Culture Wars and Denominational Loyalties
Russell E. Richey

Writing about United Methodist Polity
Thomas E. Frank

Women's Contributions to Church Renewal
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Introduction

A Cow's Eye View

I believe that the place where an animal dies is a sacred one.” Connecting with livestock animals is what Temple Grandin does best. And she does it at the most sensitive time of their lives: at the point of their death in the slaughterhouse. Dr. Grandin, a professor of animal science at Colorado State University, is a nationally recognized expert in the development of humane systems for slaughtering cows, sheep, and other cattle. In fact, a third of all the livestock handling facilities in the U.S. have been designed by her.

But she is equally well known among those who live with the neurological condition known as autism. As few have done before, and none with her success, Temple Grandin has described the inner world of autism—her inner world—with skill and candor. As Oliver Sacks notes in his foreward to her book, Thinking in Pictures (Doubleday, 1995), it was a long-held medical dogma that autistic people had no recognizable inner life or awareness—or that whatever went on was trapped behind a wall of pathology. Temple Grandin changed all that. The woman who compares her mental processes to that of the TV character “Data” in Star Trek and calls herself “the anthropologist from Mars” has made the connections that were essential for her own wellbeing. In the process, she has made key reforms in an industry that supports our meat-eating society at its most basic level.

The key word is, of course, connection. I would never have associated autism with the humane treatment of animals, but when Grandin writes about her concern for their comfort and calmness at
the end of their lives she conveys an ethical passion for others born of deep understanding and identification. (The working title for her manuscript, she confides, was “A Cow’s Eye View.”) Grandin’s work is especially beautiful because it arose in a setting where her differentness prevented the usual social contacts. Instead, the energy made another path.

Now assuming that the vital force to connect is also present in us, we have to make similar choices. Like Grandin, most of us understand that we are constantly relating our inner world and values to the outside world around us. Unlike Grandin, most of us think of it as merely natural and inevitable and don’t see it as the wonder that it is. But connect, self-knowledge with meaningful action, we must. Those of us who publicly specialize in the religious have all but hung out a sign saying, “House of God: Deep Connections Made Here.” In helping others with this process, it could make all the difference in the world to be able to say clearly how and why we do it ourselves.

Please consider this the theme music behind the current issue of QR. It is against this broad melody that we consider particular issues of ecclesiology, Methodist history and practice, ordained ministry, and scripture, both ancestral and Christ-centered. You will find here a host of fine essays, all of which address basic questions of Christian identity and mission elaborated in the myriad pathways of church order and ministries. I hope you will see yourself and your service within them.

Sharon Hels
Culture Wars and Denominational Loyalties: A Methodist Case Study

Conventional wisdom today holds that

- denominational loyalty, at least among mainline denominations, has weakened decidedly;
- the once-prominent "establishment" denominations as institutions are fading;
- individuals, congregations, and regional judicatories are staging "Boston Tea Parties" protesting decisions, priorities, inefficiencies, waste, monetary claims, and the onerous, oppressive burden of the bureaucratic board and agency structure which seems to be the cohesive principle in denominations today;
- caucuses and struggle groups have balkanized denominations, turning conventions, assemblies and conferences into contentious and demoralizing rather than unifying and galvanizing experiences;
- many of these struggle groups and caucuses align themselves into two broad coalitions, liberal and conservative;
- these coalitions transcend denominational, indeed religious, boundaries;

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that liberal and conservative\textsuperscript{1} or liberal and evangelical\textsuperscript{4} identities threaten now to divide, perhaps even destroy, denominations.\textsuperscript{5}

The range of such problems, including especially the divisions within denominations, spell, some would suggest, the end to denominationalism.\textsuperscript{6} At the very least they portend (as a United Methodist bishop and a seminary president both prophesied in the aftermath of the last General Conference) the clean division of such mainline denominations into new conservative and liberal entities—and the end to United Methodism as we know it.

Denominationalism as Division?

This paper endeavors to show that division does not constitute a new threat at all but that it has haunted denominations and denominationalism rather continuously throughout U.S. history. Indeed, were theology rather than history and sociology to be the métier of this essay, one might affirm with H. Richard Niebuhr that division is the essence of denominationalism:

\textit{For the denominations, churches, sects, are sociological groups whose principle of differentiation is to be sought in their conformity to the order of social classes and castes. . . . They are emblems, therefore, of the victory of the world over the church, of the secularization of Christianity, of the church's sanction of that divisiveness which the church's gospel condemns.}\textsuperscript{7}

Even on historical grounds, one might view division to be a characteristic of denominations. Divisions and/or near divisions constitute the story of virtually any denomination or denominational family, a fact readily discernible in the annual \textit{Yearbook of American & Canadian Churches}\textsuperscript{9} or any other effort at the full mapping of North American religion. And the larger pattern of denominations or denominationalism evidences periods of intense fracturing and fragmenting—periods when existing bodies experience internal strain, when some denominations do split, and when new denominations emerge, often with commentary on the prior denominational order as constitutive of their purpose and self-understanding.
The "great awakenings" of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries represent such periods of fracturing and fragmenting. So also do the slavery and sectional crisis of the middle nineteenth century, as well as the late nineteenth, early twentieth century time of centralizing, professionalizing, corporate restructuring, and cultural realignment. The latter period, with its great Pentecostal effervescence, has sometimes been portrayed as one of cultural crisis or as though the new denominations sprang ex nihilo. Recent scholarship, however, suggests that Pentecostalism has stronger ties to Methodist and other existing traditions than has sometimes been supposed. It further suggests that those, together with the Holiness and Fundamentalist movements, existing traditions, ought to be seen as developments from, if not divisions out of, earlier denominational stock. At any rate, the Holiness, Pentecostal, and Fundamentalist eras represent times, if not a single time, of serious denominational sifting and shifting. And so, too, does this period from the 1970s to the present. Division within the denominational household may be (to borrow an image from Robert Handy but employ it differently) the religious counterpart to economic depression.

Certainly all denominational divisions do not occur in these periods of fracturing and fragmenting. Some movements, as nineteenth century Methodists illustrate, have shown a genius for dividing every decade. And yet we should not lose sight of these larger patterns in the history of denominational division. Individual denominational divisions have coincided sufficiently with these larger processes of restructuring for one to suspect that denominationalism, in effect, renews and reconstitutes itself (that is, reshapes the denominational form) through divisions and severe tension. The Presbyterians may best represent this larger pattern of tension, division, and reunion. They arose amidst the Puritan crisis within and without the Church of England, divided into new side and old in the First Awakening, suffered significant losses from the Cumberlands and to the Christian (Disciple) movements in the Second Awakening, split New School and Old over issues that would ultimately divide the nation, and only narrowly escaped a major division during the Fundamentalist controversy. Current turmoil within Presbyterianism, paralleled across mainstream Protestantism, suggests that once again both individual denominations and the larger pattern of denominationalism itself are in a period of transformation.
Constitutive Division: The Methodist Story

Division, then, is not only part of the fabric of denominationalism; it is also woven into the life of individual denominations. Such a history of division is well illustrated, perhaps fittingly illustrated, by the Methodists. Methodism began, of course, as a reform movement within the Church of England, pledged in deference to, if not always in agreement with, the Wesleys, John and particularly Charles, who insisted that Methodism did not and would not separate from the Church of England. To that pledge British Methodism remained committed through and beyond John’s life. And yet, as Richard Heitzenrater has demonstrated, even under Wesley Methodism increasingly structured and conducted itself in ways that pointed towards separation.

The inertial pressures toward separation from the Church of England that the Wesleys resisted were, if anything, more intense in the colonies. Methodists immigrating from Ireland or England and persons here who developed Methodist or Methodist-like sympathies found it more difficult to structure Methodist life within an Anglican parish. First of all, that system was not everywhere established, but even where it was it was not always well led or maintained. And during the Revolution when Anglicans—clergy and laity—fled to Canada or to Britain (as did all the preachers Wesley had sent over, save Francis Asbury), the parish system deteriorated dramatically. The first division occurred during this period, even before Methodism officially separated from the Church of England in 1784. The movement split badly.

In 1779, during wartime hostilities, the regularly called conference, meeting in Fluvanna County, Virginia, proceeded to establish American Methodism as a church through autonomous act and presbyterial ordinations. They asked:

q. 14. What are our reasons for taking up the administration of the ordinances [sacraments] among us? a. Because the Episcopal Establishment is now dissolved and therefore in almost all our circuits the members are without the ordinances, we believe it to be our duty.

q. 19. What forms of ordination shall be observed, to authorize any preacher to administer? a. By that of a Presbytery.

q. 20. How shall the Presbytery be appointed? a. By a majority of the preachers.

q. 22. What power is vested in the Presbytery by this choice? a. 1st.

To
administer the ordinances themselves. 2d. To authorize any other preacher or preachers approved of by them, by the form of laying on of hands and of prayer. 12

This declaration of independence had been anticipated and countered by an “irregular” conference held the prior month in Delaware to accommodate Francis Asbury, then in hiding, and clearly to contravene the anticipated separation. 13 This conference, almost exactly the same size as the later “regular” body, queried: Q. 10. Shall we guard against a separation from the church, directly or indirectly? A. By all Means. 14 And the following year, this Chesapeake group queried:

Q. 12. Shall we continue in close connexion with the church, and press our people to a closer communion with her? A. Yes Q. 20. Does this whole conference disapprove the step our brethren have taken in Virginia? A. Yes. Q. 21. Do we look upon them no longer as Methodists in connexion with Mr. Wesley and us till they come back? A. Agreed. 15

This latter group, which insisted on awaiting John Wesley’s provision for ecclesial order, eventually won out; and the schism was healed.

Continuous Divisions?

I have dwelt at more length on this particular separation than I can on subsequent ones to make two points: 1) that American Methodism was already dividing internally before it officially “divided” itself from the Anglicans and established itself as a distinct denomination, and 2) that the formal separation in 1784 actually involved a threefold disengagement—(a) from the Church of England; (b) from the North American Anglicans among whom the Methodists had labored, who were then also being reconstituted as an independent church and among whom were kindred spirits, chief of them, perhaps, Devereux Jarrett, who were deeply offended by the Methodist departure; and (c) eventually from Mr. Wesley and British Wesleyanism. The latter also was to be an occasion for offense, for in their first Discipline, the Americans pledged:
During the Life of the Rev. Mr. Wesley, we acknowledge ourselves his Sons in the Gospel, ready in Matters belonging to Church-Government, to obey his Commands. And we do engage after his Death, to do every Thing that we judge consistent with the Cause of Religion in America and the political Interests of these States, to preserve and promote our Union with the Methodists in Europe.  

This pledge and unity, too, American Methodists found impossible to honor when Wesley sought to exercise church government. In 1787 Wesley ordered the convening of a general conference and the election of specific persons as bishops. The Americans resisted these commands and stripped the above pledge from the Discipline. So American Methodism began in a complex division, though one it has consistently celebrated, rather than bemoaned.

To 1787 is often traced yet another division, namely the beginnings of the African Episcopal Church, traditionally associated with Richard Allen’s walkout from St. George’s. Full separation came after a number of other provocations aimed at black parishioners. In 1816 several African-American churches, which had formed in similar reaction to Methodism’s racial policies, covenanted to establish their own denomination. From these small beginnings and those of the African Union Church and the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, much of Methodism’s significant black membership was drained off.

But these losses were gradual. The actual break between black and white Methodists was more gradual, and more gradually recognized on both sides, than we have sometime been led to believe. The divisions were caused by white racism and ignored for the same reason. By contrast, another division, largely among whites, registered itself immediately and traumatically. It came in 1792, when Methodists from the Virginia-North Carolina area followed James O’Kelly, an erratic but prominent leader, in demanding “democratic” rights for preachers, protesting monarchical behavior by the bishops, and especially Asbury, and witnessing against slavery. The break came over a proposal made to the General Conference of that year that would have given preachers a right of appeal over their appointment, a popular initiative that seemed destined to pass. When the legislation failed, O’Kelly’s supporters, later called “Republican Methodists,” walked out.
From the vantage of the late-twentieth century, their departure looks like a minor event, primarily because the "Republicans" proved stronger in protest than they did in subsequent organization and evangelizing. But during the 1790s their "schism" was no small matter. Rather, it seemed at that time to be a major "culture war," a battle over the soul of the movement, a question as to whether Methodism would be a Wesleyan or an American cause, a denomination shaped primarily by the culture, practices, beliefs, style and ethos of the inherited Wesleyanism or of the republicanism of the new nation. Republicanism had tremendous appeal and appeared to capture essential elements of what both the New Testament and pietism envisioned for the Christian life. Republican Christianity, as O'Kelly articulated it, offered a vision of equality, fraternity, justice, and human rights. It made sense to persons, particularly the preachers who had experienced any arbitrariness in the appointive powers, the bishops. A new church for a new nation, a democratic church for a democratic nation, so urged O'Kelly. Was the choice, as he presented it, between Wesleyanism and Americanism? To move beyond that dilemma and contain the schism took a decade of concerted effort on the part of Asbury and his supporters.

In appreciating the significance of this division and several of the subsequent Methodist schisms, we might well keep in mind the close votes in the presidential elections within the Southern Baptist Convention in those years when moderates still mounted resistance to its conservative drift. A number of those contests were extremely close, suggesting that the SBC was deeply divided. Such proportions cannot be found, however, in the much smaller numbers of churches and clergy now formally affiliated with the moderate Southern Baptist organizations. The depth and extent of a fault line and the size of the parties divided thereby do not then always correspond with—or are they accurately measured by—the size of a party that departs. This was clearly the case for the Republican Methodists and would prove to be the case in the subsequent nineteenth-century divisions. Similar, major "cultural" and social issues surfaced—in virtually every decade of the nineteenth century—to split Methodism again and again.

Divisions: Minor and Major

To be sure, not all the cleavages within the Methodist family can be traced to a decisive moment and a legislative contest. Nor did they all
produce such serious trauma. The separate organization of the German movements, the United Brethren and Evangelical Association, reflects their distinct origins in the broader evangelical movement and the specific leaven of Reformed, Mennonite and Lutheran pietism. Still, the first conference of the United Brethren in 1789 and its formal organization in 1800 and the first conference of the Evangelical Association in 1803 and its formal organization in 1807 represented failures (on both sides) to carry through on the looser comity they had enjoyed with the Methodists. Unification was revisited in the next decade and repeatedly thereafter until the two movements, united in 1946, joined with the Methodist Church in 1968. Early Methodism experimented with intercultural, bilingual community but found differences along language lines difficult to bridge.

Three protests of the early nineteenth century had regional or local effect. William Hammett, ordained by Wesley, settled eventually in Charleston. He built a strong following, resisted the authority of Asbury and Coke, and led a schism of Primitive Methodists (there and in North Carolina) that began around 1792 and largely dissipated after his death in 1803. At the northern reaches of the movement, a group of “Reformed Methodists,” led by Pliny Brett, who had itinerated from 1805 to 1812, sought church government and local authority more akin to that appreciated in New England. They protested episcopacy, emphasized the attainability of entire sanctification, and repudiated war and slavery. Formally organized in 1814 at a convention in Vermont, they drew several thousand adherents across New England, New York, and Canada. By the Civil War, most of the Reformed movement had affiliated with the Methodist Protestants.

In the second decade of the century, the African Methodist Episcopal (1816) and the African Union (1813) churches organized, as we noted. Their centers were and remained in Philadelphia and Wilmington respectively. The organization of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church in New York in 1820 was closely related with a separation among white Methodists (also in New York) led by Samuel Stillwell, a trustee at the flagship John Street Church, and his nephew, William Stillwell, a preacher then in charge of two of the African-American congregations. At issue in both divisions was ownership of church property and control over ministry. The Stillwells grew to some 2,000 members in the New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut areas, continuing until the younger Stillwell’s death in 1851. Another separate Methodist body, also with the name
Primitive Methodists, developed around the figure of Lorenzo Dow, the export of American-style camp meeting revivalism to Britain after 1805, and import-of-the-export as a distinct denomination, beginning in 1829. The Primitives developed strength in Pennsylvania and especially in Canada.¹⁹

The democratic themes associated with these several movements came to focus in the reform efforts of the 1820s: to permit election of the episcopal lieutenants or surrogates known as presiding elders, to allow some conference role and representation to the two-thirds of the Methodist ministry functioning as local rather than itinerant preachers, and to permit laity a say in the governing annual and general conferences. Here, as with the Republican Methodists, a set of legislative proposals gave focus to concerns, practices, and styles that went far deeper and presented the church once again with the question as to how its internal life would draw on the best aspects of democratic society. Here, too, the reformers initially carried the day. At the 1820 General Conference they passed (decisively, 61 to 25) legislation providing for election of presiding elders, a proposal that surfaced early in Methodist history and was repeatedly urged up to the present. It was vehemently resisted by the bishops, including William McKendree, who attacked it in his opening episcopal address to that conference, and bishop-elect Joshua Soule, the architect of Methodist constitutional order. Soule pronounced the change unconstitutional and insisted that he could not “superintend under the rules this day made.” Soule’s resignation prompted the conference to suspend the new legislation.

A decade of intense, bitter, and recriminating politics followed; new media emerged to carry the campaign to the populace; popular conventions met to broaden the reform agenda; bishops and conferences suppressed dissent and excommunicated dissenters. The reform movement eventually garnered support from some of the strongest of Methodist leaders and drew its following from the heart of the Methodist movement, namely in the upper southern and middle states. In 1830 a new denomination, the Methodist Protestant Church (MPC), came into being to consolidate the reforms. And here, too, the rather modest size of the new denomination scarcely registers the deep division and cultural war through which Methodism had passed.
Slavery, Region, Race

Each division produced not only losses—of persons, of richness and diversity, of leadership, of principle—but also countermeasures that sometimes paralleled, sometimes negated the points of the reformers. Losses and reactive countermeasures certainly attended the divisions of the 1840s and 1850s, the exiting of abolitionists to form the Wesleyan Methodist Church in 1842, the split of the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1844, North and South (MEC and MECS, respectively), and the emergence of the Free Methodists in the late 1850s (formally organizing in 1860). In each of these divisions, high principle on one side produced compensating efforts on the other. The MEC, particularly in New England and the burned over district became more receptive to abolition in the face of competition from the Wesleyans. The MECS intensified its mission to the slaves in the wake of the division of 1844. And New York Methodists contended with the witness of reformers who criticized elite control of the annual conference, the use of pew rents, slippage in the church's teaching on sanctification, and irresolution on slavery. "Freedom" was the emblem of their several-pronged attack on Methodism's "bourgeoisification" and accommodation to society's practices, and it was the foundation of their call for a return to primitive Methodism.20

The division of 1844 produced differing ecclesiologies and notions of the relation of church to the civil order, North and South. Both churches, at times, read the division as though it primarily concerned notions of the power of General Conference, the authority of bishops, and the limits of social witness. Underneath these theological and polity concerns, of course, lurked slavery and the differing sectional attitudes toward it. Sectional division of the churches produced intense moral warfare and principled posturing, undergirded by fears and hopes about slavery. If they did not actually "cause" the growing division of the nation, the several church splits anticipated and aggravated it.21 The division of 1844, creating a Methodist Episcopal Church and a Methodist Episcopal Church, South, left continuing scars and fault lines that now vibrate over abortion and homosexuality. If these current issues constitute banners in a larger and deeper culture war, so might we also portray the contest between slave and free in Methodist churches in the 1840s and 1850s.

The 1860s saw massive population shifts among Black Methodists and one major new African-American denomination, the Colored
Methodist Episcopal Church (CME). The latter, formalized in 1870, represented the culmination of MECS efforts to minister to slaves, and then freed persons, under strict racist guidelines. It can be read as either the extrusion of African-Americans or as their exodus. One stimulus to MECS cooperation in the establishment of the CME was the success enjoyed by the MEC (the northern church) with the ex-slaves and the even greater and more radical political advances of the AME and AMEZ. All these population shifts—and not just the emergence of the CME—ought to be seen as important divisions. Also of a divisive quality was the decision by the MEC in 1864 to authorize the creation of separate Black annual conferences, a segregating gesture “perfected” in the North before it was spread across the South. This de jure separation of Black and white proved as complete as, and in fact longer-lived, than the division of the MEC and MECS.

Language, Gender, Class

Some of these internal divisions look benign in hindsight but raised then, as current divisions raise today, questions about the character and unity of the church. I refer to the establishment of distinct language conferences (e.g., as requested by Korean-Americans), an issue that has resurfaced as highly controversial. The year 1864 saw the authorization of German annual conferences by the MEC. German mission conferences had been established in 1844, as had a mission conference for Native Americans. Swedish, Norwegian, Danish, Spanish, Japanese, and Chinese conferences would emerge later.

Episcopal Methodism granted laity rights in General Conference only gradually (in 1866 and 1872 in the MECS and MEC, respectively) and had even greater difficulty with overtures to include women as laity or to ordain them. But Methodism did sanction women-run voluntary societies that functioned like conferences, notably the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (1874), which was interdenominational but always heavily Methodist, the Woman’s Foreign Missionary Society (1869); the corresponding entities for the MECS (1878) and MPC (1879); and the Ladies’ and Pastors’ Union (1872). There was no threat of division along gender lines, but the internal structural differentiation deserves notice.

Class differences were not so easily contained. From the 1860s on, the holiness cause increasingly took on aspects of class war. Church
leaders who initially embraced their fervent piety increasingly reacted to sustained holiness criticisms and free-lance itineration with a heavy, disciplining hand. Schisms proved inevitable. The Free Methodists, as we noted, had already exited in 1860. The National Camp Meeting for the Promotion of Holiness of 1867 led to the formation of a National Camp Meeting Association. Holiness camp meetings and itinerating holiness preachers called Methodism to return to its primitive practices. They recalled a prewar and pre-1844 Methodism of entrepreneurial circuit riders, of outdoor quarterly meetings conjoined with camp meetings, of shouting preachers and demonstrative religiosity, of discipline through class meetings and of side-street preaching houses. Many felt ill at ease in the grand, uptown Gothic cathedrals, lavishly appointed and funded with pew rents; unnourished by worship centered in the Sunday service rather than the camp; ill-equipped to function in the increasingly nationalized and centralized program of the church and in the corporate board and agency structure authorized in 1872; and unsatisfied by a view of the Christian life as nurtured by home and in Sunday school and provisioned through John Vincent’s uniform lesson plan, teacher institutes, and Chautauquas.

The holiness camp meetings represented one side in a culture war that pitted the anxious bench and class meeting against the Sunday service and the Sunday school. The prophetic spirit became, in places and at times, a “come-outer” spirit. And so in the 1880s and 1890s, regional and state holiness associations and conventions gradually transformed themselves into new denominations, the Church of God (Anderson), Church of God (Holiness), the Holiness Church and the Church of the Nazarene. These organizations separated so thoroughly that it becomes hard to recall and envision the broader war within Methodism in which they had first campaigned. The same, with important qualifications, might be said of the Pentecostal movements.

Coda

The twentieth century, of course, represents something of a different story. Its agenda was reunion, ecumenism, Christian unity, the ending of denominational divisions. Methodism experienced several major reunions: the MEC, MECS and MPC uniting in 1939 to form The Methodist Church; the EA and UB uniting in 1946 to form the
Evangelical United Brethren Church; the two new bodies uniting in 1968 to form the United Methodist Church. And a century of reunions has not yet ended. The most recent General Conference gave authorization for Methodists to proceed with COCU and to explore rapprochement with the AMEs, the AMEZs, and the CMEs.

Ironically, unifications have proved to be immensely divisive. This needs to be understood if one wishes to understand internal and transdenominational coalitions today. For instance, the prospect of unification of the MEC and the MECS caused near division in the South (the MECS), with race as the major concern. When unification came, it did so with an accommodation to the South that built a radical division into the very fabric of the denomination, namely the segregation of African-Americans nationally into a Central Jurisdiction. And just as that scandal ended, the caucuses and special-interest groups within Methodism were born.

Division and culture wars have been a rather constant feature of Methodist denominational life and, if not an every decade affair for others, at least very common. Conventional wisdom has a short memory.

Notes


5. The contrast that James Davison Hunter employs in *Culture Wars* (New York: Basic Books, 1991) is “progressive and orthodox.”


7. Niebuhr had earlier affirmed:

The evil of denominationalism lies in the conditions which make the rise of sects desirable and necessary: in the failure of the churches to transcend the social conditions which fashion them into caste-organizations, to sublimate their loyalties to standards and institutions only remotely relevant if not contrary to the Christian ideal, to resist the temptation of making their own self-preservation and extension the primary object of their endeavor.


10. To speak as though denominationalism were a living creature is only to grant the religious historian the license of the economist who treats the market in similar fashion. The analogy, I would suggest, is a close one.


12. “Minutes of Conference from the year 1774 to the year 1779 [from minutes kept by Philip Gatch],” *Western Christian Advocate* 4/5 (26 May, 1837), 18–19: Minutes of a Conference held at Roger Thomson’s in Fluvanna County, VA, 18 May, 1779.

13. Quest. 8. Why was the Delaware Conference held? Ans. For the convenience of the preachers in the northern stations, that we all might have an opportunity of meeting in conference; it being unadvisable for brother Asbury and brother Ruff, with some others, to attend in Virginia; it is considered also as preparatory to the conference in Virginia: “Minutes of Some Conversations between the Preachers in Connexion with the Reverend Mr. John Wesley,” *Minutes of the Methodist
Conferences Annually Held in America: from 1773 to 1813, Inclusive (New York: Daniel Hitt and Thomas Ware for the Methodist Connexion, 1813), 19.


18. For a firsthand treatment, see Jesse Lee, A Short History of the Methodists in the United States of America (Baltimore: Magill and Clime, 1810), 178–180.


Harmon-ic Convergences: Constituting a Church for a New Century

Mainstream Protestantism is in crisis. If you did not already think so, surely you would be convinced by reading almost any publication about contemporary church life in America or listening to almost any lecturer or preacher at almost any conference or pastors' school.

One of the 1980s books that helped set off anxiety in United Methodism, in a chapter entitled “Sick unto Death,” referred to membership losses as a “hemorrhage.” The seven-volume self-study of “the Presbyterian presence” published in 1992 likewise adopted the metaphor of illness. “We approached our subject as a study in pathology,” the authors began, asking first “What is going wrong?” Mainstream Protestantism is at a “dead-end,” declared Newsweek magazine in a 1993 story. And in 1996 Thomas Reeves authored a book called The Empty Church: The Suicide of Liberal Christianity, asking the question, “Why should Episcopalians survive?” The church is immersed, in short, in a rhetoric of crisis.

I have chosen this time in history to write a book on United Methodist polity. I have enjoyed the bemused support of friends and colleagues who think it is crazy and probably a waste of time to take on such a topic. But the project was long overdue: no full-length
comprehensive critical study of United Methodist polity has been published in over thirty years and even it was only the second such study of this century. The first general polity study of the century was John J. Tigert's magisterial work, *A Constitutional History of American Episcopal Methodism*. This helped elevate him to the episcopacy, but he died shortly thereafter from choking on a chicken bone at a church dinner—a mixed message for polity authors, to say the least.

The second comprehensive polity study came from the pen of Bishop Nolan B. Harmon, who certainly fared better in living past his 100th year but whose ideas about the church may seem quaint in an age of new paradigms. Yet I wonder if there is not something to be gained by confronting his ideas seriously for a measure of convergence between them and an emerging church for a new century.

**The Challenge of Constituting a Church**

The rhetoric of crisis does at least signal that this is a period of asking fundamental questions about the nature and purpose of the church. Who or what constitutes the church, that is, brings the church into being? What are the constitutive elements that make the church "church" and bring it to faithfulness? And what are the gifts a tradition like Methodism has to offer as constitutive practices for a church emerging into a new century?

Bishops Tigert and Harmon did not ask these questions with quite the sharp edge that characterizes those same questions today, mainly because the two men were organically Methodist, handing along an extended-family tradition once handed to them. Bishop Tigert inscribed his book, last printed in 1916:

> to the memory of my mother, Mary Van Veghten Tigert, a life-long Methodist of the olden type, the melody of whose voice lifted in rapturous experience, sacred song, or prevailing prayer, in love-feast, class meeting, and revival service, yet lingers, a hallowing influence, in the heart of her first-born son.

Bishop Harmon, born in 1892, descended from a paternal grandfather named John Wesley Harmon, a preacher, reformer, lecturer, and editor of the robust nineteenth-century North American type, and from a
father, N. B. Harmon, who served Methodist churches in New Orleans, Texas, and Mississippi. Bishop Harmon's maternal grandfather, Robert Davis Howe, was himself the son of a Methodist preacher and an early graduate of Wesleyan University in Connecticut, an educator who instilled in his daughter, Bishop Harmon's mother, Juliet Howe, a love of Methodist ways.

In those moments (which seem even more precious now) when I sat in his den and talked with—or mostly listened to the stories of—Bishop Harmon, I always felt that I was in the presence not of just a man but of Methodism itself, as if the tradition were palpable in his very being. His life did, after all, span almost half of Methodist history in North America; he, his parents, and his grandparents reached across practically the entire two centuries. He was a member of the old Baltimore Conference, the homeland of American Methodism, to whom he dedicated his book *The Organization of The Methodist Church* in 1948. He had helped that annual conference navigate the stormy merger of the northern and southern Methodisms in 1939, a merger that broke that historic conference into four other annual conferences in two of the new jurisdictions.

Yet his role there, as well as his editorship of *The Interpreter's Bible* in the 1950s, for example, showed his desire to balance change and continuity, to connect long traditions with new needs and approaches. Bishop Harmon's connective ligaments were stretched to the breaking point, of course, by the events of the 1960s. Presiding over the North Alabama Annual Conference after the death of Bishop Bachman Hodge, Bishop Harmon found himself at the flashpoint of the Civil Rights movement. Insisting on progressive change, again an argument from continuity, he publicly protested the shenanigans of Governor George Wallace and decried the violence of Bull Connor. He also joined other white mainstream religious leaders in Birmingham in asking Martin Luther King, Jr., to cease public marches and demonstrations and give a new city administration time to work toward racial harmony.

Thus, much to his chagrin, Harmon found himself one of those to whom King's *Letter from the Birmingham Jail* was addressed. It was a hurt to which he never quite reconciled himself, for he believed that he shared much the same hope for a just society. Perhaps this is one more reason among many to wish that Dr. King had lived and that he and Bishop Harmon might have walked down Auburn Avenue and talked through their different perspectives on those days. It is one more
reason to hope that maybe now they have indeed met in God's good
time.

The dominant cultural center which Bishop Harmon hoped to hold,
and which U.S. American mainstream Protestantism represented for
generations, has proved to be a great deal more tenuous and complex
in recent years. Many reasons may be adduced for this, probably
paramount among them the rampant and uncontrolled market system
that erodes much of the organic tradition and community life in the
U.S. But certainly another is the supreme challenge of moving from a
patriarchy dominated by northern European assumptions and norms
toward becoming a society and church that honors both genders and
multiple cultures, a society and church in which the covenant bonds of
community include a full range of voices and outlooks strengthened
by a commitment to stay together through change and to seek a
common good. Making covenant today is more difficult than ever.

Constitutive Practices of Church in Classic American
Methodism

To return, then, to the fundamental questions: What are the
constitutive practices of a church for a new century? And what is
Methodism's unique contribution to these practices? More precisely,
what is the nature of United Methodist's constitution as a church?

Certainly one contribution of Methodism is already embedded in
the way I have framed the questions. What constitutes the church,
one can argue from Methodist tradition, is first of all not offices but
practices. The order follows from the practice, not vice versa. As
Wesley stated once in an argument defending Methodist practice:

What is the end of all ecclesiastical order? Is it not to bring
souls from the power of Satan to God, and to build them up in
his fear and love? Order, then, is so far valuable as it answers
these ends; and if it answers them not, it is nothing worth.9

What we are looking for here are the practices that enable people to
grow in the knowledge and love of God and to become communities
of witness and service.

Methodism's history is striking for the extent to which, as a society
or association within the Church of England, it could take for granted
the traditional sacramental marks of "church." Methodist people were baptized in parishes of the national church; Wesley urged them to partake of Holy Communion there as often as possible. Methodism was not trying to bring a church into being, only to reform the one given across generations of believers. This gave Methodism less of a primal instinct for constitutive polity, in contrast, for example, with the English Congregationalists, for whom polity itself was a means of "stirring up and disciplining the faith," in Stephen Foster’s words.10

In the service of its reforming impulse, Methodism combined a deeply Anglican sensibility with a distinct focus on preaching—proclaiming the gospel and calling people to holy living. From a polity standpoint, Methodism always privileged preaching. Its meeting places were called preaching houses; the original "connexion" of which Wesley was the center was constituted by his personal mentoring and assigning of preachers. For nearly two centuries Methodist conferences were gatherings only of preachers in covenant, the annual meetings of Methodism’s missionary order of preachers.

In the 1920s Bishop Harmon wrote *The Rites and Ritual of Episcopal Methodism,* in which he argued that American Methodism’s adoption of Anglican rituals was constitutive of the new church. Wesley’s edition of the Sunday Service, which he provided for the new Methodist Episcopal Church in America in 1784, was the “connectional bond” for Methodism just as the Book of Common Prayer was “in a sense the constitution of the English Church.”11 The rituals implicitly contained within themselves a whole polity for Baptism, Eucharist, and the ordered ministry to administer them.

But it is arguably true nevertheless that for nineteenth-century American Methodism these rites were part of the taken-for-granted background against which Methodism could concentrate on its distinct practices of preaching and holy living. In the unstructured context of an America lacking much in the way of either civil or ecclesiastical polity, Methodist preachers felt complete freedom to ignore Wesley’s Sunday Service and to be content with a Lord’s Supper celebrated only quarterly at most during the visit of a presiding elder. As a result, United Methodist worship today is immensely varied from place to place, and virtually no canon law governs worship practices.

Early American Methodists’ first attempt to establish and protect certain elements of their common life reveals what they considered constitutive. Though not calling it a constitution per se, in 1808 the
preachers in conference adopted a broad statement of the powers of a
delegated quadrennial General Conference, followed by certain
Restrictive Rules as limits on what any particular General Conference
could do. This primal constitution is still the cornerstone of United
Methodist polity today.12

Thus the first constitutive element of Methodism was conference
itself, the gathering of preachers to confer, in Wesley's words, on
"what to teach, how to teach, and what to do."13 General Conference
was granted "full powers to make rules and regulations for our
church" and thus was the central, national link in a chain of
conferences that included annual and quarterly conferences for
regions and locales.

Then followed the Restrictive Rules, intended to make it
extremely difficult for a General Conference to alter other coeval
constitutive features of the church. No particular rite or ritual was
protected under these rules. Instead, they protected first the Articles
of Religion as Wesley had edited and reduced them. Here the
church is defined as

\[\text{a congregation of faithful men in which the pure Word of God is preached, and the Sacraments duly administered according to Christ's ordinance.}\]

Here the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper are named
with brief definitions and assertions—in particular the legitimacy of
infant baptism and the understanding that the body and blood of Christ
are eaten "only after a heavenly and spiritual manner"—by faith.

This formula of Word and sacrament, so prominent in Reformation
ecclesiology, is repeated today in the Preamble to the 1968
constitution of The United Methodist Church. An additional sentence
invokes "the discipline of the Holy Spirit" for the church's basic tasks:
the maintenance of worship, the edification of believers, and the
redemption of the world.14

Second, the 1808 Restrictive Rules protected "the plan of our
itinerant general superintendency," that is, the linchpin of the whole
itinerant ministry for which the missionary order of preachers was
organized. This rule established the authority of general
superintendents—New Testament episkopoi, or overseers, whom
American Methodists began to call bishops over Wesley's protest—to
assign preachers to their circuits and to travel the connection themselves as preachers par excellence.

This was, to be sure, an episcopacy that "the Christian church had not yet seen," in Bishop John Nuelson's words. Like bishops of a more monarchical tradition, American Methodist bishops appointed the preachers to their places and enjoyed life tenure. But unlike those more organic forms, Methodist episcopacy was not a separate order, was not organized by diocese, and carried no distinct sacramental authority. Bishops were constituted more like heads of an order, overseers and leaders of the mission movement with primary tasks of preaching, teaching, and evangelism. The extent to which such tasks constitute "church" has been an enduring question and ambiguity for Methodist bishops.

Third, the Restrictive Rules protected from change the General Rules of the United Societies. Here Wesley had given out in compact form the basic disciplines of holy living as he understood them. A society was defined as a "company" of persons "having the form and seeking the power of godliness . . . that they may help each other to work out their salvation." To that end they were divided into "smaller companies, called classes," each with a leader. Then followed a section on "doing no harm, by avoiding evil" with some specific evil practices named, such as slaveholding, usury, and uncharitable conversation; then a division on "doing good," in particular "by giving food to the hungry, by clothing the naked, by visiting or helping them that are sick or in prison"; and finally a listing of six disciplines by which Christian life was sustained through the means of grace: worship, Word, the Lord's Supper, prayer, "searching the scriptures," and "fasting or abstinence."16

The Restrictive Rules then went on to protect the right to church trial for both preachers and members of Methodist societies, and to control the publishing and book concerns by designating all their profits for the preaching order: "for the benefit of the traveling, supernumerary, superannuated, and worn-out preachers, their wives, widows, and children."17

To find a fairly contemporary restatement of classic American Methodism one need look no farther than Bishop Harmon's book Understanding the United Methodist Church, last edited in 1977.18 Here he takes the reader through the Articles of Religion one by one; interprets the General Rules line by line; and explains first the conference system and then the episcopacy and ministry. He details
with care the worship and sacramental practices appropriate to Methodism. Only then does he describe church programs, missional structures, organizations, and activities.

So compelling is this vision one might be tempted to say, "well then, just do it." Surely, here is a convergence of Harmonic vision with the formation of church now. Is not United Methodism just the perfect church for the postmodern era?

Not so fast. A triumphalist history will not do. North American Methodists have long had a tendency to rely on narrative for their identity, a narrative proclaiming the providence of God in blessing them with success in extending their mission. Such narrative statements introduced every Discipline until 1939, when they were replaced with more circumspect but nonetheless confident historical reviews. In fact, one might argue that the Methodist tendency to think itself perfectly ordered and suited to its social context may in part account for the dearth of interest in critical studies of polity after 1900. This taken-for-granted world (so succinctly if inadvertently summarized by Bishop Charles Henry Fowler a hundred years ago in the sentence, "Methodism means always doing the best possible thing.") must give way to more critical understanding.

Like its founder, Wesley, Methodism is eclectic in nature. It synthesizes elements of organic and free churches, sacramental and evangelical ministries. Those who inherit this tradition are dining on a rich and varied stew. But if this stew is to serve another generation or become part of some new ecumenical feast, United Methodists must learn again the recipe and select the ingredients with fresh attention. It will not do to declare glibly that United Methodism is everybody's friend, that this church has no problem recognizing other denominations' baptisms and ordinations, no problem with an open communion table.

In the last fifty years the wake-up call has come unmistakably loud and clear, that if United Methodism is really to be united—to build one ecclesial community of diverse peoples and to practice the full participation of both genders—and if United Methodism is to find its place in the church ecumenical, then it must reexamine foundational questions of who or what constitutes church in its unique tradition. Only with critical self-knowledge can United Methodism be a viable partner in ecumenical conversation.
Constituting the Local Church Congregation

In the remainder of this article I examine one basic locus of “church” for its constitutive elements, namely, the local church congregation. Here one ought to find ecclesiology in its most basic distilled form, traceable through history to present debates on the nature of “church.” Here certainly United Methodism is in ferment.

In American Methodist history three basic frameworks for understanding the local assembly of Methodist people have typified their respective eras. First, Methodist gatherings originally were organized as societies divided, in turn, into class meetings. Under the guidance of class leaders, Methodist people met in local places for prayer, reading of scripture, self-examination, and collection of money to support the movement and aid the poor. Under the leadership of traveling preachers, they met in chapels or preaching houses to worship, to sing hymns, pray collectively, hear the Word of God, and enjoy times of revival. Under the administration of a presiding elder, they met with other local societies to report on the local work, worship and receive the Lord’s Supper, and have revival through a Quarterly Conference.

All of this movement—of members between class meeting and society, of preachers from place to place on their circuit, of presiding elders from circuit to circuit, of bishops from conference to conference, all cycling through quarterly, annual, and quadrennial conferences—came to be known as the “wheel within the wheel.” No wonder Bishops Coke and Asbury could write in their 1798 Discipline annotations: “Everything is kept moving so far as possible”!20

Such movement depended upon the vitality of local discipline for continuity, however; and this is the point at which the passing generations brought significant change. As late as 1904 the Methodist Episcopal General Conference adopted a constitution stating that “members of the Church shall be divided into local societies.” But by then even the six-month probationary period for church membership had been dropped, and Quarterly Conferences were soon to be mandated only twice a year.21 As Randy Maddox and Gregory Schneider have shown, the mutual accountability that structured the class meeting gave way to the dominant American culture of individual privacy and gentility.22 Class meetings gave way to the schoolroom model of Sunday school. The societies were left as little more than audiences for preaching, a development which played right...
into Methodism's historic privileging of preaching anyway. These audiences responded by organizing an enormous variety of mission activities as the quintessential American voluntary association. But they now lacked even the characteristic discipline that had given Methodist meetings their constitutive character.

By the turn of the twentieth century, then, Methodist missional activism was carrying the day. As previously independent associations for education and mission were absorbed into denominational bureaucracies, the organized financial and volunteer support of local Methodist gatherings became ever more crucial. Beginning at least by the 1920s, the language of societies fell into disuse, and the new term local church came into vogue. Diagrams from the 1980s of how a local church should be organized—with boxes for each discrete function connected by solid lines to governing bodies—show that this form of connectionalism entailed specialization in local units that paralleled offices in national units. The local church was modeled along the lines of a branch office or local franchise outlet of the national corporate headquarters, paying its apportioned share of denominational costs.

Meanwhile, upon the union of northern and southern Methodisms and the Methodist Protestants in 1939, the local church began to be recognized as a fundamental unit of church. The publishing house, with Nolan B. Harmon as book editor, asked Murray H. Leiffer, both a sociologist of religion with major interest in Methodist polity and a professor at Garrett, to help reorganize the Discipline so that all local church legislation would be in one place. By 1944 that chapter was brought to the forefront of the book, where it has remained. One significant consequence of the change was that Quarterly Conference—today known as Charge Conference—was cut off from the nexus of Annual and General Conference, at one time all described in one continuous chapter on the whole conference system.

It almost seems inevitable now that by the 1980s the lingo would begin to change again to recognize the prominence of the local assembly. A systemic model of the basic mission of the church—"to make disciples of Jesus Christ," as the 1996 Discipline has it—now introduces the chapter on the local church. A paragraph on the "primary task and mission" of the local church was adopted earlier, diagrammed by the General Board of Discipleship as a system for developing the discipleship of the laos, the whole people of God, in a flow from community through church formation and back to
community again—a systems or productivity plan semiotically connected with the metaphor of "making" disciples in the denomination's new mission slogan. Moreover, the term congregation found its way into more and more legislative paragraphs. The Council of Bishops adopted the term for their pastoral statement on Vital Congregations—Faithful Disciples in 1990. As their principal author, I tried to keep the term close to its generative source as a literal translation of the Greek ekklesia and thus to link it to contemporary ecclesiology. I wanted to capture the dynamism of Leonardo Boff's term ecclesiogenesis, the sense that every time the congregation gathers, the church comes into being once more. I hoped to link the term with Hans Küng's claim that "the local ekklesia is not a 'section' or a 'province'...a sub-division of the real 'Church'...[but rather the Church is] wholly present in every place, endowed with the entire promise of the Gospel." I wanted readers to realize with Letty Russell that each gathering of Christians in ecclesia holds primary responsibility for creating an inclusive koinonia or "partnership of equals" that anticipates the reign of God. But unquestionably the term congregation colluded with a spirit of independence abroad in the denomination, particularly as new nondenominational, independent congregations were so often promoted as models of church for the new century.

This spirit was blowing hard in the 1996 General Conference, which undertook to remove the bureaucratic model almost entirely and in the process removed a great deal of church discipline of the local assembly, period. What used to be called program "work areas," such as status and role of women or Christian unity, are now mentioned in a single sentence but nowhere mandated or defined. A council on ministries is mentioned but not defined. The only mandated bodies are those legally required for an incorporated organization in the U.S.—a board of trustees, committees for personnel, finance, and nominations, and a loosely defined council to coordinate it all and act as the executive agency to carry out the directives of the Charge Conference. But with this last term we are reminded again that for all this independence and the lingo of congregation abroad in the denomination, there is no basis in United Methodist polity or tradition for considering the local church congregation as a self-constituted assembly or independent body. Local churches clearly are not self-constituted; they are governed in all major decisions not by an...
annual congregational meeting but by a charge conference authorized and normally presided over by an officer of the connection, the district superintendent. They do not hire their own pastors, holding only a consultative role in receiving a missionary pastor sent by the itinerant order of preachers, not a power of call. They do not own their own buildings, which are held in trust for the denomination. Their property travels with the connection, so to speak, since United Methodist local church property is defined as a place to which a bishop has appointed a United Methodist pastor.28

So one might well ask today, what exactly constitutes a local United Methodist church? The Discipline speaks with multiple voices on this subject, defining the local church in four ways as:

"a community of true believers . . . in which the Word of God is preached . . . and the sacraments are duly administered"—the rhetoric of classical Protestantism that remains foundational but is not specific to Methodism;

"a connectional society of persons who have professed their faith in Christ"—the rhetoric of class meetings and the General Rules, now little known or practiced per se in United Methodist churches;

a place of "definite evangelistic, nurture, and witness responsibility . . . and a missional outreach responsibility"—the rhetoric of contemporary church revitalization programs, persuasive but too programmatic to be compelling;

"a strategic base from which Christians move out to the structures of society"—the rhetoric of social activism which the Discipline unhappily does not link with Methodist traditions of holiness.29

To these has been added in 1996 the mandate of church growth productivity, to "make disciples" as a systemic church process—a rhetoric that seems just to assume a consensus on theological substance and content.

In short, United Methodism continues to come out looking pretty much like a church in search of a church. Albert Outler may have been profoundly right about this movement when he declared that
Methodism's unique ecclesiological pattern was really designed to function best within an encompassing environment of catholicity... We don't do as well by our lonesome... We need a catholic church within which to function as a proper evangelical order of witness and worship, discipline and nurture. 

Viewed through the prism of the local assembly, United Methodism seems to be at something of a pause in self-understanding. If its local churches are not constituted by historic rites and rituals as a uniform practice held in common; not constituted by consistent practices of spiritual holiness; not constituted by a structured connectional covenant for mission; yet are also not self-constituted as churches unto themselves or as bodies with their own covenants in local places, then what exactly does constitute a United Methodist church? What is the constitutional covenant that all United Methodist local church congregations share?

There are signs, of course, that United Methodism may find its way toward church yet. With the adoption of a new Hymnal and Book of Worship in 1988 and the baptism study in 1996, the church has a sound theological and ritual basis for understanding itself as Body of Christ and not just as voluntary association with dues-paying members. But the most hopeful sign remains, for me, the possible emergence of a new church, truly catholic, truly evangelical, truly reformed, which can come through the mutual sharing of the gifts of Methodist tradition with those of other heritages. If United Methodism, other Methodist bodies historically African-American, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Disciples of Christ, and United Churches of Christ, become serious about covenanting to find new ways of being church together, perhaps the Holy Spirit will point the way toward a church that embodies the unity for which Christ prayed.

Participation in such covenanting will make at least three major contributions to United Methodism. First, ecumenical conversations tend to produce balanced and comprehensive Trinitarian understandings of church that counteract the preoccupations of any one of their participant bodies. Dialogue with more sacramental or Pentecostal traditions, for example, can challenge the tendency in many United Methodist congregations toward a christocentrism more typical of many of their Protestant neighbors. Emphasis on the being (substance) of the church in more organic traditions may balance the United Methodist tendency toward activism so clearly reflected today.
in the privileging of “Go ye . . . and make disciples” (Matt. 28:19-20) over any other scriptural word or act constituting ecclesia.

In the language of the Consensus document of the Church of Christ Uniting, the church is called to be catholic, evangelical, and reformed, each “an essential dimension of the Church’s common life.” Ecclesia is catholic as it is inclusive and disciplined by the “essential institutions” of Word and sacrament. It is evangelical as it shares the gospel “message of new life and hope with all people.” It is reformed as it continues in the pilgrimage of discipleship in new ways, “a sign or foretaste” of God’s coming reign.

Encounter with understandings of church central to other communions is crucial to a balanced ecclesiology. Writing from the Orthodox tradition, for example, John Zizioulas argues for the fullness of a Trinitarian ecclesiology. He suggests a distinction between the act of Jesus Christ instituting the ecclesial community of his followers, in particular through the institution of the Eucharist, and the activity of the Holy Spirit in constituting the church, bringing it into being as community and institution through the gifting of its members for ministries. This reinforces a conception that the church is both a given—something that followers of Christ can receive, already instituted, as a sign of God’s reign in the world—and a gift—always being constituted or brought into ever new ways of being through the continual presence of the Holy Spirit. Thus, Christians are confident that, in the words of the United Methodist baptismal ritual, “the Church is of God, and will be preserved to the end of time.” They are also blessed with a variety of gifts needed to be in ministries for their own time and place.

This last point brings us to a second benefit from participation in ecumenical conversation, namely, a refreshed and deepened understanding of the meaning of the “local church” and its connection with the church ecumenical. As suggested above, voices across a wide spectrum of the churches (e.g., Kung, Boff, Russell) have argued that the assembly (ecclesia) in each place is fully or wholly church but not the whole Church. Thus, on the one hand, the church in its fullness is present in each local place. In Zizioulas’s words,

the Church is local when the saving event of Christ takes root in a particular local situation with all its natural, social, cultural, and other characteristics which make up the life and thought of the people living in that place.
Rather than imposing an alien culture on the people of a place, the ecclesia is embodied in the language, stories, rituals, and outlooks of the people who actually comprise the particular assembly. A fully nuanced and textured understanding of the culture of Christian congregations is critical for ecclesiology and ministry, since there are no other ecclesial but these located and particular assemblies.

To ignore culture or make it subservient to an essentialist ecclesiology is tyranny because it fails to recognize the situatedness of the church. Just as God is essentially personal and communicating, risking particularity through the gifts of creation, incarnation, and inspiration, so ecclesia is essentially created and embodied in living human communities that by nature are local and particular.

On the other hand, the local church as church has no ecclesial significance without its communion with other local assemblies who share its witness and service. The local ecclesia is ecclesia eschatologically, as it together with other assemblies is a sign of God’s reign that transcends all particularities of culture and locale. The promise of this eschatological community is the focal point of church-constituting acts of worship (leitourgia) and service (diakonia), with the local community (koinonia) itself a sign of the eschatological, universal communion (oikoumene).

Just as creation is the only world human beings have been given and its givenness is its transcendence, so ecclesia is a gift and its givenness (institution by Christ) is its transcendence (continued constitution in every time and place by the power of the Holy Spirit).

Christians know ecclesia when they see it, in the signs of God’s reign embodied in whole, just communities of witness and service.

Finally, ecumenical conversation will contribute to United Methodism’s understanding of church because such dialogue is itself an essential ecclesial practice. In this sense it is not so much the covenant or consensus statements themselves but rather the practice of composing them that enacts and embodies ecclesia. Getting the words right can become an obsession, resulting in descriptions of church that seem idealistically remote from any living community. But the act of mutually seeking a fuller understanding of church is a practice that unites meaning and action, being and doing, history and presence, disposition and act, reason and habitus. A covenant is meaningful only as making covenant; ecclesia is communion only as Christians make community by the power of the Spirit. Here, too, ecclesia mirrors the Christian understanding of God. In Catherine LaCugna’s words,
The nature of the church should manifest the nature of God. Just as the doctrine of the Trinity is not an abstract teaching about God apart from us but a teaching about God's life with us and our life with each other, ecclesiology is not the study of an abstract church but a study of the actual gathering of persons in a common faith and a common mission. We are all members of a church on the way toward the full realization of God's life; communion is an eschatological hope.16

United Methodists need this ecumenical conversation in order better to discern the constitutive elements of ecclesia. This is not in the service of a new round of institution-building but in the service of the Christian life. The critical test of an emerging church will be its capacity to encourage people's growth in the knowledge and love of God and thereby build up a community of witness and service to the Reign of God. I conclude with Wesley's words from his early statement of "the character of a Methodist"—a precis of the Christian life as love of God and neighbor:

These are the principles and practices of our sect; these are the marks of a true Methodist. By these alone do those who are in derision so called, desire to be distinguished from other men. If any man say, "Why, these are only the common fundamental principles of Christianity!" thou hast said; so I mean; this is the very truth . . . the plain, old Christianity that I teach . . . from real Christians, of whatsoever denomination they be, we earnestly desire not to be distinguished at all . . . let us strive together for the faith of the Gospel; walking worthy in the vocation wherewith we are called . . . remembering, there is one body, and one Spirit, even as we are called with one hope of our calling.31

Notes


13. Large Minutes, Wesley, Works, 8:275.


16. The General Rules may be found in the 1996 *Discipline*, ¶62.

17. The Restrictive Rules may be found in almost identical form in the 1996 *Discipline*, ¶s 16–20. A rule protecting the Confession of Faith of the Evangelical United Brethren Church was added for the 1968 Constitution.


27. 1996 *Discipline*, 254, 256.

28. Ibid., 248–250, 263, 2503.

29. Ibid., 201–204.


Barbara Troxell and Patricia Farris

One Eye on the Past, One Eye on the Future: Women's Contributions to Renewal of the United Methodist Church

At a time when the United Methodist Church is hungering for renewal and new vision, as it awaits the birth of a new purpose and structure—at such a time as this—the denomination finds itself once again poised either to embrace or reject the contributions of women to its renewal and revitalization.

Yet for many, these contributions are either overlooked entirely or perceived as threatening. We intend, therefore, to explore women's contributions to renewal of the United Methodist Church based on:

—historical data,
—interviews with contemporary churchwomen, and
—our own projections of future options.

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The Historical Legacy of Women in the UMC

The Re-Imagining Conference of November, 1993, and its subsequent conferences and newsletter were considered by many of its critics to be a radical aberration from Christian work and faith. But it can and should be seen in another light: as a continuation of the work of women in the churches, based on the formation of the women’s missionary societies of the last century. For the last century and a half, women in Protestant churches have been organizing for dialogue, theologizing, ministry, and mission.

The Women’s Missionary Societies of the last century were founded in the years following the Civil War. They began at a crucial juncture in U.S. history and reflected its broader cultural dynamics: a growing population, increasing prosperity, industrialization and urbanization, and a general belief that improvements in the lives of women at home and abroad would improve the human race as a whole. Because of their newfound prosperity, many women employed others to help run their homes and volunteered their time and energies outside it. Missionary work, as an extension of the “women’s sphere,” was thus considered acceptable work for Christian women. These women created “missionary societies” in order to organize their mission projects at home and abroad and to exercise control over the funds to be used for those projects.

From the beginning, several factors distinguished the women’s societies from the male-administered boards and agencies. The minutes of society meetings often record passionate discussions of controversial issues and a clear effort to achieve consensus. Truly democratic leadership was their style. They built into their organization plans for continual self-study and re-evaluation. By means of extensive letter-writing and prayer, they nurtured a strong “sisterly” feeling of support within the groups and with the missionaries.

Using the resources available to them, often through the sale of crafts and baked goods, women raised money for mission. To achieve their common goals, women’s groups eagerly worked with their ecumenical partners, sharing information, prayers, and Bible study materials in the form of thousands of leaflets and tracts. The missionary societies were never underwritten by the church; funding for all their work came from the women themselves, given on top of their regular church contributions.
They made clear the spiritual basis for their activity: the slogan of the Women's Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South (MECS) was, "Grow we must, even if we outgrow all that we love."

Several of their organizations, such as the Women's Home Missionary Society, took very active progressive social stands on issues such as temperance, child labor, law enforcement, causes of war, neglected children, polygamy, violations of the Bill of Rights, race relations, immigration, and the rights of sharecroppers. Those who worked with the women's missionary societies often pushed for broader recognition and authority within the life of the church and in the broader society. Within the church, for example, they promoted the acceptance of deaconesses and lay rights for women; in the U.S., they created the field of social work and nurtured leadership among women in popular movements, such as the Women's Christian Temperance Union.

Through it all, the women and the work of the church grew and prospered. Case in point: the annual income of the Women's Foreign Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South grew from $4,014 in 1874 to $259,178 in 1909. Their number of auxiliaries grew from 150 to 4,201. By 1909, they had sent 92 missionaries, were supporting 107 schools, and had responsibility for $200,000 worth of property.

But the very success of these women's organizations ultimately led to their demise. In 1910 the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South—at which women had neither laity nor clergy rights—voted to combine the Women's Home and Foreign Missionary Societies and to subsume them under the denomination's Board of Missions.

In language strangely prescient of current dilemmas, an active Methodist woman wrote to her friend in 1910:

*I fear women will lose their independence of thought when they lose responsibility for, and management of, their own affairs... I fear the future will see the most intelligent women seeking a field of usefulness elsewhere and leave the church lacking the leadership that leads to enthusiasm and further development... We are a helpless minority in a body where the membership is made up largely of men opposed to the independence of thought in women.*

*ONE EYE ON THE PAST, ONE EYE ON THE FUTURE*
As a bridge between the nineteenth-century women's missionary societies and the contributions of women today, we offer brief portraits of three pioneering women from the history of U.S. American Methodism whose "independence of thought" thankfully did not lead them to seek "a field of usefulness elsewhere."

**Ida B. Wells-Barnett** (1862-1931) was an African-American journalist and advocate for social justice whose primary contribution was in the anti-lynching movement in the late-nineteenth century. When a yellow fever epidemic killed her parents and a younger sister, Wells, at the age of sixteen, supported her five brothers and sisters as a school teacher in Memphis. She soon became a newspaper columnist and then an editorial writer. "Through these columns, Wells created a standard for herself, her people, and United States society. She forged a deep and abiding spirituality rooted in the black church of the South." 6

An ecumenical person, Ida Wells was involved in Congregational, African Methodist Episcopal, and Presbyterian churches at various times in her life. Her "strong sense of Christian duty" 7 led her into unwavering advocacy for the rights of blacks, who were subject to daily oppression and the constant threat of being lynched by lawless gangs of whites. She spoke, wrote, and acted fearlessly against such conditions. Townes writes, "She yoked Christian duty and womanhood with justice, moral agency and vocation. . . . Wells-Barnett lived out her faith and sense of vocation. . . . Her high social, moral, and religious standards demanded a just society. . . . [She] blazed the trail for others to follow." 8

**Georgia Elma Harkness** (1891-1974), "the first woman theologian to teach in a Protestant seminary in the United States," combined in her creative life a deep spiritual commitment to God in Christ, an unwavering passion for justice and peace, and an ability to teach theology plainly and clearly. These were not divided for her but woven into the tapestry of a faithful life. In the words of Rosemary Skinner Keller, who wrote the definitive biography of Harkness, 9 "Georgia Harkness's prophetic witness for social justice throughout her adult life was closely tied to her faith commitment as an evangelical liberal." 10

First nurtured in the faith at Harkness Methodist Church in upstate New York, she continued as an ecumenical Methodist and United Methodist her entire life. A consistent pacifist throughout her adult
life, even in the face of two World Wars, Harkness also spoke out against racism, on behalf of women in ministry, and against militarism (for example, she was a very vocal opponent of the internment of the Japanese-Americans on the Pacific Coast during World War II). Her commitment to justice was explicitly rooted in her deep faith in the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ. Georgia Harkness certainly "stands as both forerunner and role model," as Rosemary Ruether has written.

Thelma Stevens (1902–1990) was a Southern white woman who as a teenager witnessed the lynching of an African-American teenager. "The experience profoundly changed Stevens's life, for she vowed that 'if the Lord would ever let me live long enough I would spend the rest of my life working for basic fairness and justice and safety for black people.' " She became the director of a Methodist women's-sponsored Bethlehem Center in Augusta, Georgia, from the late 1920s to late 1930s and organized interracial camping programs and other social justice and outreach programs.

Her administrative skills were later put to use in the traditionally male-run agencies of the church. She became head of the Bureau of Christian Social Relations of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, and, in 1940, the full-time executive of the Department of Christian Social Relations of the Women's Division of Christian Service of the Board of Missions of The Methodist Church. Her accomplishments there were significant: she was the primary writer of the 1952 Charter of Racial Justice; she built strong ties between Methodist women and the United Nations, strongly influencing the decision to construct the Center for the United Nations in New York City. After she retired in 1968, Stevens battled sexism in the church, volunteered with Church Women United, and helped in the formation of the UM General Commission on the Status and Role of Women. She worked for justice for gay men and lesbians, and she was a wonderful mentor for younger women.

Tensions of Authoritative Leadership Experienced by Women

As we consider the renewal of the denomination, it is important to highlight the fact that women often experience difficulties in dealing with traditional forms of authority and leadership. We tend to
understand leadership to be the creative exercising of authority in community, the responsible use of power to name, to influence, and to change people and situations. Furthermore, since it is *legitimated* power, authority requires relationship; and it is most fully expressed when shared in mutual ministry. When this basic definition of leadership collides with traditional authority structures, some characteristic tensions result that will strongly affect the experience of women church leaders. We will explore three of these tensions, which mark the context in which women's contributions to church renewal are being made today.

**Women's Authority Eroded.** Between 1990 and 1997, one of the authors facilitated a series of interviews on authority and mutual ministry among UM women in leadership in the church. Among the comments were these:

—A retired staff person of a general agency: "I see so much violence against women and oppression of women within the church escalating in the United States and in various parts of the world. I am very sad and angry about this violence born of patriarchy. This violence must be named and talked about openly in the church so it can be confronted and addressed."

—A former district superintendent of a south central annual conference: "Though I have been affirmed as a key leader in terms of the general church, as a good representative of our conference, I find immediate colleagues stomping on me. It is as if they are threatened by me. Would that be the case if I were a man? There seems to be an issue here of inability to share power."

—A current agency staff person noted: "I have had more communication in the past three years than in the four prior from people asking how to respond when other laity raise concerns and questions about why the UMC has women pastors. In phoning, they are asking for biblical rationale to support our ordination of women. Our office had no idea such a resource would be needed again at this point in time."

—A bishop noted that early in her episcopacy she felt categorized by being seen and received primarily as a "role" or an "office" rather than as a real person. This was not so much "backlash" as it was a feeling of being "reduced to a role." She learned that she needed to let go of her own need to insist that others see the "real me." She began to accept the new office in a "reconstructive" way, affirming the inner knowledge that she was a whole person called to a particular office of bishop in the church.
Another bishop expressed hope that clergywomen in the UMC "will not ricochet at defensive postures" in the coming years. "The backlash is on, and my plea is that they take their authority in good stride and remember how they came to be where they are out of the kind of mutual exercise of power for each other and on behalf of each other."  

The backlash against women in leadership in church and society can be seen in movements that seek to silence the voices of women theologians, pastors, and church executives. Witness, for example, the turmoil following the "Re-Imagining" Conference in November 1993, because of which certain women who planned the event actually lost their jobs. Women in the United Methodist Church, aware of the backlash effect, are responding in various ways. They may expend enormous amounts of time and energy defending their positions and their work; they may become angry and reactive; they may acquiesce to their own silencing; or they may go underground. In all cases the inner wisdom and valuable leadership of women seeking to follow the call of God in their lives is muted or denied.  

In the current climate of ignorance or outright hostility against feminist, womanist, mujerista, Asian women and Native women theologians, pastors, and diaconal ministers, how do women continue to offer constructive leadership? What can renew these women in their quest for authentic, faithful, inclusive, prophetic ministry? How can we persist in naming the idolatries of sexism, racism, and disempowerment? As women church leaders acknowledge their sense of the erosion of women's authority in institutional settings, these questions call for our serious reflection.  

Accountability systems in conflict. The clash of authority systems produces deep struggle. The struggle is most painful when personal authority clashes with institutional authority, when new patterns of partner-oriented leadership are denigrated by hierarchical systems. In the interviews and informal conversations we have had, many women spoke passionately about what, for them, was the struggle between what the church ("tradition") expected and what the "inner witness" of the Spirit ("experience") directed.  

—A clergywoman's story: Under pressure from colleagues and friends in the church to allow herself to be nominated for the office of bishop, she discovered that tradition, reason, and the perceptions of
others were in conflict with the "inner witness." The outer voices, as well as the voice of reason ("Of course, you would be a good bishop; you can do it.") were saying one thing. The inner voice kept quietly insisting, "This is not your calling at this time. You can do it, but you may lose your soul." Thus, she withdrew from consideration.

—A bishop spoke of her approach to authority as one of being honest, truthful, direct in confronting, and even apologizing to her Cabinet for mistakes. Cabinet colleagues were shocked at such expression of vulnerability, for they felt it subverted or undercut her authority as bishop. She responded that she considers apologizing when she is mistaken as part of the appropriate use of authority.

—General agency staff colleagues said, "Authority is what we are authored to do, which is connected with who we are as persons." They spoke of the occasional "cacophony of voices" which then must be heard and sorted out until there is some clarity about where God's voice is. They also used the image of the "human body" which "includes a very complex system that exists to keep us alive and well. The image is one of dynamic interaction with all of creation, in the sorting out of our ministries."

This conflict of accountability systems raises a second set of questions for our consideration. How do we find healthy ways to remain accountable to God, to other persons, and to our own best selves when the alternative is numbness or cooptation by institutional systems of dominance/subordination? How do we exercise courageous leadership on controversial issues without closing our minds to diverse viewpoints and those who hold them? How do women venture to lead others without being distracted by the rewards of the old-style competition ("one-upsmanship") model or being isolated by the new megachurch super-pastor model? When inner authority conflicts with the authority of office or institution (even the denominational rules themselves), the tension must be dealt with. Under these conditions, trustworthy sources for renewal are of vital importance.

Challenges of chaos and of law-and-order. For some in today's world, only chaos, disorder, and situations and people and events that are out of control are what is real. But in a society sick or fearful of chaos, the clarion call is for "law and order" and "rules and regulations." This nation and parts of our denomination seem to be caught in what Walter Wink calls "the myth of redemptive violence," that is, the belief that God has called us to bring order out of chaos.
through any and all means, including combat and violence. Because of this, we forget that chaos has a positive function as the milieu for creation and the birthing of the new.

Questions of order versus chaos are really concerns about proper boundaries, and in our church and world these boundaries can be either too loose or too rigid. Many women and men, both clergy and lay, are leaving the United Methodist Church or the church altogether because they do not feel heard or supported in their creative leadership. They feel stifled, bound too tightly by denominational restrictions. Others leave because they feel the denomination has become too loose, too "liberal," and has abandoned the basic tenets of orthodox Christian faith.

—Several interviewees, including one bishop, named the pain they felt about clergywomen who leave the active ministry because these women feel they cannot be heard or received in the church as they are. "Yet," the interviewees stated, "These are some of the most courageous, visionary, and gifted women." The boundaries have become too tight for them, particularly with regard to images of God, styles of worship and music, sexual orientation, and lifestyle.

—Agency executive: "God created life out of chaos! But we don’t really believe that. We have such a linear idea of what life is. Yet life is a cyclical spiral of evolution. We often will revisit what we have been through before in similar yet different ways."

—Agency executive: "Part of mutuality in ministry is to allow whatever gut-level reaction comes, rather than having to be so linear, statistical, numerical." But this way, she pointed out, feels like chaos and being out of control, and "that is scary and not orderly enough for many people in the church."

Thus we have our third set of questions: Does strong leadership mean conquering, accommodating, or attending carefully to chaos? How much and what sort of order is necessary for the authentic practice of women’s ministries? By what process should we set and/or adjust our personal and vocational boundaries? How tolerant of the intolerant can we afford to be?

Present Elements and Future Options for Renewal

Our thesis is that the United Methodist Church is undergoing an existential crisis of direction and definition. The denomination, always
closely tied to North American cultural dynamics, has been buffeted of late by societal forces of economic change, increasing racial/ethnic diversity, urbanization, a new populism suspicious of all large-scale organizations and their leadership, growing polarization between rich and poor, and the decline of U.S. hegemony as a world power. Not surprisingly, numerous prognoses, paradigmatic models, and new structures are being discussed and explored at all levels of church life.

But it is troubling to note that denominational leadership in general, including conservative groups within the denomination, have embraced "re-engineering" but attacked "Re-Imagining." The church accepts stereotypically male forms of language and thinking as new paradigms for church development, whereas it greets the concepts and styles of church women with suspicion and even disdain. Among some conservative groups, such as the Good News organization, the Presbyterian Lay Committee, and their larger umbrella organization, the Institute for Religion and Democracy, Re-Imagining has become the very symbol of modern ecclesiastical heresy.

In point of fact, the Re-Imagining Conference was for many the most public and visible manifestation of women’s theologizing, organizing, and visioning. One very significant perspective is revealed in Defecting in Place: Women Claiming Responsibility for Their Own Spiritual Lives.16 This Lilly-funded study, based on research surveys of some 3,746 Roman Catholic and Protestant women, documents the fact that the Re-Imagining Conference, in both form and content, was not an aberration. This research documents the existence of circles of women throughout the church who are 1) not content with the limited theology they often receive in their local churches; 2) frustrated by the obstacles placed by the church to their full participation and recognition of their authority; and 3) working within the church nevertheless for the healing and renewal of their own lives and that of the institution itself.

We can note many examples of contemporary women’s contributions to the renewal of the UMC, contributions which embody creativity, courage, and deeply transformative faith commitments. We will name but a few: Bishop Sharon Brown Christopher and Aileen Williams, who risked initiatives based on the Quest paradigm; Phyllis Tyler Wayman, whose prophetic leadership grounded the Covenant Discipleship group experience in ministries of justice; retired Bishop Leontine Kelly, who continues the struggle against racism and has championed the cause of universal health care and opposition to
nuclear testing; Nobuko Miyake Stoner, See Hee Han, and others for their powerful, redemptive work on Japanese-Korean relations; Jeanne Audrey Powers, who has offered public witness as a lesbian woman with decades of experience as a denominational leader and ecumenist; Tweedy Sombrero and Anne Marshall, who speak passionately about the theft of Native American spirituality by church and commercial opportunists; and Jacqueline Carrasco of Chile and others who are challenging traditional roles for women while living out ancient/new models of church as a source of empowerment and reconciliation.

Based on our historical and present experience as women of the church, we would like to point toward sources of renewal in the United Methodist Church. Some of these are being overlooked, some deliberately misreported, and some trivialized. All, we believe, offer grounds for hope and encouragement for women and for the church as a whole. We raise eight for discussion and serious consideration.

Contributions of a Transformative Ecclesiology to Renewal of the United Methodist Church

1. Acknowledging the need for communities of support, faithful people who care for, challenge, and pray with us, study scripture with us, and hold us accountable to our visions and covenantal commitments.

Every one of the twenty-five women we interviewed named support communities as essential to the nurturing of her relationship with God and her continuing in ministry within the United Methodist Church. Support communities are necessarily diverse; support communities for these women leaders included women and men, young and old, families and friends, colleagues and spiritual guides, laity and clergy, persons within and outside of the United Methodist denomination.

Contemporary forms of “Christian conference” are actually sacramental in purpose, a means of grace. Jesus knew this. The Wesleys knew this, as did members of class meetings in the Wesleys’ day. Members of covenant discipleship groups in our day know it today. The renewal of the United Methodist Church depends on such communities of support and accountability.

2. Practicing discernment within a holistic spirituality.

Holistic spirituality means a sense of interconnectedness with God, with others, with our world, with the earth and all creatures, and with
ourselves. Christians express it as the relationship of all life to the presence and guidance of God as God is known in Jesus Christ. This interconnectedness is developed in many ways. We are called to:

—Take sabbath time intentionally (daily, weekly, monthly, yearly) to attend to God and God’s call in one’s life. This is a way of caring for our soul’s and body’s well-being. Make time and space for prayer and whatever else nurtures our relationship with God.

—Know that our “inner life” is fully connected with our “outer life.” Several women interviewed said that it was only in midlife that they realized they had an inner life that required tending; they now find that tending a great joy and grace.

—Develop a holistic spirituality which honors body as well as spirit and mind, embracing the whole of creation.

—Begin and end each day with special rituals for re-connecting, gathering, centering.

—Meet regularly with a spiritual director or spiritual companion who keeps us honest and aids our discernment (our “listening” and “sifting.”)

—Trust the “means of grace,” Keep a balance of “works of piety” and “works of mercy”—together with “no-works,” but simple resting in God. “We must learn to ground our spirituality in what European theological traditions most fear—physical embodiment, cultural particularity, and the unavoidable reality of multifaceted interdependence and cosmic interconnection.”

3. Claiming authority from God in the self and in the community of faith, trusting that God in Christ speaks through inner wisdom within diverse persons and communities of discernment. We are called in our baptism to claim the power of God, for “through baptism (we) are incorporated by the Holy Spirit into God’s new creation and made to share in Christ’s royal priesthood.”

Our styles of leadership and organization should reflect this affirmation, through greater mutuality among all persons, honoring the gifts of persons of diverse genders, races, classes, educational levels, sexual orientations, and cultures. God does speak through diverse theological perspectives, new ways of preaching Jesus Christ, and diverse expressions of faith—for at the center is Jesus Christ, not creed, tradition, or even scripture. In women’s experience, such centering on Jesus Christ eschews triumphalism and arrogance, as well as forms of patriarchal control often associated with Christ-centered faith.
As Jean Miller Schmidt writes, “The power to transform the world must be rooted in profound spirituality, biblical faith, and theological reflection (and not simply human effort), while insisting equally that this must not mean conforming to a particular type of piety.”

4. Naming alienating sins.

We must dare to name all forms of exclusion, repression, and violence against marginalized persons as antithetical to the liberating gospel of Christ. This confessional contribution to renewal is grounded in our baptismal covenant. Our vows (or in the case of an infant, the vows of parents or sponsors) include: accepting “the freedom and power God gives to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves.”

Letty Russell writes of four contradictions which we must name and reject would we be a church faithful to Jesus Christ:

Coalitions and safety are a contradiction... There are no coalitions without risk. A second contradiction is that of trying to solve conflict without sharing power. Persons of privilege cannot solve conflict without giving up or sharing power. A third contradiction is that we think we can create community without diversity. Community is not built on sameness. Community is built out of difference. Finally, we need to develop spirituality in which we recognize the contradiction of celebrating liberation without struggling for justice.

We are called not only to name, but to resist; and such resistance includes praying, acting, speaking with authority and intentionality, “interceding for the souls of institutions.”

5. Dialoguing with integrity

In the current cultural climate, it cannot be assumed that true dialogue is always possible or that it will lead readily to reconciliation. Authentic dialogue exists only when those involved affirm themselves, move to mutual examination and criticism, and then onward to mutual affirmation.

Women still move into dialogue on highly conflicted issues from positions of marginalization and vulnerability in the institution. Understanding that, we must find new forms of conversation and relationship-building which draw on the experience of the early women’s missionary societies as well as the spirit of Wesley’s class meetings.
Women’s experiences of dialogue can offer sources of renewal to the larger church: by creating safe places for honest sharing which assume confidentiality and mutual respect; by giving careful and consistent attention to the presence and the leading of God’s Spirit and wisdom; by assuming that diversity in the body is expected and healthy; and by grounding the experience in the worship of the triune God.

6. Affirming the ministry of the laity as we recall the Wesleyan model of small groups led by laity, based in the ministry given in our baptism. Together, before any laying on of hands for ordination or consecration, we have been baptized. Thus we are called to honor the daily ministries of the laity in their places of service and prayer. There will be no renewal of the United Methodist Church without laity.

It is striking to us that the first Re-Imagining Conference included a large percentage of laywomen. The majority of participants were intelligent, active laywomen of diverse Christian communions. While inclusive of clergywomen and men, many of the participants came from traditional women’s groups and offices in the denominations, similar to those of their foremothers in the women’s missionary societies.

It is imperative that we affirm and encourage coalitions of lay women and clergywomen, together with men, who want to share power out of abundance, rather than compete in an atmosphere of scarcity and competition. Trust the laity as thinkers, doers, reflective practitioners from whom clergy can learn a lot!

7. Encouraging deep ecumenism and internationalism. As we become more aware of our interconnectedness in this world, we must develop our commitments to an ecumenical and international style which celebrates diverse gifts and contributions of all members. An international scope keeps the material and social needs of the poor at the center of the church’s agenda for mission and ministry; it keeps us humble and respectful of other Christian traditions and the practices of other religions.

As our colleagues in Shalom Ministries have written, “Great religious themes are controversial and debated for centuries. These discussions affect the ways people deal with their cultural setting as well as how the church understands itself and its mission.”23 They note that a key religious question confronting us now is this: “How will we relate to other people? What does it mean to follow Jesus’ teaching to love our neighbor?”24
8. Worshiping the Triune God undergirds and enlivens all other contributions to renewal. At the center of our lives as United Methodist Christians is worship in all its facets of praise and thanksgiving, confession and forgiveness, word and table, hymn singing and silent waiting, intercession and engagement in God’s mission for holiness/wholeness in the world. Even as the persons of the Triune God are ever in relationship with one another, so do we lift up our hearts and reach out our hands to be in relationship with one another through the power of the One who first loved us.

Women have sought the transformation of vital worship through emphases on “worship in the round”; involvement in worship of “the whole person”—body-mind-spirit—in every age and stage, in all beginnings and endings within one’s life; and awareness of all of creation within Christian worship. Renewed emphasis on the sacraments, together with regular weekly celebration of the Eucharist in many (though not yet the majority of) United Methodist churches, has deepened our life in God.

A transformative ecclesiology, renewing the United Methodist Church, requires honest, open, celebrative, authentic worship of the triune God.

Conclusion

The title for this paper is taken from Madagascar, where a proverb speaks of the chameleon, an amazing creature whose two eyes can turn independently, thus allowing a large field of vision embracing many directions at once. The Malagasy people say that the chameleon has one eye on the past and one eye on the future.25

Thus, with one eye on the past and one eye on the future, it is our conviction that attending to the marginalized voices and acting on the historical and present witness of women within the United Methodist Church are essential elements as we live into the future.

It remains to be seen whether or how women’s perspectives and contributions will be sought and incorporated into new models of church and denomination. Will women’s theological and ecclesiological contributions be embraced at the heart of denominational restructuring?

In this time of renewal of our denomination, we assert that our Wesleyan, United Methodist tradition has never been about drawing
sharp lines but about depth inquiry, asking questions, embracing diversity—in commitment to the gospel that liberates persons, society, and even the church itself. It is our hope that our denomination will celebrate women’s voices and styles of leadership; women’s insights in theology and spirituality; and women’s gifts, graces, and wisdom as profound and faithful sources of renewal and revitalization.

Notes

2. See Mary Isham, *Valorous Ventures: A Record of Sixty and Six Years of the Women’s Foreign Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (Boston: Women's Foreign Missionary Society, Methodist Episcopal Church, 1936), 37; and Elaine Magalis, *Conduct Becoming to a Woman: Betrothed Doors and Burgeoning Missions* (New York: Women's Division, Board of Global Ministries, United Methodist Church, 1973), 16.
7. Ibid., 152.
8. Ibid., 155.
12. Quotations are not attributed to persons by name, unless previously published, especially in Barbara B. Troxell, "Honor One Another with Our Stories," in Keller, ed., *Spirituality and Social Responsibility*.
20. Jean Miller Schmidt, “Reexamining the Public/Private Split: Reforming the Continent and Spreading Scriptural Holiness,” in Russell Richey, Kenneth Rowe, Jean Miller Schmidt, eds., Perspectives on American Methodism (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 244.
24. Ibid., 4.
25. Patricia Farris participated in a WCC team visit to Madagascar in 1992 related to the “Ecumenical Decade: Churches in Solidarity with Women.”
Facing the Wilderness/Encountering Chaos

God frees the Israelites from slavery in Egypt and leads them into the Promised Land. That story, proclaimed in preaching and song, seems never to grow old. It is a powerful story of change. There is geographic movement, from Egypt to Canaan. There is social transformation, from slavery to freedom. But a funny thing happens on the way: Israel enters the wilderness. That part of the story often disappears from view.

Wilderness: A View from the Center

Wilderness, a place in between. Wilderness, a place “outside” the structures of an ordered world. Wilderness, a place that is wild, chaotic, untamed. Wilderness, a place occupied by “the other.” Such a place is often perceived and experienced as dangerous and threatening. Typical responses, then, are to avoid it, to escape it, control it, tame it, or annihilate it. Within my own cultural context, Euro-American, images of wilderness loomed large in the imagination of those moving westward and settling in the U.S.

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Wilderness not only frustrated the pioneers physically but also acquired significance as a dark and sinister symbol. They shared the long Western tradition of imagining wild country as a moral vacuum, a cursed and chaotic wasteland. . . . Civilizing the New World meant enlightening darkness, ordering chaos, and changing evil into good.  

The wild forest must be cut down and parcelled; the open prairie plowed and fenced. The wild and open natural world, and all associated with it, must be conquered. Euro-American society expands, extending its control over larger and larger areas. The order of the “civilized world” conquers the chaos of the wilderness. The basic mythic pattern is that of creating order out of chaos, one manifestation of which is imposing culture upon nature.

That same paradigm can also be detected operating within human society. The “center” of society, that is, the dominant culture, defines order. All others are relegated to the margins. The binary pattern represented in the nature-culture dynamics noted above can be observed in such oppositions as female-male, savage-civilized, dark-light, emotional-rational, matter-spirit. The pattern is consistently imaged as chaos-order. The goal of society is to maintain those structures that create and protect order. Society must secure itself against chaos, by either walling that chaos out or fencing it in. Walled and gated communities are designed to keep the “chaos” out, providing security for those within. Prisons or reservations, ghettos or barrios keep the “chaos” fenced in—excluded from the ordered, the good society. Yet another option is to impose order on the chaos, bringing those at the margins into conformity with the norms of the center.

This paradigm of order controlling chaos also tends to shape the dynamics of personal and institutional life. Transitional events for individuals and movements for change within institutions are often imaged as wilderness moments, a time of liminality, when one is betwixt and between. Typically such moments of chaos are viewed as times to “get through”—with minimal damage or disruption. The norm is to maintain existing patterns and structures; the task is to secure the order.

We seem fixated on structures; and we build them strong and complex because they must, we believe, hold back the dark
forces that are out to destroy us. It's a hostile world out there
and organizations, or we who create them, survive only
because we build crafty and smart—smart enough to defend
ourselves from the natural forces of destruction. ... Many
organizations I experience are impressive fortresses.3

Change, if it must happen, should proceed quickly and efficiently,
moving in a planned manner from one order to another. The story
pattern is “out of Egypt” and “into the Land,” passing quickly over
the wilderness on the way.

Religious language and concepts tend to share in and reinforce such
attitudes. God is imaged as a God of order. Genesis opens with that
wondrous story of creation, in which God commands those
separations which establish an ordered world—light from darkness,
water above from water below, land from sea, day from night. Psalms
such as 8, 19, and 104 praise this God who creates, maintains, and
sustains that ordered world. Many other psalms express a cry to God
from the midst of chaos, pleading for rescue from that threatening
chaos. The tradition remembers and celebrates the God who creates
order out of chaos.

Wilderness: Other Images

A Place of Retreat. It is important to recognize, however, that another
perspective on the wilderness also threads through the history of
dominant Euro-American culture, a perspective that embraces the
wilderness.

It is not that wilderness was any less solitary, mysterious, and
chaotic, but rather in the new intellectual context these
qualities were coveted.5

What emerges is a romantic image of the wilderness and a concept of
the noble savage. The wilderness becomes a place of retreat and
escape—if only for the weekend—from the evil of the ordered world
of human society. But the basic mythic pattern does not change. This
view simply reverses the signs: what was positive is now negative, and
vice versa. The binary opposition between order and chaos remains
unchallenged. Order and chaos remain as separate and distinct entities.
A Place of Resistance and Revelation. Alternative perspectives, however, can be discovered—most commonly in the writings of persons at the “margins.” Delores Williams has explored the formative role that images of the wilderness, particularly within the biblical stories of Hagar, have played for communities of African-American women. In these traditions one does not find competing concepts of wilderness, one positive, the other negative. While the wilderness was a positive place, the experience of the wilderness was ambiguous. Wilderness provided a place of refuge from and resistance against a hostile social order; it was a place in which to forge identity and to affirm “such qualities as defiance; risk-taking; independence; endurance when endurance gives no promise; . . . .” The wilderness also served as a symbol of struggle—the black people’s struggle for survival and for identity. “One of the constituent ideas in the Hagar-in-the-wilderness symbolism is Hagar’s, black women’s and black people’s encounter with the threat—and often actuality—of death-dealing circumstances.”

In describing antebellum slave traditions, Dwight N. Hopkins depicts the wilderness as a place of resistance for persons who had been enslaved on the plantations of the U.S.

So the wilderness and nature tradition provided both a haven from white imposition of political power over black humanity and a surrendering to and reaffirmation of God’s word of deliverance. . . . the One who offered freedom to oppressed humanity tarried there on the boundaries of society in opposition to the whitewashed columns of the slavemaster’s residence.

Hal Recinos, writing out of the experience of the barrio, offers a similar image. Noting that “mainstream society concludes that the barrio is inferior and worthless,” he declares that “the biblical narratives direct attention to the insignificant places of established society as the proper context of divine disclosure.” Others writing within Latino/Latina or Hispanic experiences offer additional images: en el camino, exile or diaspora, borderlands. bell hooks, an African-American woman “yearning” for liberation, embraces the tradition of the wilderness image when she “[chooses] the margin as a space of radical openness.” She says of this place:
"Locating oneself there is difficult yet necessary. It is not a 'safe' place. One is always at risk. One needs a community of resistance.”

She also distinguishes between the marginality that is imposed and the marginality which one chooses as the space of resistance and openness.

A Place of Encounter: Jung Young Lee, drawing upon Asian-American experiences, takes the experience of margin as the central concept in his theology. A crucial shift occurred for him when he recognized the interrelationship of center and margin.

Thinking from the margin rather than from the center gives me a fresh perspective. My careful observation of the pond helped me define marginality and the marginalized person. First of all, I noticed that marginality is defined only in relation to centrality. . . . They are mutually relative and co-existent.

From this perspective he further suggests that the “margin” might well be the only place from which to create a genuinely new form of community.

The image from the center is often that of the expanding circle. The circle is expanded to include others. But the circle is still defined by the center, and inclusion (or exclusion) remains under the control of the center. Lee moves defining power from the center to the margins and thinks in terms of (inclusive) relationships between rather than incorporation within.

The images of wilderness and of chaos as the necessary context for any significant effort toward conversation in a genuinely pluralistic or multicultural world are evident in the works of Fumitaka Matsuoka and Audre Lorde, respectively. It is by moving outside the established structures of knowledge that new “ways of knowing” emerge, that new understandings are forged.

At the Edge of Order and Chaos. In another sphere of inquiry, scientists have developed chaos theory and complexity theory, concepts that have rapidly found proponents in many disciplines. These new scientific paradigms have altered dramatically not only long established and deeply entrenched scientific understandings of the nature of the cosmos but also cultural perceptions of the world. Thus, in yet another idiom, business managers can read about
Thriving on Chaos, or organizational leaders can explore managing organizations on the boundary between chaos and order. As is evident in the very title of the book by Margaret Wheatley cited above, new scientific concepts and philosophical constructs are reshaping the language of organizational management and systems analysis. Dynamic and complex organizations are now being imaged as living on the boundary between order and chaos—with the two reciprocally interacting one upon the other.

Wilderness/Chaos: Engaging the Biblical Narrative

In the cultural context of ancient Israel, wilderness functions as a symbol of chaos.

The wilderness is the land of chaos, because the law of life does not operate there; we hear several times that the desert is tohû or tohû wâbhû, the characteristic expression of chaos, the lawless, the empty.

How, then, does the Bible depict Israel's experience of the wilderness? Two perspectives are commonly noted, one positive, the other negative. Both seem to be present in the Pentateuchal narrative of the wilderness wanderings. The positive perspective is normally expressed as God's guidance of Israel, whereas the negative is seen in the rebellion (murmuring) of Israel against God. Framing the conversation in this manner, identifying a positive view and a negative one, is striking in its similarity to the discussion of wilderness "in the American mind" (Nash). And, not unlike the historical pattern of the dominant-culture American experience, it is the negative assessment that tends to prevail.

In many ways, the most remarkable observation about "wilderness" in biblical scholarship is the prevailing silence. Rarely does an "introduction" to the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible include a chapter on the wilderness. It is interesting to speculate on a reason. Certainly the prominence of the Exodus motif and the centrality of Sinai attract attention. Still, one wonders: Does scant attention to the wilderness narrative betray a lack of interest in "life at the margins"? Does it reflect a reluctance to face the chaos?

The range of images now invoked by the theologians noted above, together with emerging understandings of the cosmos and of culture,
suggests that it is neither prudent nor helpful to avoid the Pentateuchal wilderness narrative and other biblical symbols of wilderness—to ignore the experience of Israel “at the margins,” to avoid this encounter with chaos. Moreover, the narrative of the wilderness wanderings constitutes some 70 percent of the Pentateuch, reaching from Exod. 13:17 until the end. It is intriguing indeed that so much of the foundation story is situated outside the Land.

The narrative of the wilderness wanderings that now exists weaves together numerous stories and diverse voices. The story was told and retold many times throughout the centuries. Each telling of the story created a thread that became woven into the fabric. Each new reading of the story blends new meanings with that story. Two of these voices will be engaged here.

**A Path Through**

One of these voices proclaims the glory of the LORD manifest in God’s guidance of Israel through the wilderness. With Israel encamped at the sea, the LORD hardened Pharaoh’s heart so that he would pursue the fleeing former slaves. This narrative voice makes clear that the LORD was in control—even of the Pharaoh. The power and glory of the LORD are made manifest in and through God’s victory at the sea and over the sea, in God’s slaying of the sea. The sea is “split” or “divided.” Such language evokes strong mythic connotations in the ethos of the ancient Mediterranean world. God’s glory is made known in the defeat of chaos, Pharaoh-Egypt/Sea. With this act of dividing the sea God opens to the Israelites “a way out.” This image of the way through the sea imprints itself upon the wilderness narrative.

God provides a way through the desert. The chaos of the wilderness poses no real threat; neither does it need to be the occasion of struggle. The LORD is in control, and a people has been formed. With the defeat of chaos comes the creation of a new people. Israel enters the wilderness as a “created people,” and they process through the wilderness in an orderly manner.

The reader of the narrative, who enters the story of the wilderness wanderings with this awareness, knows that God establishes the way through. Thus the reader tends to assume that the fleeing people need only follow and trust in that power. Immediately the narrative identifies the people as the “whole congregation of the Israelites” (16:1–2; 17:1). Congregation suggests structure and organization; this is clearly not a
people in disarray. The congregation is led through the wilderness on a
directed path. Itinerary reports shape the journey narrative. Sinai, the
locus of lawgiving, functions as “the literary center of the wilderness
itinerary.” 30 The LORD has defeated the power of chaos, Egypt/Sea, and
guides the people in an orderly manner through the wilderness on their
way to the Land. Any murmuring by the people, then, can only reveal a
lack of confidence in the LORD, the One who has gained victory.

A Place of Possibility and of Struggle

Another voice, however, can be read within this narrative, a voice
that subverts the typical paradigm. In this reading Egypt represents
not chaos but order. Egypt is understood as the center of power, the
dominating political power—a power that extended into the land of
Canaan. Read in this way, the LORD led Israel out of the established
order and into the chaos of the wilderness. The image at the sea is
not the splitting of the sea, the act of defeating chaos. Rather a
wind blows back the sea, then ceases—returning the waters over
the Egyptians (14:21aβ-bα, 27aβ). The LORD “toss[es] the
Egyptians into the sea” (14:27b; cf. 15:4-10). Chaotic sea
overcomes Pharaoh. The LORD inundates the Egyptian order with
the chaos of the sea. And the people of Israel? They suddenly find
themselves facing the chaos of the wilderness. This story subverts
the normal paradigm—not order out of chaos but order turned to
chaos. God “uncreates” the established power structure, the
existing order, and leads a people into chaos.

Exodus 15:22-25a. On the other side of the sea, the people face crisis
almost immediately. Lacking water, they come to Marah, only to
discover that the water there is bitter (Exod. 15:22-25a).31 While the
narrative is clean and simple,

1. Description of the crisis 22b-23
   a. Three days/Lack of water 22b
   b. Water not potable 23
2. Protest of the people 24
3. Intercession: Moses cried to LORD 25αa
4. Resolution of crisis 25αβ-δ32

the situation is serious: this people have journeyed three days without
finding water, and at Marah the water cannot be drunk. Therefore the
people protest. It is easy enough to sit in judgment of the Israelites. The story has progressed a mere two verses from Miriam's song of triumph. In two verses the text moves from a song of victory to a protest. Can the Israelites forget so quickly? Can they lose faith so quickly?

My cultural context—within the dominant Euro-American culture, at the center—reinforces that reading. The admonitions are plentiful: "Don't complain," "Don't create a disturbance," "Look on the bright side," "Simply trust in the Lord."

In contrast, nothing in the biblical text itself suggests that the Israelites' protest is wrong. The Lord does not punish or reprimand the people; rather God simply responds to the need. It is also important to recall that the biblical prayer tradition, in both Old and New Testaments, includes complaint (the cry to God for help). Many of the psalms are complaints, both individual and communal in form. Furthermore, it has been observed that the Exodus narrative itself is structured around the cry of Israel and the response of the Lord to that cry. But this protest in the wilderness adds a new dimension. Whereas the usual lament or complaint is a cry addressed to God, the protest is directed by the people against Moses. Protest confronts human leadership. It reflects the struggle for survival, and the stakes are so high that a quarrel breaks out between the people and their leader. Having fled the old (enslaving) social structures, Israel has been led to a place of resistance and possibility. But it will also be a place of fear and turmoil, where a successful outcome is by no means assured. In their protest the people were identifying and articulating their own vital needs. Not to voice that need would reflect a dangerous lack of consciousness and indifference to their own fate. But they do protest. To use a contemporary expression, in the protest, the people were “discovering their own voice.”

Matters of basic survival are not limited to the wilderness; they are present within any and all social contexts—within established social structure or outside that structure. Within established social structure, however, the system itself governs the provision and distribution of supplies. The “answer” lies within the structure. The wilderness, however, provides a context in which the community faces itself and within which it will move toward its future.

Exodus 16. Moving on from Marah, the people face hunger—and again protest.
If only we had died by the hand of the LORD in the Land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly.

Wilderness is associated with Moses and with hunger, the land of Egypt with God and with food. Contrast with the hunger of the wilderness is the memory of food in Egypt. Food is associated with the ordered life of Egypt; starvation with the chaos of the wilderness. The struggle of order and chaos continues to play itself out. Furthermore, God is identified with Egypt. Even if the option is dying "by the hand of the LORD," God's presence in Egypt is acknowledged. In other words, the protest poses a fundamental theological issue: Is God present in and identified only with order? Or is God present also in the wilderness, in the chaos (cf. the question in Exod. 17:7)? The people protest that it is Moses who had brought them out into this wilderness, where they are threatened with starvation and where they are separated from the LORD.

God's response addresses three concerns. First, God provides food (16:4). The immediate need must be addressed, or the people will perish. (As, for example, a battered woman flees her home, then fears for her survival. Her basic survival and safety needs must be met.) Second, by that very act of giving food God makes it known "that it was the LORD who brought you out of the land of Egypt." This is a strong assertion. Not only is God present with them in the wilderness, God is the very One who brought them into that wilderness, who led them out of the established social order of Egypt. Yes, there is risk in facing the chaos of the wilderness. That wilderness is threatening. But existing structures can be painful or limiting. This narrative affirms that God can lead a people out of such systems. Old structures that govern life are dismantled. Deciding to move outside the known order is always difficult. The original decision itself is not easy (see Exod. 14:11-12)—and it always remains open to doubt. Once we have stepped outside it is not uncommon to question the choice itself, the decision for change. Each crisis brings into question their resolve. Where is God in the midst of this disorder? Is God even present? It is easy to associate God with the old order, because that is precisely where God had previously been known.
and experienced. It is important to note that God honors these questions by the very fact of the response.

Third, God unfolds a new social order. God embraces both the order and the chaos, affirming that life moves in the tension between the two. The people, who face starvation, find themselves on the threshold between the old order and present disorder. While "normal life" is suspended, God provides for basic needs; but God also engages the people in a contest of wills that determines their very identity. God issues instructions that point to a new possibility.

*This is what the LORD has commanded: "Gather as much of it as each of you needs . . . . (Exod. 16:16a, NRSV)*

Already a new order begins to unfold. But this new formation will not be like the earlier system, in which the distribution of goods was neither equitable nor just.

*But when they measured it [the bread] with an omer, those who gathered much had nothing over, and those who gathered little had no shortage; they gathered as much as each of them needed. (Exod. 16:18, NRSV)*

God led Israel out of the old social structure to create the new. That is not an easy process. The people live in the tension between present chaos (with the need for food) and the proposed new order. These tensions create dissension within the community, conflicts between the people and their leaders. In the midst of these stresses, the people will struggle to know and to understand God—even challenging God’s presence. But this voice within the narrative, while honoring the struggle, affirms that God has brought about this world of chaos—placing this people “on the edge” between order and chaos.

**Two Voices: A Summary**

The affirmation that God created an ordered world imparts confidence. It offers a sense of purpose and meaning, evident in the continuing power that Genesis 1 exercises on the religious and cultural imagination. Likewise, the declaration that God created this world out of chaos is reassuring. In the Exodus story the image of
God splitting the sea, thus providing a way through for the Israelites, offers hope. Chaos does not triumph. The image of God guiding Israel in the wilderness, moving them stage by stage toward Sinai, then station by station to the Land, affirms the power of the LORD. God can be trusted to get one through the wilderness.

Clinging to order, however, can be limiting and painful. An unyielding order is static. Thus another voice moves within the story. God leads a people into chaos, undoing the order that had previously controlled their lives. This people is brought out from Egypt to face chaos, to encounter the wilderness. There they face risk, including serious threats that may overwhelm them. There they engage in struggle, seeking identity as a people, learning new forms of social existence, grappling with community dynamics, and vying for leadership. The LORD leads them into wilderness and is engaged with them in that chaos. God encounters them at the margins, outside both Egypt and the Promised Land. There, in the tension between order and chaos, God is discovered.

Granted that disorder spoils pattern; it also provides the materials of pattern. . . . That is why, though we seek to create order, we do not simply condemn disorder. We recognize that it is destructive to existing patterns; also that it has potentiality. It symbolises both danger and power.

Notes

4. Psalm 69 expresses vividly the distress with the image of chaotic waters: "Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck" (69:1, NRSV).
5. Nash, Wilderness and the American Mind, 44.
6. Delores S. Williams, Sisters of the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), esp. 108-139 (quotations from 122 and 130). One needs to note that Williams traces antebellum and postbellum traditions, noting differences between them. Elsewhere Williams has suggested that “the wilderness should replace the cross as a symbolic meaning pointing to Jesus’ victory over sin,” Women’s Theological Center Newsletter 9/1 (March 1991): 3. Here wilderness is not equated with sin but is the locus of victory over sin.
10. Ada María Isasi-Díaz, “‘By the Waters of Babylon’: Exile as a Way of Life,” 149-163, in Reading from this Place: Vol. 1, Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in the United States, eds. Fernando F. Segovia and Mury Ann Tolbert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995). Other essays in this volume address similar topics. Fernando F. Segovia, “In the World but Not of It: Exile as Locus for a Theology of the Diaspora,” 195-217, in Hispanic/Latino Theology, eds. Isasi-Díaz and Segovia, who speaks of diaspora and exile. For a discussion of diaspora experiences in other contexts, see the Women and Religion Section of the 1996 Annual Meeting of the AAR, on the theme “Transforming the Diaspora: Women’s Traditions in the Americas.” Papers explored particular concepts of diaspora within the African Atlantic world, in Jewish rituals, among Cherokee writers, and for Chocotaw women in the Protestant Church.
12. This is the title of one of the essays in Yearning: race, gender, and cultural politics (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1990), 145-153.
13. Ibid, 149.
15. Jung Young Lee, Marginality: The Key to Multicultural Theology (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), in which he talks of marginality as in-between and in-both, but also offers the possibility of imagining marginality as “in-beyond”; see also, Fumitaka Matsuoka, Out of Silence: Emerging Themes in Asian American Churches (Cleveland: United Church Press, 1996), who speaks of the “holy insecurity” of the Asian-American.
17. Ibid, 151.
19. Audre Lorde, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House,” in FACING THE WILDERNESS/ENCOUNTERING CHAOS


24. See note 3 above.


29. Ibid, 119.


31. The text continues (vv. 25^-26), introducing yet another voice: "... and [God] put them to the test." The wilderness as a place of testing is another significant motif, one often associated with rituals of transition. That thread of the narrative, however, will not be explored in this article.


35. Coats notes that the preposition 'id "moves the action described by the verb from..."


37. Cf. the Gospel story in which a woman incessantly pleads for justice, until her demand is met (Luke 18:1-8).

38. Wilcoxen, "Some Anthropocentric Aspects," 343: "The murmuring narratives authenticate, in a sense, the tensions that arise within social order; people do get hungry, water shortages do occur, men [and women] do become envious of the power and status of rulers. These experiences are taken up, their reality is integrated into the Israelite world, by the murmuring narratives."

39. There has been much discussion over the question whether the sea episode belongs to the Exodus story or the Wilderness narrative. I would agree with Childs (Exodus) that from the perspective of this tradition or voice, the sea episode does belong to Exodus story. I would also suggest that the debate itself points to the ambiguity of this place on the border, on the edge, at the threshold.

William B. Lawrence

The Theology of the Ordained Ministry in The United Methodist Church

Was the 1996 General Conference of The United Methodist Church the “most radical” legislative session of the denomination in two centuries? Did it make specific changes that alter our tradition at its roots? Did it shake our forms of ministry to their foundations? Did it revise the theology of ordained ministry in United Methodism?

All of these questions are pertinent. But the last of them points toward the real problem facing the denomination as it reflects upon and implements a new ordering of ministry. Does the United Methodist Church understand the ordained ministry theologically? Did the decisions in Denver reshape the theological basis of the ordained ministry for the church?

As I have pondered such matters, a picture has begun to form in my imagination.

A Bishop Prepares for Annual Conference

A bishop is preparing to preside at a session of Annual Conference. In the midst of this process, it occurs to the bishop that it may be

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necessary to plan for—and preside at—seven different liturgical events for persons who are being given authorization to conduct the ministries of the church.

Liturgical event number one could be a service to ordain elders to ministries of Word, Order, Sacrament, and Service. These are persons who will have already been elected full clergy members of the Annual Conference. Their ordination would grant to them a permanent authorization for ministry, which could be removed only by their voluntary surrender of credentials or some judicial proceeding.

Liturgical event number two could be a service to ordain deacons to ministries of Word and Service. These are also persons who will have been elected full clergy members of the Annual Conference. They have sought and received the affirmation of the church as candidates for ordination to the office of deacon as the 1996 Discipline defines it. Their authorizations are for a lifetime. However, the authorizations are semi-permanent, in that they remain valid only so long as these deacons either find positions to which the bishop will appoint them or request leaves of absence for any period when they are not appointed.

Liturgical event number three could be a service to ordain deacons to ministries of Word, Service, and Sacrament under the provisions of the 1992 Discipline. These are persons who will have been elected to probationary membership in the Annual Conference and who have the expectation that they could also be ordained elder some years hence. Their authorizations are permanent in time, lasting until death, unless judicially or voluntarily removed. However, their sacramental authorizations are limited in space to the place where they are appointed by the bishop.

Liturgical event number four could be the ordination of deacons to ministries of Word, Sacrament, and Service under the provisions of the 1992 Discipline, for persons who will have been elected to associate membership. These individuals have completed the Course of Study, served four years as a local pastor, met some educational requirements, and are at least thirty-five years old. Their authorizations are permanent in time (unless voluntarily or judicially removed) but limited in space to the places of their appointment by the bishop. Further, they have no expectation that they could be ordained elders at any point in the future.

Liturgical event number five could be a service of consecration for diaconal ministers. These are persons who were candidates for that office before 1997 and who wish to continue on that track toward lay
membership in the Annual Conference. They are not interested in ordained ministry. Their authorization as consecrated diaconal ministers is permanent, but they are not consecrated to forms of ministry; rather, they are consecrated to a relationship with the Annual Conference.

Liturgical event number six could be a service of commissioning for persons who are to be appointed either to pastoral ministries in local churches or to ministries of service. Those individuals who are commissioned will have been elected to probationary membership and they "shall" receive an appointment from the bishop—to ministries of "Service" (if they intend to seek ordination as deacon) or to ministries of "Service, Word, Sacrament, and Order" (if they intend to seek ordination as elder). The authorizations granted by this commissioning are limited in time to the period of one's probationary membership and apply only to the form of ministry for which one is seeking eventually to be ordained. This commissioning service is supposed to include the laying-on of hands by the bishop, according to paragraph 316 of the Discipline. But it is not ordination and should not be construed as or confused with ordination!

Liturgical event number seven could be a service for licensing local pastors, all of whom are to be appointed to local churches for ministries of Word, Order, Sacrament, and Service. Many different types of persons might be licensed in such a liturgical event: some will be currently enrolled in the local pastors' Course of Study; some will have completed the Course of Study; some will have completed a theological degree but not have been elected to probationary membership or be commissioned; some will have completed a theological degree and will have been elected to probationary membership and will have been commissioned; and some will have been ordained deacons (in the sense of liturgical event number two above) and elected to full clergy membership in the conference but because of unusual circumstances are going to be appointed as pastors. In fact, anyone who will be appointed as a pastor and who is not an ordained elder must have a license, according to Par. 341. The authorizations granted by this license are limited in time and space: they must be renewed annually, and they only apply to the places where these persons are appointed.

In my imagination, I see a bishop exhausted by all these possibilities even before the gavel falls calling the Annual Conference to order. Shall some of these liturgical events be combined? Which
ones? How will the distinct and confusing authorizations be communicated to the variously ordained, commissioned, consecrated, and licensed persons, to say nothing of the persons who otherwise participate in the service?

The Theologian's Dilemma

It is bewildering to describe the perplexities of the consecrated, ordained, licensed, commissioned, and otherwise authorized forms of ministry in the United Methodist Church. Obviously, some of the confusion exists because we are in a time of transition, adapting to the major changes adopted by the 1996 General Conference. Yet this period of transition will last to at least the end of the year 2000, and it could last as long as the year 2009, if persons who entered some form of candidacy prior to 1997 wish to continue their pursuit of the ministry to which they feel called even though the church no longer receives new candidates for that option.

Moreover, between now and 2009 we will have at least three sessions of the General Conference. What happens if the legislation changes again? One of the results of the radical decisions in Denver was the elimination of diaconal ministry. Approved in 1976, it was revoked in 1996. Apparently, after twenty years the denomination decided that it was not working. Who knows what will happen twenty years hence? Since all of these changes are merely legislative enactments, any of them can be altered by subsequent legislation. And all it will require is a simple majority of the General Conference delegates to do so.

We have been studying ministry for at least half a century. Perhaps the changes wrought in 1996 will be left alone for a while. Surely, some of the disarray will settle down with each passing year. Nevertheless, persons who were granted authorizations under a former Discipline cannot lose those authorizations by some retroactive legislation. It is possible that bishops who preside at liturgical events at Annual Conferences will become accustomed to making interesting decisions about how to distinguish ordinations, consecrations, commissionings, and licensings from one another—as well as determining upon whom episcopal and other hands should be laid.

But the real problem is cloaked within those visible—whether real or imagined—words and deeds. Polity, manifest in ecclesiastical actions that grant authorizations for ministry, is an expression of
The real problem facing United Methodists is not trying to describe who is authorized to do what. Rather, the real problem is to understand the whole situation theologically.

Toward a Theology of Ministry

Some might argue that we have arrived at this current set of circumstances because we lack a theology of ministry in The United Methodist Church. I would demur. It is not that we lack a theology of ministry; it is that we have a plethora of theologies of ministry. Some of them are congenial with one another, and some are in conflict with one another. Currently we have no mechanism for exploring them, reconciling them, or deciding which ones among them to reject.

The General Conference, where all of this occurred, is a legislative body, not a theological seminar. The only way it knows how to handle church doctrine is to turn it into church law. It is constitutionally prohibited from altering our doctrines. But the only process for determining whether it acts in violation of this constitutional principle is to appeal to the Judicial Council, and that Council has ruled repeatedly that it decides matters of law, not matters of theology. So the General Conference, which is not established to do theological work, makes theological decisions by getting advice only from within itself (or from the commissions, task forces, or agencies it chooses to create) then turns those theological decisions into legislation. Sometimes it simply creates legislation, then leaves itself and others wondering what the church law is saying theologically.

Amid this confusion, I think it is still possible to identify two general principles that have had a major impact on the theology of ministry in the United Methodist Church. First, our sources and guidelines for doing theology in general are multivalent; that is, they are expansive rather than restrictive in meaning; they lead to different interpretations; and they encourage rather than inhibit diversity.

Second, our theology of ministry specifically has been built upon foundations which are boldly ecumenical yet distinctly Wesleyan.

Multivalent Sources and Guidelines for Doing Theology

The legislative enactment which appears as Par. 63 in The Book of Discipline under the title “Our Theological Task” lists the famous four
sources and guidelines for doing theology: scripture, tradition, experience, and reason. Scripture is identified as primary.

But scripture does not offer a single, clear, unambiguous pattern for ordering the ministry of the church. As David Bartlett has said, "The various writings of the New Testament provide evidence for a variety of forms of ministry in the first century church."8 The New Testament recognizes the concept of apostolic ministry, as well as the offices of bishop, elder, and deacon. But neither can one find in the New Testament a uniform code for those three offices nor can one find any consistent witness that authority to preside at sacraments was limited to certain persons or offices.

Because our primary theological source and guideline is not definitive about ordained ministry, we must read it through our other sources if we would use it to arrive at defining theological positions. We must read it from the perspective of tradition, with the insight of reason, through the wisdom of human experience. And we must do all of that without the guidance of an organized body of ecclesiastical theologians.

We inherited the threefold pattern of ordained ministry—bishops, elders or presbyters, and deacons—from the broader Catholic tradition and directly from the Church of England, in which John Wesley was a priest. That threefold pattern, however, received an important modification from Mr. Wesley. His decision in 1784 both to ordain persons in England and to authorize ordinations in America was based on his view that as an elder he was equal to a bishop—a "scriptural episkopos," Wesley said. This shifted the authority to ordain from the episcopal to the presbyterial office.

Within the Methodist Protestant aspect of our tradition, that theological principle became a matter of polity: as people in "the church without a bishop for a country without a king," Methodist Protestants valued ordination, but they vested the authority to ordain in the hands of "a thousand bishops." In referring to what he called "the paradox that truly expresses the polity of the Methodist Protestant Church in relation to her ministers," Lyman Edwyn Davis wrote, "It is an elementary principle of our denomination that there is but one order in the ministry; that all elders of the Church of God are equal; and Christian ministers are forbidden to be lords over God's heritage."9

Besides the Catholic-Anglican-Tory ordering of ministry and the Democratic-Jacksonian ordering of ministry, we have inherited (and, at various times, explicitly embraced) an element of Reformed
theology in our understanding of ministry. Is one ordained to Word
and Sacrament? Or is one ordained to ministries of Word, Sacrament,
and Order? The Reformed tradition tended to emphasize the latter, and
in fact since 1968 United Methodists have done the same.

We are also heir to a development in Wesleyan Methodism that
distinguished the authorizations according to different types of
ministerial practice. Wesley permitted lay preaching, but he did not
permit the lay administration of sacraments. Ordination was not
required to proclaim the Word in Wesleyan practice, but it was
required to preside at the Font and at the Table.

Furthermore, the multiple traditions embraced within United
Methodism have expressed themselves in various forms of ministry.
The United Brethren (like the Methodist Protestants) had only one
order of ministry, the elder. The Evangelical Association apparently
ordained persons as both deacons and elders, but perhaps in something
closer to Asbury's experience of consecutive ordinations on
consecutive days. Evangelical Association attitudes toward the
episcopacy also varied: officially, they had bishops, but they could
function quite well without them. In fact, during the mid-nineteenth
century they went decades without bothering to elect one to fill a
vacancy.

So we bring many theological traditions to our ordering of ministry.
But we also bring varieties of experience. United Methodists
experience cultural diversity in different regions and different
homelands. To be a United Methodist in the southeastern United
States, where Southern Baptists are dominant, is very different from
being a United Methodist in regions where Roman Catholics or
Congregationalists or Lutherans dominate.

There is the ethnic diversity which characterizes the denomination.
Black United Methodists in the ordained ministry, tragically, have
found that they are far more likely to be welcomed in African
American churches outside the Wesleyan fold than they are in white
United Methodist congregations. Korean United Methodists are more
likely to feel at home in a congregation of the Korean Methodist
Church than in a United Methodist congregation of the dominant
culture. Native American United Methodists value their freedom to
draw upon the cultural heritage of their many nations quite beyond the
narrow confines of Anglo Wesleyanism. To impose any one
experience upon others as normative is to violate the integrity of their
experience.
Finally, reason cannot be expected to lead us to discover some central truth which lies at the heart of all traditions or experiences. Some might wish to argue that there is a rational structure to doctrine in general, and to a theology of ministry in particular, which we United Methodists once accepted and to which we should again aspire. But that has never been true in the past, and it is not true today. Moderate and liberal advocates of social justice emphases in ministry, like moderate and conservative advocates of individual conversion emphases in ministry, wonder how each other can claim the right to be called “evangelical.” Systematic theologians construct their systems while facing attacks from deconstructionists. Modernists are assailed by postmodernists. Arminian theologians wonder how the human will can be brought into accord with God’s will; and process theologians wonder if it is even possible to say that God has a will.

Every one of these well-reasoned theological approaches has something to say about the ordained ministry, and all of them can be found in the United Methodist Church. So the first general principle about our theology of ministry is this: Our sources and guidelines for theological reflection are multivalent. They have many meanings and many values. Consequently, our theology of ministry has no single source; we are a much more complex people than that.

Foundations of a United Methodist Theology of Ministry

In our evolving theological perspective on ordained ministry, we have taken some clear stands. Briefly, I would like to list and illustrate several of them.

One involves our commitment to an emerging ecumenical consensus. There is a sacrament which authorizes persons for the ministry of the church, and it is Baptism. We affirm “the ministry of all Christians,” rooted in our baptism, and we do it not simply with rhetoric but with the way we have institutionalized candidacy for ordained ministry. No one can become a “candidate” without receiving overwhelming support from a community of faith. A congregation in its Church (Charge) Conference, or multiple congregations in their Charge Conference, must endorse an individual by a super majority (two-thirds) vote. No pastor, no ordained minister, and no bishop can simply bestow an authorization for ministry upon someone. A local, non-ordained body of the laos must first offer its
confirmation to an individual’s sense of call. This is a converging ecumenical insight. It also embodies an aspect of connectionalism in the theological tradition of Wesley.

Moreover, we continue to find ways to enlarge the participation of the laity in that activity. As a result of the new constitutional amendment, the lay members of the Board of Ordained Ministry will vote on the character and qualifications of persons to be ordained when they are presented to the clergy session for approval. And the hands of the non-ordained, as well as the hands of non-United Methodist clergy, may be added to those that physically participate in the prayers at the time of ordination.

A second theological stance taken by United Methodists is that, because ordained ministry is rooted in the church, it is part of the mystery of salvation. Par. 101 of the 1996 Discipline (whose present form dates back to 1976) speaks of God’s saving work through covenants. It then celebrates “the new covenant in Christ” as “another community of hope” through which God acts to save God’s people. God is free to save us in whatever way God mercifully wills to do so. But one way God saves is through the church. So the church’s ordained ministry is a ministry of salvation.

A third and related theological stance is one that we have continuously affirmed since the days of Mr. Wesley: the ministry of salvation is both social and personal. There is no holiness without social holiness. As Ralph Sockman, in his own sexist way, reminded his elite congregation of executive leaders in the depths of the Depression, no businessman could claim personal holiness for not having committed adultery if he paid a wage to his secretary that forced her to violate the seventh commandment in order to survive. Racism, sexism, economic exploitation, and other sinful social systems are as much in need of God’s saving, transforming grace as any individual thief hanging on a cross. This commitment to social holiness has been institutionalized in the ordained ministry of the United Methodist Church by the way we have historically understood the office of deacon. Since the 1784 ordinations in England and America, there has been a characteristic Wesleyan expectation that ordained ministers would enter the offices and orders of both deacon and elder. The office of deacon is the ministry of social transformation, and it has been deeply rooted in our practice of ministry theologically as well as liturgically.

Until the 1996 General Conference, that is. We still have the office, and in addition a new and legislatively separate order of deacon. We
now say that elders are ordained to ministries of Service, as well as to Word, Sacrament, and Order. But we have separated the ministry of deacon from the ministry of elder. It happened, in part, because of a confusion of language. Some United Methodists began casually to talk about the new form of the diaconate as a “permanent deacon,” without realizing that everyone in the broadest Wesleyan/Methodist tradition who was ordained since 1784 was also a “permanent deacon.” One’s ordination as deacon was not surrendered or removed when one was ordained elder. Rather, the authorizations to ministries of Word and Sacrament (and Order) were added to the institutionalized and theologically sound authorization for Service given to a deacon. By our act of liturgical and institutional separation in 1996, we have lost something vital and theologically profound.

A fourth theological stance we have taken is our continuing commitment to the call to ordained ministry as “inward” and “outward.” This is neither new nor uniquely Wesleyan, of course. But it remains essential to our understanding of ordained ministry that there is no self-authenticating call, just as there is no objective imposition of the authority to minister without the faithful commitment of an individual to serve. From the initial action by the super-majority vote of a Charge Conference, to the annual renewal of candidacy by that same body, to the annual actions of District Committees on Ordained Ministry, to the recommendations of the Annual Conference Board of Ordained Ministry, and to the decision of the Conference itself, the correspondence between the “inward” and “outward” call will have been repeatedly tested.

A fifth theological stance involves some recent choices of language. Back in 1976, the Discipline began to use the phrase representative ministry to describe the lay diaconal ministry and the ordained ministry. Linked to the sense of call as inward and outward, this concept of representative ministry offered a significant way to think theologically about (ordained or consecrated lay) ministry as

- representing the church to God (in liturgy, prayer, and pastoral presence),
- representing Christ to the church (in presiding at the Table, in a model as servant),
- representing Christ to the world (in witness, service, love, and sacrifice).

As a theological concept, “representative ministry” had broad ecumenical endorsement and was widely valued across the
church—even among Christians whose specific views of the ordained ministry differed from ours.

With the 1996 Discipline, the phrase representative ministry has all but disappeared from our legislation. Its echo may be heard in only one place, namely Par. 303.2, where we assert, "The Church's ministry of service is a primary representation of God's love." Theologically, it sounds like the bland serving the bland.

What has gained prominence in the current legislation is the concept of "servant leadership." While the phrase may look unobjectionable, it lacks the richness and subtle nuance of the now absent "representative ministry." For one thing, "servant leadership" does not adequately express the transcendent aspects of representing the people to God, or Christ to the people and to the world. Rather, it is limited to the perspective of immanence: the human Jesus, the despised suffering servant, or the successful business or political leader. This is a democratization, or leveling, of theology that risks robbing our doctrine of its mystery, and hence of its power.

Implications

Many of the changes that the 1996 General Conference adopted in reference to ministry will be apparent at the time that subsequent Annual Conferences actually convene. Within these Annual Conferences voting patterns will shift, places will change, the color of name tags will be suddenly altered, and the number of members will rise.

About 4,500 part-time Local Pastors across the connection have now become voting clergy members of their Annual Conferences. Though their voting rights will be limited, they certainly could have a significant impact on the organization, operation, financing, programming, and social witness of a conference. Further, their presence as clergy members will require that an equal number of lay members be added. To be sure, this will be more significant in some conferences than in others, but the addition of a sizable number of new voters will be an interesting phenomenon to observe. It will also add to the cost of an Annual Conference session, where increased numbers of lay and clergy members have to be housed, fed, and provided with printed documents. Will intimacy shrink as franchised participation enlarges? Will the number of hours that the conference is
in session be reduced. Will there be more worship or less, more business debate or less, more theological reflection or less?

Similar questions arise with reference to the decisions facing the 1,400 diaconal ministers in the United Methodist Church. Should all of them be eligible for and choose to seek full clergy membership in the Annual Conferences and ordination as deacons, it will have an enormous impact on several areas of church life. Not only would their presence add a great number of new clergy members, it would also reduce (by the same number) the lay membership. Hence, to meet the equalization requirement, an impressively large number of new lay members may have to be added to the Annual Conference.

Besides these numerical considerations and all of the social as well as financial considerations attached thereto, a political matter looms on the horizon next year. The diaconal ministers who (in 1995) sought election to the General and Jurisdictional Conferences as lay delegates may (by 1999) be full clergy members with deacons’ orders seeking election as clergy delegates. While this may seem like a purely political matter, the decisions of the 1996 General Conference have potentially invested such issues with theological significance. The Denver meeting created the concept not merely of two separate and distinguishable ordinations as deacon and elder but of two “orders” of ministry in the Order of Deacon and the Order of Elder. These are to be “covenant” communities, whose purposes are fulfilled in regular gatherings “separately or together” for study, for “mutual support and trust,” and for accountability.

Theologically, this appears to offer the potential for a further fragmenting of the larger (and more historic) covenant as “conference.” Persons who are ordained to and invested in the diaconate will have a separate house from those ordained to and invested in the presbyterate. This could further separate a servant ministry from a sacramental ministry. The invitation to Font and Table could be divorced from the sending forth to serve by the very nature of the ways we have chosen to order and ordain our ministry. Each Order will have its own officers and its own representative on the executive committee of the Board of Ordained Ministry. The risk that their common calling will be subsumed under separate political agendas is great indeed.

Finally, it is the separation of ordination from authorization for ministry that raises the greatest theological issue for understanding the ordained ministry in the United Methodist Church. The problem can be illustrated in two particulars.
One involves the authority we deny to deacons in their ordination but expect them to fulfill as full clergy members of the Annual Conference. Ordained to ministries of Word and Service, these deacons still participate in one of the fundamental acts by which we order the church: determining the character and qualifications of persons for every office of ordained ministry. As full clergy members, deacons will vote on whether persons become local pastors, deacons, or elders. Deacons will participate in deciding whether all the clergy are blameless in their life and official administration. But they will do so as holders of an office which has not been ordained by the church to exercise such ministries.

Theologically, the question is not whether they should have such authorization. It is instead whether granting such "ordering" authority to people not ordained to it undercuts the theological significance of ordination to order. If people who are not ordained to ministries of order still participate in ordering the church in the same way—even if not to the same extent—as people who are ordained to ministries of order, then ordination to order is irrelevant. Do we really want to say that?

The second particular which illustrates the point is a decision in which the General Conference has sundered the relationship between ordination and the authorization to conduct the acts of ministry.

It was Mr. Wesley's vision to separate the authority to preach from the authority to preside at sacraments. He allowed laity to preach but not to administer Baptism or Eucharist. The sacramental authorization, he believed, was solely granted in ordination.

In the broad Methodist theological tradition, that same principle has been maintained. Even when exceptions were granted, such as by allowing non-ordained local pastors to administer sacraments in the bounds of their pastoral charges, these practices were very clearly understood as exceptions for the higher purpose of providing pastoral care that included Baptism and Holy Communion.

With the 1996 General Conference, however, the basic principle has changed. Now the fundamental standard for the exercise of all ministry will be a minimum of three years serving in an appointment appropriate to one's calling before any ordination occurs. This means that all persons who serve as pastors to congregations will serve as local pastors for three years. These will not be exceptions; they will be normative. In authorizing the exercise of sacramental ministry without ordination to that ministry, the General Conference has severed the
relationship between the theology of ordination and its actual practice. This is a major shift with potentially great ecumenical implications.

There is no question that our theology of ordained ministry is emerging despite the fact that we have no entity in the church claiming responsibility for theological reflection, and we habitually reduce issues of doctrine into legislation. The cost of our theological indifference is already great, and it is being incurred while we are committed to extensive ecumenical endeavors. With what theology of ordained ministry will United Methodists engage approach such conversation partners as the African Methodist Episcopal, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion, and the Christian Methodist Episcopal churches? With what theology of ministry will we pursue covenant union toward a Church of Christ Uniting? And from what theological perspective on the ordained ministry will we continue the work expressed in the World Council of Churches document *Baptism Eucharist and Ministry*? Have we radically altered our understanding of the relationship between deacon and elder, between ordination and the exercise of pastoral ministry?

There may only be one existing body in the church that is constitutionally equipped to claim theological competence for the denomination. The General Conference cannot. The Judicial Council will not. That leaves the Council of Bishops. But will they?

**Chaos or Creation?**

I began with questions: Was the 1996 General Conference the most radical such meeting in two hundred years regarding ministry? Did it shake our forms of ministry to their foundations? Did it revise our theology of the ordained ministry?—I must offer my own conclusions: “Yes.” “Yes,” and, perhaps unintentionally, “Yes.”

From a theological perspective, these changes have been more chaotic than creative. I assert that on the following basis:

1. We have altered the theological understanding of vocation, or call, to ministry. The twofold sense of call as inward and outward has been shifted to emphasize call as inward, with some outward monitoring by church. Candidates for ordained ministry will now have to articulate the specific form of ministry to which they feel called. Those who feel called to the diaconate will have to initiate their own placement; they will not itinerate, and if they do not find a venue to
which the bishop will appoint them, they can lose their orders. This imposes all of the vocational authority upon the inward call of the individual who feels summoned to a ministry of service. It makes ministry even more a profession than a calling.

2. We have severed the relationship between ordination and the acts of ministry. Every United Methodist who is a candidate for ordained ministry will exercise the office of deacon or the office of elder before she or he is ordained to it. Every elder will be ordained to ministries of service (as well as word, sacrament, and order) without having been ordained deacon. By legislative fiat, that strips the diaconate of its unique, historical, biblical foundation and transfers it to elders' orders. (To argue that baptism is authorization to engage in ministries of service does not help, for that would make the ordination of deacons irrelevant, also.) The ordering of the church's ministry thus has no relationship to ordination. Ordination ceases to be a symbol that the ministry of Christ's church is represented in a minister of Christ's church.

3. We have sent confusing theological messages to the ecumenical community and to the candidates who might be appropriately gifted for specific ministries. One form of servant ministry is the chaplaincy—hospital, nursing home, child care residency, and military. Presumably, someone who is ordained to the servant ministry would properly fill such a position. However, we have said that deacons are not authorized to administer the sacraments. For the church to ordain persons to servant ministries but deny them the authorizations to carry out those ministries is bewildering, at best. How could one be a hospital chaplain but not administer Holy Communion as part of the ministry? How could an ordained deacon be expected to find a position in prison chaplaincy, when the institution will likely judge the deacon to be less than fully ordained?

4. This chaos invites arbitrary or ill-considered actions. A Board of Ordained Ministry may choose to affirm a policy that would simply "license" all deacons and thus enable the Cabinet to create a virtual appointment to a pastoral charge near the place of a deacon's service, authorizing the deacon to administer the sacraments within the bounds of her or his appointment. Theologically, this invalidates the integrity of a servant ministry and destroys the linkage between ordination and the exercise of ministry. Or a future General Conference may decide to add sacramental authorizations to the office of deacon. This would effectively end our theological self-understanding as a connectional
church with an itinerant ministry, since non-itinerants would be authorized to do everything that itinerants are ordained to do.

5. Even this much theological confusion is consistent with our history. What is not new about the current crisis is that we have one! In times past, we have always been able to discern a theological hope in our theological heritage. We must do it again. In Asbury’s time, it was through discerning the relationship between our connectional life and our itinerant ministry. In the nineteenth century, it was through discerning the relationship between sanctification and social holiness, between social holiness and social institutions. Now, on the eve of the twenty-first century, it may be through discerning the relationship between a servant ministry and a sent ministry. But someone will have to claim the spiritual and theological competence to exercise such discernment.

We are at a curious point in Methodist history. A confrontation, of sorts, is occurring between the General Conference and the Annual Conferences. The General Conference turns theology into legislative regulations. It writes educational standards, creates regulatory boards to administer its policies, and adopts laws such as those which exclude homosexuals from candidacy, appointment, and ordination. Then, each Annual Conference turns that legislation back into a living connectional covenant. It decides who meets those standards. It decides whether preference will be given to graduates of United Methodist seminaries or other schools. It decides whether a Local Pastor, trained through the Course of Study, is as well-trained for ministry as a seminary graduate with a Master of Divinity degree. It decides what constitutes “practice” and self-avowal with regard to sexuality. It decides whom to include in the ordained ministry and whom to exclude.

Somebody in the church has to provide the theological discernment and leadership to guide us through this confrontation, to define our theology of ministry, and to keep it connectional. Only the Council of Bishops has the constitutional freedom, the theological responsibility, the corporate identity, and the general oversight of the church to accomplish this. Bishops cannot vote in either the General Conference or the Annual Conferences. But they can be servant leaders to the whole connection if they will find their theological voice and guide the church to inspect its shaken foundations of ministry.
Notes

1. In January of 1997, instructors of United Methodist polity gathered in Atlanta for a meeting organized by the Division of Ordained Ministry of the Board of Higher Education and Ministry. It was intended to orient participants to all of the significant changes wrought in our church by the 1996 General Conference, but the core of the conversation concerned ordained ministry. One of the participants was Susan Henry-Crowe, the chaplain at Emory University and a member of the Judicial Council. She offered the opinion that the 1996 General Conference "was the most radical conference in two hundred years in terms of ministry."


3. They could, of course, return to school, pursue a theological education, relinquish their permanent status as Associate Members (but not their deacon's orders), apply for Probationary Membership, and hope at some point after reaching age forty to be elected to full membership as well as elder's orders. Or, before the end of the year 2000, those who were Associate Members before January 1, 1997, can simply ask the Board of Ordained Ministry for a recommendation to full membership. If recommended, if they have met certain educational requirements, and if two-thirds of the full members approve it, they become full members eligible for ordination as elders, without relinquishing their Associate Membership or becoming Probationary Members. See Discipline, 1996 §585.3.

4. Normally, that limit is six years, but it may be extended for as many as three additional years if three-fourths of the Full Members vote to grant it. See Discipline 1996 §118.

5. The Western Pennsylvania Conference, for instance, apparently decided at its 1997 session that all candidates for ministry (even those already certified and enrolled in theological school) will be treated according to the legislation in the 1996 Discipline.


7. See, for example, decisions numbered 243 and 358.


10. See §110-314.
But who do you say that I am?" (Mark 8:27). The question that Jesus asked of his first followers he also asks of you and me. It was not a rhetorical question then, and it is not now. The question is real, and Jesus expects real answers. We must take care with our response. The stakes are high. Based on the exchange between Peter and Jesus (Mark 8:27–33), our answer makes us either a building block or a stumbling block for the kingdom of God. It places us either in league with God, who is the source of all life, truth, and love; or in league with Satan, the source of death, lies, and hate.

A version of Jesus' question rang in Paul's ears as he lay blinded and dazed, sprawled out on the Damascus road in the noonday sun (Acts 22:6–8). Paul's answer for the question of Jesus' true identity became the kernel of the gospel he preached throughout the first century Mediterranean world. It is the kernel of Paul's letter to the church at Colossae and every other Pauline letter that has survived.

For Paul, for Peter and the first disciples, and for us, Jesus' question is not tricky. However, the full extent of the answer is "indescribable" (1 Cor. 9:15) if not incomprehensible, either too outrageous or too wonderful to fathom. Jesus, a human being, acknowledges to Peter that...
he is the Messiah of God, the Christ, the Son of the living God. To Paul, the risen Christ acknowledges that he is a human being, Jesus of Nazareth. In the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "the man Jesus is God"—fully and truly human, yet at the same time, fully and truly God. This is not dualism. Instead, it is ambiguity in its most glorious and shocking theological expression.

Characterizing Jesus Christ as fully human and divine was as contradictory to Paul and the earliest Christians, including those in Colossae, as it is to each of us today. And we humans have a very low tolerance for ambiguity. We demand certainties, and we are willing to pay an unholy price for them. Too many of us live by the motto "A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush." But in matters of faith the prevailing ethos is closer to "A bird in the hand had better be worth all the birds in creation." The certainty of our tiny grasp could hardly be worth the risk of losing the gift of God in Jesus Christ. Set the one bird free, Jesus would say, and you will be free as well. Throughout his letters, and emphatically in the letter to the Colossians, Paul declares that God in Christ offers to all of us an unimaginable freedom—but we must be willing to lay down our tidy certainties and embrace a mind-boggling ambiguity.

Historically, holding onto the ambiguity inherent in the true identity of Christ—fully human and fully divine, both at the same time—has been always been too mind-boggling. Resolving the contradiction leads us to strategies that are as predictable as they are ancient. Christ can be certainly human or certainly God—but certainly not both, and certainly never both at the same time. The early church called these certainties "heresy," and these so-called heresies are alive and well today. While I hardly am calling for some twentieth-century version of the Inquisition in our local churches, I am unapologetically stating that what we believe about Christ matters.

Paul must have agreed. Paul's own testimony in Gal. 1:15-17 suggests that after his experience of the Damascus road he retreated to the Nabataean wilderness (the southwestern desert in modern Jordan), possibly for months. Paul obviously needed time to reconcile himself to a truth that he knew would be called scandalous and foolish. Like Jacob after his wrestling match with God, Paul may have returned from the desert limping, a "thorn" firmly and painfully in place. But the church at Colossus, and all of us who grapple with Paul's densely packed letter to that community, are the blessed beneficiaries of his unwillingness to settle for anything less than a
truth whose ambiguity can never be resolved. Finally, we gaze at this truth only through a glass darkly.

Paul and the Situation in Colossae

By the time Paul wrote the letter to the Colossians, Colossae was a town whose glory was faded. Located 100 miles east of Ephesus in the upper valley of the Lycus River in Phrygia (modern Turkey), Colossae had enjoyed significant prosperity and status in the ancient world. Probably as a result of the earthquakes that plague this region, Colossae seems to have vanished. No mention of this city can be found after the second century (CE), and archaeologists today can find no trace of its ruins. Unlike the neighboring church in Laodicea, Colossae’s church does not warrant even a passing reference in the Revelation to John (see chapters 1–3).

Generally, native Phrygians and Greek settlers inhabited the city. However, extrabiblical literature suggests that Antiochus III dispersed a substantial number of Jewish families from Palestine into this area. A synagogue likely would have been located in Colossae, and Judaism would have exercised some influence in the beliefs and practices of the Colossian people. This issue is not insignificant, but more important is the widely accepted evidence that this area of Phrygia was a hothouse for a variety of syncretistic religions best described as Gnostic mystery cults.

A few scholars have argued that the “problem” in Colossae is similar to that in the Galatian churches—namely, that the gospel of God in Christ preached by Paul is being compromised by “Judaizers.” However, this argument has little merit. Unlike Paul’s letter to the Galatians, we can find in Colossians no reference to Torah (“the Law”) whatsoever. As we will see later, the Colossian troublemakers are said to have a philosophy of “human traditions” (2:8) and “plausible arguments” (2:4). This philosophy has many of the characteristics of the life-negating and elitist mystery cults prevalent throughout this region of the ancient world, and especially in southwestern Phrygia. The threat represented by these cults afforded Paul a unique opportunity to reflect on the unity of the cosmic Christ and the historical Jesus.

We learn in Col. 1:7 that Epaphras, not Paul, first preached the gospel to and founded the Colossian church. In fact, as is the case
with the church in Rome, Paul has never even visited the area (2:1). We know very little about Epaphras. He is only referenced three times in the New Testament (Col. 1:7; 4:12; Philem. 23). However, Paul's relationship to Epaphras seems to be one of teacher/mentor.

Paul is writing from prison (4:3, 10, 18). He tells us that a large cast of characters, including Epaphras, is with him (4:7-17). But only Timothy is implied to be a participant in the drafting of the letter (1:1), just as he is in Philemon, Philippians, and 2 Corinthians. The location of Paul's captivity is unspecified, and scholars have innumerable theories. Rome and Ephesus are the most likely candidates.

A thoroughgoing analysis of the authenticity of this letter is not one of my missions here, but a few comments are in order. Generally, scholars have challenged Paul's authorship of Colossians, as well as other letters in the Pauline corpus, from three standpoints: literary, ecclesiastical, and theological. The literary characteristics of Colossians diverge frequently from so-called "typical" Pauline style and vocabulary, but in every case these divergences fall into one of two categories. First, they are found in verses that are accepted almost unanimously as liturgical/hymnic material widely known and used in the Colossian church and in early Christian circles (e.g., 1:15-20). The second category of literary discrepancy occurs in verses where Paul clearly and purposely references the terminology of the "philosophy" that threatens the Colossian church so that he can refute it with the gospel (e.g., the word philosophy itself in 2:8). I join scholars who are unmoved by these literary arguments. Regarding the ecclesiastical issues, the evidence in Colossians for a church that is far more institutionalized than any in Paul's lifetime is inconclusive at best. Paul does reference "the church" (1:18; 1:24; 4:15, 16), but hardly in a way that could lead a genuine investigation to conclude that this "church" is any more established than that in Galatia, Rome, or Philippi. Finally, the theological evidence presents the most significant challenge to the letter's authenticity—but not significant enough to disclaim the letter, unless that is your purpose. Later in the article, I will reference numerous examples of this letter's theological consistency with those Pauline letters that most everyone acknowledges as genuine. The evidence indicates that Paul or one of his most intimate colleagues, with Paul's direction, conceived and generated this letter. My attitude is simple: if the evidence that mitigates against Paul's authorship of Colossians is at least as
inconclusive as that which supports the letter's authenticity, then I see no reason to join the skeptics.

All of which brings me to a concluding point before we scrutinize this July's lectionary texts. Not unlike Methodism's reluctant founder, John Wesley, Paul was a pastor and an "occasional" theologian—not a speculative or systematic theologian. The letters of Paul are addressed to a specific audience and a specific circumstance or occasion. He did not write theological treatises. Instead, he was a pastor and, as the apostle to the Gentiles (cf. Acts 15:22f), he visited his "congregations" around the Mediterranean Sea. When a personal appearance was impossible, he sent his trusted emissaries, often giving them a letter to read in the church. Thus the Pauline Epistles are genuine letters to a group or groups of Christ's earliest followers, communities that were at least known to him if not founded by him.

July 12, 1998—The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

Proper 10: Colossians 1:1-14

Amos 7:7-17
Luke 10:25-37

Orthodoxy and Orthopraxis: "Right Belief" and "Right Practice"

It is tempting to gloss over Paul's formula of greeting and prayer (1:1-11b) so that we can go straight to the "meat" of the letter. However, in the opening verses of Colossians, Paul not only provides important clues to interpret the balance of his message, but he also introduces theological and spiritual issues that we need to raise in the church and culture today.

For some Christians, Paul's words contain some bad news. Clearly, Paul announces to the Colossians (and to us) that what we know and what we believe must be manifested in our work-a-day worlds for our knowledge and beliefs to be genuine. Our behavior counts. We may be justified by faith (Rom. 3:27-30), but for Paul this is a faith that must leave our souls and wander into the world. On the road to Damascus, and I suspect every day of his life thereafter, Paul was confronted with the same Jesus who said, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven" (Matt. 7:21). Right belief (orthodoxy) must lead to a right practice (orthopraxis). As we will see, Paul finds this holy dynamic so wonderful that he thanks God for the Colossian
friends because they embody it (1:3–8). And he finds this holy
dynamic so necessary that he prays to God that these same folks will
be sustained and strengthened in it (1:9–11b).

Although Proper 10 continues through 1:14, a careful reading of
this scripture reveals that Paul’s intercessory prayer begins with 1:9
and most likely ends with “patience” in 1:11. The remainder of the
lection then is best understood as an introduction to the “Hymn to the
Cosmic Christ” (1:15–20).8 I will reflect upon 1:12–14 in Proper 11.

When I was in seminary, I had the genuine blessing of studying
under Fred Craddock, the well-known professor of homiletics and
New Testament studies. Although he strongly recommends the
discipline of preaching and teaching from the lectionary, he likewise
urges all of us to scrutinize these texts, making our own faithful
determinations regarding their internal coherency. Our interpretation
of any scripture always is affected by how much or how little of the
text we include in the exegetical enterprise.

A book could be written and many sermons preached on Paul’s
brief words of greeting to the Colossians (1:1–2). He employs here the
same formula found in all of his letters and a formula commonly used
in the ancient world. In fact, these verses are a verbatim reflection of
the greeting found in 2 Corinthians. Paul’s words of greeting are
difficult to hear with fresh ears. We toss words like saint, will of God,
in Christ, or grace around the church (and beyond) so casually and
frequently that they have lost much of their rich meaning. At the very
least, Paul’s greeting to the Colossian church gives us all a chance to
reacquaint ourselves with basic Christian vocabulary.

As is the case with every Pauline letter except Galatians and Titus,
Paul moves from greeting to prayer. Here, his prayer includes both
thanksgiving (1:3–8) and intercession (1:9–11b). The two movements
of this prayer represent more of a shift in tone than substance. In fact,
Paul uses the same words to signal that the two parts of the prayer are
to reinforce one another? And what is this twice-stated message? That
when we hear the truth of God’s grace revealed in Christ Jesus and
take this truth into our being (“comprehend” in v. 6), we will be
shaped by it and it will bear the fruit of good works. Orthodoxy leads
to orthopraxis necessarily. Conversely, and by implication, if we have
no fruit, then a false belief and faith must delude us.

Those of us who have been raised on a diet of sola fide, sola
scriptura2 will struggle with Paul’s clear implication that our
behavior has an impact on our salvation. This struggle is unique to
Western Christianity, with our broad Augustinian and Lutheran theological heritage. Our Eastern sisters and brothers seem to have less a problem than we. Borrowing from the Cappadocians (the "Greek Fathers") in the early Eastern Church (ca. 300 CE), John Wesley probably did a better job of expressing the dialectical relationship between faith and works than any theologian in the past 250 years. \(^10\) Wesley argued that God's act in Christ is foremost, but we must react to God's first action: "For, first, God works; therefore you can work. Secondly, God works; therefore you must work." \(^11\) A review of Paul's letters, including and especially Romans and Galatians, will reveal his consistency on this point. "The only thing that counts [in Christ Jesus] is faith working through love" (Gal. 5:6).

Further, "we are what [God] has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works" (Eph. 2:10).

The "works" that Paul ridicules in Galatians and Romans are the rigid, overwhelming requirements of Torah (the Law) as he believed his old friends, the Pharisees, saw them (e.g., Rom. 3:27–30). As we will examine in Proper 12, Paul is not gentle with the works of the Colossian "philosophy" either (2:16–23). Any works that we perform to earn our righteousness before God actually are not only worthless. They are counterproductive. They move us further from and not closer to God. On the other hand, our life lived in a manner that is "worthy of the Lord" (1:10) is a vital demonstration of our faith in the source of all life who is the one, true God revealed in Jesus Christ. And these fruits of faith, like faith itself, are possible only by God's "grace" (1:6) and God's "glorious power" (1:11). Finally, to the horror of Martin Luther and his followers,\(^12\) we must conclude that Paul very well could have included in Colossians or any of his other letters the acute observation of the writer of James: "So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead" (James 2:17).

Before we move on to Paul's treatment of one of the church's most ancient hymns, I want to make three brief observations about this lectionary text. First, in the prayer of thanksgiving Paul evokes the threefold classic Christian virtues of faith, hope, and love (1:4–5), also found in 1 Cor. 13:13 and 1 Thess. 5:8. Paul indicates that hope has a cause-and-effect relationship with faith and love. Here, hope is the content of the gospel. Especially in 1 Corinthians, Paul offers a configuration of these three virtues that is altogether different, suggesting that love is superior to hope and faith. This represents a theological distinction rather than a theological inconsistency. It
reflects Paul’s willingness to address different problems in different communities of faith with answers that will be helpful. In Corinth, the problem was a lack of love. In Colossae, it was a lack of hope. As I said earlier, Paul is a pastoral, not a systematic, theologian.

A second observation regards Paul’s implicit arguments that grace is both a gift and a process. Grace as a gift is given and received (1:6a). We “heard” this grace and “truly comprehended” it at a certain point in time (1:5). On the other hand, grace is characterized as organic. It “is growing in the whole world” and bears “fruit” (1:6). Paul prays that his readers will “grow in the knowledge of God” (1:10). Some of us have a hermeneutic informed by our own personal experience that finds more comfort in grace as a gift, not unlike John Wesley’s “Aldersgate experience” or Augustine’s report in Confessions of that one anguished moment in the garden. Others might resonate and have greater comfort with grace as a process—a faith that continually grows. These sisters and brothers might better connect with Wesley’s “moving on to perfection.” Possibly they would find peace in knowing that Augustine never considered God’s grace in his life as limited to that one point in time only, but that it had been unfolding since his earliest recollections (as he reports in Confessions as well).

A final observation: Paul places a greater emphasis on “knowledge” in this letter than in any other. This emphasis begins in the prayer of thanksgiving (1:6, “truly comprehended”), extends explicitly into the intercessory prayer (1:9-10), and continues throughout the letter (e.g., 1:25, 28; 2:2; 3:2, 10). For Paul, the source of this knowledge is God in Christ alone. This knowledge is not something that we can achieve apart from grace. What seems evident is that knowledge, probably by name, must have figured prominently in the “philosophy” that threatened the beliefs and practices of the Colossian church. And we will see that the knowledge of the “philosophy” can be achieved by human means alone.

If Paul’s emphasis on the knowledge of God seems to contradict Karl Barth, who demanded that God in Christ is “Wholly Other,” utterly and absolutely unknowable, it is for the simple reason that it does. Barth was responding to the excesses of Schleiermacher and Harnack, among others; and as he later acknowledged, he was engaging, to some extent, in necessary polemic. But it was an overstatement nevertheless, relative to Paul’s experience of God. We
can, by grace, know something of God—and that knowledge, by grace, will grow as we journey home to God in Christ.

July 19, 1998—The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

Proper 11: Colossians 1:15–28

Amos 8:1–12
Luke 10:38–42

Cosmic Christ, Crucified Christ

There is a Jewish adage contending that angels must sneak into our homes every night to tamper with our Bibles, because the scripture that we read yesterday seems so very different from the same verses read today. This delightful frustration of an ever-changing text, rich with its myriad possibilities for exegetical emphasis, certainly applies to Col. 1:15–28. Every time I study these verses, I find something new.

The last time I studied this text, vv. 15–20 especially were put into service of Matthew Fox’s compelling, if controversial, reflections on the “cosmic Christ.” Fox argued for a paradigm shift from “the Quest for the Historical Jesus” to “the Quest for the Cosmic Christ.” Although Fox describes himself as a theologian of creation and incarnation, his embracing of the cosmic Christ, while distancing himself from the historical Jesus, threatens Paul’s vital paradox of Jesus Christ, fully human and fully God. More germane to this portion of our lectionary study, as we will see, Fox’s call for a paradigm shift is undermined by Col. 1:15–20 — one of the very texts he uses to support it. Maybe the angels have been tampering with Matthew Fox’s Bible, too.

To be sure, the New Testament witness is resplendent with allusions to the so-called cosmic Christ. The prologue of John’s Gospel (1:1–18) and the letter to the Hebrews (1:1–3ff) are clear and unambiguous statements to this end. In addition to Colossians, Paul continues this theme as well. He writes that Jesus Christ is “one Lord . . . through whom are all things and through whom we exist” (1 Cor. 8:6). In his letter to the Philippians, Paul borrows a hymn from the earliest church, which we will see is the case in Colossians, to lay claim that Jesus Christ was, is, and always will be fully God (Phil. 2:5–11).

And Colossians certainly underscores this cosmic, divine nature of Jesus Christ. Christ is the agent through whom everything is created (1:16), as well as creation’s sustainer (1:17). The fullness of God is
said to dwell in Christ (1:19); consequently, Christ is not one among many in creation but one above all of creation (1:15, 17).

Many scholars argue convincingly that Paul has utilized the hymns and other liturgical materials of the earliest church in his letters. Students of New Testament Greek will find ample evidence that these materials existed independently of Paul, including a tone, style, and vocabulary that are foreign to those more typically used by Paul. Beyond the hymn already cited in Philippians, Rom. 1:3–4 also serves as another example of Paul’s borrowing of liturgical materials from the church.

What is interesting and important to me is not that Paul imported this material into his letters but how he shaped this material, and, then, what purpose it served for his ancient audience. Literary criticism, like many academic enterprises, often leaves the question, “So what?” unanswered.

Without doubt, Paul upholds the full divinity of Jesus Christ in Colossians. But how can this former Pharisee accept a holy and cosmic role for Jesus when all of his religions training would demand that divinity is the exclusive domain of the God of the Israelites? When we review Old Testament and apocryphal literature, we are struck with remarkable similarity between the language used to describe God’s “wisdom” and “word” with the language employed by Paul to describe Christ Jesus (cf. 1:15; Prov. 8:22; 1:17; Sir. 4:3–26). For Paul, Christ is God’s wisdom and word. Of course, we need look no further than the Fourth Gospel (1:1–3) to find agreement within the New Testament canon.

In the context of Colossians, this emphasis had practical rather than speculative intent. If Christ Jesus is fully divine—not one among many “elemental spirits of the universe” (2:8) but one through whom all of these erstwhile spirits were created (1:16–17)—then the “philosophy” of the Colossian heretics is just that: heterodoxy, or wrong thinking.

When we look at our churches and the larger cultures in which they reside, can we not see a love and worship of twentieth-century versions of “elemental spirits”? I do not refer here to the growing fascination with astrology, witchcraft, and the like. My point is rather that our faith has lost a singular focus. Like some residents of Colossae, people of faith today have a wide array of options in which to ground their faith. Money, power, prestige, and status are easy to isolate as objects of our adoration. Nobler possibly, yet no less counter
to authentic Christian faith, is the absolute reverence and homage many of us pay to nation and family. And then, as dangerous as any form of idolatry is the worship of our denominations, doctrines, local churches, and yes, God forbid, our pastors.

Paul rejects the idea that Jesus Christ is one object among many for our faith. Instead, Christ is revealed to be the subject of the cosmos—the one through whom everything is created and sustained. To direct a worshipful gaze in any direction other than God’s in Christ Jesus would be to cut oneself off from the source of all life, temporal or eternal.

But cosmic and divine are not all we must say about Christ, according to Paul. He extends this ancient hymn so that it embraces not only the one true God in Christ but also the man Jesus of Nazareth.19 By adding this emphasis to the hymn (cf., 1:20, 1:22a), Paul reminds us that the cosmic Christ is none other than the crucified Jesus. Thus, Paul leaves no room in Colossians for Jesus Christ to be anything other than fully divine and fully human. If Christ was not fully human, then the reconciliation between God and the whole of the created universe achieved by God at the cross is as great a fraud as is Christ’s bodily death itself. Paul cannot preach any other Christ than Jesus Christ crucified (1 Cor. 1:23)—Deus Homo, fully God and fully human.

The Christ who promises to dwell in our midst (Matt. 28:20) is not simply some ethereal, ghostly spirit. The man Jesus, who is God, has a body, and that body is the “church” (1:18, 24). He has flesh and bones, and, as Luke’s and John’s Gospels make clear, the body of the risen Christ still bears deep wounds (Luke 24:39–40; John 20:25–28). What a complete image of the church! Wounded though we are, broken in so many ways, the church is the body of Christ in and for the world—truly and fully human, truly and fully God. We cannot expect the world to believe this good news. Maybe it is too absurd even for those of us who inhabit the church to believe. But in my own experience, I have caught a glimpse and heard a whisper of the holy paradox of Jesus Christ most clearly and most frequently in the broken, wounded body of our Lord. In the church, we come to know both the cosmic Christ and the crucified Christ—divine and yet human, perfect and yet broken.

Moving from this ecclesiastical plane to a more existential one, this paradox of Jesus Christ has positive implications for modern humanity. If I had to summarize the two most prevalent complaints that I hear in pastoral care situations, they would be “I am alone” and
“My world is a mess.” Jesus Christ, fully human and divine, speaks to these ubiquitous issues.

A profound and frightening cosmic loneliness is a hallmark of our era, but the person of Jesus assures us that “Emmanuel” is real (Matt. 1:23). In the words of a contemporary creed, “God is with us. We are not alone. Thanks be to God.” Jesus Christ who is fully human can offer friendship to each of us with authenticity (John 15:15). By faith, this Jesus becomes a friend, a sojourner through a life that is punctuated by as much sorrow as joy for us all.

Conversely, the Jesus Christ who is fully God offers, again by faith, the assurance that an upside-down world already has been turned right-side-up. We have the Paul of paradox—who says that God’s rule in Christ is not yet fully established, but at the same time, by faith, it is. We will leave the debate regarding Paul’s eschatology to our study of Proper 12. The good news here is Paul’s conviction that our rescue from the “powers of darkness” (1:13b, 20) has already occurred, despite the evidence to the contrary. Divorce, addiction, and spousal and child abuse tear the fabric of our homes. The gap between the very rich and the very poor is ever widening. Even if our own lives seem free from this despair, we do not need to be overly endowed with empathy to recognize and grieve the horror and pain in the world. Genocide, famine, wars, and terrorism are constantly served up on the evening news. Our big homes, bright-eyed children, and exclusive clubs cannot shield us finally from this daily dose of atrocity. That man Jesus can be our friend, but only Jesus Christ who is God can reconcile this world of trouble.

If Christ Jesus is fully divine but not fully human, then we are still alone—albeit in a God-ruled universe. If Christ Jesus is fully human but not fully divine, then he had better be our friend—because the world is pitched in a hopeless downward spiral to hell; and we are going to need all the friends we can get. However, Paul always presents “both/and,” and never “either/or.” The ruler of the cosmos is, was, and always will be none other than Jesus Christ. This outrageous claim is only possible within Paul’s framework of the full and concurrent humanity and divinity of Christ Jesus. And if we would only have the eyes and ears of faith, then we can experience the work and person of this Christ: cosmic and crucified, God and human, master of the universe and intimate friend.

Wrestling with the necessary paradox of Christology is the principle issue presented by Proper 11, but I want to conclude with a few observations beyond this issue. First, the Christ-hymn (1:15-20) has been
used to support universalism—a notion that because of Christ, and regardless of belief or practice, we are all justified before God. “Through [Christ] God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things” (1:20). What could be more straightforward? Yet when we place these words in context, we discover that the indicative is qualified by the imperative. In other words, we only participate in God’s reconciling work through Christ when we maintain certain beliefs (e.g., 1:23) and certain behaviors (e.g., 2:12; 3:12–17). The case for universal salvation, therefore, is not properly built on texts such as these.

Finally, the concluding words of this lection (1:24–28) speak both to Paul’s vocational clarity and to his conviction regarding the content of the gospel he has been called to preach and teach. In today’s church, ministers are offered opportunities to be psychologists, social workers, political activists, business managers, and entrepreneurs. Likewise, we are always tempted to reconcile the gospel to culture instead of the more challenging task of reconciling culture to the gospel. For us, Paul’s words are as refreshing as they are convicting. He clearly knows who he is, what he must do, what he must say, and to whom he must say it. We would all benefit from such clarity.

July 26, 1998—The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

Proper 12 Colossians 2:6–15 (16–19)

Hosea 1:2–10

Freedom from . . .

I have failed to observe thus far that we can surmise from Paul’s letter that the church in Colossae is indeed holding fast to the truth of the gospel. Paul “rejoices” to hear of “your morale and the firmness of your faith in Christ” (2:5). But despite this general approval, something is rotten in Colossae. For reasons we will never know, Paul seems worried that the Colossians may be deceived by the “plausible arguments” of the unnamed troublemakers (cf. 2:4). Proper 12 gives us the clearest picture of a threat that could have extended into nearby Laodicea and beyond (2:1).

Thousands of words have been offered in speculation about these plausible arguments of the Colossian “philosophy.” Most likely, this philosophy had no singular focus and belief. Rather, it was a syncretistic witch’s brew that probably included Gnosticism, local
mystery cults, some Judaic influences, and of course, a bastardized version of the gospel.23

Wouldn't we all like a cookbook for life, filled with recipes to solve every problem and crisis? Wouldn't it be nice if we had a law with a set of regulations that, if we followed it meticulously, would assure us of carefree living, or at least provide us with the means to finesse our way through any difficulty? Paul the Pharisee knew of this desire better than anyone. But he came to know, in Christ, the truth that even if rigid adherence to a bevy of rules could justify us with the Master of the Universe, we could never accomplish such a feat (cf. Rom. 7:21–23). It is precisely the dangers of this cookbook approach to a right relationship with God that supplied the friction between Jesus and his opponents, "the Scribes and Pharisees" in the Gospels. Jesus and the early Christians charged that Pharisaic Jews confused "human traditions" with the love and life of God (compare Mark 7:1–8 with Col. 2:8).

Once again a cookbook approach is being peddled in Colossae. It evidently promises that we can manage this risky existence (2:23), connect with the "elemental spirits of the universe" (2:8), and live a life of tidy certainty and comfortable security. Further, we can achieve our own salvation, at least in this world. We can become self-actualized, in control of our own destinies. All we have to do is follow the rules. These rules included the observance of weekly, monthly, and annual rituals (2:16), dietary restrictions (2:16, 21), a form of severe asceticism (2:18, 21, 23), the worship of angels (2:18), and visionary trances (2:18). Initiation into this club probably included circumcision (2:11), which by definition excluded one half of the population. But this cult was not for every man, either. Paul implies that by virtue of its rigid rules and exclusionary membership policies, the philosophy is "puffed-up" (2:18) and elitist (2:23).

Paul's observations regarding the exclusion of women or harsh asceticism may appear to be ironic, because these are precisely the charges that are usually leveled against him. Indeed, Paul's view of women (e.g., 1 Tim. 2:12, if genuine) and human sexuality (e.g., 1 Cor. 7:38), to name only two points of contention, represent perspectives so unenlightened in the late twentieth century that they stand indefensible. But I contend that Paul, the prince of paradox, is a voice calling out for a thoroughgoing inclusivity that is radical today and was quite unthinkable in his own era (cf. Gal. 3:28; Col. 3:11). Paul makes explicit what the Gospels only imply: in Christ, the
barriers that stand between races, genders, classes, and economic
groups are shattered once and for all.

Thus, Paul’s bad news is that even if we had a recipe book of
religious practices and moral behaviors that guaranteed the safe life, if
not the good life, we could not adhere to it anyway. The good news is
that it does not matter any longer. In that man Jesus who is God, who
stands above every spirit and power in the cosmos (2:10; 1:17), we
may not be offered the safe life. But we are offered eternal life. And
eternity can begin now: “you have come to fullness in him”(2:10).
Paul declares that this is a “freedom from” granted to each of us by
God in Christ.

When we live in Christ, the liberation of humankind by God is all
encompassing. We are free from our “trespasses” (2:12), our mistaken
choices that distance us from God and neighbor. We are free from the
haunting specter of death (2:12). We are free from our oppressors—
those “rulers and authorities” (2:15). We are forgiven and free from
guilt (2:13). We are free from the loud chorus of shame that sings that
off-key song, “You are no damned good” (2:14). We are no longer
damned. We are free.

Finally, we are free from the need to perform those works whose
purpose is to make us worthy before God (2:16ff). In fact, Paul says
that when we go about the business of self-actualization and
self-redemption, we cut ourselves off from Christ, who is the
authentic source and “method” of reconciliation with the world, our
neighbors, ourselves, and God (2:19). In Proper 12, and as we will see
in Proper 13, Paul is no antinomian. But right behaving does not lead
to our redemption; rather, right behavior flows from the redemption
won for us by that man Jesus who is God. Our good works of love
demonstrate our belief in this good news. They are necessary because
they reveal that our faith is grounded in God and not in ourselves. Paul
is unequivocal: God in Christ has already achieved what we are all
trying to achieve by our own wits.

This last point brings us to Paul’s eschatology. Is Paul really saying
that this multilayered freedom is a present reality, that God has
already “rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred is into
the kingdom of his beloved Son” (1:13)? At this juncture, the reader
will not be surprised that Paul’s answer is “yes and no.” In faith
(2:12), God’s work in Christ has already been completed. In glory
(1:5, 26), this holy work is not yet fulfilled. In faith, we can be assured
that at the cross—at one wondrous, hideous, specific point in
time—our freedom was secured (2:14). In faith, we can have confidence that when that man Jesus muttered, "It is finished" (John 19:30), God really meant it. At the same time, no sane person would argue that God’s kingdom of love and justice has come on earth as it is in heaven. We wait on the “glory” of a heavenly life. We are bound for the Promised Land, but our freedom train has not yet arrived.

Like Paul’s Christology, Paul’s eschatology requires both dimensions if we are to keep from doing great harm to the good news of God. Paradox is always difficult, but with God, it is always necessary. When we live into the “already” of God’s rule and our redemption, we are free from that obsessive pursuit of “works righteousness” in which we all sometimes participate. We are free from the guilt that can grow to pathological levels, and we no longer dwell on the past. As we are free from the past, so too our anxiety over the future can ease because we know that in Christ, God’s control of the universe and the victory over those “dominions or rulers or powers” (1:16) have been won. And in a world where God is in charge, that howling hound of shame can be booted back to hell. Once again, we are declared to be “very good indeed” (Gen. 1:31). The “image of . . . God” made visible in Christ (1:15) has been established in us as well (Gen. 1:26–27). By God’s grace and through faith, we are given all this already; and Eden is now restored. Paul’s references to the Genesis story are not direct, but they are certain.

But there are millions of people living in our communities and around the world whose everyday life suggests that any claim for a realized eschatology is a bad joke at best. These brothers and sisters live in a prison of mental or physical disease, poverty, hunger, abuse, racism, sexism, and ageism. Trauma to body and soul is the norm. Consider this: 35,000 children die every day in our world. Even the possibility of freedom of any kind seems remote, and the suggestion of a freedom that is a present reality seems like lunacy. To these children of God, the conviction that God’s promise in Christ of freedom has already been made but is not yet fulfilled offers a gospel of “hope laid up . . . in heaven” (1:5) and “the riches of glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory” (1:27). In 1 Corinthians, Paul sets love above faith and hope (1 Cor. 13:13). In Colossians, Paul sets hope above love and faith (1:4–5) for God’s desperate sons and daughters. “Hold on!” Paul says. “God’s reign is not yet fully established, but it is coming.” And we must proclaim by our presence to these people that they are not alone as they wait on
margins of society. We must go to the margins and make ourselves available to our broken neighbors, where we offer them the Christ who lives in us (2:6) and they offer to us the Christ who lives in them.

Now, we depart Proper 12 and the “freedom from” offered by God in Christ and move on to Proper 13. We will discover there a positive form of freedom: the freedom to move out of the darkness and into the light.

August 2, 1998—The Ninth Sunday after Pentecost
Proper 13: Colossians 3:1-11
Hosea 11:1-11
Luke 12:13-21

The Frightening Freedom to...

The negative freedom of Proper 12, the “freedom from,” moves into the positive freedom of Proper 13, the “freedom to.” I encourage the exegete and preacher to include 3:12-17 in the lectionary text, as I have done in the following reflections. These additional verses will give a picture of Paul’s positive freedom that is far more expansive and rich.

Earlier in the letter, Paul has made a passing nod toward this “freedom to” when he writes “continue to live [our] lives in him . . .” (2:6). Earlier still, he writes of the need to “bear fruit in every good work” (1:10), which implies this same form of freedom that Paul declares we now have in Christ. Paul expressed this great truth well to the Galatian church: “For freedom Christ has set us free” (Gal. 5:1).

We have been set free from our trespasses and guilt, our shame, the threat of eternal death and separation from God, our oppressors, and a manic drive for performance and unholy perfectionism . . . so that we finally can be free to make genuine choices. The first form of freedom leads to the second necessarily.

Upon first glance at this package of negative and positive freedoms, we are enthralled. And why shouldn’t we be?

Few people would reject God’s offer in Christ of these negative freedoms. Who does not want to be free from this nightmarish gallery of temporal and eternal torment? When God offers to break the chains that have shackled us all of our lives, we cannot say yes quickly enough. While most of us have not yet experienced an absolute freedom from these burdens, we are delighted by even a partial release from them.
But as soon as we sense our freedom from individual and corporate demons, we are startled by the rest of the package. As the negative freedoms continue to unfold in our lives, we begin to recognize the positive freedoms—that we truly can choose our own path in this life. And for some, this freedom is a frightening, even regrettable, insight.

As Paul makes evident in Proper 13, when we accept the freedom from our demons, we are immediately saddled with the responsibility to decide whether we will reside in a land of darkness or a land of light. Or as Paul writes, we must choose whether we will “set (our) minds on things that are above,” or “on things that are on earth” (3:2).

Paul’s use of the “things that are on earth” is not unlike his use of “flesh” in other letters (e.g., Gal. 5:16). This language does not imply that Paul espouses a life-hating ethos, and it does not imply that we should either. Of course we should love this life, but how? Do we use our energy in service of our own project or in service of God’s project? Do we set our mind on things of the earth and this world of flesh, or on things that are above, where our liberator sits “at the right hand of God” (3:1).

Understandably, most of us accept our “freedom from,” but then reject our “freedom for.” We embrace the happy thought that we are free from our demons, but we recoil at the prospects of the personal accountability that accompanies our free will. We have all heard that age-old disaffirmation of accountability: “I’m only human, after all.” Paul claims that God calls each of us Paul to be fully human—not only human, but “God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved” (3:12).

Whether or not we want this freedom, in Christ we have it. We are free to love or not to love. We are free to build relationships and community or to disavow them for the sake of our own gratification. We are free to “put to death” (3:5) the “old self with its practices” (3:9)—and clothe ourselves with the new self that bears “the image of its creator” (3:10). Likewise, we can choose to turn away from God’s gift, stumble back into the darkness of our old life-defeating behavior (cf., 3:5, 8–9), and await the certain “wrath of God” reserved for the “disobedient” (3:6). But because we are free to choose, our judge is none other than ourselves. In Christ, we are free to obey and we are free to disobey. And so, many of us participate in a tragic irony. When we reject our positive freedom and the accountability it contains, we return to the “power of darkness” (1:13) and reacquaint ourselves with all those old demons from whom we were once free.

“Old self” and “new self” (3:9–10) imagery is employed frequently by Paul. The old self must be put to death (Rom. 6:6), and we must be
its executioner. Also, the old self is equated with Adam and the new self with Christ (1 Cor. 15:22, 45–49). Adam was "from the earth, a man of dust"; as such, he must die. But Christ "is from heaven," a "life-giving spirit" who is eternally free from death. Further, Paul evokes images of a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17; Gal. 6:15) and renewal and re-creation (2 Cor. 4:16) throughout his letters.

We have here a provocative symbol of the death of the old self and the creation of a new self. It is also a symbol of renewal and re-creation. Paul has introduced this symbol by name earlier (2:8). Of course, I am referring to the ritual of baptism. Paul alludes to this symbol, referencing the "stripping off" of the old self and "putting on" the new self (3:9–10). This is the precise language of baptism into the body of Christ in Paul's century and in our own.

When we examine the behaviors of the old self (3:5, 8–9) and the new self (3:12–17), two patterns emerge. I would contend that these catalogues of vices and virtues are not in the least meant to be exhaustive. These patterns of behavior indicate either the kingdom of darkness or the kingdom of God's beloved Son, and all of these behaviors have to do with whatever either undermines or nurtures relationships. The old self is only interested in gratifying individual desire. Sexual, emotional, and economic exploitation and abuse are the everyday ethical aberrations of one who lives in the darkness of the old self. Here, relationships with people are no different from relationships with any other thing. Other human beings become objects for our use in furthering our own project. Given today's cry for self-sufficiency and so-called rugged individualism, Paul's admonitions are striking and convicting. We are free not to love, and God will honor our freedom regardless of how we use it. At the same time, God in Christ will judge our use of freedom.

But Christ continues to call us out of the darkness of our narcissism and into the light of God's project. It is a project of "love which binds everything together in perfect harmony" (3:14). The barriers that stand between any groups crumble under the weight of love (3:11), as we are constantly being renewed. We are all unified in Christ (3:11; see also Gal. 3:28; 1 Cor. 12:13). God offers us freedom from the mistery of the past and the uncertainty of the future not so that we can be free to pursue our own dreams and our own projects but that we can be free to pursue God's project of a "holy and beloved" (3:12) community of God's chosen ones. The "riches of Christ" found in that community will make our wildest dreams seem puny and lifeless. In
another letter, Paul summarizes the choices given to us by God succinctly: “For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom for self-indulgence, but through love, become slaves to one another” (Gal. 5:13). Paul’s words to the Galatians remind me of Jesus’ words to his disciples: “But I am among you as one who serves” (Luke 22:27). Finally, our positive freedom is nothing less than the freedom to love as God loves.

We can only speculate why anyone would refuse God’s gift of liberation in Christ. The recent film The Shawshank Redemption offers one insight. Could it be that, like long-term prison inmates, we have grown so accustomed to a life of incarceration that we cannot tolerate a life filled with genuine choices? Some of us have been so imbued with a fear of God’s wrath that we have stopped believing in God’s mercy. The risks of freedom seem too great. We shrug our shoulders and return to the darkness, mumbling something about being “damned if we do and damned if we don’t.” And, tragically, we have missed Paul’s point: we are only damned if we don’t—if we don’t try out this new freedom to be free to love.

Conclusion: “I Preach Christ Crucified.”

In the Letter to the Colossians, we see in sharp relief the evidence that Paul looks at the world through a singular lens; namely, the lens of his understanding of Christ Jesus. For Paul, Christology is theology—and it is anthropology, sociology, soteriology, ontology, eschatology, ethics, moral theology, and biblical theology (not to mention physics, biology, and psychology) as well. The list is endless. Without Christ, we have no authentic understanding of God, our individual being or doing, our neighbors, our community, or our world. Against the backdrop of Jesus Christ, anything that is knowable becomes known; remove that backdrop, and nothing makes sense at all. “Indeed,” Paul might say, “remove Christ Jesus at great peril. Not only does your world fall apart, but the entirety of the cosmos falls apart” (cf. 1:17). All of the wonder, sorrow, and joy of the cosmos is contained in that man Jesus who is God. All of the love and life that are possible in this life and in eternity are offered in Christ—and only in Christ.

We can love God, but we cannot know God fully. We can love ourselves, but we can never know ourselves fully. We can love our
neighbors, but we cannot know them either. The mystery has been
intimated, but it remains hidden (2:2-3).

If we cannot know God fully, then we must never confuse what we
say about God with God. We can experience God, by God's grace,
maybe catch a whisper or a scream of all that is holy on our own
Damascus roads, here and there, now and then. God encounters each
one of us in our every breath, in every moment of life and death. But
the encounter is diminished as we fumble for the words to describe it.
We simply do not have the mind or the language to embrace the One
who exists outside of time and space, even when that One intrudes
into time and space in Jesus Christ. We cannot know God fully, and
we cannot describe the encounter with God—but when God comes to
us in Christ Jesus, we must speak. After all, if we remained silent,
even the stones would shout out, "The historical Jesus and the cosmic
Christ, the human being and God's own Wisdom and Word —
 inexorably linked, for all time and beyond all time!"

And one place where this proclamation is declared loudly and
clearly is Paul's letter to the Christians in Colossae.

Notes

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2. See The Christological Controversy Richard A. Norris, Jr., trans./ed., The
Christological Controversy (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), for an overview, as
well as these Christological arguments in the words of their ancient authors; also
Bonhoeffer has an excellent, if not polemical, survey in Christ the Center, 74-101.

8-9; see also Harper's Bible Dictionary (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1985), 175.


5. Lohse, 165-167.

6. For the case for authenticity, see Luke T. Johnson's The Writings of the New
against authenticity, see Lohse, 177-183. See also Johnson, 253-257, for a broader
consideration of authenticity within the Pauline corpus.

7. Johnson, 244-257.

8. Lohse, 32f, see also Ralph P. Martin, Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon

9. Compare v. 3 and v. 9 ("pray"), v. 6 and v. 9 ("the day"; "understood");
"knowledge"), v. 6 and v. 10 ("knowledge"), v. 4 and v. 9 ("heard"), v. 6 and v. 10 ("fruit"; "grow"), and references to "all" or "whole" in vv. 4, 6, 9, 10, 11.

10. "Only by faith, only by scripture"; or more expansively, we are saved only by faith in God’s grace revealed in Jesus Christ, and this grace is revealed only in scripture—not the church, and certainly not the natural world. It is Martin Luther’s “battle cry” against the Roman church and "a theology of glory" of scholastics like Aquinas. For an excellent overview of Luther’s theology, see Justo L. Gonzales, *The Story of Christianity*, Vol. 2 (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1984), 29–37.

11. John Wesley. Albert C. Outler, ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 9ff; the so-called “Cappadocians” include Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Basil the Great; but the influence of early Eastern Christian thought on Wesley extended significantly beyond these three.


13. For Luther’s reference to the Letter of James as “pure straw,” due to his misunderstanding of James’s use of “works,” see Gonzalez, 30.


22. From “A Statement of Faith of the United Church of Canada.”


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