales of woe or persecution—how candidates were not ordained because of orthodox understanding of the Trinity or the use of male-God language, for example. I have heard a similar pattern of recounting stories of woe in groups on the left.
25. Though the word liberal is not used in the official confessions, it is clear from what is repudiated and how the language is used that the Confessors are referring to the liberal wing of the church. Moreover, in supporting documents and speeches, liberalism is targeted explicitly. These criticisms are not, however, leveled at particular liberals by name.

26. See William Abraham, Waking from Doctrinal Amnesia. For an evangelical counter-response to Abraham’s argument, see Scott Jones’s chapter on scripture in Wesley and the Quadrilateral: Renewing the Conversation.

27. This is not the only odd switch in the normal patterns of denominations. Because of the return to traditions, particularly those of the early centuries, members of a denominational confessing movement may bring back emphases that are not normally associated with their denomination. Another example is the Disciples of Christ “Confessing Christ” Movement. The symbol at their opening conference was the Disciples chalice with the Nicene creed engraved upon it. The creeds were highlighted in the worship services. While this would not be a problem in United Methodist circles, for Disciples, a non-creedal church, the focus on creed in symbols, liturgy, and theology was controversial. As conference participants complained about the prominence of creeds, leaders backtracked saying, “It’s not about creeds.” (One of the leaders, George Ervin Crain, noted that it was not about creeds but about God. He then went on to talk not about God but about male-God-language.) See “Confessing Christ for the Third Millennium: A Working Theological Conference,” Cassette Tapes. (Austin: Reliable Communications, 7-10 March, 1986; George Ervin Crain, “Shall the Disciples of Christ Become a Confessional Church?” Unpublished Paper; and Steven Odom, ed. Program for “Confessing Christ for the Third Millennium” (Austin, March 1996). In a similar reversal, the United Methodist Confessing Movement calls for their non-confessional church to become confessional. This has been a huge point of controversy among United Methodists. So the movements in non-creedal churches like Disciples are highlighting creeds. The movements in non-confessional churches like the United Methodists are highlighting confessions.


29. Braaten has been highly critical of Lindbeck’s postmodern philosophy but finds him to be a helpful ally in this struggle.

30. Some of these people try to bring different sides together in their own theologies. Fackre, for example, joins narrative theology with Barth’s Word of God theology.

31. I am not suggesting here that the similar movements represent some sort of unified conspiracy that was planned in advance with coordinated, synchronized movements. I am simply noting that these people know each other, read each other’s work, use similar phrases, and are influenced by similar cultural and theological movements. The same thing can be said of groups on the left. There are overlapping webs of influence across denominations. You can trace language and influence on each side. But even though the Confessing Movements do not represent a fully organized and synchronized plot, neither are they as spontaneous as some of the Confessors like to claim. For example, Billy Abraham is surely overstating his case when he writes, “Independently and serendipitously, confessing groups have sprouted
... Without any orchestration and with a minimum of organization, a network of convictions and concerns has surfaced and taken many by surprise.” William J. Abraham, “A Quest for Renewal in Contemporary Christianity,” 117. His claim simply does not fit the evidence.

32. The United Methodist Confessing Movement has not as clearly separated itself from the Good News movement. Though they have no official or formal association, they have an overlapping leadership and membership. Moreover, the Good News movement has been a strong supporter of the Confessors. The Confessors have still, however, distanced themselves from formal connections with Good News. Even though their primary focus has remained on theology, the United Methodist Confessors have moved more quickly to other political issues than have the other confessing movements. The United Methodist Confessing Movement document is the most openly critical of feminism, abortion, homosexuality, and sexual promiscuity. See “A Confessional Statement of the Confessing Movement with the United Methodist Church,” Confessing Movement Conference (Atlanta, April 29, 1995).

33. I have heard this complaint in informal conversations and in discussions at academic meetings. William Abraham notes (and refutes) the same suspicion. See William J. Abraham, “A Quest for Renewal in Contemporary Christianity,” 117.

34. While working on this project I sought out members of the Confessing Movement. The Confessors with whom I talked were remarkably hospitable. William Abraham loaned me his files on the Confessing Movement which included letters exchanged among the early leaders and drafters. Reading these letters, I was particularly struck by the writers' sincerity and passion about theology and doctrine.

35. I don't think that it is any accident that these movements took off or gained momentum in the wake of the controversial Re-Imagining Conference. For an analysis of this influence, see Monica Myers and Pam Rose-Beeler. It would be a mistake to believe, however, that these groups are all anti-feminist or unwilling to consider feminist alternatives and inclusive language. Gabriel Fackre, the United Church of Christ Confessing Christ leader, for example, recommends the language “God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Mother of us all.”

36. Comments, The Confessing Movement Consultation (Atlanta, April 5, 1994).

37. These recent confessing groups draw explicitly on the Confessing Church movement of Germany that opposed Nazism and issued the Barmen Declaration. For the United Methodist Confessors, the link is that both groups faced a church that was in such extreme crisis that statements against the church were necessary to save the church and be faithful to the gospel. The connection with the German movement is evident in less formal references, in speeches, in early drafts of documents, in some of the official documents themselves, and in later descriptions by leaders of the movements. See, for example, Gabriel Fackre, “The Church of the Center,” 133, and William J. Abraham, “A Quest for Renewal in Contemporary Christianity,” 117.


40. Ibid.

41. Thomas C. Oden, et al., “A Confessional Statement of the Confessing Movement with the United Methodist Church,” Ratified by the Confessing Movement


44. The irony of this move is that the doctrinal standards include things which the United Methodist Church officially opposes. For example, in his *Explanatory Notes on the New Testament*, John Wesley is adamant about women not speaking publicly in church. Not only is the United Methodist Church out of compliance with the Notes (and hence our doctrinal standards) on this point, the older John Wesley was himself out of compliance. In his later years he allowed women a greater public speaking role in worship.


47. One could ask similar questions about postmodern calls for a return to Thomas or Aristotle.

48. In the end, most United Methodists pretended to ignore the whole issue. When I ask moderate and even most conservative United Methodists what they think of the Confessing Movement, a standard response includes a scowl, a moment of grumbling, and then something like this: "Oh, I agree with most of their faith claims, but why on earth did they have to say it that way? Did they want to start a fight?" I find a similar response when I ask about some of the statements made by groups on the left.

49. Of course, these claims are not unique to Wesley. We could just as easily return to many other figures. But given the United Methodist context and the confessors' call for a return to Wesley, it makes sense to focus here on Wesley's usefulness.


None of the many innovations in the 1989 United Methodist Hymnal and the 1992 United Methodist Book of Worship is more significant than the vast expansion of resources for the celebration of the sacrament variously known as the Lord’s Supper, Holy Communion, the Eucharist, or the Service of Word and Table. These resources not only facilitate the celebration of the sacrament in a wide range of worship styles and provide the seasonal variety needed for frequent and even weekly celebrations, but they can also introduce United Methodists to a much richer, fuller sacramental theology. This sacramental theology comes to us both through a rediscovery of our Wesleyan heritage and also through our participation in an ecumenical liturgical renewal that has recovered for our day a wider Christian heritage.

United Methodists who think that a twelve-year-old in confirmation class can learn what the Lord’s Supper means simply by hearing a brief
explanation from the pastor might be astonished to learn that innumerable books, many of great sophistication, have been written through the ages on eucharistic theology. They might benefit from realizing that the greatest theologians, including the Wesley brothers, considered the Lord's Supper to be a mystery far beyond the ability of any of us to understand fully. We could profitably spend much time exploring the highways and byways of historic and contemporary eucharistic theology, including the rich legacy of John and Charles Wesley. But here and now I intend simply to describe some of the insights and understandings from this theological treasury that are actually expressed today in our new United Methodist ritual.

The Basic Pattern

These insights and understandings begin to appear in the opening pages of the Hymnal and the Book of Worship: The Basic Pattern of Worship, the introduction that precedes it in the Book of Worship, and the commentary that follows it in the Book of Worship. We are told that the Service of Word and Table is "an encounter with the living God through the risen Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit." This applies to both the Service of the Word and the Service of the Table, which, as the Basic Pattern shows, together form a unity. In this encounter, as we shall see, we have koinonia (communion, community, participation, sharing, fellowship), not only with God in Christ but also with those who worship with us, including the universal Church of all times and all places. And in this encounter, as we shall also see, we celebrate not only Christ's atoning death but the whole gospel, from the goodness of creation to the final consummation of all things.

The Basic Pattern makes it clear that whatever else the Lord's Supper is—and it is much else—it is a meal. It is eating and drinking together with our Lord and with one another. To be sure, it is a token meal, a category with which we are familiar from all the token offerings of food and drink that serve constantly in our secular culture as rituals of bonding.

It is a simple series of actions: taking the bread and cup, saying a blessing, breaking the bread, and giving the bread and cup to those present. We see this fourfold action of taking, blessing, breaking, and giving in Jesus' ministry as he fed the hungry multitudes, instituted the
Lord's Supper, and broke bread with the disciples at Emmaus. These actions, as we shall see, signify for us the whole ministry of Jesus and indeed all God's mighty acts. Moreover, they suggest a whole Christian spirituality, a pattern for a whole Christian life.

These actions follow naturally in our worship service from the proclamation of God's Word and form a unity with it. As naturally as conversation is followed by refreshments, the Word that we hear leads us to the Word that we can see and touch and taste and smell. As naturally as conversation continues over refreshments, the fourfold action of the holy meal itself includes words—especially the words of the blessing that we call the Great Thanksgiving, where the church most clearly says what we believe about the Lord's Supper.

There are many Great Thanksgiving texts in the Hymnal and Book of Worship; and taken together they express a rich, clear understanding of the Lord's Supper, a whole gospel, a whole theology. The gospel we celebrate is so many-faceted that to try to express it all in one prayer would give us a Great Thanksgiving of inordinate length. Given our United Methodist preference for short prayers, the Hymnal and Book of Worship contain a collection of Great Thanksgivings. Every one of them follows a common pattern and expresses a basic core theology. Some of them are intended for general use at any time of the year. Others are for use at particular times in the Christian year and highlight facets of the gospel that are especially appropriate on that day or in that season. Still others are for use on occasions such as weddings, funerals or memorial services, healing services, ordinations, and consecrations, highlighting those facets of the gospel most appropriate for that occasion. And the fact that pastors are not limited to the Great Thanksgiving texts in the Hymnal and Book of Worship is an acknowledgement that even all the texts together do not do justice to all the facets of the gospel that may need to be highlighted from time to time.

In what follows I shall go through the pattern common to these Great Thanksgiving texts and at each point along the way quote from various of them to show the richness of the theology that together they proclaim.

The Opening Dialogues

But first let us look at two opening dialogues—the opening Greeting in A Service of Word and Table I that sets the tone for the service as a
whole and the dialogue that in most cases introduces and sets the tone for the Great Thanksgiving itself. The fact that both of these are dialogues reminds us that this is an encounter and a communion of the people with one another. The rubric specifying that the Great Thanksgiving must be led by the pastor (or another ordained elder) reminds us that this person has been duly authorized by the wider Church to represent the universal Church and signifies that this encounter and communion includes not only those visibly present but the whole universal Church, the communion of saints.

When the Greeting proclaims, “The risen Christ is with us,” we are reminded that this is an encounter not only with the Church but with our risen Lord and thereby with the living God. In the dialogue before the Great Thanksgiving pastor and people exchange another reminder of this fact: “The Lord be with you. And also with you.” The term the Lord has a double reference, to the Lord God and to the Lord Jesus Christ. We emphatically believe in the real presence of Christ in Holy Communion and also in the Service of the Word.

What follows is an invitation to a joyous, heart-lifting experience: “Lift up your hearts. We lift them up to the Lord.” The words can be reinforced by the body language of the pastor who lifts hands at this point and keeps them raised. While many feelings may in appropriate circumstances have a place in the experience of Holy Communion, the predominant note is that of joy and celebration. It is no accident that we speak of celebrating the Sacrament of Holy Communion.

What are we called to do that is so joyful? “Let us give thanks to the Lord our God. It is right to give our thanks and praise.” This prayer is the Great Thanksgiving. The word Eucharist means thanksgiving. The connection of joy and thanksgiving is further spelled out in the opening words of the prayer itself: “It is right, and a good and joyful thing, always and everywhere to give thanks to you, Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth.”

Note, too, that we are giving thanks and praise. We are not only giving thanks for what God has done but, we are also praising and blessing God for who God is and what God's nature is. This is emphasized in the opening words of An Alternative Great Thanksgiving: “Blessed are you, our Alpha and our Omega, whose strong and loving arms encompass the universe, for with your eternal Word and Holy Spirit you are forever one God” (78, echoing Rev. 1:8; 21:6; 22:13).
The Great Thanksgiving

Following an ancient tradition shared by Protestants and Roman Catholics alike, the Great Thanksgiving is addressed to the first person of the Trinity, who in almost all our great thanksgivings is addressed as "Father" but who alternatively may be addressed simply as "God," or, in the instance just cited, as "our Alpha and our Omega." Either of the latter two forms of address may be chosen, not to avoid calling God "Father" but to delay introducing the intimate word "Father" in order to make more vivid and dramatic the moment after the Great Thanksgiving when the pastor introduces the Lord's Prayer by saying: "And now, with the confidence of children of God, let us pray: Our Father..." The context of the terms God and our Alpha and our Omega in the Great Thanksgiving makes it clear that the first person of the Trinity, not the whole Trinity, is meant. This use of the word God for the first person of the Trinity has ample precedent in Christian history, including most of the traditional collects and the traditional use as a Trinitarian benediction of 2 Cor. 13:13—"The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all."

All the great thanksgivings in the Book of Worship have a three-part structure. In all but the two briefest great thanksgivings each of the three parts ends with a congregational response. This structure, taken from some of the earliest known Christian great thanksgivings and today widely used in other Christian denominations, is an excellent framework for expressing a strong and balanced Trinitarian theology.

Part One. The first part of the Great Thanksgiving is praise and thanksgiving for creation and the covenant with Israel, in which food and drink are repeatedly seen to play a significant role.

It opens with praise to the One who is "almighty, creator of heaven and earth" (36, echoing the Apostles' Creed). "Before the mountains were brought forth, or you had formed the earth, from everlasting to everlasting, you alone are God" (58, echoing Ps. 90:2).

Next comes thanksgiving for the mighty acts of creation, recognizing the work of the whole Trinity. "In the beginning your Spirit moved over the face of the waters" (68, echoing Gen. 1:2). "Through your Word you created all things and called them good" (78, echoing John 1:3; Genesis 1). "You created light out of darkness and
brought forth life on the earth” (58, echoing Genesis 1). “By your appointment the seasons come and go. You bring forth bread from the earth and create the fruit of the vine” (76, echoing traditional Christian and Jewish prayers). “From the dust of the earth you formed us in your image and breathed into us the breath of life” (60, echoing Gen. 2:7). “Male and female you created us. You gave us the gift of marriage, that we might fulfill each other” (124, echoing Gen. 1:27; 2:24). “In you we live and move and have our being” (78, echoing Acts 17:28). “In love you made us for yourself” (62, echoing Augustine, Confessions, I: ch. 1). “To love and to be loved” (52). “You have made from one every nation and people to live on all the face of the earth” (72, echoing Acts 17:26). “You . . . made us stewards of your world. Earth has yielded its treasure, and from your hand we have received blessing on blessing” (76, echoing Gen. 1:28; Ps. 67:6).

We remember God’s faithfulness through the generations. “When we turned away, and our love failed, your love remained steadfast” (36). “When we had fallen into sin and become subject to evil and death (62), you did not desert us” (78). “When rain fell upon the earth for forty days and forty nights, you bore up the ark on the waters, saved Noah and his family, and made covenant with every living creature on earth” (60, echoing Genesis 6–9).

In particular, we remember that “you made covenant with your people Israel” (78) and that “your Spirit came upon prophets and teachers, anointing them to speak your Word” (68). We identify with Israel as we pray: “You delivered us from captivity, and made covenant to be our sovereign God” (36). “When you led your people to Mount Sinai . . . you gave us your commandments and made us your covenant people” (60, echoing Exod. 19:24). “You fed us manna in the wilderness and gave grapes as evidence of the promised land” (64, echoing Deut. 8:16; Num. 13:23). “You brought us to a land flowing with milk and honey, and set before us the way of life” (66, echoing Exod. 3:17; Deut. 30:15). “When your people forsook your covenant, your prophet Elijah . . . heard your still small voice” (1 Kings 19:11–12). You “spoke to us through the prophets, who looked for that day when justice shall roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream, when nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore” (54, echoing Amos 5:24; Isa. 2:4; Mic. 4:3).

All this is like a mighty “whereas” that calls for a “therefore”; and in our traditional great thanksgiving, which remains in our Book of
Worship, we continue: "Therefore with angels and archangels, and with all the company of heaven, we laud and magnify thy glorious name" (47). But since what we have recited in the first part of our new great thanksgivings is a narrative rather than an exercise in logic, these texts use not therefore but and so. "And so, with your people on earth and all the company of heaven, we praise your name and join their unending hymn" (36). The congregational hymn of adoration and praise that closes this first section of the Great Thanksgiving is addressed by the universal Church of all times and all places to the universal God of all times and all places, the "God of Abraham and Sarah, God of Miriam and Moses, God of Joshua and Deborah, God of Ruth and David, God of the priests and the prophets, God of Mary and Joseph, God of the apostles and the martyrs, God of our mothers and our fathers, God of our children to all generations" (74).

This hymn may be spoken by the congregation or sung to any of five alternative tunes that are provided. This choice not only recognizes that congregations differ in musical taste and singing ability but, it also acknowledges that the mood in which the Lord's Supper is being celebrated may appropriately change from one occasion to another. Lent may call for a tune in a minor key, while Easter may call for a festive tune.

The hymn begins: "Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might, heaven and earth are full of your glory."

Then the hymn makes a dramatic shift. The God of the whole cosmos has come among us in a human being, Jesus of Nazareth, who was greeted by an assembly of ordinary people as he humbly rode into Jerusalem, and whom we greet now as we recognize his presence in our assembly and prepare to eat and drink with him. We use the same greeting the crowd in Jerusalem used two thousand years ago: "Hosanna in the highest. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest" (37, echoing Matt. 21:9; Mark 11:9-10). And to make it clear that the one we are calling "blessed" is not just anyone who comes in the name of the Lord, the pastor immediately adds, "Holy are you, and blessed is your Son Jesus Christ" (37).

Part Two. The second part of the Great Thanksgiving centers upon redemption, recognizing that this is the work of the whole Trinity. Thanks are given for the whole Christ event from Incarnation to coming again and for the new covenant, in all of which the
significance of food and drink is repeatedly mentioned. "In Jesus Christ your Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth" (78, echoing John 1:14). "In the fullness of time you gave your only Son Jesus Christ to be our Savior" (56, echoing Gal. 4:4; John 3:16), "your crowning gift" (62), "our light and our salvation" (58, echoing Ps 27:1), (58, echoing Ps 27:1), "a light to the nations" (54, echoing Luke 2:32), "to redeem the world" (62). Notice throughout our Communion texts how intensely incarnational the theology is. Bread and wine matter, food and drink matter, material well-being matters, distributive justice matters, this world matters, because God in Christ loves the world enough to enter into flesh and blood.

Remembering the message of Advent that the Christ who came two thousand years ago in humility and comes now in Word and Holy Spirit will ultimately come in final victory, we prepare to eat the holy meal as a remembrance of what is already accomplished, a celebration of living presence, and a foretaste of the day foretold by the prophets, when justice, righteousness, and peace shall prevail. We give thanks in the words of Mary’s song: “You scatter the proud in the imagination of their hearts and have mercy on those who fear you from generation to generation. You put down the mighty from their thrones and exalt those of low degree. You fill the hungry with good things, and the rich you send empty away” (54, echoing Luke 1:51-53).

At Christmas we remember that “at his birth the angels sang glory to you in the highest and peace to your people on earth” (56, echoing Luke 2:14). It is fitting that we celebrate Christmas Eve with Holy Communion as well as carols. Those who ask why we are celebrating Jesus’ death when we ought to be celebrating his birth have too narrow a view of Holy Communion. The bread and cup recall the Word who became flesh and blood and dwelt among us as well as the body broken and the blood shed on Calvary.

The Christmas Great Thanksgiving treats the accounts of Jesus’ birth as a sort of overture to the Jesus story, in which themes are introduced that will be fully played out in what follows. “As Mary and Joseph went from Galilee to Bethlehem and there found no room, so Jesus went from Galilee to Jerusalem and was despised and rejected. As in the poverty of a stable Jesus was born, so by the baptism of his suffering, death, and resurrection you gave birth to your Church . . . . As your Word became flesh, born of woman, on that night long ago, so, on the night in which he gave himself up for us, he took bread . . . .”
The Jesus story continues. "You sent a star to guide wise men to where the Christ was born, and in your signs and witnesses, in every age and through all the world, you have led your people from far places to his light. In his baptism and in table fellowship he took his place with sinners" (58). “At his baptism in the Jordan your Spirit descended upon him and declared him your beloved Son” (68, echoing Matt. 3:16-17; Mark 1:9-11; Luke 3:21-22). “Your Spirit led him into the wilderness, where he fasted forty days and forty nights to prepare for his ministry” (60). “With your Spirit upon him he turned away the temptations of sin” (68). “When hungry and tempted, he refused to make bread for himself that he might be the bread of life for others” (76, echoing Matt. 4:1-4; Luke 4:1-4; John 6:35).

We are also celebrating Jesus’ earthly ministry. “Your Spirit anointed him to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who were oppressed, and to announce that the time had come when you would save your people. He healed the sick, fed the hungry, and ate with sinners” (37, echoing Luke 4:18-19). This remembrance of Jesus’ own words and actions is a clear call to ministries of justice, mercy, and healing. “As a mother tenderly gathers her children, you embraced a people as your own and filled them with a longing for a peace that would last and for a justice that would never fail” (78, from Eucharistic Prayer A, proposed for the Roman Catholic liturgy by the International Consultation on English in the Liturgy).

As we prepare to eat and drink with the living Christ, we remember how crucial in Jesus’ earthly ministry is eating and identifying with the poor and marginalized. “Though he was rich, yet for our sake he became poor.... When the multitudes were hungry, he fed them. He broke bread with the outcast but drove the greedy from the temple” (76). “Emptying himself that our joy might be full, he ... ate with the scorned and forgotten [and] washed his disciples’ feet” (64, echoing Phil. 2:7; John 15:11; Luke 15:1-2; John 13:1-17).

But the heart of God’s saving work for us is in what is sometimes called the paschal mystery—that is, the Passover mystery of what Christ did for us as the Lamb of God. “By the baptism of his suffering, death, and resurrection you gave birth to your Church, delivered us from slavery to sin and death, and made with us a new covenant by water and the Spirit” (37). Note that the biblical feminine imagery of
the God who "gave birth" and "delivered" complements the address at the beginning and end of the Great Thanksgiving to "Father."

Because what God did for us in Christ is far greater than any explanation we can give, the various great thanksgivings show us different facets of the wonderful mystery of it all. "He humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. He took upon himself our sin and death and offered himself, a perfect sacrifice for the sin of the whole world" (62). [He] "made there, by the one offering of himself, a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice for the sins of the whole world" (48). "In Jesus' suffering and death you took upon yourself our sin and death and destroyed their power for ever. You raised from the dead this same Jesus, who now reigns with you in glory, and poured upon as your Holy Spirit, making us the people of your new covenant" (78). "By your great mystery we have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of your Son from the dead and to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading. Once we were no people, but now we are your people, declaring your wonderful deeds in Christ, who called us out of darkness into his marvelous light. When the Lord Jesus ascended, he promised to be with us always, in the power of your Word and Holy Spirit" (66, echoing 1 Pet. 1:3-4; 2:9-10; Matt. 28:20). "He commissioned us to be his witnesses to the ends of the earth and to make disciples of all nations" (72, echoing Acts 1:8; Matt. 28:19). "At his ascension you exalted him to sit and reign with you at your right hand" (71, echoing Eph. 1:20-23). And on the Day of Pentecost he baptized us "with the Holy Spirit and with fire" (68, echoing Matt. 3:11; Luke 3:16; Acts 2:1-4).

These statements from our various great thanksgivings, taken together, make it clear that it is Jesus' passage through suffering and death to resurrection and ascension, together with the giving of the Holy Spirit, that we are celebrating in Holy Communion. What happened on Calvary is part of a larger mystery that is meaningless without the resurrection and apart from the work of the Holy Spirit. Holy Communion is not a Good Friday celebration, and we now see Good Friday itself as part of the Great Three Days that extend from Holy Thursday evening through Easter Day. The Lord's Supper is not a funeral for poor dead Jesus but a celebration with the risen Christ.

We have now come to the point in the Great Thanksgiving when we recall that "on the night in which [Jesus] gave himself up for us, he took bread, gave thanks to you, broke the bread, gave it to his
disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." When the supper was over, he took the cup, gave thanks to you, gave it to his disciples, and said, "Drink from this, all of you; this is my blood of the new covenant, poured out for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me" (37, echoing Matt. 26:26-28; Mark 14:22-24; Luke 28:19-20; 1 Cor. 11:23-25).

We note that the word *remembrance* is a translation of the New Testament Greek word *anamnesis*, which has a meaning stronger than what we ordinarily mean by our word *remember*. We might better use the word *recall* in the sense of "call back." "Do this to call me back."

During the Great Fifty Days from Easter through Pentecost we add that "on the day you raised him from the dead he was recognized by his disciples in the breaking of the bread, and in the power of your Holy Spirit your Church has continued in the breaking of the bread and the sharing of the cup" (67, echoing Luke 24:35; Acts 2:42; 1 Cor. 10:16-17).

Once again in the Great Thanksgiving we have come to a point where what has gone before is a *whereas* that now calls for a *therefore*, where the narrative calls for a *so what*. "And so, in remembrance of these your mighty acts in Jesus Christ, we offer ourselves in praise and thanksgiving as a holy and living sacrifice, in union with Christ's offering for us" (38). Notice how carefully this sentence deals with the issue of eucharistic sacrifice that has so sharply divided Christians since the Reformation. It affirms with Rom. 12:1 our self-offering "as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God" as well as the "sacrifice of praise" commended in Heb. 13:15 and the sacrifice of thanksgiving referred to in Ps. 116:17, offering them "in union with Christ's offering for us," which as the Reformation insisted is "full, perfect, and sufficient," made once for all and never to be repeated.

This second of the three parts of the Great Thanksgiving comes to an end as the congregation is called to "proclaim the mystery of faith" and responds, "Christ has died; Christ is risen; Christ will come again" (38).

Part Three. The third part of the Great Thanksgiving is a petition focusing upon the Holy Spirit that follows from our remembrance of God's mighty acts in Jesus Christ. In our new Ritual as a whole there is much more emphasis than formerly upon the work of the Holy
Spirit, and this is certainly true of the Service of Word and Table. Earlier in A Service of Word and Table I, the Prayer for Illumination invokes the power of the Holy Spirit upon the proclamation of the Word. Earlier in the Great Thanksgiving we have already seen many references to the work of the Holy Spirit, all the way from the beginnings of creation until today. In this last part of the Great Thanksgiving, we invoke the power of the Holy Spirit here and now, looking forward with confidence to the future.

We petition God to “pour out your Holy Spirit on us here, and on these gifts of bread and wine” (38), recognizing that the Holy Spirit works not only upon us but upon nature as well and upon our relationship with the fruits of the earth. Then follow two closely related petitions: “Make them be for us the body and blood of Christ, that we may be for the world the body of Christ, redeemed by his blood” (38. Adapted from the Consultation on Church Union’s eucharistic liturgy Word Bread Cup [Cincinnati: Forward Movement, 1978], 27). This is not transubstantiation. The bread and cup become signs or symbols of the body and blood of Christ, and like all signs or symbols they partake of the reality of, and help to effect, that which they signify or symbolize. The bread and cup become for us—that is, in their relationship to us—the body and blood of Christ as in sharing them we are constituted and renewed as the body of Christ for the world. The equivalent petition in An Alternative Great Thanksgiving puts it in another way: “Pour out your Holy Spirit on us gathered here, and on these gifts, that in the breaking of this bread and the drinking of this wine we may know the presence of the living Christ and be renewed as the body of Christ for the world, redeemed by Christ’s blood” (79).

Holy Communion also makes us one in the Spirit. We petition God: “By your Spirit makes us one with Christ, one with each other, and one in ministry to all the world” (38). The first trial draft of this prayer said “service to all mankind,” but this was changed in two ways. “Service” was change to the more comprehensive term ministry, which includes social action ministries. “Mankind” was changed to “the world,” to include not only women but also the whole creation. We are to minister not only to the human family but to our environment as well. This is signified not only by our words but by our relating in this sacrament to the fruits of the earth—bread and wine. An Alternative Great Thanksgiving uses words adapted from the Didache, a Christian liturgy of the late first or early second century:
"As the grain and grapes, once dispersed in the fields, are now united on this table in bread and wine, so may we and all your people be gathered from every time and place into the unity of your eternal household and feast at your table forever."

On certain occasions our petitions become more specific. At weddings with Holy Communion we add, "By the same Spirit bless Name and Name, that their love for each other may reflect the love of Christ for us and grow from strength to strength as they faithfully serve you in the world" (125). At healing services we add, "By the same Spirit heal us in body, mind, and spirit, cleansing away all that would separate us from you" (619). On memorial occasions such as All Saints' we add, "Renew our communion with all your saints, especially those whom we name before you," and then name the honored dead, either aloud or in our hearts (75). At funerals or memorial services with Holy Communion we pray to be made "one in communion with all your saints, especially Name and all those most dear to us, whom we now remember in the silence of our hearts."

After a time of silence for remembrance we continue, "Finally, by your grace, bring them and all of us to that table where your saints feast for ever in your heavenly home" (153).

As we have just seen, this unity is eternal—"until Christ comes in final victory and we feast at his heavenly banquet" (38). We do not need as a church to choose between different theologies as to just how "Christ will come again"; but surely the God who comes to us in the living Christ will finally be victorious, and we can picture the glory of that day as like a banquet, a feast. The Lord's Supper here and now is a foretaste of that ultimate feast. This token meal is like the token food and drink served in someone's living room in anticipation of the feast to come in the dining room.

What remains in the Great Thanksgiving is a doxology—praise to the triune God—and the people's great "Amen." "Through your Son Jesus Christ, with the Holy Spirit in your holy Church, all honor and glory is yours, almighty Father (God), now and forever. Amen" (38). An Alternative Great Thanksgiving ends, "Through Christ, with Christ, in Christ, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all honor and glory is yours, almighty God, now and for ever. Amen" (79).
Sharing the Bread and Cup

What is prayed in the Great Thanksgiving is powerfully reinforced in the actions that follow.

Praying the Lord's Prayer to 'our Father' immediately after the Great Thanksgiving gives us the opportunity to claim the intimacy with God in Christ for which we have just invoked the power of the Holy Spirit.

When the pastor breaks the bread, even if it is done in silence, it is an act that signifies the unity with one another and with Christ for which we have just prayed. If desired, the words printed in *A Service of Word and Table I*, taken from 1 Cor. 10:16-17, may be used.

"Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf. The bread which we break is a sharing [a communion, a participation, a *koinonia*] in the body of Christ. The cup over which we give thanks is a sharing [a communion, a participation, a *koinonia*] in the blood of Christ" (39).

The giving and receiving—the sharing—of the bread and cup are the climactic bonding with Christ and with one another in the Lord's Supper.

Given the meanings of this holy act as expressed in all that has gone before, and especially in the Great Thanksgiving, who should feel free to partake of this holy meal? Those who minister the bread and cup are told in *The Book of Worship*, "All who intend to lead a Christian life, together with their children, are invited to receive the bread and cup. We have no tradition of refusing any who present themselves desiring to receive. . . . Every effort should be made to make each person, and especially children, welcome at the table" (29). At the baptism of a mixed group of children and adults a rubric states, "It is most fitting that the service continue with Holy Communion, in which the union of the new members with the body of Christ is most fully expressed. The new members, including children, may receive first" (94). When only one or more children are being baptized, the rubric reads: "It is most fitting that the service continue with Holy Communion, in which the union of the newly baptized children with the body of Christ is most fully expressed" (99). At weddings with Holy Communion, a rubric reads, "Not only the husband and wife but the whole congregation are to be invited to receive communion. It is our tradition to invite all Christians to the Lord's table" (115). At weddings, funerals, and memorial services a rubric states that "there should be no pressure that would embarrass those who for whatever
reason do not choose to receive communion” (115, 152). I recall that
the question of the communion of the unbaptized and possible
relevance of the Wesleyan concept of Holy Communion as a
“converting ordinance” were brought to the attention of the Book of
Worship Committee but intentionally left unresolved. In short,
whether or not to receive, or bring one’s children to receive, is left to
the consciences of those present.

Earlier in the service, prior to confession and pardon, there may be
an invitation to Holy Communion, the wording of which is not
prescribed but which may give some guidance. A Service of Word and
Table I and II contain the following invitation: “Christ our Lord
invites to his table all who love him, who earnestly repent of their sin
and seek to live in peace with one another.”

The traditional invitation in A Service of Word and Table IV is as follows: “Ye that do truly and
earnestly repent of your sins, and are in love and charity with your
neighbors, and intend to lead a new life, following the commandments
of God, and walking from henceforth in his holy ways: Draw near
with faith, and take this Holy Sacrament to your comfort . . .” (26).

The words suggested at the giving of the bread and cup are, “The
body of Christ, given for you.” “The blood of Christ given for you”
(39). The Great Thanksgiving has already illuminated the multifaceted
significance of these words. Some urged that the words broken and
shed be used, but given has at least two advantages: First, it makes
clearer the linkage between what Christ has given to us and the bread
and cup that we, in Christ's name, give one another. Second, given is
more comprehensive in its meaning than broken and shed, although it
certainly includes them. Jesus Christ gave his body and his life's blood
not only on Calvary but throughout his earthly ministry, and continues
give them to us today in this holy sacrament.

Giving and receiving communion is much more than speaking and
hearing these words; it is an action. “Serving one another acts out our
faith that Christ is the giver of this holy meal and that we are receivers
of Christ’s grace” (30). The meaning of this action is not only personal
and churchly but worldly as well. This action should model and
signify distributive justice and compassion in the world. It should
nourish and empower us for ministry in the world. This is why, after
sharing in the bread and cup, the congregation may pray:

Eternal God, we give you thanks for this holy mystery in which
you have given yourself to us. Grant that we may go into the
world in the strength of your Spirit, to give ourselves for others, in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (39)

According to the Book of Worship, "What is done with the remaining bread and wine should express our stewardship of God's gifts and our respect for the holy purpose they have served. 1) They may be set aside for distribution to the sick and others wishing to commune but unable to attend. 2) They may be reverently consumed by the pastor and others while the table is being set in order or following the service. 3) They may be returned to the earth; that is, the bread may be buried or scattered on the ground, and the wine may be reverently poured out upon the ground—a biblical gesture of worship (2 Sam. 23:16) and an ecological symbol today" (30).

And so, after a final hymn and a dismissal with blessing, comes the "going forth" (32) into the world, where with the grace we have received we are enabled to experience every meal, all life, as sacramental, in a sacramental universe.

Notes

3. Hymnal, 2-5; Book of Worship, 13-32.
6. Hymnal, 6, 9; Book of Worship, 33, 36.
Several years ago a study on John Wesley and the sacraments concluded that modern Methodism has “little spiritual power and very limited intercourse with God.” Many United Methodists would concur with that statement even today. This negative assessment of the spiritual life of the church fits into a larger pattern, an overarching theological division within the contemporary church. Of these two basic perspectives on Christian faith we have, on the one hand, those who focus on the socio-ethical implications of the Christian life. Their deepest concern is with orthopraxis, literally “right praxis,” including a strong emphasis on what Christians can do for others. On the other hand are those who focus on Christian identity, emphasizing orthodoxy, or right Christian belief. The history of conflict between these two perspectives goes back at least as far as the nineteenth century. And as this quote reveals, among the numerous theological differences between the two groups we may now see a widening gulf on the topic of the means of grace, including the traditional sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion.
There is no doubt that both camps share a fervent concern for the life of the church and the truth of the gospel. Yet this concern is expressed in very different ways. The orthodox camp, for example, raises questions about the apparently limitless aspirations of the modern, liberal self. Does the church rely too much on its own political correctness and moral powers, thus taking for granted the workings of grace and the power of God? Orthodox mainline thinkers worry that the current mentality of corporate North America, best characterized by the motto of the Nike Corporation, “Just do it,” has taken over the modern church, forcing it to give up both spiritual power and intercourse with God. From this perspective, the solution looks rather simple: just put more emphasis on God’s power and God’s free gift of grace. This approach is exemplified by Ole Borgen’s classic attempt to unite evangelicals and “sacramentalists,” the two groups that seem to have retained a sense of God’s power. Here Wesley’s concern for the means of grace serves as framework.

The orthopraxis camp, on the other hand, often labeled as liberal, is worried that such critiques might lead to the abandonment of Christian social action. How can we make sure, they ask, that faith in God really does make a difference in this world? Are the orthodox camps aware of the importance of uncompromising Christian praxis, the call to make a difference in this world where people are hurting? In this view, the solution to the problem lies in a more conscious effort to improve Christian praxis. In the process, Wesley’s own praxis often serves as a model that Christians need to imitate in the present. Wesley’s concern for the means of grace, however, is often overlooked.

Rather than choose one side or the other, however, we should begin to see the limitations in both positions as they stand. Both solutions are in danger of becoming self-referential. Liberal theology tends to assimilate God into the benevolent activism of the modern self, usually white and “first world,” a self that has a tendency to make all that it touches into its own image. This model can undervalue not only the divine Other but also the human other. On the other hand, the sacramental and evangelical camps tend to miss the challenge of the human other as part of their theology. The needy neighbor, while perhaps the subject of charity, is not part of their theological presuppositions. Unable to appreciate what is other and challenging in this world, this perspective leads to another form of self-referentiality that ultimately results in a loss of God as the “wholly Other” as well.
Ironically, both approaches end up losing what they are most concerned about; both the relation to God and the relation to the human neighbor suffer. Another irony is the relation of Wesley to these two camps. While both refer to Wesley for support, both manage to fragment Wesley’s position significantly. If we are willing to take another look at Wesley’s own position, we may prepare ourselves for a first step beyond the impasse.

The Means of Grace

For Wesley, God and humanity cannot be played off against each other. Keeping with his Anglican tradition, he sees God and humanity to be most intimately related through the means of grace. This is Wesley’s definition: “By ‘means of grace’ I understand outward signs, words, or actions ordained of God, and appointed for this end—to be the ordinary channels whereby he might convey to men preventing, justifying, or sanctifying grace.”

His initial list includes three elements: “The chief of these means are prayer, whether in secret or with the great congregation; searching the Scriptures (which implies reading, hearing, and meditating thereon) and receiving the Lord’s Supper.” Later he added fasting and Christian conference.

As a backdrop to this list, in many of our North American churches we again find mirror images of the two major camps. On the one hand, there are those who see the whole purpose of the Christian life in terms of the means of grace, not always of course in terms of the whole list but at least of some of its elements. While in the “Bible Belt” scripture is still the primary candidate, there are others who focus more on the sacraments, others yet who focus on the personal relationship to God expressed in prayer. On the other side, there are some who feel that we should look elsewhere for what really matters in today’s church. This is related to a basic problem in Wesley’s own time, and Wesley himself was not happy with either side. So far the issue is clear, and this it as far as Methodist theologians have usually considered it. We are left with the challenge to find a more constructive way of dealing with the means of grace.

Expanding the means of grace tradition. How can we make sure that we are not perpetuating the conundrums of that old impasse whose entrenchments are no longer helpful? At a time when even mainstream sociological studies confirm that the opposition between
conservatives and liberals is still in full swing, a mere affirmation of
the importance of the means of grace hardly seems to be sufficient.9

Trying to expand our vision, we might find a first clue in Wesley’s
theological focus on Christian love of God and love of neighbor,
sparked by God's own love in Christ. This is a central element of
many of his writings, 10 and it leads Wesley to a radical expansion of
his definition of the means of grace later on. In a sermon entitled “On
Zeal,” Wesley locates the means of grace in a larger framework,
unfolding the double focus of his theology in terms of the means of
grace. How seriously Wesley takes the love of neighbor is seen in the
fact that he now incorporates the “works of mercy”—good deeds for
the benefit of the neighbor—into his list of the means of grace. This is
one of the distinctive marks of his theology; Wesley is fully aware that
“this is not commonly adverted to.” 11 Developing a vision of what
really matters in the Christian life, Wesley works out a framework of
four concentric circles. At the center is love, more precisely the double
focus of love of God and love of neighbor. In the circle closest to the
center Wesley locates what he calls “holy tempers.” 12 The next circle
is constituted by works of mercy, and the third circle by works of piety
(the traditional means of grace). In the outermost circle Wesley locates
the church.

The most remarkable thing about this framework is the place of
works of mercy in relation to works of piety, a fact which some of
Wesley’s interpreters have noted correctly but have not developed
further. In agreement with both the prophet Hosea and the evangelist
Matthew, Wesley points out that “God will have mercy and not
sacrifice.” 13 Whenever works of mercy interfere with works of piety, it
is the works of mercy that “are to be preferred.” Wesley explains to
the surprised reader that “even reading, hearing, prayer, are to be
omitted, or to be postponed, ‘at charity’s almighty call’—when we are
called to relieve the distress of our neighbour, whether in body or
soul.” 14 This same pattern can be found as part of the Doctrinal
Standards, the binding documents of contemporary United
Methodism, in the General Rules. The General Rules start with the
concern for doing no harm and doing good and only then proceed to
the attendance “upon all the ordinances of God,” where the works of
piety are listed. 15

While it is common knowledge that works of mercy are of
fundamental importance to Wesley, we must now try to understand to
what purpose he introduces them into the means of grace tradition. In
this new model, works of mercy are more than correct actions, orthopraxis. If they are truly means of grace, then they are also channels of God’s grace which convey grace to the one who acts mercifully. A work of mercy is therefore no longer a one-way street, leading from the well-meaning Christian to the needy other. Something comes back in return, which transforms the doer of mercy as well. In doing works of mercy, a real encounter takes place with God which cannot be separated from the encounter with the needy other.16

A fresh reflection on the works of mercy as means of grace might help us in leaving the old impasse to which the opposition of orthodoxy, right belief, and orthopraxis, “politically correct” right praxis, has led us. Bringing together both works of piety and works of mercy as means of grace, Wesley keeps together the love of the (divine) Other and the (human) other in a special way. This is the fundamental challenge. Can the fact that the relation to the divine Other cannot be separated from the relation to the human other help to overcome the current theological and spiritual impasse in the church?

Following the lines of this argument, we have to consider the full range of this challenge. It has been argued, for instance, that works of mercy are means of grace which point to God’s presence but not to God’s identity. In this model, God’s identity would be defined solely by the works of piety.17 But is not God’s identity also at stake in the works of mercy, for instance where we encounter Christ’s presence in the face of the neighbor? Can somebody have an encounter with God’s presence without receiving even a glimpse of God’s identity? We need to see the relation of works of piety and works of mercy in more constructive ways.

Between the Other and the other. “Those who say, ‘I love God,’ and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen” (1 John 4:20).

It is not necessary to go to great lengths about the platitude that both works of piety and works of mercy are important. Nobody would disagree with that. My basic point is more specific: We need to give a theological account of the fact that works of mercy are now to be understood as means of grace. Whether we realize it or not, works of mercy are already means of grace. All that the church can do is realize this fact. The real problem is that here is a blind spot not only of those who favor orthodoxy but of those in the orthopraxis camp as well.
Actually the problem has two distinct aspects. First, there is one-sided concern for works of piety and orthodoxy which denies to works of mercy their status as part of the means of grace. Second, a one-sided concern for the works of mercy often forgets the same thing, namely, that works of mercy are not just good deeds but real means of grace.

Let me take a look at the second problem first. If it is forgotten that works of mercy are real means of grace, any concern for such works tends to get stuck in a one-way street. This concern might promote good deeds or “outreach” projects whereby Christians are doing good things for others. But even if those works are done out of love for the neighbor, it is hard to avoid a certain condescending attitude. In this case, the fate of the needy other is placed in the hands of the one who is acting in a merciful way. What is less clear, however, is that the encounter with the needy might have a powerful impact on the doer of mercy as well.

This is still one of the major blind spots of some Christian social activists who honestly seek to help others in need. Many social action programs have had to deal with this misunderstanding. In the Civil Rights movement, for instance, some well-meaning white Americans ended up turning their backs on the African American struggle because they did not realize that their own liberation was at stake, too. The exclusive concern for what one can do for the needy other is not only incomplete but problematic. The contribution which the other might make in return is overlooked. Worse yet, that those needy others cannot be taken seriously in their difference from us leads to the attempt to mold them into our own image.

This attitude has had detrimental consequences for those who were supposed to be the recipients of works of mercy. George Tinker, a Native American scholar, tells the “history of good intentions” of the missions to Native Americans. Despite the moral integrity of the missionaries and the fact that they did not benefit from exploitation themselves, they nevertheless facilitated exploitation by others. Tinker traces this phenomenon back to an unconscious attitude of condescension, tied to the idealization of the missionaries’ own white culture. This made it impossible to learn from the Native American other. In regard to the more recent context, Robert Allen Warrior, another Native American scholar, sees a problem in that “liberals and conservatives alike” have decided to come to the rescue of Native Americans, since they are “always using their [own] methods, their
Warrior sees hope only where Christians are finally starting to listen more carefully to the other in need.

Among those who exalt orthopraxis apart from the means of grace, a similar pattern of control seems to be repeated in the relation to God. It is this problem which the orthodox critics have sensed so well. The focus on orthopraxis, centered in the power of the modern human self, tends to concentrate on the self's reach for God. The patronizing tendency in which the charitable self usurps the needy other is also implicit in relation to God. There is a very real danger that God becomes a function of the well-meaning individual.

If, however, works of mercy are understood as means of grace, they can be seen as what they are: channels of grace. The one-way street of liberal charity, leading from the self to the other and from the self to God, opens up into a two-way street. The self acting on behalf of the other is no longer the one in charge but a recipient. In working for others, Christians are first of all recipients of the grace of God. Those who do works of mercy are themselves transformed in their encounters with the needy other. In this connection, the relationship to the needy other contributes to the relationship to the divine Other as well. Now the self is gradually opening up to the transforming power of God's grace. Only as orthopraxis becomes a two-way street can we realize what many of the oppressed have known all along: The liberation of the oppressed is tied to the transformation of those who volunteer to help.

This account helps to better understand what is actually experienced by Christians of all walks of life who have on occasion been forced out of their personal safety zones. Many people in our churches have actually been transformed by their encounters with needy neighbors. All that theology needs to do is to further clarify these dynamics and to correct misunderstandings.

The earlier set of problems, a one-sided concern for the works of piety which forgets that works of mercy are means of grace, is perhaps more difficult to analyze. Wesley is quite concerned about this because he knows that people have fallen from grace simply because they did not pay attention to the works of mercy.22

No doubt, an exclusive focus on the works of piety, including prayer, reading the Scripture, and Holy Communion is not enough. But what precisely is the problem? At first sight it looks as if those concerned with works of piety know what those concerned with works of mercy did not know, namely that Christianity is not a set of
one-way streets, moving from the self to the other and from the self to God. For those who understand the thrust of the works of piety correctly, the focus is reversed. The divine-human relationship is no longer initiated by humanity, leading to God, but runs from God to humanity. Means of grace are channels of God's grace and must be used accordingly. Thus, it may seem as if all that one needs to do here is to add works of mercy on top of works of piety.

The real problem, however, cuts deeper. The focus on works of piety may cover up yet another set of blind spots. The most drastic problem occurs when means of grace are mistaken for the thing itself. One example is the confusion of the Bible as the word of God with the Word of God in many Protestant circles. If the Bible is a means of grace, then it is a means of God's speech; but it is not automatically identical to it. This is the problem addressed by Wesley in the “Means of Grace” and picked up faithfully by his interpreters.23

But even where this is clear, an exclusive focus on the works of piety tends to neglect a concern for the needy other, which is God's own concern. The problem is that, in focusing exclusively on God's relation to humanity in the works of piety, the sacramental character of one's involvement with the neighbor cannot be fully appreciated. Simply adding works of mercy on top of works of piety without accounting for their interrelation does not make much of a difference. Such works of mercy become mechanical actions, mere "applications" of a more important set of truths. There seems to be a connection between this theological analysis and the findings of a recent study by the Pew Research Center that "religious teachings have remarkably little influence in shaping people's attitudes on broad social issues like welfare and the role of women in the workplace."24 This bifurcation can also be found in many of our churches.

The trouble is that where the relation to the neighbor is not taken into account as means of grace, the traditional means of grace—reading of the Bible, participating in Holy Communion, and praying—are left without a double-check. The concern for the move from God to us might lead to a cover-up in which God's grace becomes self-serving, covering up the fact that the faithful may not be interested in anything but themselves and their own salvation. Ultimately, the Christian self is not transformed, and the works of piety lose their challenge. Adding works of mercy on top of works of piety does not lead automatically to the quantum leap that we are looking for.

In this way, both the liberal and the orthodox modes ultimately miss both the love of the human other and the divine Other. The orthodox
concern for God’s relation to us is in danger of covering up Christian self-interest in the name of God. If the relation to the needy other is lost out of sight, there is no double-check of our relation to the divine Other, as the writer of 1 John already knew. The concern for the wholly Other does not necessarily overcome the self-centeredness of theology. Theology must ask itself, How can the concern for God’s sovereignty be misused to cover up that self-centeredness and parochial character which is so typical of “first world” theology?

On the other hand, the concern of orthopraxis in relation to others and to God, even if pursued with the purest of intentions, is in danger of leading to a form of self-centeredness that is ultimately unable to see anything in the other but its own mirror-image. No wonder it is not able to find God present there either! The focus on right praxis needs to clarify how its concern for the needy other functions. Those who take this approach must be able to face up to the self-critical question, “Who put the other in this place?” and thus to become aware of their own need for God’s liberating power.

Beyond Orthodoxy and Orthopraxis

The challenge of taking a clue from Wesley’s position is that often the results cannot easily be appropriated either by the orthodoxy or the orthopraxis camp. Preaching on the Sermon on the Mount, Wesley makes it clear that “whatever creeds we may rehearse; whatever professions of faith we make; whatever number of prayers we may repeat, whatever thanksgivings we read or say to God,” we may still miss the mark. The same is true for those who follow the first two General Rules of doing no harm and doing good.25 Orthodoxy in itself is not sufficient. Neither is orthopraxis. In Wesley’s example, instead of that separation of theology and ethics which has been a constant temptation in the history of modern theology (that is, instead of the separation between orthopraxis and orthodoxy), we find the roots of a full-fleshed spirituality which ties everything together in terms of love of God and love of neighbor.

Yet Wesley’s concern for the means of grace and the power of the Spirit is not simply “high-church evangelicism,” as Albert Outler has assumed in another context, in the sense of having it both ways.26 Likewise, Wesley is not seeking only a middle road between orthodoxy and orthopraxis. While Outler notes correctly that Wesley...
was not interested in playing the works of piety and works of mercy off each other, this does not mean that he is leaving both virtually unchanged, in a harmless bifurcation. Wesleyan spirituality transforms both elements, orthodoxy and orthopraxis.

First of all, Wesley develops a spirituality that continues to transform the orthodox and high-church traditions. Mainstream Anglican theology did not include the works of mercy in the means of grace tradition in the same way that Wesley did. Wesley’s emphasis on the relation between works of piety and works of mercy aims at reconstructing both elements. The basic point that I am arguing here is that we must expand the commonly accepted insight that Wesley always relates doctrine to issues of Christian praxis. It is generally acknowledged that this concern refers to the relevance of doctrine to praxis. But we still need to explain how faithful Christian praxis (which does not forget about the needy) in turn also helps to reshape matters of doctrine. Outler’s helpful point that Wesley was a “folk-theologian” must be understood in a more fundamental sense. Wesley was not concerned only about transmitting the Christian faith to common people. In taking seriously the works of mercy he also developed theological tools which (even though perhaps only in preliminary form) allowed him to listen to and learn from the people, so that in the end he, too, was changed.

Wesley’s spirituality, and this is my second point, also transforms the concern for right action. Including the works of mercy into the means of grace is a radical challenge not only for those who are not concerned about right action but especially for those who are. Works of mercy are no longer one-way streets. Combined with works of piety, they invite an encounter with God which offers a substantial reconstruction of the powers of the modern liberal self and its tendency to assimilate everything to its own interests. This is what many of the so-called contextual theologies still need to realize. The theological task is not simply to adapt Christianity to one’s own context. The works of piety (reading the Bible, celebrating Holy Communion, praying) help to guide works of mercy in the search for those contexts where God’s saving presence is most needed today. The basic challenge for the church, then, is to search for God’s own works in favor of those in need and to join God there.

One example of how both works of mercy and works of piety come together is Holy Communion. We must realize that the Christ whom we meet at the Communion table and in the liturgy of the church...
cannot be another Christ than the one we meet in the needy other, the marginalized. Holy Communion is communion with Christ, who is both "sitting at the right hand of God" and walking the dusty roads of this world. Communion is therefore no longer merely a mystical and private transaction between God and the churched. Communion includes God's concern for all of creation, especially those who are most needy, eating and drinking together with them at the table.

To try to combine the concern for orthodoxy and orthopraxis into a middle road between both would, therefore, be a fatal misunderstanding. To leave it there would mean to perpetuate the bifurcation in the contemporary church. If the orthodox and liberal camps do not communicate, both will ultimately leave the modern self untouched and in charge: the liberals glorifying in the power of the self and the conservatives sheltering it in a religious escape. Facing this challenge, the task of theology is to give an account of how both elements, works of mercy and works of piety, reconstruct themselves whenever they are brought into a dialogue. More specifically yet, both need to be reconstructed in light of God's own praxis. Both the concern for right doctrine and the concern for right praxis are far too important to be left to the various camps. Contrary to what much of contemporary theology still seems to tell us in one way or another, the Christian faith is not first of all about either orthopraxis or orthodoxy, taking one or the other (either doctrine and piety or the acting self) as a starting point.

Theology needs to try to discern God's presence in relation to the church's self-presence. Wesley seems to have sensed this in his call for a "religion that is spirit and life; the dwelling in God and God in thee." This is the true importance of the means of grace. The key to understanding those means is not primarily the concern for right doctrine or right action. The means of grace are a central place for experiencing God's gracious presence in specific locations with those who need help the most.

God's gracious presence, experienced through the various means of grace, is the context in which both orthodoxy and orthopraxis come together. In the experience of God's presence, Christian doctrine and Christian praxis are intertwined. Here we are at the very heart of Wesleyan theology and doctrine. Theology—no longer being either a catalogue of doctrines subsequently applied to ethics or exclusively preoccupied with questions of individual praxis or personal piety—can then be properly understood as reflection on praxis. And
this means God's praxis in relation to our own. In this way theology can be renewed and transformed creatively.

**The Two Poles of Spirituality**

We have already seen how love of God and love of neighbor are related for Wesley. Wesley's interpretation of the Gospel warning not to "lay up treasures upon the earth" is a good illustration, for it points away from our fixation on anything other than God. The love of God is absolutely central. Yet when Wesley encourages "laying up treasures in heaven," he does not first of all talk about the utterly transcendent. Wesley does not waste any time to point to the neighbor in need. If this were simply good moral advice, the theological reader could move on. But here we are back at where we started, at the connection between the human other and the divine Other. The concern for laying up treasures with the heavenly Other makes sense only if it is tied to the needy other.

Doing works of mercy, laying up treasures in heaven, or whatever other expressions Wesley uses, is aimed specifically at those most in need. In his own way, Wesley arrives at a "preferential option for the poor," taking seriously Matthew 25 and other biblical passages. In recent scholarship there is broad agreement that for Wesley the poor "are at the heart of the evangel and that life with the poor is constitutive of Christian discipleship." We are now clearer about the theological connections: Any option for the poor must first of all be God's own option for the poor.

Wesleyan theology must deal with two poles, God and the poor. This reminds us that God's presence in Christ is always tied to specific locations. The encounter with those in need sheds light on our understanding of God. If works of mercy are real means of grace, a neat separation of God's presence from God's identity is no longer possible. That is to say, works of mercy, the encounters with the needy, are channels of God's grace which help us better understand who God is. While works of mercy do not tell the whole story, they do in fact offer a glimpse of God's identity, as Jesus' own story shows.

We meet God and Christ in feeding the hungry, caring for the sick, helping the poor. It is not just that we encounter some abstract presence. On the contrary, God in fact shows God's own face. No method of correlation needs to be implied here. I am not talking about
an inherent quality of the oppressed which would point us to God but about seeking God where God has said God would be. Obviously this is not yet a complete doctrine of God, but our thinking about God can no longer do without this impulse, and neither the orthodoxy nor the orthopraxis camps have paid sufficient attention to it yet. In this light the contribution of theologies from the margins can no longer be classified and put aside as “special interest theologies.” God’s own interest in Christ and the Holy Spirit is at stake. The church cannot bypass this fact.

Therefore, the judgment that “modern Methodism” suffers from “little spiritual power and very limited intercourse with God” is true only if the classic Wesleyan concern for works of mercy and the poor is misunderstood as a one-way street. Nevertheless, this comment still serves as a warning for Methodist theology, even though the question of the relationship to God has now to be seen in the more specific light of the encounter with those at the margins. The ultimate focus of Wesleyan spirituality is not first of all the praxis of the “people called Methodists,” orthopraxis, but the discernment of, and response to, the triune God’s presence and praxis in the world.

God’s Praxis

The interdependence of orthodoxy and orthopraxis for which I am arguing is, in some ways, already part of the theological landscape. A number of recent resolutions of the General Conference of the United Methodist Church could serve as examples of an ongoing attempt to tie together belief and praxis more closely. “Toward a New Beginning Beyond 1992,” for example, a 1992 resolution, is striving for the interrelation of Christian doctrine and praxis. Yet there are still gaps. The concern for “nurture,” “outreach,” and “witness” does not go much beyond the old concern for orthopraxis; a call to repentance and the question of what God teaches us in the marginalized other are missing. In this context, the invitation “to meet with local people from racial/ethnic-minority communities in their own setting” might lead to spectatorship rather than to conversion.

There are now various theological models available which are related to new ways of living the Christian life, beyond orthodoxy and orthopraxis. For Latin America Gustavo Gutierrez has created a new paradigm when he understands theology as “critical reflection on

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Christian praxis in light of the Word.\textsuperscript{39} In the North American context Frederick Herzog's reconstruction of theology in terms of God-Walk, Theop-raxis, Christo-praxis and Spirit-praxis inviting Christian discipleship is still one of the primary models.\textsuperscript{40}

Christian practice seems to be ahead of theology, as the example of United Methodist Covenant Discipleship groups shows.\textsuperscript{41} These groups, reclaiming the Methodist heritage of bands and classes, are tying together four elements: acts of compassion, acts of justice, acts of worship, and acts of devotion. Some theological schools and seminaries who are now beginning to take seriously the field of urban ministry also are in a good position to provide a new theological consciousness.

On these grounds, both the concern for right doctrine and the concern for right praxis can be reconstructed theologically. In order to go beyond frameworks that are caught up in self-referentiality, a basic openness to both the needy other and the divine Other must be recovered. While the orthopraxis impasse sheds light on the limits of modernity and the power of the modern self, the orthodox impasse may shed light on the limits of a concern for God's Otherness which fails because it neglects the actual plight of the other.

The basic point is that the encounter with the needy other and the divine Other leads to a reconstruction of both the moral self (orthopraxis) and the doctrinal teachings of the church (orthodoxy). Here a suggestion for the further development of theology in the twenty-first century crystallizes. What would happen if the basic point of the theological search is neither orthopraxis nor orthodoxy but God's own praxis, initiating and inviting both the love of God and the love of neighbor? So far, it appears, we have only scratched the surface of this question.

Notes

2. Cf. Borgen, \textit{John Wesley and the Sacraments}.
5. Ibid. The three notions of scripture, prayer, holy communion have a sound basis in the official Anglican formularies, Prayer Book, Ordinal, Homilies, and the Catechism.
12. Wesley lists some of these fruits of the Spirit which Paul mentions in Gal. 5:22-23, "long-suffering, gentleness, meekness, goodness, fidelity, temperance."
14. John Wesley, "On Zeal," 314. Ole Borgen, in John Wesley and the Sacraments, 105, lays too much emphasis on the works of piety, which he asserts are "of the greatest importance for Wesley."
16. For Wesley the works of mercy are not just "prudential" in the sense that they would be optional means of grace which may or may not be used according to changing circumstances. It has often been overlooked that Wesley's distinction between "instituted" and "prudential" means of grace does not apply here, for works of mercy are not listed in either category. See John Wesley, "Minutes of Several Conversations between the Rev. Mr. Wesley and others, from the year 1744, to 1789," 323-324. This seems to be overlooked by Knight, The Presence of God in the Christian Life, 5.
17. Knight, The Presence of God, 13, defines works of mercy as means of grace "which encourage openness to the presence of God" as opposed to means which "describe the character and activity of God." According to Knight, God's character is described by scripture, preaching, eucharist, and "prayers of the tradition."
19. Ibid., 17.
20. Ibid., 3.


24. Quoted in (25 June, 1996) *The New York Times*, June 25, 1996. At the same time, the survey found that religious teaching had its greatest effect on moral and sexual issues, especially abortion and homosexuality.


30. It has been argued that the notions of orthodoxy and orthopraxis are tied together by a third term, orthopathy. Cf. Theodore H. Runyon, "A New Look at ‘Experience,’” *Drew Gateway* (Fall 1987): 44–55. Contrary to Runyon’s intention, however, this emphasis might still wind up focusing on the Christian self feeling its religious pulse.


32. The crucial issue of the concrete shape of Wesley’s praxis together with his concern for the poor is neglected in Randy L. Maddox’s article “John Wesley—Practical Theologian?” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 23 (1988): 101-111.


34. M. Douglas Meeks, "Introduction: On Reading Wesley with the Poor," in *The Portion of the Poor: Good News to the Poor in the Wesleyan Tradition*, ed. M. Douglas Meeks (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 9. See also the contributions of the various authors in the volume.


36. As Craig B. Gallaway, "The Presence of Christ with the Worshipping Community: A Study in the Hymns of John and Charles Wesley," Ph.D. dissertation, Emory University, (1988), 226. has pointed out, this is exactly the concern of the Wesley hymns: "The spirituality of these hymns is not political in the sense that it lays down a specific social ethic. But it is political in the sense that it challenges and transforms the way people see themselves in relation to God, and to each other... At the center of this spirituality... is the recognition of Christ’s continuing presence by the Spirit in history with the community of his people."


40. Frederick Herzog, *God Walk: Liberation Shaping Dogmatics* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1988). In an instructive article entitled "United Methodism in Agony," *Perkins Journal* 28 (Fall 1974): 1–10, Herzog has argued for a constructive interrelation of three concerns that were not yet brought together in the United Methodist Church, the doctrinal mandate, the concern for liberation, and the challenge of minorities.

Earthrise: A Call to Prayer, A Call for Creation

Andrew D. Reichert

I was one-and-a-half years old on Christmas Eve in December of 1968, when, almost a quarter of a million miles away from the earth, three men disappeared for thirty-four minutes. Aboard Apollo 8, William Anders, Frank Borman, and James Lovell travelled behind the moon, thus becoming the first human beings ever to enter lunar orbit.

As their spacecraft emerged from the far side of the moon, theirs were the first human eyes to see Earth appear on the lunar horizon. At 8:40 p.m. on that Christmas Eve, Anders spoke to nearly half a billion TV viewers, all of whom were also watching the earth slowly rise over the bleak lunar landscape. "For all the people on Earth," he said, "the crew of Apollo 8 has a message we would like to send you." After pausing for a moment, Anders continued. As the static sounds of speaking from space added more wonder to his message, he recited, "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth."

Now I know why I'm here.
Not for a closer look at the moon,
but to look back at our home, the earth.
—Astronaut Alfred Worden

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There was another pause, as the tiny spaceship with its three astronauts continued on course around the moon, the earth ever rising in the distance. Again Anders’s voice broke the silence of outer space:

And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, Let there be light: and there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness. And God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And the evening and the morning were the first day. And God said, Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters. And God made the firmament, and divided the waters which were under the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament: and it was so. And God called the firmament Heaven. And the evening and the morning were the second day. And God said, Let the waters under the heaven be gathered together unto one place, and let the dry land appear: and it was so. And God called the dry land Earth; and the gathering together of the waters called he Seas: and God saw that it was good. (Gen. 1:2-10, KJV)

After another brief interval amidst the crackle of space communication, Borman concluded with a short benediction: “And from the crew of Apollo 8,” he said, “we close with good night, good luck, a Merry Christmas, and God bless all of you, all of you on the good earth.”

People were awestruck. Never before had such a feat been accomplished. From The Washington Post:

At some point in the history of the world, someone may have read the first ten verses of the Book of Genesis under conditions that gave them greater meaning than they had on Christmas Eve. But it seems unlikely . . . . This Christmas will always be remembered as the lunar one.

And from The New York Times, which boldly proclaimed Apollo 8 to be “the most fantastic voyage of all times”: “There was more than
narrow religious significance in the emotional high point of their fantastic odyssey."

After ten successful lunar orbits, Apollo 8 reentered the earth's atmosphere at 25,000 mph, splashing down south of Hawaii on December 27, 1968. Apollo 8's color photographs of the small bluish-green, marble-like "earthrise," gently rising over the lunar horizon, amidst the vast, black background of outer space, led humanity to "realize as never before that their planet was worth working to save. The concept that Earth was itself a kind of spacecraft needing attention to its habitability spread more widely than ever."

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A little over a year before these historic words from outer space, Christianity was indicted as the historical basis for much of the ecological crisis on the "good earth." In an article published in *Science*, the historian Lynn White, Jr., charged that "especially in its Western form, Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen." Returning to the first Genesis account of creation, White wrote that

*By gradual stages a loving and all-powerful God had created light and darkness, the heavenly bodies, the earth and all its plants, animals, birds, and fishes. Finally, God had created Adam and, as an afterthought, Eve to keep man from being lonely. Man named all the animals, thus establishing his dominion over them. God planned all of this explicitly for man's benefit and rule: no item in the physical creation had any purpose save to serve man's purposes.*

Although strongly critiqued, both pro and con, since first being published, White's stance appears to be based clearly in the biblical text. In Gen. 1:28 God tells Adam and Eve to "be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth" (KJV). The Hebrew word for *subdue* used in this passage is *kabash*, which when translated into English, means "to tread down, disregard, conquer, subjugate, and violate—bringing into bondage." Such would seem to be what humanity has done—and is doing to the earth. War-torn and ravaged, as well as famished in parts, while predictions of global warming are
becoming more and more a reality—it seems that humanity has kabashed the earth.

Such action stems from an instrumental rather than an intrinsic understanding of nature's worth. This instrumental understanding suggests that plants and animals in the natural world have significance only to the extent that they are useful to the needs of human beings. Thus, an evolutionary-type hierarchy can be understood in which humans, subordinate only to God, rank higher than animals and plants, which in turn rank higher than minerals and soil. This hierarchical reasoning suggests that more "developed" humans, animals, and plants are of greater value than less "developed" humans, animals, and plants, which in turn have worth only to the extent that they can be used by the more "developed" forms of life.

Perhaps the contemporary irony of the first creation account of Genesis is that to some degree it has been misread with an evolutionary frame of mind, in which "higher," more "developed" species have assumed a God-given right to dominate "lower," less "developed" species. This hierarchical approach is what Rosemary Radford Ruether called the "big Lie . . . that starts with nonmaterial spirit (God) as the source of the chain of being and continues down to nonspiritual 'matter' as the bottom of the chain of being and the most inferior, valueless, and dominated point in the chain of command."9 Like a "Tower of Babel," the outline below incorporates issues of racism and sexism to depict the "Big Lie," the idolatrous "chain of command":

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Perhaps what can easily be noted from the “tower” above is how quickly life-forms can be reduced to objects as one ventures down from the lofty heights of “higher being.” Objectified, such life forms are easily manipulated by “higher” life which will value “lower” life only to the extent that it is instrumentally helpful to the “higher” life.

Referring to concepts of Albert Schweitzer and Martin Buber, United Methodist Bishop Emerson S. Colaw writes about a “reverence for life that includes a recognition that air, earth, and water have a life of their own and must be respected . . . When abusing nature,” the bishop writes, “we are violating a personality. We must not think of nature as an ‘it’ but a ‘thou.’” Similarly, the ethicist James M. Gustafson distinguishes between the “I-It” and the “I-Thou” relationship of humanity with the rest of creation:

*When other persons and nature and its parts are “thingified,” related only as Its for their utility value, there is a*
diminishment not only of the other but also of human lives. The sense of life as Spirit, the sense of the world as a vessel through which persons relate to God and God to persons begins to evaporate. The mystery of life is lost. Despotism is a maximal I-It relation to the natural environment.11

Webster’s Dictionary defines a despot as an “absolute ruler . . . with unlimited powers.” Interestingly, anthropocentric is defined as “conceiving of everything in the universe in terms of human values.” Selfish, of course, is being “too much concerned with one’s own welfare or interests.” Perhaps it is time to consider that much of humanity is selfish, thinking that it is the end-all, be-all of the universe, justified to dominate and subdue all of creation rather than helping to serve it.

But the command to serve creation is equally scriptural. In Gen. 2:15 it is written that “the Lord God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it” (KJV). The Hebrew word for dress is abad, which when translated into English, means “to work and serve.”12 Similarly, the Hebrew word for keep is shamar, meaning “to guard and protect.”13 Although many people maintain an instrumental view that the earth is for humanity, Gen. 2:15 clearly states the reverse: it is humanity who is for the earth. That is to say, the central vocation of humanity is to guard and protect, indeed, to serve the natural world of creation.

Such a stance topples the idolatrous “Tower of Babel” depicted above. As well it should. The notion of human domination is fraught with danger for humankind, a reality that is reflected in the text itself. The eleventh-century exegete Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac (known as Rashi) noted the following regarding the word dominion in Gen. 1:26:

The Hebrew word yirdu connotes both “dominion” (derived from radah and “descent” (derived from yarad): when man is worthy, he has dominion over the animal kingdom; when he is not, he descends below their level and the animals rule over him.14

* * *

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Given the staggering statistics of humanity’s ecological devastation of the earth, ours may very well be a way of rapid descent rather than dominion. Indeed, I recently told a professor over a cup of coffee, “I think the only thing we can really do is pray.” Staring into our coffee cups while aromatic steam ascended to our noses, we both chuckled, realizing how prayer is too easily left as the effort of last resort, when it might best be considered first and foremost.

“Am I being too pessimistic?” I asked him.

“No... just realistic,” he said.

Contemplating, I thought of my sister, who has always contended that over coffee, oftentimes, one can return to something resembling “center.” A prayerful and contrite return to “center”—that is what humanity needs, for it has gone astray, “about a half-bubble off plumb,” to borrow an expression from the writer William Least Heat-Moon. Unfortunately, however, I fear that we really do not know how to return to that midpoint.

“Do you know what we’d have to do to close the hole in the ozone layer?” Michael McCulley, a former space shuttle astronaut, once asked me.

Afraid of the answer, I said nothing.

Responding to my silence, McCulley said, “We’d have to park every car tomorrow—and keep ’em parked.”

“Yeah, I know,” I mumbled.

“That’s just not goin’ to happen, Andy.”

McCulley is right. Healing creation is not going to happen—at least not overnight, and I dare say not without prayer, either.

Saying that “we must change or be changed,” the farmer, ecologist, and writer Wendell Berry notes, “We must learn to grow like a tree, not like a fire.” Realizing the absurdity of infinite economic growth in a world of finite resources, Berry writes:

\[\text{The economies of our communities and households are wrong. The answers to the human problems of ecology are to be found in economy. And the answers to the problems of economy are to be found in culture and in character.}

\text{We must achieve the character and acquire the skills to live much poorer than we do. We must waste less. We must do more for ourselves and each other... The great obstacle is simply this: the conviction that we cannot change because we are} \]
dependent on what is wrong. But that is the addict's excuse, and we know that it will not do.\textsuperscript{18}

Forgetting our ecological interdependence with all of creation, we have become addicted to our economies. We have become so engrossed in the language of "dollars and sense," as the Cable News Network puts it, that we can hardly make sense of ourselves without reference to our dollars and cents. Theologian Sallie McFague notes, "Ecology is not an extracurricular activity; rather, it must be the focus of one's work, the central hours of one's day, however that is spent."\textsuperscript{19}

Sadly, however, it is economy which has moved from the sidelines to the middle of our lives; economic concerns have become the focus of our work and the central hours of our days. Building momentum over time, our appetite for getting and spending, our raging fire, cannot be extinguished quickly. Rather, like a tree, we must learn to slowly but steadily move from our destructive path, returning to the center, where infinite economic growth in a world of finite resources is realized as the absurdity that it is.

\begin{quote}
In his book \textit{Young Men and Fire}, novelist Norman Maclean writes about the pioneering "Smokejumpers" of the 1940s. The elite fire-fighting force of the U.S. Forest Service, these men dared to parachute directly toward a forest fire. After they landed their job was to begin fighting it. Characterized as a rough and rugged bunch, Maclean recounts a ranger's response to a Forest Service exam. "What would you do to control a crown fire?" was the question; and the ranger's answer: "Get out of the way and pray like hell for rain."\textsuperscript{20}

Granted, it is an ironic choice of words: praying like hell . . . but perhaps one applicable today given the ecological "fire" we face. And by praying, I do not necessarily mean petition: \textit{O God, save us from our destructive ways}. Rather, I am speaking about conversion—"a radical metanoia, a U-turn of the mind," as the theologian Lesslie Newbigin writes.\textsuperscript{21}

Prayer is a particular religious gesture; and gestures, notes Brett Webb-Mitchell, are "themselves, what help to define a culture or community like the Church and its various denominations."\textsuperscript{22} Thus, prayer as conversion could be the gesture to define a community which is creation-oriented in its practices. Such a community would have to move "from an economy based on consumption," Bishop Colaw writes, "to one that focuses on conservation."\textsuperscript{23}
The United States, a consumption-driven country which represents less than 5 percent of the world population but consumes over 30 percent of the world’s resources, is a nation that values the principle of religious freedom. If more and more religious US Americans were to take seriously the gesture of a prayerful life, along with a conversion type of attitude of helping to heal creation, then, like smokejumpers fighting a raging fire, the way of ecological devastation might begin to give way to a more promising future.

In her book *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography*, the poet and essayist Kathleen Norris describes the plains around her small-town home in Lemmon, South Dakota. “On a clear night,” she writes, “you can see not only thousands of stars but the lights of towns fifty miles away. Scattered between you and the horizon, the lights of farm houses look like ships at sea.” What Norris has found through her prayerful conversion—“life in the slow lane,” as she puts it, is a “spiritual geography”—a sense of and respect for, as well as connection to, the land.

Ancient Israel had a sense of “spiritual geography.” Calling it “pure gift [and] radical grace,” the theologian Walter Brueggemann notes that the land of ancient Israel was a gift from God. “This is gift-land,” Brueggemann writes, “people under gift are rare . . . [And] even rarer [are people] who stay that way and who do not forget.” Similar to grace, the land we live on is a gift. Our choice is clear: we can abuse that grace, thinking the land is ours to own and possess—or, as the stewards that we are, we can nurture that grace by serving the land, ever diligently tending to the earth’s needs.

John Wesley wrote in 1768 that a steward “is not at liberty to use what is lodged in his hands as he pleases, but as his master pleases.” Our master is God. God is whose we are, as the land on which we walk is also God’s; for Ps. 24:1 reminds us: “The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof; the world and they that dwell therein” (KJV).

Yes, the land is a gift—but a gift which has been entrusted, for stewardship is not ownership. “We are to love and hate,” wrote Wesley, “to rejoice and grieve, to desire and shun, to hope and fear, according to the rule (God’s) which prescribes whose we are, and whom we are to serve in all things.”

Serving God in all things begins with prayer. And prayer begins with silence. “Be still and know that I am God,” urges Ps. 46:10 (KJV). Oddly, the Hebrew word for be still is *raphah*, which among other possibilities can be translated into English as “slack, idle, and
slothful—even relaxing, curing, and being healed." Such are not necessarily pleasing qualities in our culture of busyness, darting to-and-fro, always doing this, doing that... on the go, got to go... doing, doing, doing... producing, producing, producing... consuming, consuming, consuming... Yet the Scriptures speak of being still and knowing that God is God. Such stillness, such knowledge begins with silence.

While teaching a class of girls how to "make silence," Norris writes, "We liked the way [silence] made a space for us in the midst of noise." Similarly, the theologian W. Paul Jones teaches monastic practices of silence and prayer to those who are not necessarily monks:

The intimate splendor of silence is the interiority of God. Wrapped in an immense indigency that echoes the chambers of the heart, our images of God evaporate, until silence becomes the mystery which is prayer... "It is the quiet self " who hears the birds at daybreak, a child giggling, wind in the cedars, the crackling of fire... Heard from a silent center, such sounds render living a lively gift of praise. "

We must learn to "make silence," to be still and know that God is God; for in such silent stillness, we can hear that humanity is not the end-all, be-all of the earth. Rather, humanity is but one part of God’s creation. And God willing, through such a realization, we can begin to change. Considering an economy of conservation rather than consumption, our conversion can be one in which we begin to grow like a tree rather than like a fire.

Awaking to creation this morning, I heard the assuring sound of a mourning dove, cooing in the distance. Looking through the trees with coffee cup in hand (its contents brewed with a washable filter), I strained my eyes in an attempt to see my winged friend. I could not find the creature. But as more and more birds began their early morning symphony of song and the sun steadily moved higher and higher on the earth’s horizon, I realized that humanity stands at the beginning of a new dawn—one which can continue its descent toward destruction or one which can lead toward a new and better day for tomorrow—indeed, a new earthrise.
Notes

3. Ibid., 183.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid., 174. The term earthrise was made popular when a photograph taken from Apollo 8 was printed on a US stamp entitled “Earthrise.”
6. Ibid., 183.
12. Strong, #5647.
13. Ibid., #8104.
18. Wendell Berry, What Are People For? (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1990), 198, 201.
23. Colau, 8.
27. Ibid., 50.
29. Ibid., 421.
30. Strong, #7503.
After I had been a full-time pastor in parishes for a few years, I returned to graduate school. In the weeks before my move, I had a recurring conversation with a wide range of people. I would tell of my plans to go back to school. “Great!” would be the enthusiastic response. “What are you going to study?” I would reply with answering enthusiasm, “Old Testament.” Faces would fall, eyes glaze, voices go flat. “Oh.” This happened so often that I was tempted to say carpentry or flower arranging or quantum physics just to see if the reaction would be any different. A few times someone was brave enough to ask “Why?”—not without a touch of reproach. Now that I teach Old Testament in a seminary I have almost gotten used to the puzzlement. Once in a while someone will venture timidly, “But you are a Christian, aren’t you?” And I am as much at a loss as my conversation partner to explain, in one or two short sentences, why a Christian would “waste” her career on the Old Testament.

Given the state of ignorance of the Bible on the part of a large number of incoming seminarians, it is no surprise to find the ordinary churchgoer bewildered when asked to consider the Old Testament seriously, that is, as something other than a collection of predictions.
about Jesus, interspersed with battles, begettings, and legalistic
minutia. Given the reality that the vast majority of sermons preached
in mainline Protestant churches are based on Gospel texts, I do not
anticipate a change in this situation any time soon. And given the
nature of the lectionary itself, I am not sure that even increasing the
percentage of sermons based primarily on Old Testament texts would
significantly increase our hearers' understanding of either the content
or the "relevance" of the Old Testament.

The six texts before us for Ash Wednesday and Sundays in Lent,
Year C, provide an example of readings that can easily become
stumbling blocks to comprehension, especially for people whose
primary interaction with Scripture is listening to what is read and
preached on Sunday mornings. The pericopes range from early
Genesis to post-exilic prophecy, though they are not presented in
chronological order. Two of the six have bits excised from their
middles. But, most damaging to the cause of comprehension, all of
them seem to have been chosen to bolster whatever we think the
Gospel reading for the day is about.

Now, I do not mean to turn this into a diatribe on the making of
lectionaries. I certainly do believe that it is legitimate to relate Old
Testament lections with those from the New Testament. In the ensuing
pages I will discuss each Old Testament text in some detail. Since these
pericopes do not form one extended section of scripture but rather are
diverse in time and style as well as source and audience, I have not
attempted a seamless essay of effortless-sounding connections. No two of
the following sections are quite the same in terms of emphasis or tone.
Some give more attention to details of language; others are closer to
potential sermons I might preach. Motifs from one text can be found in
others; an emphasis one Sunday will probably resonate through other
weeks as well. All of this is to say that I both confess and apologize for
my inability to make tidy and free-standing exegetical comments.

In his early days, Adolph Hitler spent some time aspiring to be a
painter. Many years ago Life magazine printed a picture he had
painted of a grand steamship on the ocean. But a good half of the
ship is obscured by billows of thick, black smoke. He had
apparently tired of the subject before finishing the ship and found it
much easier to cover the remaining portion of the canvas with black
smudges than to finish the detailed work. The discussions of the
following texts differ in length, in part because I hope to avoid the
smoke-smudge syndrome.
Similarly, because I do not consider the sermon an appropriate place for lectures on Israel’s history, source criticism, the Documentary Hypothesis, or any of a myriad of things we Old Testament professors teach, I have tried to avoid “lecturing” on those topics here. All of those historical-critical and other scholarly matters may be likened to underwear: you want to have it on but you do not want it to show.

February 25, 1998—Ash Wednesday
Joel 2:1-2, 12-17
Ps. 51:1-17
2 Cor. 5:20b-6:10
Matt. 6:1-6, 16-21

Joel begins with a warning, using the military signal of a blaring trumpet or the ram’s horn (shofar). As is the case with most symbols, the blasting trumpet has been employed to signify more than one thing. It is clearly used as a military signal and warning of impending disaster (cf. Jer. 4:5, 19, 21; 6:11; Hos. 5:8; Zeph. 1:16). Even the military use of the shofar has more than a single meaning, however, as the familiar tales of Joshua at Jericho’s walls (Joshua 6) and Gideon with his minuscule army against the Midianites (Judges 7) show. A blast of the horn can also mean “Cease!” or “Disperse!” (2 Sam. 2:28; 18:16; 20:1; 20:22). Joel will play off some of the multiple meanings when the phrase in 2:1 is repeated at 2:15.

The warning in v. 1 heralds the approach of “the Day of the LORD.” With near unanimity the prophets see the Day of the LORD as fearsome desolation (Isa. 13:9), darkness (Amos 5:18; 5:20; Joel 2:2; 3:4) or overwhelming battle (Ezek. 13:5; Joel 2:11).

Two pairs or synonyms are used in v. 2: darkness and darkness, cloud and cloud. Then there is a switch so abrupt as to cause many translators to scramble to fix the text. “As dawn spreads upon the hills . . .”, Joel begins. But how can dawn be a comparison for darkness? So some translators emend to “blackness” (RSV, NRSV, NEB, REB) or “darkness” (TEV), although others do allow “dawn” (JB, NIV, NAB, NASV).

How does one describe the indescribable? Joel tells us in this verse that the coming Day of the LORD is unique. What words will be adequate for that? If it cannot be described adequately, at least the
prophet can make it clear that what he is talking about is not the same as anything else, and so he speaks of a darkness which is like dawn. Joel is not without precedent in this anti-logical practice. Both Exod. 20:15 and Deut. 4:21 describe what the Israelites perceived at the Sinai theophany by saying they "saw the voice." Again, translators are wont to "correct" this obvious slip with phrases such as "they perceived the thunder." Similarly, Genesis 18 describes a momentous visit to Abraham and Sarah by—well, by whom? Depending on which verse and which version you consult, the visitors are three men, two angels, and God, the Lord, or three angels. Every shift does not denote a different source clumsily attached. Rather, we are reminded that what Abraham and Sarah experienced that day cannot be captured by mere words, much less, in our times, by a made-for-TV-movie.

Over and over in these six texts for Lent we will be told of things that we do not understand, things that we do not understand because we cannot understand them. Asking questions about them, trying to figure them out, is not wrong per se, but we need to be careful not to spend all available time and mental energy on making scripture fit a system of logic that we can safely carry around inside our heads.

So one meaning of the spread of the darkness of the Day of the Lord as the dawn is that it is beyond our comprehension. Another meaning, I think, is that Joel is describing the coming of the Day as being as inexorable and as all-pervasive as the dawn. Ready or not, sunrise comes just about every 24 hours. No human force can either compel it or hold it at bay. (Jesus’ warning against trying to figure out the timing of the end comes to mind here: cf. Matt. 24:36, 42, 44.) Of course, Joel didn’t know about life above the Arctic Circle, but there, too, sunrise comes at the appointed time, even if the “night” has been several weeks long. The dawn spreads over all the landscape; no distinction is made between “deserving” and “undeserving,” between “faithful” and “unfaithful,” or between any other categories we may dream up. Thus, the Day of the Lord is coming on its own timetable; it is impervious to human efforts to hasten or retard its arrival; it will be a unique event in the world’s history; and it will cover everything and everyone (“all the inhabitants of the land” in v. 1).

The following nine verses—excised from the lectionary—are of horrifying descriptions of the “great and powerful army.” The figure is of a destroying army. A locust plague perhaps, drawing on material in chapter 1? Probably not, both because that has already happened and because what Joel envisions is something even worse than the worst
they have already seen. Whatever it is is vastly destructive, unstoppable, striking terror onto the faces of all witnesses. The sun, moon, and stars are overwhelmed by the power of the destruction. Most terrifying of all, the final verse of this excised portion shows the LORD as the commander of this army.

In the light (or rather overwhelming darkness) of the descriptions in verses 3-11, the proclamation of v. 12 comes as a shock. "Even now," says the LORD, even in the face of this overwhelming disaster, it may not be too late. The LORD says, "Return to me with all your heart." Simple words, which in their very simplicity we may misunderstand because we do not understand deeply enough or because, having found one meaning, we are content to stop without considering additional levels.

Return here is the verb with which the prophets are ever exhorting their listeners. The turn implied is one of 180 degrees. At times the focus of prophetic speech is on what is to be left behind, often expressed in the all-encompassing "evil ways" or "wicked doings" (2 Kings 17:13; Jer. 18:11; 25:5; 35:15; Ezek 14:6; 18:30). In other instances, the focus is on the direction toward which they are to turn, namely, the LORD (Hos. 14:3; Joel 2:13; 2 Chron. 30:6). These are not separate exhortations but the specifying of the two extremes of a continuum. If one is walking toward God, it is not in evil and wickedness. If one is walking in sin and transgression, it is not toward the LORD. (One is reminded of John Wesley's question about "going on toward perfection.") Human beings can move in only one direction at a time.

The phrasing in v. 12 adds another dimension, for it is the LORD speaking. Turn "to me." Along with the thunderous darkness of the prophet's vision there is the personal invitation of God, of the author of that vision and the disaster it portends. Neither the transcendent vision nor the immanent invitation cancels out the other.

In Zech. 1:3 and Mal. 3:7, both of which are older than Joel, the call "return to me" is followed by "and I will return to you," says the LORD. An even older prophetic voice, that of the eighth-century Amos, gives out with a solemn litany of Israel's refusal in the face of God's persistence and even the crescendo of plagues and punishments: "And you did not return to me" (Amos 4:6, 8, 9, 10, 11). The invitation may be spurned, whether it comes with promise or threat.

The turn is to be undertaken "with all your heart." We make metaphorical body divisions differently from the ancient Israelites.
(Actually, each culture seems to have its own variations.) Although our knowledge of anatomy and physiology recognizes the heart as a muscle which pumps blood, we still speak of it as the seat of emotions, most especially as the site of love. We contrast "heart" with "head," the site of rational thought. Biblical Hebrew, in contrast, assigns the heart the functions of thought and decision-making. Thus, to turn one's heart to the LORD says little about one's feelings but much about one's decisions and the actions that arise from them. From Deuteronomy onward, service to God and loyalty to the LORD are enjoined to be done "with all your heart." (Cf., among many, Deut. 4:29; 6:5; 10:12; 26:16; 30:6; Josh. 22:5; 1 Sam. 12:24; 1 Kings 2:4; Jer. 29:13; Ps. 119:2.) In a few contexts in English translations the connection between "heart" (Hebrew) and "mind/thought/decision" (English) shows clearly.

**Trust in the LORD with all your heart**
and do not rely on your own insight. (Prov. 3:5)

...for the LORD searches every mind ["hearts" in the Hebrew text] and understands every plan and thought. (1 Chr. 28:9)

Emotions—the province of the "heart" in English—are not volitional. Thoughts, and more especially decisions—the realm of the "heart" in Biblical Hebrew—are more nearly under human control and thus susceptible to exhortation and even legislation in ways not appropriate to emotions.

Joel next calls for customary liturgical activity: fasting, weeping, wailing. And again he adds a surprise. Along with the outward activities specified in v. 12b, there is to be an inner action: "Rend your hearts and not your clothing." The tearing of clothing was traditional in situations of grief (Judg. 11:35; 2 Sam. 3:31, 13:31), repentance (2 Kings 19:1, 22:11; Jer. 36:24; 2 Chron. 34:27), and other sorts of great calamity (Gen. 37:29; Num. 14:6; 1 Kings 21:27).

This change of heart/mind will accompany and make possible the "return to the LORD, your God" (13a). It is the very nature of God which both demands and enables this change and turn. In what sounds like a liturgical formula, Joel describes God as one who is gracious, compassionate, slow to anger, abounding in covenant faithfulness, and renouncing punishment (13b). This is all part of God's name and thus of God's character (cf. Exod. 34:6-7). Very similar recitals are found...
in different types of literature coming from different periods of Israel's history (Num. 14:18; Jon. 4:2; Ps. 86:15; 103:8; 145:8; Neh. 9:17). Shorter versions are similarly widespread (Ps. 111:4; 112:4; Neh. 9:31; 2 Chron. 30:9, among others).

Disaster is immanent. And a gracious God invites repentance. And—Joel continues his balancing act—even if repentance comes, the people cannot thereby compel God to relent. "Who knows?" asks Joel. There are two other occurrences of this phrase in similar contexts that are tantalizingly similar: 2 Sam. 12:22 and Jon. 3:9. The results of these two occasions were different, reinforcing the notion that God will not be compelled mechanically by any human activity.

In v. 15 Joel repeats the command of v. 1, but this time with a different objective. The trumpet is to be blown now to convene the entire community, similar to its use in Isa. 27:13. Perhaps in the background is also the note in Lev. 25:9 of the blast of the ram's horn on the Day of Atonement. Now the fast mentioned in v. 12 is to be implemented. All the people are to be gathered. The specifying of extremes (old ones and nursing babies, v. 16) is understood to include all the elements between the stated pair. Thus, young and old, male and female (an infant who is nursing cannot come without its mother!) are summoned. Even those who are specifically exempted by earlier legislation (engaged men and newlyweds excused from military service in Deut. 20:7; 24:5) are specifically not exempted here. The priests are to make their plea to the LORD in the presence of the entire community ("your people"). The request is that the simple question "Where is their God?"—at once a taunt made in the past (2 Kings 18:34; Isa. 36:19) and an accusation used by the prophets to reproach idolatry (Jer. 2:28)—not now be turned upon Israel.

And here our lection ends. Even if we assume that Israel thronged to the sanctified assembly Joel summons, we are not given God's answer here. There is no quick fix, no easy solution. And what we know of Israel's history after Joel's time bears this out.

The Gospel lesson appointed for Ash Wednesday (Matt. 6:1-6, 16-21) gives the preacher some obvious points of contact. Joel's call for inward rather than only outward action (hearts rather than garments being rent) finds its echo in Jesus' three examples of private rather than ostentatiously public piety: giving alms (vv. 2-4), praying (vv. 5-6), and fasting (vv. 16-18). The mocking question with which Joel ends ("Where is their God?") could also be asked of us. It is
implied in Jesus' words concluding the pericope: "Where your
treasure is, there your heart will be also."

March 1, 1998—The First Sunday in Lent
Deuteronomy 26:1-11
Ps. 91:1-2, 9-16
Rom. 10:8-13

Whether or not it is adequate to retain Gerhard von Rad's designation
of this text as a "little credo," 1 Deut. 26:1-11 can be characterized as a
liturgical text in that it gives instructions for actions and words to be
performed with the priest in the Temple ("the place that the LORD
your God will choose as a dwelling for his name," v. 2). This is a text of
remembrance and thanksgiving, accompanying offering and festivities.

All of the instructions in this passage are cast in the singular, a
distinction which, regrettably, is no longer possible in English despite
the South's informal plural form "y'all." The potential anonymity of
English collective you is thwarted in Hebrew by the specificity of the
singular. Although the book of Deuteronomy is presented in the form
of Moses' exhortation to the entire second generation of Israelites
immediately before they enter the Promised Land, the singular verbs
and singular pronouns keep everyone from allowing individual
responsibility to melt away/disperse into the generality of the crowd.

In the span of 11 verses, the LORD is specified nine times as "your
[singular] God." This is no anonymous deity. Neither is this a new
God concocted to suit the needs of the new situation of life in settled
agricultural surroundings, for the specified liturgy includes, in v. 7,
"the LORD, the God of our ancestors." There is both a present
relationship and a past history; there is both the remembrance of what
has gone before and the moving into a new and different set of
circumstances. These new circumstances are linked to the past both by
the continuity of the same LORD and by the new situation's being the
fulfillment of promises which that God made to their ancestors. Twice
the phrase "the land that the LORD your God is giving you" occurs,
making clear both the status of the land as gift and the the identity of
the Giver.

Verses 5 and 6 contain a profound shift. "He" (that is, my
wandering Aramean ancestor Jacob) went down to Egypt and "he"
sojourned there, growing from only a few to being a great nation. There the Egyptians oppressed "us," and God freed "us" from that oppression. On no level at all can that be a literally factual statement, since the generation who entered the land was, according to the narrative, the next generation after the Exodus from Egypt. Impossible chronology perhaps, but profound theology. Every succeeding generation can be incorporated into the community by the affirmation that we also are the ones who have been slaves in Egypt and who now have been liberated by God.

In technical ecclesiastical terms, this is anamnesis, the "not-forgetting" of our history. It is the active, participatory remembering not only of our history but thereby also of our identity. (See Laurence H. Stookey, Calendar: Christ’s Time for the Church [Nashville: Abingdon, 1996], chapter 1, for a good explanation of the meaning of this term.)

The historian-compilers of our books of 1 and 2 Kings, along with the prophets, are unflinching and unflattering in their diagnosis that Israel’s besetting temptation and sin was idolatry. Idolatry often happens in two stages. First we forget the L ORD. Then we craft some other god—or decide we no longer need mytho-poetic constructs and simply enthrone ourselves. Deut. 6:10-15 spells out the temptation. It is a clear warning lest, when the people had what they needed, they would forget its ultimate source.

The ger or "sojourner," is mentioned twice in today’s text. In v. 5 we recall our own history of being sojourners in Egypt. In v. 11 we are enjoined to take care that the sojourners are made welcome in our festivals of thanksgiving for the L ORD’S goodness.

It is hard to find an appropriate rendering for ger in v. 11. The RSV uses “sojourner,” which has a satisfyingly technical and religious feel to it. TEV and NJB both use “foreigner;” KJV and JB opt for “stranger.” Most popular today is “alien,” chosen by NEB, REB, NASB, NIV, NRSV, and NAB. That may well be the closest way to designate the status of those who have no status. The ger is not a citizen, and has no rights and no power. The ger has no patron—except, of course, for the L ORD. The ger is one of the trio of people without land or standing or patron for whom Israel is to be especially careful and for whom the L ORD is ultimate patron. The others under God’s particular care are the widow (a woman who is husbandless) and the orphan (a child who is fatherless, regardless of whether the mother is still living). We might
feel pinched to call the ger an "undocumented alien" today, but it might be the pinch of truth.

The instructions in our pericope conclude with rejoicing by the entire household. Since the offering is of the first of the harvest and since the community's crops would likely ripen at the same time, it is not a stretch to see this rejoicing as involving the entire community. The Levites, who have no cropland and thus have no harvest, are included. The undocumented aliens are also included.

The Gospel lesson for the first Sunday in Lent is Luke 4:1-13, the story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. What Satan offered Jesus—food, fortune, fame, and self-sufficient self-congratulation—were also tempting dangers when Israel was newly in the Promised Land. So also today. I would not try to line up neat correspondences between verses from Deuteronomy and verses from Luke. Still, one can identify many temptations which Deuteronomy is attempting to combat. Seductive voices tell us that new situations need new gods; that the community's responsibility doesn't have to be my responsibility; that what we have now is the result of our own perspicacity and hard work (with some fortuitous timing here and there perhaps); that religion is a private, individual affair, or a somber affair, or that it is to be limited to those who are like us and with whom we are comfortable.

The devil has no end of "opportune times" (Luke 4:13).

March 8, 1998—Second Sunday in Lent

Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18
Psalm 27
Phil. 3:7-4:1

Genesis 15:1 begins "After these things..." If this literary hinge were the only way biblical Hebrew narratives began, we might be safe in seeing nothing here except the notice that we are now beginning a new story. There are many places, Gen. 22:1; 39:7; and 40:1, for example, where a fuller understanding of the current narrative is made possible by calling to mind just which "things" we are now "after." Genesis 14 recounts battles and kidnapping and the blessing of Abram by King Melchizedek. After such tumultuous events, God's first word in chapter 15, "Do not be afraid," makes even more sense. God
continues, “I am your shield,” using a form of the same Hebrew word as in Gen. 14:20, where it is translated “delivered.” That is, the God who delivered Abram in the previous adventures is still with him to be his protection and deliverer.

“... the word of the Lord came to Abram...” So say the English translations. They are not wrong, but neither are they quite right enough. Biblical Hebrew has a perfectly serviceable common verb for come and it is not used here. In fact, at least 110 times (I may have missed some) we have the same phrase as in Gen. 15:1 and never once does “the word of the Lord” ever “come” to anyone with the regular “come” verb. Clearly this is an idiom, and idioms can be reduced to nonsense if each element is torn from its setting. Still, I think there is a nuance here which is important.

The verb in question is “to be, become, happen.” How would it sound to say “The word of the Lord happened to Abram?” The experience involves one’s entire being, not just ears or eyes. When one has been grasped by the word, one cannot remain the same. Something has happened. The word has happened. Or think, for instance, of Ezekiel and the bizarre-sounding things he did at the behest of the word of the Lord. The word surely happened to him.

What a surprising response Abram makes to the word! In verses 2-3 he says in effect, “It’s all very well and good, God, for you to say my reward will be very great. But what I really want is a child, an heir. That is what you promised me when we started out together. So far it hasn’t happened, and I have had to make other arrangements for my property after I die.” What is God’s response to such audacity? Not what we might expect. God does not scold Abram for his “lack of faith.” Because Abram is honest about what is on his mind, God is able to reaffirm the covenant and to use the example of the star-strewn sky as a visual reminder of the vastness of Abram’s descendants. If Abram had said nothing or had merely mouthed pious phrases, he would have left the encounter with the same questions he had in the beginning. Precisely because he was honest, God was able to allay his fears.

“And he believed” we are told in 15:6, long before even one son is born to Abram. What made the difference? Perhaps viewing the night sky reminded him of all that God had already created; maybe Abram saw a relationship between God as the creator of the starry expanse of the universe and God’s ability to keep promises made to humans. Yes, it seemed impossible for Abram and Sarai to have a child, and on their
own it was. But that was no more impossible than for either of them to add or subtract a single star from the constellations over their heads.

God's instructions to Abram (directly in v. 9 and implicitly in vv. 10–11), may strike us as bizarre and grotesque, but that is only because we are not familiar with the social customs of Abram's day. When a conquering king made a treaty with the defeated party, he would carry out a similar ceremony of cutting animals in half and placing the split carcasses side by side with a path between them. The defeated forces would then be made to walk between the animal halves. The victorious commander would say, in effect, "If you do not remain loyal to me, I will bring my army back and make all of you look like these butchered animals." There is a striking difference in Abram's vision, however, from this norm. It is the burning torch and the smoking pot, not Abram, which pass between the animal halves. Fire is often used in the Bible to represent the presence of God. (Cf. Exod. 3:2–4; 13:21–22; Num. 14:14; Deut 4:15; 1 Kings 18:24; Neh. 9:12.) God is making the promise to Abram and, by using this particular ritual, is making it in what Abram would understand as the very strongest terms.

God communicates to us on our level as human beings. This is a fundamental belief of the Bible. We have no way of knowing anything about God apart from our own humanness. We have no way of knowing anything about God other than through our human ways of knowing and thinking and perceiving. Even the most direct and unmediated of divine revelation reaches a human being when it reaches us. It is part of God's grace to speak to us in human terms and to use those human languages and habits and customs that make sense to us.

But because human languages, habits, and customs change over time, what made clear sense generations ago may be difficult to understand today. Thus, part of the work of understanding the Bible is to try to figure out what parts form the "message" and what portions are the "medium" used to convey that message.

God wanted Abram to know with surety that it was the Lord pledging to keep the promises that had been made. The ritual of cutting animals and then having the signs of God pass between the parts was designed to give such certainty to Abram. It would have been surprising, even shocking, for Abram to see God's signs passing through the animals instead of Abram's being told to walk between the parts. But because Abram knew what that ritual ordinarily meant and
how it was typically carried out, he was able to see what God's changes in it signified.

Part of the job of the preacher, of course, is to "translate" texts into terms the congregation will understand. This is far more than a matter of language or linguistics. What might be comparable today? Let me suggest a parallel from my own experience. I have learned, through my young daughters, that the most binding oath—far beyond the "cross my heart" of my own childhood—involves linking little fingers and pulling while each participant solemnly repeats the promise. This rite (known as the "pinky swears") is not used for ordinary things but for the most weighty matters engaged in by third- and fourth-graders. Teachers don't do "pinky swears" with students because teachers are such transcendent beings. Teachers are also seen by their elementary students as being "above the law," since they have the power to change routines and alter schedules seemingly at will. This may suggest that teachers are like God. But a God who wished to be known and trusted would work through human means such as this, however humble they might appear to us.

March 15, 1998—The Third Sunday in Lent
Isaiah 55:1-9
Ps. 63:1-8
1 Cor. 10:1-13

Why does the prophet begin such a gracious oracle with such a negative interjection? The NRSV offers the inexplicable "Ho." But in other places the word may be translated "Woe!" (Ezek. 13:3,18), "Alas!" (1 Kings 13:30; Jer. 48:1; 50:27), or the possibly more neutral "Ah!" (Isa. 1:4, 24; 58:11, 18, 20, 21, 22, and many more). At times it is an expression of lament (Jer. 22:18; 34:5). Wooden or mechanical translation is not a help to interpretation; and it is certainly possible that in this one occurrence out of 51, found in 47 verses, the prophet was to be understood differently. At our far remove we may simply be unable to grasp the nuance.

Or perhaps it is an attention-getting device, so that when he pulls a switch in the second half of the verse it will make more of an impression by its startling nature. "Alas, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money . . ." And now, what would we expect? "Those who have no money, too bad for you," or "You
should have worked harder and saved more." But instead, the declaration is "And you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price."

Isaiah is not describing a simple reversal of positions where the poor are fed and the rich are not or where the poor are fed expressly at the expense of the rich. Those who have money are not excluded. The only criterion is thirst. "Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters."
The symbols of water, bread, wine, milk are prominent at the start of this passage. No one familiar with scripture can fail to feel their resonances, from the primeval chaos waters in Genesis through the eschatological banquet in Revelation.

"Why do you persist in chasing after that which is not nourishing, which is not satisfying? Listen/hear/pay attention to me and feed on good things. Bend your ears and come to me. Listen/hear/pay attention and live."

Verses 8-9 do not represent another subject but rather sum up the entire passage. God's thoughts are vastly superior to ours; and our paths, our ways of life, are not God's. It is the Lord who forgives freely and generously and exuberantly. It is the Lord who offers the sustenance which nourishes and satisfies in the place of the junk food we gorge ourselves on. And it is the Lord who demands not silver in payment but rather the hearing ear and obeying heart. The wicked and evil are welcomed and will be forgiven. The rich may come; the destitute are invited. No—this is not the way of our familiar world.

Second Isaiah is writing to and for exiles. He is painting word pictures of what is in store. Walter Brueggemann has written much on the power of prophetic speech and its absence in much of our contemporary society. Here are some brief extracts in which he muses on the relationship between Second Isaiah and our own situation.

Exile in the ancient world or in our own situation is not an obvious, flat, social fact. It is a decision one must make. It is a very specific, self-conscious reading of social reality. There must have been many Jews in Babylon in the sixth century who settled in, made it home, assimilated, and did not perceive themselves as exiles. Such accommodation is a possible stance for faith, in ancient Babylon or in contemporary America.²

The poetry of Isaiah and the parables of Jesus are models of liberated, liberating speech that stands in sharp contrast to our conventional domesticated speech. We mostly
are scribes maintaining the order of the day. We mostly are appreciated by and paid by people who like it the way it is, who do not sense our exile and resist discerning it, who do not yearn for a homecoming because we have fooled ourselves into thinking this present arrangement is our home. To accommodate such social reality, our language becomes prosaic and didactic, because it helps keep the lid on things. Our language becomes descriptive, because it is better to tell what is than to trust what will be. Our church talk becomes dull and contained as all other talk in such a flat imperial society as ours.3

The Davidic covenant is called to mind in v. 3 and expanded from the royal family to the entire community. The expansion is then widened to universal scope including “nations that you do not know.” (v. 5) This is the Lord’s vision, and it is to our shame that it is not also our vision.

“My thoughts are not your thoughts” (vv. 8, 9) may be an antidote to human pride. Or it may be turned into lulling torpor when faced with either the vision of God’s future or the reality of our neighbor’s present. It can be unctuous pseudo-humility which rests in the status quo because, after all, “God’s thoughts are not our thoughts.”

We have been diagnosed spending our life on that which does not satisfy. We have been offered an alternative with an admission price of God’s own choosing.

March 22, 1998—The Fourth Sunday in Lent

Joshua 5:9-12
Psalm 32
2 Cor. 5:16-21

Etymological notices in translated Bibles often make little sense without footnotes. Josh. 5:9 informs us that the place was called Gilgal because God rolled away the reproach of Egypt from Israel. How’s that again? When you know that Gilgal sounds as if it comes from the verb “to roll away,” then the verse becomes clearer. Near where I live are both Boiling Fork Creek and Fiery Gizzard Gorge. No doubt each name commemorates an incident (or a meal?), and perhaps there are people whose lives are still affected by those long-ago
events. Since I do not know the reference in either case, my life is not affected by the memories those names originally kept. I remember them now only because of their quaintness quotient.

A key to the import of this text is in v. 12: "The manna ceased on the day they ate the produce of the land." But to know the import, one must know about manna: that, in the wilderness of Sin, the Israelites complained of hunger, and in response the Lord "rained bread from heaven" for them (Exod. 16:4). The remembrance of manna, of all it stood for and all the experiences surrounding it, must have been important to Israel, for Moses instructed the people to put a jar of manna into the Ark of the Covenant as a remembrance (Exod. 16:33). Perhaps the people wondered at such a command, since they were still gathering manna up six mornings a week. Today's reading gives a meaning for keeping that jar: "The manna ceased on the day they ate the produce of the land." Without a jar of manna on display before the congregation, it may be the preacher's task to call to mind what manna had stood for and what its cessation might mean.

Israel may have considered such a perpetual reminder a mixed blessing. There had been times in the wilderness when they fussed about the unvarying diet of manna and yearned for the remembered variety of Egypt (Num. 11:4-6). Now in the promised land the menu would again be varied. Still, to eat the produce of the land requires some work to produce it. Whether hunting and gathering or herding or farming, someone is going to have to do some sustained work in order for everyone to be fed.

Is the ceasing of the manna a sign that God's care for the Israelites has diminished? Did God care for them more while they were in the wilderness than now that they are in the promised land? More serious still, is God's power for sustaining a nomadic culture—which they know about because they have experienced it—sufficient for a settled agricultural community? What does the Lord know about farming? Israel might even have asked, "If this is the promised land, if this is the land flowing with milk and honey, then why is it harder to get food here than in the wilderness?" Perhaps the jar of manna as a reminder would become an irritant to them rather than a memory aid.

Maybe the telling of the stories and the nurturing and the handing on the memories was in part so the people could remember that there is a relationship between the "lessons" from the wilderness and some of the legislation for their time in the promised land. When they
planted grain fields and tended vineyards and orchards, for example, they were supposed to make sure that the poor people could have some of the harvest, and the parts to be left for them were the easiest to reach (Lev. 19:9; 23:22). And one can imagine that after a while, after a few generations had passed, such legislation might seem unnecessarily burdensome to the landowners. And not fair, either. “Why should we work this hard and then leave some of the results of our hard labor for others simply to come and take?” “Well, remember the manna . . .” someone might venture to answer. “The scramblers, the go-getters, couldn’t corner the market. And still the infirm were able to eat as well as anyone else (Exod. 16:14-18). Maybe that is what we are supposed to continue, in imitation of God.”

Across the road from my parsonage in West Virginia there was an apple orchard. After the pickers had gone through once in the fall, another man went through and sprayed the remaining apples on the trees and those on the ground with poison. Warning signs were set up in the corners and along the edges, saying that the apples were poisoned. The orchard was owned by the treasurer of one of my churches, and I asked him about it. “We have to do that,” he said. “Otherwise people would think they could just take the windfalls and that would depress our prices.” Never mind that he was under contract to ship all his apples out of state to be made into cider; never mind that he could have gotten a tax break had he donated the windfalls to the school lunch program or to the senior citizens’ center or to Meals on Wheels. “It’s the only way to stay in business,” he asserted with finality. End of discussion. And to my lasting shame, I was too chicken to tell him the story of the manna. Memory does not do much for the community if it is not shared.

And memory, unless it is exercised and honed and tended to with a degree of care, can lead us stray. This is especially true when we use “shorthand” versions that do not convey the entire story. Now, for those who know the story already, there is no problem. But shorthand is not a good way to teach those in the following generations. We are so far from the time of the events narrated in the Bible, so distant in place and language and social organization, that we have to exercise a fair degree of caution in interpretation, lest we mistake some of the shorthand for the entire story.

A signal example of this has developed concerning the Gospel reading appointed for next Sunday. When Jesus is a guest at dinner in Bethany, a woman anoints him with a most expensive ointment and
the disciples grumble about such extravagant waste. Jesus rebukes them and says, “You always have the poor with you.” Generations of folk have taken that verse snippet to their comfort as signaling Jesus’ acceptance of poverty, of economic inequities, and all sorts of similar notions which allow us to continue to live in our comfortable ways. Some people would add that Jesus is not necessarily saying that is how it should be, but he was enough of a realist to recognize that is how the world is and there is not much mere humans can do about it.

But this is not the case at all. Jesus was doing what he often did: he was quoting scripture and quoting it to people who would know the entire piece. The trouble for us is that in so many instances we now know only the shorthand, not the fullness of what it is representing. Yes, Jesus seems to be quoting from Deut. 15:11. But what if one finishes that verse? “I therefore command you, ‘Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.’” If one backs up to vv. 4-5, the entire focus shifts. “There will, however, be no one in need among you...if only you will obey the LORD your God...” That is, Jesus “is reminding [the disciples] that the existence of the poor is a constant judgment against the whole covenant community... By calling attention to the constant presence of the poor, Jesus is not urging us to forget their needs. Instead, he is directly referring to God’s command that we care for the poor. Their constant presence is nothing other than an indictment pointing to our failure as the covenant community.”

The manna ceased; new scripture is not being added to the canon. But we have in the Bible our own jar of manna to remind us of what God has already done for us and told us and invited us to do and to be.

“The manna ceased on the day they ate the produce of the land.” God sustained the Israelites still, but in a different way. Not with any less care, but tailored to the new circumstances, including the necessity of different sorts of responsibility on the part of the people. The lessons of the manna were to be interpreted and applied to the changing situations of the people’s new sort of life. The tension point—the pushing/pulling—is just at this place: how does one remember the past accurately in the present? For the sort of memory the Bible speaks of has much less to do, ultimately, with the past than with the present as it moves toward a particular future.

This leads directly to the final Old Testament pericope for this essay.
March 29, 1998—The Fifth Sunday in Lent
Isaiah 43:16-21
Psalm 126
Phil. 3:4b-14
John 12:1-8

Of all six Old Testament texts for Lent, this passage is the most explicit in treating the question of past/present/future and the relationship between God’s activity in former days and what we may expect in days to come. Much as we try to make life linear and orderly, some things withstand our attempts to push them into yes/no categories. The LORD’s identification in vv. 16-17 is clearly bound up with the paradigmatic saving activity on Israel’s behalf at the crossing of the sea. But the very next verse says, “Do not remember the former things or consider the things of old.” For a people often excoriated by the prophets for their theological amnesia, these seem peculiar commands indeed.

Some translations try to smooth over the difficulty with verbs such as “dwell on” (NIV, NEB, REB, TEV), “brood over” (NEB, REB), or “cling to” (TEV); or the simple imperative “Do not” is softened into “No need to” (JB, NJB). While it probably is salutary to give up brooding and to cease clinging to or dwelling on the past, I think that is not the import of this verse. That the prophet likely did not have in mind a thoroughgoing erasing of the memory banks (Oh, how computer jargon has infected us all!) is clear from ensuing passages such as 46:9, which makes use of much of the vocabulary found in chapter 43.

It is not enough to say what the meaning is not. What might the meaning be? I would suggest this: because the people have not been able to remember what God has done on their behalf and in that remembrance live faithfully, God is going to move to “Plan B.” God will now do something new. Perhaps Israel will be able to remember when they see not dry land in the midst of the sea (Exod. 15) but flowing waters in the aridity of the wilderness. Perhaps the people who have been unable to be faithful to their God will pay attention when they see the wild animals giving obeisance (v. 20).

On Easter Sunday we will again rejoice at the crossing of the sea, we will again exult in our Lord, who has been raised to new life. But in our faulty memory of these past deeds, we do not live well in covenant in the present. We have “seen it all.” Some of us are jaded, others discouraged. Could it be possible that God might say to us,
"Forget what went before. Forget the path through the Sea. Forget even the empty tomb. I am going to do something new."

Brueggemann suggests that the "metaphor of exile may be useful to American Christians as a way of understanding the social context of the church in American culture. The exile of the contemporary American church is that we are bombarded by definitions of reality that are fundamentally alien to the gospel, definitions of reality that come from the military-industrial-scientific empire, which may be characterized as 'consumer capitalism.' In a variety of ways the voice of this empire wants to reshape our values, fears, and dreams in ways that are fundamentally opposed to the voice of the gospel."

But Brueggemann does not go quite far enough. It has become something of a parlor game in some ecclesiastical circles to blame the wider culture for foisting vapid definitions of reality upon the church. That will not do. For one thing, we do not have to accept every definition of reality that is paraded before our adoring gaze. And too, all by ourselves we are capable of creating our own idols. They may be empty tombs or pipe organs or burgeoning attendance figures. Into our own situation, whether put upon us from outside or freely manufactured and embraced without our own circles, God may need to say, "Forget all that. I am going to do something new."

The one thing we can be sure of is that whatever the new thing is, it will not contradict who God has been from Creation through Incarnation to Ascension. We will be surprised, maybe even dismayed. And yet we are assured that the final word is joy and praise. Whatever the future that God is preparing, its purpose is that "the people whom I formed for myself... might declare my praise" (v. 21).

Notes


3. Ibid., 79.

4. Bruce C. Birch and Larry L. Rasmussen, *Bible and Ethics in the Christian Life*, rev. and expanded ed. (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989), 179. See also the larger discussion of this passage, 176–179. Actually the entire book may be seen as useful in our responsible guardianship of our own “jar of manna.”

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Quarterly Review is a publication of The United Methodist Publishing House and the United Methodist Board of Higher Education and Ministry.