Methodist Doctrine
Charles M. Wood

Wesley, Trinity, and Slavery
Josiah Young

Trinity and Spiritual Formation
Sondra Mattaei
Contents

Introduction
Sharon J. Hels .................................................. 111

Articles

The University and the Church: Faith in Search of Understanding
Benjamin Ladner .............................................. 113

Transcripts of the Trinity: Communion and Community in Formation
for Holiness of Heart and Life
Sondra Matthaei ............................................... 123

Some Assumptions and Implications regarding John Wesley’s View of the
Trinity: “The Root of All Vital Religion”
Josiah Young ................................................. 139

Evangelization Toward Trinitarian Inclusiveness in the Asia Pacific
Malcolm Tan Thian Hock .................................. 155

Methodist Doctrine: An Understanding
Charles M. Wood ............................................ 167

QR Lectionary Study

The Flowers of Preaching: Readings from the Gospel of Luke in Year C
Nestor O. Miguez ............................................ 183
Introduction

Puzzles and Mysteries

The first time I heard about the Trinity, I thought it was a puzzle you could solve, like a riddle. "The Trinity means that there are three Persons but only One God. Can any of you explain this?" Mr. Bradwisch launched the question like a big old softball to a group of well-scrubbed, trusting little third graders during religion period at Elm Grove Lutheran School in 1961. The class took aim immediately. What were the odds, after all? The question involved small numbers, and it was flattering to be asked and not told about God for a change. We took some good cuts. I remember saying, "it's like the flame that you make when you hold three candles together." "OK, not bad." He listened to a few more of our ideas, and it seemed that we were on the verge of getting it. But then he closed us down: "Children, I will tell you the correct answer. Nobody can explain the Trinity. It's a mystery." I remember thinking something along the lines of You set us up, you jerk. If we couldn't get it right, what was the point of all that guessing?

The writers who have tackled the question of the Trinity in this issue are well aware of the dangers of turning mysteries into puzzles. Plus, they have the advantage of writing for us adults. We know all about mysteries because we have so many of our own: special loves and fears, inexplicable loyalties and hopes beyond hope, dreams for our children and our world, an understanding of great evils to be fought and treasures to be shared. We have felt the hints of transcendence that penetrate these things. Our seasoned thoughts on the Trinity (the profound mystery of God's inner being in relation to the
world) rest on the foundations of this common human experience of mystery. Without it, all we have is clever talk about sublime things.

We begin with an address by Benjamin Ladner, who leads us back from our institutional affiliations to our primary experiences of the sacred amidst the hard, often explicable circumstances of life. Sondra Matthaei follows with a meditation on the Wesleyan balance between the nature of God and the nature of human salvation, that is, the complete journey of faith. Josiah Young raises the indispensable question of relevance in another way: for Wesley, was the right knowledge of God, knowledge of a triune God, enough to raise a prophetic call against slavery just when such trade was at its most profitable? Malcolm Tan tells an equally compelling story, one of triumph and disaster in the Asia Pacific region and the need for Trinity as a hope for a just society. I think you will particularly enjoy the thoughtful distinctions of Charles Wood, who shows us our heritage as Wesleyan thinkers about Christian doctrines, the Trinity in particular. Finally we have a superb exposition of key passages in Luke’s Gospel for preaching by Nestor Miguez.

With the exception of the Ladner piece and the QR Lectionary Study, all these articles were presented in Working Groups at the Tenth Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies, August 12-22, 1997, whose topic was “Trinity, Community, and Power: Mapping Trajectories in Wesleyan Theology.” Each is intended to support the work of our theologically educated leaders in (using the words of the recent Dialogue on Theological Diversity) by “promoting the unity of the church” and “helping individuals understand the classical faith of the church.”

We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life... We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete. 1 John 1:1, 4

Sharon Hels
1997 Annual Meeting Lecture  
General Board of Higher Education and Ministry  
The United Methodist Church

Benjamin Ladner

The University and the Church: Faith in Search of Understanding

I want to begin by acknowledging how much I am in your debt. As Roger Ireson noted, I received my Ph.D. from Duke University, which allowed me to be thoroughly exposed to the Methodist tradition of knowledge and faith, especially through my teaching in the Duke Divinity School. Indeed, I am now old enough to be approached by people who were in one of my classes long ago; and I worry that they might hold me responsible for what I said back then or for what they now say in pulpits and classrooms. Would I still stand behind what I thought I understood then? Who knows, it was so long ago. But now I have the great privilege of leading an outstanding Methodist-related institution. I hope that my being here with you symbolically reaffirms the important link between higher education and Methodist-related universities in this country.

As an academic, I am of course familiar with what it means to give a lecture; and I know that what you are probably expecting. I am honored that you have invited me for this purpose. But I would like to change the mode of address. Instead of lecturing, I prefer to have a conversation.
with you about some things that have come to matter a good deal to me.

In this mode, I would like to focus on a few pivotal experiences that have shaped my life and to share what I have learned in light of them. Certainly one of these was my experience at Duke University and the impact of a Methodist-based higher education on my own imagination.

Another is the visits I made to the Trappist Monastery in Bardstown, Kentucky, where Thomas Merton lived and wrote his extraordinary books. The Cistercian Order is one of the strictest monastic orders in the Roman Catholic Church, requiring monks to take an absolute vow of silence. So when you visit the monastery, a single monk is appointed to act as spokesperson for the monastery and to converse with you.

I once asked the monk who was allowed to speak with me what his life was like. He said, “Well, I get up in the morning at 2:30 and say prayers, followed by private scripture readings. Then at 4:30 I eat a peach and say prayers and engage in meditation. At 6 o’clock we participate in the daily liturgical service, and the rest of the day is spent pretty much that way, but also includes working in the fields, the library, or making cheese. Then we end the day at 8 p.m. with prayers before going to bed.”

I said, “It’s a little difficult for me to imagine doing anything significant at 2:30 a.m., so let me just ask about the 4:30 a.m. meditation. You live in silence all day [the monks use only hand signals to communicate while doing farm work]; then you begin the next day in solitary meditation. What are you thinking about?” “Oh,” he said, “that’s pretty easy. For the last seventeen years I have been meditating on part of a verse in the Gospel of Matthew.”

This response made a deep impression on me. At the time, I was struggling through my classes, all but convinced I was coming down with Attention Deficit Disorder; and I thought, “Well, here’s a guy who gets up at 2:30 a.m. to meditate on just a few words of a sacred text. What is going on?” From that brief experience, I think I learned something about the nature of discipline and about what it must mean to go deeper than I thought it might be possible to go, through an apparently small opening in your experience.

Even now in my mind’s eye I see this man as someone who inhabits a particular kind of institution. I compare this with my present position and the opportunities I have to speak with people about what it means to work inside an institution doing certain kinds of things,
principally studying and teaching. When I reach out to people in other institutions who have similar values, similar commitments, similar interests, I find sometimes that our social, religious, and educational institutions are not in sequence; they don’t match; there are problems, misunderstandings, and tensions between them. So I have been trying to figure out what it really means to live inside an institution and whether one better does this “monk-like” or in other kinds of ways.

Undoubtedly, a second major influence on my life has been the combined impact of the conglomeration of institutions within which I grew up. Some of you who are my age or older will remember a time when all major institutions in society seemed inherently to make sense. Our lives were ringed by churches, schools, hospitals, law courts, and so on. They encircled my life so completely that it would not have occurred to me to ask why I engaged in institutional activities, why an institution existed, or whether I should spend time inside it. It just seemed obvious that institutions enabled people to do what they wished to do in a productive and meaningful way. To large segments of our population, that is no longer so obvious.

A third shaping influence was the fact that over time, due to my temperament and inclination, I invested myself in certain institutions and not others—specifically the church and the academy. As a result of these choices, I became increasingly self-conscious about the unique character of these institutions. In the university, for example, the “intellectual life” became almost palpable; and the further I advanced inside the university, the more I was identified as “an intellectual”—something I never quite understood, frankly. This made me wonder how many identities I was carrying around, even inadvertently, just by being identified with various institutions, and what role these institutions have in making me who I am.

Another important experience took place when I was a young man. Just as I was embarking on an academic career, working hard, building a family, going to graduate school, and (by my own reckoning) becoming much smarter, my second son was born severely retarded. I report this not as a matter of sympathetic interest but simply to say that at a certain point in my son’s young life an excruciating decision had to be made to turn his life over to an institution. At that point, in which I was by my own estimation at the peak of my intellectual powers, on the brink of getting officially certified as a “Doctor of Knowledge,” I had to wrestle with the fact that I was giving up my son to people whose identity was known to
me only as representatives of an institution. I wondered what would happen if there was an emergency in the middle of the night and someone he didn't know had to take him to the hospital. Or what if he were by himself and wanted something, or if he missed me and began to cry. To these questions and others the institution's social worker replied, "It's not likely that he will know." Those words startled me and lingered in my imagination. The key word was know. What does knowledge mean in such a situation? What is the role of knowledge in human experience in relation to the institutions within which we play out our lives? What do we need to know in order to be whole human beings or to relate meaningfully to others? What does an institution have to do and what fiduciary responsibility does it have to develop whole human beings?

Another incident: I was a young philosophy professor in the sixties; and as my university was falling apart, I was trying to talk about the meaning of life with young people who were on LSD and throwing bricks at the Administration Building. The Vietnam War was raging at full tilt, as was the Civil Rights Movement; and serious questions about the presumed authority of institutions were at the top of our agenda.

Then, more recently, I became president of a university and tried to weave together this almost accidental sequence of events that has, nonetheless, provided a kind of order to my existence and relate it to my present institutional experience. I ask myself now, "What is this thing that houses and feeds and educates people and provides order and insight and direction to young lives unfolding? What is my personal responsibility and authority, but also the responsibility of the entire institution with its particular past and its particular history?"

It strikes me that the incidents I have just recounted constitute a certain order that I've given to my life by virtue of my memory. We know from psychoanalysis and psychotherapy that when people are in trouble they will come to authorities and say, "I need help"; and usually they get this response: "Well, tell me about it." So you begin to talk about your life, and over time the experienced listener picks out certain things that you had not paid attention to and starts to make linkages between those things. Suddenly a pattern emerges, a sequence, an order that you had not previously recognized. Those things then become significant symbols and signposts to help you understand who you are, where you've been, and where you are going.

Institutions are like that. One of the problems of understanding the relationship of institutions to each other, especially the relationship...
between the university and the church, is that each one is entirely
different. Every institution orders its history and connects its
significant events and experiences in its own ways. At American
University, for example, we were founded not as an undergraduate but
as a graduate school back in the late nineteenth century. Chartered by
Congress, we were founded as a national university in the nation's
capital. As a result, we are still, I believe, the only Methodist-related
university that has no regional affiliation with an Annual Conference.
We are directly related to the national church as a whole by virtue of
our historical status. Also, we have the largest international school in
the country on our campus—in fact, one of the largest in the world.
Over 140 countries are represented in our student body. Therefore, we
have 13 different chaplains, or their equivalents, who hold regular
services with groups in our student body. That makes us a particular
kind of institution with particular kinds of issues that predefine a
unique context to talk about spiritual nurturing or attending to the
needs, religious and otherwise, of our student body.

But there are larger questions that surround these distinct
institutions. Behind the university-church relationship are more
serious questions about the sacred and the profane and about faith and
knowledge. We have come to assume that knowledge and faith, and
the profane and the sacred, are very different orders of experience. So
different, in fact, that they are separate; and we must work to establish
linkages between them.

Thinking this way, however, has very little to do with how we
actually live our lives. The late Mircea Eliade, a well-known scholar
of religion at the University of Chicago for many years, studied the
sacred as it manifested itself throughout the world, not just in
Christianity. He concluded that there is a fascinating aspect to the
sacred wherever it is identified; namely, that when you look across the
whole spectrum of human experience, the sacred is apt to appear at
almost any moment in almost any object, event, or circumstance.
There seems to be no particular pattern or exclusive quality about
what can be identified as the presence of the sacred.

Inside Christianity there is a persistent temptation to make faith
exclusive and to insist that the sacred can be identified only within
certain boundaries and not others, within a certain set of doctrinal
statements and not others. Simply put, one must believe just this and
not that—and only then the sacred may appear. Now, stretch your
imagination for a moment: What if the sacred is not bound by what
we think of the sacred? What if the Creator is not bound by what we imagine about the Creator? What then? I suspect we would have to come to terms with a whole new set of issues—similar, perhaps, to those confronted by my Trappist monk friend.

Objects, events, space, time, and human beings are always more than what we know them to be. At any moment, they may open onto a deeper level of reality than we had suspected. That is why it is appropriate to understand the location of the sacred as somehow within the profane. That is a difficult thought; it is much more manageable—neater, if you will—for us to imagine the sacred apart from the profane. It is more convenient for God to be remote. It is certainly less disruptive for the Creator of all that is to be incomprehensible than to meet God in the staring eyes of the poor and the disposessed.

But look again at the sacraments. The sacraments declare fairly directly that anything, however ordinary, at any moment can become a repository and a vehicle for the sacred. Here is bread, here is wine, here is a marriage, here is death. In other words, the unavoidable, routine, predictable, and mundane events of every human life are precisely the most profound, most accessible contexts for discovering and engaging the sacred.

One of my favorite philosophers, Michael Polanyi, has reminded us that, after all, reality can be defined. I always appreciated that observation because in this time of high-tech professional education we have all but given up on talking about such large concepts as reality, goodness, truth, and beauty. We may have lost something in being unwilling to make sense of these grandiose terms. At any rate, Polanyi suggested that reality is that which opens up to an indeterminate future and has the capacity to take us further.

Polanyi's definition is not a bad way to talk about whether something is real or unreal, and it may even provide a kind of "reality check" for some of our favorite ideas. How many things are actually "unreal" by virtue of the fact that they take us nowhere, do not open up? To what extent have our faith commitments been short-circuited and dead-ended by defining and delimiting them too much? How much of what we hold dear have we turned into an object simply to increase our sense of security, thereby eliminating the freedom of opening and moving us into the future, and without realizing we have destroyed it by holding on to it?

Not unlike, but certainly not to the extent of, my Trappist friend, I have a penchant for gnawing on ideas that I can't resolve. So I carry
around in my addled brain a whole panoply of broken phrases and half-cocked ideas that I think about on an airplane or a subway or walking down the street. One of these fragments is an observation by the Italian playwright Luigi Pirandello, who wrote in the notes to his famous play "Six Characters in Search of an Author": "There is an inherently tragic conflict between life and form." What he means is that there is something fundamentally incompatible between our emotions, our passion, our intentions, and our commitment to the ways we come out of ourselves, on the one hand, and the forms, institutions, and dogmas that we use to try to capture that passion and movement in order to hold onto and preserve them with the intention of passing them on to our children. In other words, life actually lived tragically conflicts with the forms our lives take, whatever forms we rely upon—most conspicuously, institutional forms. Institutions are, after all, those seemingly solid things that we invest in and hold on to. Institutions protect the things that we value so that they will outlast us. But what if these institutions have lost their connection to the originating passion or insight or commitment that brought them into being? Then serious questions must be raised about the legitimacy of, say, the U.S. public school system, the Methodist Church, the U.S. legal system, and so on.

I believe Pirandello is wrong in saying the conflict he describes is inherently tragic. But there is a fundamental question of whether the nature of our institutions resonates and is faithful to the originating impulse, insight, commitment, faith, and values that brought them into being. A great difficulty of talking about faith in connection with Christian institutions, dogmatic expressions, beliefs, and doctrines is that the Christian faith has as its central focus not a doctrine but an actual life lived unpredictably, a life which cannot under any circumstance be totally summed up, boxed in, or reduced to easy formulas for us to believe in.

Christians claim that Jesus’ life always—always—opened onto wider, deeper meanings, and that even now it is a door through which we can discover the depth and fullness of our own lives. Such a claim, however, requires us to redraw the boundaries between knowledge and faith because, whatever the institution or context, human knowledge—like the ground of our faith—is always distinctly personal. It is not and cannot be fundamentally abstract and remote. Its intention is not knowledge for the sake of knowledge but knowledge for the sake of personal engagement. This implies that the
sacred is already here. Where? Here, at any place, any moment, any object, any event, waiting for the possibility of engagement. Here: in this room, in that water, in this bread, in that loss, in this word, in that experience.

When I was an undergraduate at Baylor University, wide-eyed, naïve, full of spunk, attending college on a basketball scholarship, thinking I was pretty hot stuff, I chanced to take a theater class I had not intended to take but had used to fill an open spot in my schedule (I wasn’t exactly driven by intellectual curiosity). Snap, I thought, as the professor, a man named Paul Baker, walked out onto the theater stage. Our first assignment, he said, was to go find a rock. “You will have to be very careful in finding your rock,” he said, “but I’m certain you will recognize it as yours when you see it. Then, you will need to live with it for the next six weeks. What I want you to do is to handle this rock as much as you can and get to know it. Out of this experience of your relationship to your rock we will begin to create.”

Get the picture? I was living in the athletic dorm with, let us call them, “non-intellectually focused” fellow students, eating at an “animal house” training table; and I was bright enough to know it would not be cool to carry a rock around and “get to know it” in that setting. So I waited until everyone had gone to bed before sneaking down to the Brazos River to scour the banks for the “right” rock. It seemed a little stupid because there were so many rocks, but I was convinced that I was looking for a particular rock, though I had no idea what it would look like. Somehow, I found it—my rock—and under the darkness of night took it back to the dorm; and for the next six weeks I got to know it. Sure enough, I began to draw and later to write about what I was getting to know.

Our first examination was based upon the insights that had come from our relationship to our rocks. The test was this: We were to clap out the rhythm of the life of someone close to us. Mr. Baker sat in the back of the class and listened to each presentation, which roughly consisted of the following: clap ... clap, clap ... clap, clap, clap ... clap (or something like that). When the student was finished, he would say, “Your friend is about 45 years old, probably raised in the Midwest, has no children, is in something like banking or the corporate world, not very religious but generous.” And he would be right.

As I began to think about this experience, I asked myself, “What in heaven’s name does he know, and what is he listening to and looking
at that I cannot see? Where are the clues?” Even in my naive adolescent state, I think it was at that point that I began to understand that everything is always more than it is and that when you engage the world, any piece of the world, you engage your own history. And when you engage the life of another person, really engage—if you can get rid of the preconceptions that you bring, the expectations about what they ought to be and the formulas we have devised to interpret them—you may be met with a depth of reality that can change your life.

What qualifies you to see, to hear, to perceive in that way? Nothing. Absolutely nothing. You already are engaged, bound up with the fullness of life in the world. The kingdom of God is not somewhere else. It is among you. Seeing it, hearing it, having access to it are as simple as coming to yourself. There are no tricks or passwords to learn. It is more a matter of letting go... and of courage. You cannot do this by yourself, because all of life and all of the fullness of life that resides in everything and everyone is bestowed. It has already been given to us by another.

One of the biggest challenges of my present position is to answer the question, “How can we teach these things?” Well, it is as easy as giving an account of your life—in other words, not so easy. One model may be parenting, for those of you who have children. On a daily basis what you are saying implicitly to your children is this: “We brought you into this world because we have confidence that meaning is everywhere, and we can introduce you to it. What you need to do first is to look at us. What we do and say, how we live, is what we know about what it means to be a human being. Take us seriously and live as we do, until you are able to live as you do.” This is not arrogance; it is faith that on ordinary days we have powers that can give us access to the most extraordinary things.

I think that is the meaning of the incarnation, in which faith and knowledge become actualized in a life. It is not a life for which you can qualify. It is not a life you can justify. It is not a life for which you can take credit. It is bestowed, entirely bestowed. It can be addressed, it can be engaged, but it is given, not earned. And it is here, all around, always accessible.

The single requirement for claiming such a life is simply to be in community, in the institution of community. There are no qualifications necessary for being a human being and a child of God—that is the meaning of grace. You do not qualify because you
know something somebody else does not know. You do not qualify because you believe something that someone else does not believe.

You do not qualify because you are good. You qualify because your life was bestowed, you came into it, and all you need to do to fulfill the purpose that God had in mind when creating you is to come to yourself.

There are symbolic rites and sayings that, when we enact them, hold us and our jumbled, disordered, accidental lives together. Hence, the word religion comes from the Latin verb religio, which means "to bind or hold together." Religion is not a set of doctrines, beliefs, or sacred texts. It is the absolutely freeing recognition that despite my screw-ups, despite my best efforts to do myself in, despite my accomplishments, taken together—my good moments, my bad moments, my hungers, my sexuality, my passion, my fears, my sufferings, my celebrations, even my death—all hold together, make sense, connect, and bespeak a depth and mystery out of which I am free to live. Even death opens onto wider being, which is why we can speak confidently of it as a form of reality, not the end of reality.

The university community, as I have come to know it, is not primarily a community anymore, at least not in the traditional sense. The modern university is a confederation of intellectual frameworks, mostly walled off from each other. Perhaps persons in the university and the church can meet on common ground by opening themselves not to the rigidities of correct ideas or doctrines but to the reconstitution of the human community. It is late, very late in all our lives to be missing this grand possibility.

The psychiatrist R. D. Laing wrote some years ago that "what we think is less than what we know; what we know is less than what we love; what we love is less than what there is; and to that precise extent we are so much less than what we are." Grounding our thinking in a world, a real world, which at any moment may open onto the depths that are already present, can give us ourselves and each other, have we but ears to hear and eyes to see.
As a Christian religious educator, I have long been interested in matters of formation and transformation in faith. The full range of these concerns can be expressed in one simple question: How do we come to know ourselves as Christian? My interest in the nature of Christian spiritual formation is supported by lifelong experience in the church and concentrated study of our historic Wesleyan roots. But it is a contemporary problem that has pushed me to examine this question more deeply. My own local United Methodist church is growing rapidly, and many of these new members come from other denominations or have no previous church background. These adults do have a sense of what it means to be Christian, but they have little knowledge or understanding about what it means to be United Methodist. In this setting, the general question of spiritual formation is slightly recast: How am I United Methodist in my Christianity?

A key Wesleyan insight into the nature of the Christian life is the role of communion and community in formation for holiness of heart and life. The concept of communion is illuminated by John Wesley's interpretation of the Trinity as a pattern for Christian life, a life in communion with the Three-One God and our neighbors. Because

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Wesley understood salvation as a process of growing in faith, I will argue that Wesley understood the Way of Salvation (via salutis) as growing in communion with God and neighbor—and furthermore that this growth took place in discernible stages over the course of a human life. Growing in communion with God is both a means and an end of the way of salvation. From God's first invitation to communion through repentance and pardon in the work of Jesus Christ, a deepening communion with the Three-One God and others grows through the perfecting work of the Holy Spirit, until full communion with God is reached in glory. The role of community has to do with how the church participates in this process of growing in faith. Thus, the structures of the institutional church must be congruent with God's saving purposes. I will argue here that United Methodism has made a unique contribution to this process of spiritual formation, based on this key Wesleyan understanding.

The Trinity as Communion

The meaning of communion with God in three Persons is conveyed by the words of Charles Wesley: "One with God, the source of bliss, Ground of our communion this." The use of the words person and communion are critically important. As John Zizioulas, a leading Orthodox expositor of the Trinity, has explained, "The significance of the person rests in the fact that [a person] represents two things simultaneously which are at first sight in contradiction: particularity and communion. A person cannot be imagined in [her- or] himself but only within [her or] his relationships." John Wesley used the term Persons for the Trinity precisely because it reflected this understanding. While recognizing that each Person of the Trinity is distinct, Wesley also affirmed that God is One through the communion among the three Persons.

The word communion (Latin, communio) means a fellowship of one with another, a deep mutual sharing in the life of another. Communion exists among the three Persons of the Godhead, and—through the mediation of Jesus Christ and the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit—God offers participation in this communion to each and every one of us. Through the relationship constituted by God's action and our faithful response, God transforms us for a holy life. Salvation, then, is full communion with the Three-One God. But God also calls
us to be living representatives of this communion in our relationships with others: "You," as Wesley wrote, "whom he ordained to be Transcripts of the Trinity."  

Communion of the Trinity: Source of Grace. Wesley's emphasis on our relationship with the Three-One God unites these meanings of person and communion. As Zizioulas has affirmed, "The nature of God is communion." Indeed, Wesley believed that nothing in creation is separate from God: "all that is therein as contained by God in the hollow of his hand, who by his intimate presence holds them all in being, who pervades and actuates the whole created frame, and is in a true sense the soul of the universe." God seeks communion with humanity and calls humans to live in communion with each other and the world. While recognizing the oneness of the Godhead, Wesley did distinguish each of the Persons of the Trinity by their work, in that each Person in the communion of the Trinity participates in our salvation. Geoffrey Wainwright summarizes his position well when he writes, "Our salvation is for Wesley the differentiated but united work of Three Persons of the Godhead; it sets us into an appropriate relation to each Person, and it gives us a share in their divine communion."  

In the communion of the Trinity, Wesley saw God's distinctive work as the One who created and cares for creation. For Wesley God is personal—a loving "Father," the giver of grace available to all. Wesley was clearly committed to the relational interaction between the gift of God's grace and human response to that gift. But this interaction is not automatic or inexorable. "God's grace works powerfully, but not irresistibly, in matters of human life and salvation: thereby empowering our response-ability, without overriding our responsibility," as Randy Maddox puts it.  

While God is the source of grace, the second Person of the Trinity is evidence of God's love for humanity. It is only through Christ's distinctive work of love that our sinfulness is overcome and we are restored to communion with God through justification—"what God does for us, forgiveness of sin"—through Jesus Christ.  

In the communion of the Trinity, the distinctive work of the Holy Spirit is to sustain and perfect our growth in holiness. Sanctification is "what God does in us, holiness of life" through the Holy Spirit. Once again Wesley was clear that God would not force humans to respond: "The God of love is willing to save all the souls he has made.
But he will not force them to accept of it... Choose holiness by my grace, which is by the way, the only way, to everlasting life.\textsuperscript{11} We grow in holiness through the power of the Holy Spirit working in us.

\textit{Communion with the Trinity: Salvation.} John Wesley stoutly maintained that salvation is possible for any and every person and that the grace needed for salvation was provided by the three Persons of the Trinity. The process of building relationship and participating in the divine character\textsuperscript{12} was poetically described by Charles Wesley: “O that we now, in love renewed, Might blameless in thy sight appear; Wake we in thy similitude, Stamped with the Triune character, Flesh, spirit, soul, to thee resign, And live and die entirely thine!”\textsuperscript{13} Maddox employs another powerful metaphor for the process of salvation. It is, he writes, “\textit{a dance} in which God always takes the first step but we must participate responsively, lest the dance stumble or end.”\textsuperscript{14} For John Wesley the Three-One God is at work in the Christian journey through the prevenient grace that raises awareness of human sinfulness and calls us to repent, the justifying grace that brings forgiveness of sin through the mediation of Jesus Christ (pardon or “salvation begun”),\textsuperscript{15} and the sanctifying grace that transforms the human heart and life through the perfecting work of the Holy Spirit (holiness or “salvation continued”).\textsuperscript{16} Christian faith is fulfilled in the consummation of grace (heaven or “salvation finished”). All this ultimately depends on the human response to God’s salvific activity in the interaction of the “dance.”

Wesley’s vision of the Way of Salvation was profoundly biblical. We can see this scriptural grounding with special clarity in the beatitudes. The first three beatitudes in the Gospel of Matthew (5:3–5) describe God’s \textit{invitation to communion} and a renewed relationship as the divine act of removing barriers to faith during the early portion of the Christian journey. Wesley wrote:

\begin{quote}
\textit{Our Lord has hitherto been more immediately employed in removing the hindrances of true religion: such is pride, the first, grand hindrance of all religion, which is taken away by ‘poverty of spirit’: levity and thoughtlessness, which prevent any religion from taking root in the soul till they are removed by holy mourning; such are anger, impatience, discontent, which are all healed by Christian meekness.}\textsuperscript{18}
\end{quote}
Wesley considered the heart of Jesus' message to be that humans come to realize that they are totally dependent on God's grace. Only this awareness is able to break down the barriers to communion with God.

The next two beatitudes address the Spirit's perfecting work in those who have been justified and who are growing in deepening communion with God. Wesley believed that the hunger and thirst for righteousness (Matt. 5:6) is "the strongest of all our spiritual appetites." In other words, we long for communion with God, and God promises to satisfy us. "They shall be filled with the thing which they long for, even with righteousness and true holiness." Wesley also observed that even those who have reached true holiness continue to be perfected by the Spirit. Those whose hunger and thirst for righteousness has been filled turn their attention more and more toward the needs of others (Matt. 5:7). "And the more they are filled with the life of God, the more tenderly will they be concerned for those who are still without God in the world... 'The merciful,' in the full sense of the term, are they who 'love their neighbours as themselves'." Wesley interpreted Matt. 5:8-9 ("Blessed are the pure in heart," and "Blessed are the peacemakers") as the promise of full communion with God in the final stages of the Christian journey. "And to crown all, there will be a deep, an intimate, an uninterrupted union with God; a constant communion with the Father and his Son Jesus Christ, through the Spirit; a continual enjoyment of the Three-One God, and of all the creatures in him!" If the power of God's grace has at the beginning removed hindrances to the faith, resulting in a change of heart shown in the willingness to give oneself totally to love of God and neighbor, then the final stage is the promise of communion with the Three-One God that is given to those who love God wholeheartedly. "He will bless them with the clearest communications of his Spirit, the most intimate 'fellowship with the Father and with the Son'.... They see him, as it were, face to face, and 'talk with him as a person] talking with [a] friend'.... God's promise for the peacemakers is that, as children of God, they will know an even deeper degree of communion with God.

The Way of Salvation will not always be easy, as seen in the final two beatitudes (Matt. 5:10-11). Wesley indicated that the faithful are to avoid bringing persecution on themselves, but in the face of persecution, Wesley counseled, " 'Love your enemies'... 'Bless them...
that curse you'... 'Do good to them that hate you'... If you can do nothing more, at least 'pray for them that despitefully use you and persecute you'.”

While the Beatitudes provide a scriptural guide for the Christian journey on the Way of Salvation, they also depict growing communion with the Three-One God and with our neighbors. For Wesley, the importance of this spiritual lesson could not be overemphasized:

This is the spirit of religion; the quintessence of it. These are indeed the fundamentals of Christianity. O that we may not be hearers of it only!... Let us not rest until every line thereof is transcribed into our own hearts. Let us watch and pray and believe and love, and 'strive for the mastery', till every part of it shall appear in our soul graven there by the finger of God; till we are 'holy as he which hath called us is holy', 'perfect as our Father which is in heaven is perfect'!

Community as Communion

We have established that in Wesley’s understanding, God intends for us to live in communion with God and our neighbors. We have seen that the Three-One God provides the means for this deepening communion through the Way of Salvation. This raises the question about how the church participates in the process of salvation and growing communion with the Three-One God. What is the role of the church in formation for holiness of heart and life?

In his hymn, “The Communion of Saints,” Charles Wesley described life in the “spiritual community of God’s people”24 as one that is spent in sharing sympathy, kindness, and grief with each other, as well as celebrating diverse gifts and freedom in God together. John Wesley believed the church is holy because its members are holy. But he also understood the church to be more than just the sum of its parts; Wesley claimed the church itself must be involved in the Way of Salvation. Like the individuals whose growth in faith it fosters, the church as a community must respond for itself to God’s invitation to communion through repentance and pardon, growing in love of God and neighbor through deepening communion, and reaching full communion with God.

It is only through the renewing work of the Three-One God that the church is able to grow in faith; and it is only on that basis that it can
participate in the spiritual formation of its members. Wesley "insisted that the church must be holy in the fuller sense of nurturing—and expecting—the progressive holiness of each of its members." The church anticipates full communion with God and lives in communion in order to nurture and sustain its members' growth in love of God and neighbor. In the church's faithfulness for the sake of others, it participates in the inauguration of God's kingdom on earth, which will be completed in heaven.26

As an agent of the coming reign of God, the church must pattern its life after the communion of the Trinity, providing structures, relationships, and practices for instruction and nurture in the faith. At the same time, the Three-One God empowers the perfecting and renewing work. The outcome or product, so to speak, of this relationship is described in "The Character of a Methodist":

... He is a Christian, not in name only, but in heart and life. He is inwardly and outwardly conformed to the will of God, as revealed in the written Word. He thinks, speaks, and lives according to the 'method' laid down in the revelation of Jesus Christ. His soul is 'renewed after the image of God', 'in righteousness and in all true holiness'. And 'having the mind that was in Christ' he 'so walks' as Christ 'also walked'.27

Here the making of a Christian is described in essentially Wesleyan terms. The transformation of a person's heart and life radically alters her or his self-understanding. The person is who he or she is in light of a deepening relationship with God. Christian identity means consciously knowing oneself to be Christian, having assimilated the values, beliefs, and lifestyle of one who professes to be a follower of Jesus Christ and who lives in communion with the Three-One God. Wesley called this self-knowledge the assurance of communion with God through Jesus Christ. The increase in communion with God and neighbor took place, in Wesley's terminology, through the perfecting work of the Holy Spirit.

Transformation also brings growth in holiness as a way of life (vocation). As we saw in Wesley's sermon on the beatitudes, Christian vocation is a life in communion with God through an inward or personal holiness ("holiness of heart")[1]{[involving] total commitment to God, singleness of intention, centering one's life completely on God. It includes believing in, trusting, loving, worshipping, imitating,
and obeying God. It consists of constant reliance on God's grace and using the gifts God gives to become what God intends us to be."

Outward evidence of communion with God is expressed through social holiness ("holiness of life"): "the manner in which we show our love for God in our love for our neighbors, remembering that the neighbor is anyone and everyone else." Christian vocation is the response a person makes to God's invitation to communion; this faithful discipleship contributes to God's work of love in the world.

If spiritual formation occurs in the process of living and growing in communion with God and practicing a holy life within Christian community, then our life together becomes the "curriculum" of formation for holiness of heart and life. Using the language of instruction, the church's task and focus is what Wesley called "practical divinity"—instruction in knowledge requisite to the practice of faith. Practicing a holy life requires a community of faith that embodies the holy life in love of God and neighbor and which provides structures, relationships, and practices through which others might be formed and transformed through the empowering work of the Holy Spirit.

Formation through Community. John Wesley believed that the Spirit's empowering presence could make use of human efforts for God's purposes. Many persons first heard the good news of God's grace through the preaching of John and Charles Wesley. The Foundery provided a site for regular preaching services twice a day. The advent of field preaching at George Whitfield's insistence was an important means of invitation, because it took the gospel to the people: "We cannot expect the wanderers from God to seek us. It is our part to go and seek them." Structures, relationships, and practices that served the process of deepening communion with God accompanied preaching. Because transformation occurs through God's initiative, any structure, relationship, or practice may serve as a means of deepening communion with God through the mediation of Jesus Christ and the enabling presence of the Holy Spirit. The following are examples of the church's various means of awakening spiritual hunger.

1. Invitation to Communion. The Wesleys found through experimentation that preaching needed to be coupled with structures that nurtured and sustained spiritual formation. Inviting people into
Christian communion through preaching without offering them the continuing nurture of participation in a society, class, band or select society left dismal results: "The preacher had little opportunity for instructions, the awakened souls could not watch over one another in love," and the believers could not "build up one another and bear one another's burdens." Soon it became clear that a communal environment to support growing communion with God was a basic necessity.

Interpersonal relationships also fostered the invitation to communion. In "A Plain Account" Wesley noted that societies originated because of repeated requests for advice and counsel. The importance of communion with others as a context for growth in faith can be seen in Wesley's first response to these requests. "Strengthen you one another. Talk together as often as you can. And pray earnestly with and for one another, that you may . . . 'endure to the end and be saved.'" When these individuals also wanted Wesley's direct care and guidance, he established a gathering time on Thursday evenings for prayer and advice.

Methodists also extended an invitation to communion through their practice of making frequent public statements and distributing inexpensive tracts. These attempted to share the vision of full communion with God, the objective of personal and social holiness, and the expectations for membership in a Methodist society and class. Thus the invitation to communion was made in various ways, through preaching, small group nurture, and supportive relationships. But it always centered on God's grace and salvation from sin. Written documents were deliberately composed in clear, unpretentious language that communicated with the people and gave direct guidance about how to participate in the process of salvation toward a deepening communion with God and others.

2. Deepening Communion. Once persons had been awakened to their need for salvation through God's invitation to communion, John Wesley believed they should engage in a disciplined life in the midst of community. This was necessary to nurture and sustain growth in holiness of heart and life. To that end, Wesley offered three basic guidelines to the Methodist small group structures: "doing no harm," "doing good," and "attending upon all the ordinances of God." And for each of these guidelines, Wesley gave concrete examples of appropriate behavior related to the daily life of Methodists. Each group emphasized these guidelines and assessment of behavior. Those
who were identified as “disorderly walkers” were reproved and offered time to leave their sins behind, while the rest of the group prayed for them. If no change was evident after a “season,” these persons were dismissed.  

Wesley discovered that, as the numbers of Methodists grew and religious talk with individuals contributed to deepening communion, “it required still greater care to separate the precious from the vile.” So Wesley talked with every member once every three months. The dialogical nature of Wesley’s ministry can be seen in letters of guidance and consultation with members of Methodist societies. Wesley also fostered deeper and broader communion by sharing letters that provided accounts of God’s work in people’s lives. Wesley’s attention to relationships is apparent in “the process of conferring, itinerating, corresponding, and publishing ... in the day-to-day contact between the Wesleys and the preachers, the members, the critics, and the Establishment.”

Growing in communion with God and others was supported by practices such as worship, mission, and shared leadership. The importance of worship cannot be underestimated. Methodists were counselled to attend their parish church and participate in the Lord’s Supper as often as possible. Additional forms of worship, such as watch-night services and love feasts, nurtured their spiritual life. Heitzenrater notes that “on Christmas day 1747, Wesley began to use the language of covenant renewal as a means of engaging his people together in the pursuit of a more serious religion.” This annual worship service of recommitment and renewal became an important means of deepening communion with God.

The Methodists’ deepening communion with God resulted in words and actions of love toward one’s neighbor. In “A Plain Account,” Wesley describes various missions to others, such as visiting the sick, providing medical assistance for the poor, establishing two houses for widows and day schools for children, and offering a lending service. Men and women who participated in these ministries gave practical expression to their love of neighbor and at the same time developed their own leadership skills.

Shared leadership in Christian fellowship provided another means of growing in communion through the work of the Spirit. To persons who were often more accustomed to taking orders from others, the Methodist structure offered many experiences of leadership, all with clear instructions from the Wesleys: class leader, band leader, visitor of the sick, steward, trustee, schoolmasters, and more. Leadership was not merely an exercise of
power; it grew out of care for one another expressed in the form of
taking responsibility for increasing Christian fellowship.

3. Full Communion. God promises that those who have been perfected
on the Way of Salvation will be adopted as children of God and reach
full communion with God in glory. Two examples are offered here of
those who have reached fuller communion with God through
sanctification, a radical transformation of heart and life.

The select society was composed of band members who had
reached an advanced state of spiritual growth. They met on Monday
mornings with John Wesley, who recorded the occasion and purpose
for the organization of the select society in his journal [7]:

I saw it might be useful to give some advices to all those who
thus continued in the light of God’s countenance, which the
rest of their brethren did not want, and probably could not
receive. . . . My design was to direct them now to press after
perfection; to exercise their every grace, and improve every
talent they had received; and to incite them to love one another
more, and to watch more carefully over each other. . . .

In the select society, Wesley found support for his own spiritual journey.
He also used members of the select society as models for others who
were growing in their communion with God and others. Faithful lives
were frequently lifted up by Wesley not only to celebrate such a life but
also to offer an image of living in communion with God and others. At
the death of Mrs. Witham, a London band-leader, Wesley wrote, “She
was an eminent pattern of calm boldness for the truth; of simplicity and
godly sincerity; of unwearied constancy in attending all the ordinances of
God; of zeal for God and for all good works; and of self-denial in every
kind.” Through these spoken and printed forms, including the public
reading of letters, John Wesley shared examples of those who were
making progress along the Way of Salvation and growing in communion
with God, increasing in love of God and neighbor.

For Wesley, the primary aim of formation for holiness of heart and
life was preparing persons to repent of their sin and to receive God’s
redemptive grace, so that they might surrender their wills to God and
be transformed for a holy life, a life of “scriptural holiness.” This
transformation was empowered by the Holy Spirit in the life of a
community of faith.
What Then Shall We Teach?

The "explicit curriculum" of spiritual formation is found in the Wesley's stated objective of scriptural holiness through the Way of Salvation, the emphasis on love of God and neighbor, and the clear guidance and expectations for growth in communion with God. By knowing the objective and the marks of growth, an individual and the community could observe and recognize progress in the journey of faith. A variety of structures were created to meet the needs of the journey, to nurture and sustain. The gospel that was proclaimed revealed God's grace and the hope of transformation of heart and life through the pardoning work of Jesus Christ and the perfecting work of the Holy Spirit.

If spiritual formation is in the process of practicing the holy life in communion with God and others, then the "implicit curriculum" may be even more powerful than explicit curriculum in shaping lives of faith. Through the structures, relationships, and practices of the Methodists' life together, the gospel was proclaimed and people heard this message: "You are of value to God and to us. We are willing to invest our time and energy in your salvation. You are no different in God's eyes than anyone else. You can grow in faith and be saved from sin through Jesus Christ. If you persist on the journey and continue to grow in love of God and neighbor, you will be adopted as a child of God. If you falter, you will receive another chance." One who responded to God's invitation to repent and received God's grace would be welcomed into communion with others on the journey of faith.

What remains to be identified and researched is the "null curriculum," or gaps in Wesley's formulation of the communion of the Trinity and its contribution to our understanding. What can we learn from Wesley's theology that will be formative for the faithful in our time? How do we formulate the doctrines of the Trinity, salvation, and the church for the global context in which we live? That remains the challenge; but it is not our task alone. Significant questions about the nature of Christianity will be raised in local United Methodist churches, and they can certainly be fully resolved there. The answers need not be strictly uniform. Like Christianity itself, Methodism uses the vernacular; the good news in its Wesleyan form permits infinite variation of expression. The new voices in our midst can articulate new experiences of the faith, new ways to express Christian identity.
and vocation. So we must listen carefully to the witness of our new church members.

But the core reality of the Christian faith has been classically captured by Wesley’s words and church structures, and this tradition can be trusted to portray faithfully God’s overwhelming love for humankind. Our attitude, therefore, must be not one of slavish devotion to a Wesleyan past but one of profound gratitude for a vision that can be so readily and inclusively shared. As we grow in communion with the Three-One God on our own journey of faith and as our communities expand, we pray with Charles Wesley:

\begin{verbatim}
Still let thy wisdom be my guide,
Nor take thy light from me away;
Still with me let thy grace abide,
That I from thee may never stray;
Let thy word richly in me dwell;
Thy peace and love my portion be:
My joy 't endure and do thy will,
Till perfect I am found in thee.\end{verbatim}

Notes


5. Zizioulas, Being as Communion, 134.


10. Ibid., 104.
12. Maddox wrote, “The process of straining and rupturing our relationships with God’s restored empowering Presence is as gradual as the process of commencing and nurturing this relationship.” *Responsible Grace*, 153.
15. Randy Maddox found that Wesley had named “three dimensions of salvation” in various ways: “pardon—salvation begun, holiness—salvation continued, and heaven—salvation finished. Some other common threefold formulations were justification, sanctification, and consummation; or pardon, grace and glory,” *Responsible Grace*, 143.
17. John Wesley, Sermon #22, in *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 1, 496.
18. But John Wesley also noted that the righteous continue to thirst for “more and more of the water of life. This thirst shall endure forever,” Sermon #22, *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 1, 497.
22. Ibid., 528–529.
23. Ibid., 530 (emphasis on “transcribed into our own hearts” is mine).
24. Maddox noted that this is “Wesley’s characteristic informal definition of the church . . .”, *Responsible Grace*, 242.
25. Maddox indicated that this view of the church is consistent with the notion of responsible grace, *Responsible Grace*, 242.
28. Charles Yrigoyen, Jr., *John Wesley: Holiness of Heart and Life* (New York:
Women’s Division, General Board of Global Ministries of The United Methodist Church, 1996), 25.
29. Ibid.
30. Heitzenrater, Wesley and the People Called Methodists, 162.
31. Heitzenrater was describing an experiment by the Wesleys that sent preachers into the west and the north without establishing Methodist societies, Wesley and the People Called Methodists, 165.
34. The Works of John Wesley, vol. 9, 261.
37. Ibid., 165.
39. Ibid., 269.
42. Maria Harris, citing Elliot Eisner’s work: “The explicit curriculum refers to what is actually presented, consciously and with intention,” Fashion Me a People: Curriculum in the Church (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1989), 68.
43. “The implicit curriculum . . . refers to the patterns or organization or procedures that frame the explicit curriculum: things like attitudes or time spent . . .” who is present (age, class, gender, and race), how money is allocated; ibid., 69.
44. “The null curriculum is a paradox. This is the curriculum that exists because it does not exist; it is what is left out,” ibid., 69.
Some Assumptions and Implications Regarding John Wesley's View of the Trinity: "The Root of All Vital Religion"

In his sermon "On the Trinity," John Wesley asserts that to say "God" is to say that "these three are one"—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In a nutshell, that assertion "is" the doctrine of the Trinity for Wesley. He does not see how anyone can have vital religion who denies that these three are one. And all [his] hope for them is, not that they will be saved during their unbelief (unless on the footing of honest heathens, upon the plea of invincible ignorance), but that God, before they go hence, will "bring them to the knowledge of the truth."

Only those without Christian upbringing (of any kind!) may be spared a certain judgment for failing to uphold the Trinity. Wesley is neither given to metaphysical speculation about the doctrine; nor is he too serious about it. He is not, for instance, as inflexible about the doctrine as Calvin appeared to have been. Allegedly, Calvin was so zealous about the Trinity as to have borne some responsibility for Servetus's fate. Servetus, a highly-accomplished, sixteenth-century physician, was reluctant to confess...
that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are one. As a result, offended Christians burned him at the stake. Wesley writes, however:

I dare not insist upon anyone's using the word "Trinity" or "Person." I use them myself without any scruple, because I know of none better. But if any man has any scruple concerning them, who shall constrain him to use them? I cannot; much less would I burn a man alive—and that with moist, green wood—for saying, "Though I believe the Father is God, yet I scruple using the words "Trinity" and "Persons" because I do not find them in the Bible." These are the words which merciful John Calvin cites as wrote by Servetus in a letter to himself.

Wesley's tolerance is not indifference. As I have noted, the Trinity is not an adiaphoron for him, that is, a doctrine that is inessential to faith but permissible for those—"the weaker brethren"—who simply must have such a doctrine to live the Christian life. Instead he insisted that "far from being a point of indifference it enters into the very heart of Christianity; it lies at the root of all vital religion."

I should like to examine this "heart of Christianity," this "root of all vital religion," by first discussing three assumptions and three implications that I think flush out and challenge Wesley's view. Second, I will elaborate on those assumptions and implications in light of Wesley's position, à la Anthony Benezet, on slavery—a position that the "root of all vital religion" sustains, a position that reveals the "heart of Christianity." Third, I will draw conclusions that seem pertinent to life on the threshold of the twenty-first century.

Assumption One: My first assumption, which is the foundation of the other two I will discuss, is that Wesley is referring to the economy of God, or the economic Trinity—the same, so much so that one might say, "three bear record on earth . . . and these three are One." Although Wesley places the Trinity in heaven, the root of his vital religion is in the earth: religion is a human affair that either accents the distinction between the Creator and the creature or loses sight of it. In both cases, the religious dimension is inescapable. I think this is where Wesley is coming from in writing the following:
I believe this fact... (if I may use the expression)—that God is Three and One. But the manner, how, I do not comprehend; and I do not believe it. Now in this, in the manner, lies the mystery. And so it may; I have no concern with it. It is no object of my faith; I believe just so much as God has revealed and no more. But this, the manner, he has not revealed; therefore I believe nothing about it. But would it not be absurd in me to deny the fact because I do not understand the manner? That is, to reject what God has revealed because I do not comprehend what he has not revealed."

Wesley does not lose sight of the distinction between the Creator and the creature as he is humbled by “the mystery,” which he does not comprehend. "What God has revealed “is sufficient; it is good for one’s health and strength, it is rooted in the earth. Earthbound Wesley believes “just so much as God has revealed” [emphases added].

Still, earthbound religion depends on an Other. This Other signifies the economic Trinity. How else could Wesley know that three bear record in heaven unless God had made them known on earth? Earthiness is thus inseparable from the concept of the Trinity itself.

Assumption Two: Having signified God’s rootedness in human affairs, the economy also signifies the world, the management of which is God’s plan—which God will complete when the time is right... to bring all creation together, everything in heaven and on earth, with Christ as head (Eph. 1:10). “With Christ as head” means Jesus is the key to the economy. “With Christ as head,” moreover, emphasizes that religion is rootless and vapid without Jesus. To put this another way, the earthly God, Jesus Christ, is the root of Wesley’s vital religion, a religion that calls to mind Luther’s Christmas image: Christ as “an earthworm in the feedbox of a donkey.” One might say, then, that God’s embrace of the world in Jesus Christ is the heart of the Trinity.

Christ’s Godness is the critical trinitarian factor. That this is so can be seen in Wesley’s consideration of whether 1 John 5:7—which valorizes the Trinity for him—might be an unreliable addition to the epistle. He concludes that apostolic tradition upholds the Trinity as essential to the “sacred canon.” That the verse is lacking “in many copies” in the middle of the fourth century reveals that the Arianizers were interested in undermining God-the-Son. In ruling out Christ’s
Godness, they would explode the concept of the Trinity and divest Jesus of his Godness. As Wesley put it, "Unless these three are one, how can 'all . . . honour the Son, even as they honour the Father?'" Wesley thus undermines "the limited 'analogical' continuity" Arius thought existed "between Father and Son." And, given his reference to the proverb *Athenasius contra Mundum*, Wesley upholds Athanasius's *Orationes against the Arians*, which asserts that Christ is "true God, *homoousios* with the true Father."

Okay, but the subject of vital religion, humankind, and religion's object, the Trinity, make this point as well. If there is no limited—analogue "continuity between Father and Son," there is such between the Son and his human nature. Otherwise, the idiom, Christ-the-"Mediator-of-the-New Covenant"—so critical to Wesley's soteriology—does not take root in the earth.

For Wesley, Christ is also an earthling—the new Adam—prophet, priest, and king. Bracketing now the divine nature of the Word, Jesus of Nazareth both does and suffers God's will. God-in-Christ might save all from sin and death. But if the Word were not made flesh in a genuine creature, *God* would not have tunneled into the earth salvifically (vitally). To sum up assumption two: the economy of God is the world, in which God is firmly planted in Christ, flesh of our flesh, blood of our blood: "the very heart of Christianity."

**Assumption Three:** A critical factor that emphasizes this heart (and keep in mind the analogical limitation between the Word and Jesus' human nature) is the dialectic, *the-self-and-the-other*. Given the religion of Chalcedon—*Son, Lord, only-begotten—in two natures . . . without transmuting one nature into the other . . . without confusing the two natures*—Jesus himself, the root of vital religion, embodies this dialectic. One gets the sense indeed of a God who burrows into the earth, the tuber Chalcedon symbolizes. Again Luther gets to the heart of it: "It is the honor and glory of our God . . . that, giving himself for our sake in deepest condescension, he passes into the flesh, the bread, our hearts, mouths, entrails, and suffers also for our sake that he be dishonorably handled, on the altar as on the cross."

Closely (perichoretically) related to him—the one "dishonorably handled—is the Holy Spirit. For Wesley, the Spirit manages the world in drawing individuals closer each day into the perfections of the triune God. The human subject, the self, is now at one with the Other, the Spirit.
One wed to the Spirit knows Christ is in the earth. The earth thus has a triune heart, which means it is social both regarding God's self (these three are one) and social regarding the new covenant (the unity of God and humanity in Christ). In the Spirit, human beings are to be eminently social, too, in the sense of the autonomy, but inextricability, of the self in relation to other people. If the vital root of that relatedness is Christ—which is to reiterate assumption two—then assumption three may be restated as follows: The dialectic, the-self-and-the-other, is the heart of vital religion, especially when the dialectic concerns human relations.

Having set forth my assumptions, I think that now is a good point to present my implications, for they basically concern the "self-and-the-Other—the new covenant. Remember that the new covenant, the covenant of grace, means that God-in-Christ reconciles us to God and, therefore, to one another. One might say, in fact, that for Wesley the new covenant is the heart of the Christian life rooted in Christ. One who takes this new covenant to heart knows

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\text{that God is love, he is conformed to the same likeness. He is full of love to his neighbor: of universal love, not confined to one sect or party, not restrained to those who agree with him in opinions, or in outward modes of worship, or to those who are allied to him by blood or recommended by nearness of place. Neither does he love those that only love him, or that are endeaured to him by intimacy of acquaintance. But his love resembles that of him whose mercy is over all his works.}
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Given the reality of the world in which we live, is there truly such a covenant?

**Implication 1:** Many should doubt the reality of the new covenant in today's world of antisocial, meaning inhumane, relations. Where is the overwhelming evidence of such a covenant? Too many North American churches, for instance, tend to function in contempt of social relations (as in diversity). Deemed as sinful flesh, the "Other" hardly enters the sanctuary. Such churches hoard vitality in distancing other people from what privileged communities grant to themselves: health, education, peace, stability, opportunity, meaningful work, and so forth. Where is the heart, the humanity, the religion, through which triune values flow? Where is the root of vital religion, "Christ the head"?
Implication 2: Where churches virtually bar the Other from the sanctuary, the antithesis of the triune God holds court. Where the Other is taboo, and racial or economic distancing at work, the operative conception of God is monarchian. A monarchian God is not triune but a monad—a oneness-in-whom-there-is-no-threeness. Arius’s God, for example, was monarchian: the one whom he called the Christ was not God, but a lesser god. For Arius: “God being the cause of all is without beginning, most alone; but the Son, begotten by the Father, created and founded before the ages, was not before he was begotten. Rather, the Son begotten timeless before everything, alone was caused to subsist by the Father. For he is not everlasting or co-everlasting or un-begotten with the Father [emphases added].”

Recall that Wesley rejected that subordinationism.

Religion is vapid in both churches-that-bar-the-Other and Arianism because neither has a God who is in Christ (neither has a Three-in-One God). God is absent in Arianism because of Arius’s metaphysics; God is absent in those churches because of their bigotry. (What is more, neither has a genuinely human Jesus: Arius’s incarnate “word” had no human soul, and churches that are squeamish in the presence of the Other reject God’s humanity—Jesus Christ—who embraces all, equally.)

Implication 3: Such rootlessness, the absence of God-and-genuine-humanity, is due to the fact that many Christians misunderstand what they profess because they lack the love so integral to Mr. Wesley’s new covenant—which is to say that their spirituality has clay feet. By clay feet I mean that they refuse to follow God’s own example in embracing the Other to experience the real world. Their “Trinity” sanitizes discussion of the world’s problems by quarantining them. Here, Christians so spiritualize the Trinity that its vitality—that God is at the heart of sinful flesh; that God is at the root of all humanity—is lost in their failure to examine problems they pigeonhole as “political.” Yet, the bracketing of politics eviscerates doctrine and fosters a misunderstanding of vital religion.

Such a misunderstanding is docetic in that it is an antiseptic orientation to the world God manages as Word and Spirit. Docetism, from the Greek word dokeo, “to seem,” means that Jesus Christ only appeared to be a human being: in reality he was divine and not really human. Docetists thus strip God of genuine humanity and thus misunderstand their own humanity and the humanity of others. They
are contemptuous of what God has embraced at the heart of the Trinity. Ethically speaking, the consequences of that can be ugly, for there is a relation between Docetism and what I have called monarchian distancing. We discover in that juxtaposition the poverty of the monad—the deification of one kind of people—particularly given certain Apollinarian implications. The very idea that the distanced other symbolizes Jesus is tantamount to blasphemy: "He could not redeem us from our sins, revivify us, or raise us from the dead. How could we worship Him, or be baptized into His death, if He [were] only an ordinary man [meaning the distanced-one] indwelt by the Godhead? As such He must have been fallible, a prey like the rest of [them] to corrupt imaginings, and consequently unable to save us" [emphases added].

In truth, those who want to keep things on such a spiritual level want the world for themselves. In truth, those who separate theology from politics want to render the oppressed invisible, want to postpone self-examination and the real suffering it causes. Such sterility, a docetic orientation I say, is all too handy because the world's alienation—humanmade—legitimizes it. So much for vital religion and its heart, the social relations it commends on the model of Godself.

II

Might Wesley help us escape from such a fix? Surely we must appreciate his view of the Trinity, as I appropriate it in terms of my assumptions and implications, within the crisis of his time. Otherwise, his view would have little credibility for us today. Let me examine that crisis to see whether Wesley helps us.

The compelling crisis of his day was surely slavery. Wesley first got a whiff of that injustice while in South Carolina, and it went to the heart of his Christianity: "O God, where are thy tender mercies? Are they not over all thy works? When shall the Sun of righteousness arise on these outcasts of men," he writes. It was not until later, though, that Wesley, upon reading Anthony Benezet, joined the abolitionists. What did Wesley learn from the Quaker?

He surely learns an important lesson about the earth in which his God is rooted: Guinea, that part of Africa stretching from the Gambia to Kongo-Angola, is far from the benighted wasteland slavery propagandists would have it be. Blacks forged cultures well suited to human life. Their enslavement in the Americas and in England was no step up for them.

In learning something about the world, Wesley learns something about the Other. Benezet taught him that the Africans were
industrious, sociable people, whose capacities are... as enlarged and as open to improvement as those of the Europeans." Wesley thus learns something about himself, his white self, for he never tries to extricate himself from his so-called race. He learns something about Anglo-Saxon limitations. Benezet is "bold to assert that the notion entertained by some, that the blacks are inferior in their capacities, is a vulgar prejudice, founded on the pride or ignorance of their lordly masters, who have kept their slaves at such a distance [emphasis added] as to be unable to form a right judgement of them." Benezet thus helps Wesley see a genuine Other, not a "negative category of the" self. As Wesley puts it in his Thoughts upon Slavery, which is in many places but a reproduction of Benezet's views, "The African is in no respect inferior to the European." What is more, Wesley thought one might "leave England and France to seek genuine honesty in Benin, Congo, or Angola."

The critical question Benezet asks is, "How did they [the Africans] come to forfeit their liberty?" Surely, the treachery of the African kings and their henchmen concerns slavery. Still, "shall a civilized, a Christian nation encourage slavery because the barbarous, savage, lawless African hath done it? Monstrous thought." Indeed, Benezet holds that the indigenous trade in slaves took a turn for the worse with the entrance of the whites. How did the blacks forfeit their liberty? That is the question. The truth is, they, did not. Thus, both the denial of a people's humanity and the attendant apologetic for their so-called "necessary" mistreatment offends Benezet. For Christ's sake, human decency should release the Other from the tyranny of the self in admitting that nothing but greed is responsible for the trade. We have to do here with a vitiated economy, which Benezet and Wesley understood as the spirit of Mammon—"an insatiable desire of gain... the principal and moving cause of the most dreadful scene that was perhaps ever acted upon the face of the earth."

At the heart of Wesley's and Benezet's view is their vital religion—the faith that God-in-Christ is the root of humane relations. For Benezet, the Christians' duty was to embrace the world and all its people as a consequence of this root. He argues that a Christian faith that makes peace with slavery is an uprooted, slothful, heartless religion. He would not practice it.

I do not know where Benezet stood on the Trinity, so I cannot not suggest, as I have with Wesley, that the economic Trinity, as christologically and pneumatically construed, is the vitality of his
religion. My focus is Wesley, and my argument is that his stand on slavery lends far more legitimacy to his trinitarian values than his valorization of 1 John 5:7. That is primarily because Wesley was free from the monarchian values and docetic distancing which I have already discussed.

One might argue that Wesley's loyalty to the English monarchy translates into a monarchian religion nonetheless. But compared to what and according to whom—the American revolution, the Founding Fathers? I identify with neither the Crown nor the Founding Fathers, but I have to agree with Wesley when he writes to the colonists: "You and I, and the English in general, go where we will, and enjoy the fruit our labours: This is liberty. The Negro does not: This is slavery." The issue is neither the Crown nor the Founding Fathers. The issue is slavery.

Wesley understands his religion, is quite political about it; and so he practices it as a vital one. He thus brings to light these implications, which I have discussed, and summarize as follows:

- Anyone who covets economic and racial injustice worships a projection of the narrowly construed self and not a triune God.
- Anyone contemptuous of another so-called race worships a God who is not incarnate in sinful flesh; for God died and suffered for all people rooted in the earth.

Wesley's faith is credible. The meaning of the economy—as the world and as the distribution of God's very own self as Christ and Spirit in the world—is reflected in the correctness of his stand on slavery. I find that helpful by virtue of its depth of understanding and translation into an earthy holiness. Can we appropriate that?

III

Though our world is quite different from Wesley's, the question is arresting. Yet, there is continuity between Wesley's day and our own, which I should like to explore in these concluding remarks.

Wesley was attacking not simply the institution of slavery but inhumane values that have been and remain integral to tremendous societal contradictions. The shape of such contradictions changes over time, but the contradictions themselves persist. I would be blind and solipsistic, for instance, not to see that racial injustice is inextricably linked to the economic injustice that burdens millions of African Americans. The two together transmute into an untouchableness that dooms them to the pathologies of ghetto life. That is a theological
problem not unlike the one Wesley attacked in his day. Attitudes rooted in slavery reveal monarchian gods. Injustice thus wounds a triune God by way of the practical deification—docetic distancing—of certain kinds of flesh.

I relate the global dimension of that distancing to Africa's misfortune. Wesley thought Africa was a livable place and that the Europeans had done major damage to it. For the most part, I think he has a point; and I want to lift up its present-day significance in arguing that the legacies of the slave trade and another, more contemporary event, the Berlin Conference, are primarily responsible for Africa's low post on today's economy.

Few have raised that issue more compellingly than the late Basil Davidson, whose book *The Black Man's Burden* makes the case that the imposition on Africa of the nation-state, a model alien to Africa and a reflection of outside domination, is at the heart of Africa's dysfunction. Theologically speaking, one might say that the nation-state is monarchian in that it, in isolation and through *subordination*, thrives on sameness.

The nation-state, argues Davidson, who is an acknowledged authority on Africa, is a xenophobic imperative that prescribes war and is manipulated by the bourgeoisie. Africa is imploding, argues Davidson, because of the malignant effects of this model, as seen in perpetual civil wars, bourgeois corruption, ethnic cleansing, staggering debt—in a word, alienation. The upshot is the pauperization of people by the millions. And to say that Africa is *imploding* is to say, with the African theologian Kā Mana that Africans must surely own up to their complicity in Africa's *l'agonie*. Still, the failure to see the North's complicity in Africa's devastation is to strain gnats and obscure the juggernaut. Africa is in a crisis of such importance as to call to mind the events of Europe in the early twentieth century which called forth great paradigm shift in German-Swiss theology. Africa's dysfunction is therefore a theological problem of the highest order and calls Wesley's sense of vital religion to mind.

The well-respected historian and economist Immanuel Wallerstein is exemplary in his concern for Africa as he takes today's economy to task. Refusing to engage in "Afro-pessimism," as if Africa had none but itself to blame for its misfortune, Wallerstein writes: "We shall not be able to assess seriously anything about the state of Africa today or its possible trajectory until we first analyze what has been happening
in the world-system as a whole in the last fifty years." Wallerstein characterizes this world-system as "liberalism."

According to Wallerstein—and I quote him simply as an example of how one talks about the Trinity in terms rooted in the earth—"The liberal solution was to grant limited access to political power and limited sharing of the economic surplus value, at levels that would not threaten the process of ceaseless accumulation of capital or the state-system that sustained it." Wallerstein contended that liberalism was the policy of both the Americans and the Soviets, the Wilsonian trajectory on the one hand and the Stalinist trajectory on the other. Both upheld the right of nations to sovereignty and national development. Both upheld "universal values," equality for all; valorized science "(essentially in its Newtonian form)"; and held to the inevitability of human progress if pursued on the model of the sovereign nation-state. Both asserted that the rule of the people was sacrosanct, which was to enshrine democracy; but, according to Wallerstein, an elite, "rational reforming experts," administered such democracy.

Wallerstein's argument is that the collapse of the Soviets is the end of liberalism. The fall of the Soviet Union, then, marks not the consolidation of American hegemony but its demise. New configurations of power are in store for the next century; Wallerstein asserts they threaten to heighten the disparity between North and South which has been so characteristic of this old century. That means more misery is in store for the African masses and the African Americans who have no social mobility. And not only for them, but for poor people everywhere.

As I see it, Wallerstein and Davidson substantiate the view that we never experience reality in the inner sanctum of the subjective self but always in the world, the venue of otherness. Like Wesley, Wallerstein and Davidson give content to this claim: God roots the Trinity in the earth to challenge inhumane relations. How else could God be worldly, earthy—suffer and die? God is political. Yet, to see God in political conflict—North and South, have-nots, blacks and whites—is to focus not on politics but on theology. Theology should make clear the assumptions and implications of a vital religion that focuses on political problems because of God's management of the economy in the flesh. Theology, moreover, should express Spirituality—a God-led practice of charity to all persons—for the Spirit is the witness, because the Spirit is the truth.
If "the Spirit is the witness, because the Spirit is the truth," why do we appropriate the doctrine of the Trinity at cross-purposes? We have divided the economy into North and South. No talk of unity-in-diversity, no talk of the Second Person—the vitality of the humanity common to the divided world, no talk of the Third Person's regenerative, as in reconciling, power obscures the reality of that menacing bifurcation. Maybe Wesley's legacy will help stem that great divide for the sake of "the very heart of Christianity" and the "root of all vital religion."

Notes

2. Ibid., 378.
3. Ibid., 384.
4. Ibid., 384.
5. Ibid. Wesley argues that doubts regarding the verse's authenticity were removed by three considerations, one of which is "that we can easily account for its being after the time wanting in many copies when we remember that Constantine's successor was a zealous Arian, who used every means to promote his bad cause, to spread Arianism throughout the empire; in particular the erasing this text out of many copies as fell into his hands. And he so far prevailed that the age in which he lived is commonly styled seculum Arianum—'Arian age; there being then only one eminent man who opposed him at the peril of his life. So that it was a proverb, Athanasius contra mundum—'Athanasius against the world'" (379).
8. In fact, one might say that the "literal" implication of 1 John 5:7—"And the Spirit is the witness, because the Spirit is the truth," which must be read with 1 John 5:8—"There are three witnesses, the Spirit, the water, and the blood; and these three agree"—is pneumatological.
10. I am indebted to Toni Morrison's Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1992) for this concept. Through it, she makes the point that blacks—the "Africanist presence"—have been integral, and incestuously so, to whites' self-definition in the United States. "Distancing" describes that process, at work from that nation's very beginnings: "For excellent reasons of state—because European sources of cultural
hegemony were dispersed but not yet valorized in the new country—the process
of organizing American coherence through a distancing Africаниз
became the operative mode of a new cultural hegemony” (8).


12. By antiseptic orientation, I mean that something clean has to be employed against something unclean. Tertullian makes the docetic implications of that clear for me. See Tertullian, “On the Flesh of Christ,” in The Christological Controversy, ed. by Richard A. Norris, Jr. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 65–68. In his analysis of Marcion, Tertullian writes, “Let us look closely at the Lord’s corporeal substance, for the question of his spiritual substance is settled. They ask whether it is real and what its quality is. They want to know whether it existed and where it came from and what sort of thing it was. Its reply will determine what resurrection means for us . . . . Come, then, start from birth itself, the object of aversion, and run through your catalog: the filth of the generative seeds within the womb, of the bodily fluid and the blood; the leathen, curdled lump of flesh which has to be fed for nine months off this same muck . . . . Christ loved that human being, that lump curdled in the midst of impurities, that creature brought into the world through unmentionable organs, that child nourished on mockery. On this account Christ came down. On this account Christ preached. On this account Christ in all humility, brought himself down to death, the death on a cross. Clearly he loved one whom he redeemed at great cost” [emphasis added]. Salvation, here synonymous with the resurrection of human bodies, attests to the value of human flesh—which is inseparable from the human soul—no matter that it makes one queasy. If God would not take antiseptic pains to avoid humanity, who are we to avoid the humanity of others?

13. Apollinaris claimed Jesus’ flesh was divine, and his mind, or soul, or heart, totally that of the Word.


15. As found in Theodore Jennings, Good News to the Poor: John Wesley’s Evangelical Economics (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 82.


19. See V. Y. Mudimbe’s The Invention of Africa (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), in which he makes the claim that racism reflects the fact that alterity is a negative category of the same. In his The Idea of Africa (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).
University Press, 1994), Mudimbe reveals that the problem "stipulates more than a simple problem of representation. . . . The [problem] defines, in fact, an egocentric foundation of an experience, its contents and values. It suggests also, in the same movement, that the Other [the African] cannot be but the other side, the negative side, the negative proposition of oneself that should be mastered in its very contradiction and absolutely converted to the ideals of one's truth. If necessary, history—a memory codified as a lesson about what happened in the past—would function as both justification and a right for such possible violence" [emphases added], 15. Neither Wesley nor Benezet is so egocentric.

20. Wesley, "Thoughts upon Slavery," in 

21. Ibid., 80.

22. Benezet, 43.

23. Ibid. The Europeans set the Africans against themselves, he argues, furnishing them with guns, plunging them into "confusion, bloodshed, and all the extremities of temporal misery," 36.

24. Ibid., 36-37.

25. Ibid. He writes, "For this end the Son of God became man, suffered, and died, and the whole tenor of the gospel declares, that for those who refuse or neglect the offers of this great salvation, the Son of God has suffered in vain" (53).

26. Ibid. Mindful of black suffering, he (refusing to disavow his white self) asserts, "How miserable must be our [emphasis added] condition if for filthy lucre, we should continue to act so contrary to the nature of this divine call, the purpose of which is to introduce a universal and affectionate brotherhood in the whole human species" (52-53).

27. Wesley, A Calm Address to Our American Colonies, as found in Jennings, 93.

28. See Wesley's, "Thoughts upon Slavery." He writes that Africans were "so far from being the stupid, senseless, brutal, lusty barbarians, the fierce, cruel, perfidious savages they have been described." Rather they were remarkably industrious, given the heat and harshness of their environment, and quite noble in their social relations: "fair, just, and honest in their dealings, unless," writes Wesley, "where white men have taught them otherwise; and as are more mild, friendly, and kind to strangers than any of our forefathers were. Our forefathers! Where shall we find at this day, among the fair-faced natives of Europe, a nation generally practicing the justice, mercy, and truth which are related of these poor black Africans" (80)?


30. Davidson writes that independence "was not a restoration of Africa to Africa's own history, but the onset of a new period of indirect subjection to the history of Europe. The fifty or so states of the colonial partition, each formed and governed as though their peoples possessed no history of their own, became fifty or so nation-states [emphasis added] formed and governed on European models, chiefly the models of Britain and France. Liberation thus produced its own denial. Liberation led to alienation," 10.

31. KI Mana, Foi chrétienne, crise africaine et reconstruction de l'Afrique (Nairobi: CELTA, 1992). Mana writes that the matrix, the web of the crisis, which the African church connects in its many dimensions and implications "tends to implicate each African in the actual situation in which, in order to be the victim, Africa itself is no less the source and the agent. For this crisis is not only global, profound and piercing
(sigul), but touches aspects of life in which, one way or the other, each African must feel him- or herself addressed as he or she has not only been made to submit to a situation, but has more or less also produced and nurtured it." 98 [my translation].

33. Ibid., 39.
34. Ibid., 49.
Malcolm Tan Thian Hock

Evangelization toward Trinitarian Inclusiveness in the Asia Pacific Area: A Wesleyan Perspective

The Christian conviction of God as triune has not always been good news, especially in a context of volatile Asian religious pluralism. The Islamic writer Imad ad-Din describes walking through the battlefield at Hattin in 1187, after the Crusaders' army had been crushed decisively by Saladin. There he saw "heads cracked open, spines broken, eyes gouged out, stomachs disemboweled." He concluded with a pithy observation that "many 'trinitarians' had been cut in two."1

We must bear in mind that something as precious as the triune reality of God can be understood and applied in such a way that, rather than seeing God as God wishes to reveal Godself to us, we actually glorify our own projections and impose them on others. Theology then becomes stifling and oppressive. Our Trinitarian faith must result never in human destruction or enslavement but in the continuing humanization of all persons in the image of Christ, who is the very image of God. "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10:10).

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This essay reflects on how Trinitarian religion can make possible the further humanization of the community in the Asia Pacific region. The Asia Pacific region usually refers to those countries encompassed in a triangle-shaped area from India to New Zealand and up to China and Japan. It includes the countries of Southeast Asia and Northeast Asia. Although there are many differences between the various nations, current global conditions can permit one to see this as a single zone, as current economic observers have written, "The old Asia was divided by culture, language, political ideology, religious philosophies and geography. The new Asia, forged by economic integration, technology, especially telecommunications, travel and mobility of people, will increasingly look like one coherent region."2

Indeed, the view of Asia as an interdependent region was the creation of international capital and the global marketplace. The development of this new economic entity can be traced in four stages.3 First, the mid-nineteenth century saw Western colonialism and the emergence of the Treaty Port System, which created regional trade by a network of ports in the region. Up to and during World War II, Japanese imperialism and the "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere" resulted in Southeast Asia's being incorporated with the East Asia Regional Bloc. In the postwar, Cold War period, U.S. military and economic aid stabilized the regional economy and assisted in its development. This resulted in a strong orientation toward the U.S. in the non-Communist Asian economies. Finally, with the creation of the European Community (E.C.) and the North American Freedom of Trade Act (NAFTA), bringing the possibility of trade protectionism, Asian countries learned to depend more on each other in order to survive economically.

But Western imperialism brought into the Asia Pacific region not only mercantile capitalism but Christianity.

*From the time of the Portuguese to the end of the Second World War, the association of Christian missionary work with aggressive imperialism introduced political complications into Christian work. Inevitably national sentiment looked upon missionary activity as inimical to the country's interests and native Christians as "secondary barbarians."4*

In many parts of the region, it will take a long time before the Asian Christian community is able to live down this stigma, which was built
on the history of a previous generation. Consequently, there is the need for both numerical church growth and further "Asianization" of the Asian church to show that the gospel can flourish on Asian soil.

The Dynamic of Power in the Asia Pacific Region

Since the sixteenth century, when the first Portuguese traders arrived, to the coming of the Dutch and the English, and even to our present post-Cold War era—in which the U.S. is the relatively declining hegemonic power in the region—foreign influence, or power, has been projected into the Asia Pacific region in two ways: hard power and soft power. Hard power refers to military aggression, together with direct political and economic pressure. Sometimes hard power is nonmilitary in nature; it comes instead from diplomatic and economic pressure. Soft power, on the other hand, refers to the persuasive power of cultural influence and ideological promotion.

As the up-and-coming regional power, China is also learning the power-projection game from its former practitioners, despite the fact that she herself was once a victim of these tactics. For the smaller countries in the region, the proverb is appropriate: "When elephants fight, it is the grass that gets trampled."

But the projection of hard and soft power into the region may be lessening, and, in fact, may be ultimately reversed. If the projections of John Naisbitt are correct, the tables will be turned by the mid-twenty-first century, when non-military hard power and ideological/cultural soft power will be projected by the Asia Pacific region into the rest of the world. Naisbitt writes:

*What is happening in Asia is by far the most important development in the world today. Nothing else comes close, not only for Asians but for the entire planet. The modernization of Asia will forever reshape the world as we move towards the next millennium. . . . by the year 2000, Asia will become the dominant region of the world: economically, politically, and culturally.*

According to Naisbitt, this so-called "Asian Renaissance" will be characterized by the following so-called "megatrends": 1) overseas Chinese economic networks will overtake Japan's economic importance; 2) Asian economic development will create a sizeable
middle class (.5 billion by 2000); 3) Asian-style development will not follow foreign models blindly; 4) regional market economies will be more important than centralized economies; 5) rural to urban migration will turn Asia into a continent of mega-cities; 6) high technology will replace labor-intensive agriculture and manufacturing; 7) women will emerge as entrepreneurs, voters, consumers, and members of the work force, resulting in the erosion of male dominance in the region; 8) Asian “Confucianist” civilization will take on a global significance.6

The power projections to and from the Asia Pacific region appear to merit the following comments:

1. All forms of power projection, whether hard power as military, political, and economic or soft power as culture and ideology, are preoccupied with the intention to dominate. The winner gets to dominate, and the loser gets to be dominated.

2. The power projection game is motivated by economic gain. It is wealth that buys military hardware, political influence, control of the media, and in the end generates still more wealth. In the next century, the Asia Pacific region will underscore the notion that power comes from the acquisition and possession of wealth. The converse is also true: poverty will result in powerlessness. If one does not want to play or does not learn to play the economic game well enough, one remains in poverty and powerlessness.

3. A harsh and commercialized version of meritocracy appears to be the destiny of the Asia Pacific region in the next century. In this version of the “survival of the fittest,” measured by economic success, the unsuccessful will be the unfit who do not deserve to survive as part of the economic plan for the future. This heartless meritocracy will be inclusive toward the successful and exclusive toward the failures, breeding an ugly, competitive subculture revolving around the desire to get ahead at all cost.

4. History will focus its attention on the “haves” in this emerging economic zone. But the drives toward a market economy and liberal democracy projected by Naisbitt and Francis Fukuyama,7 among others, do not exhaust the possibilities of the future for this region.

The Third World and the Asia Pacific Region

Naisbitt’s generalizations about Asia’s staggering wealth must not blind us from recognizing the equally staggering numbers of the poor, whom we will always have with us.
The simple dichotomies of the past imposed their own gross distortion. Even the so-called poorest country has its clutch of millionaires living in the same lifestyle as their peers in the richest country. Each so-called rich country has, trapped in the cruel interstices of its economy, thousands of hungry and poor. The division between rich and poor is presented in each microcosm of the system; poverty at the global level was never a territorial concept.8

Besides having the poor within the borders of rich countries, there will be entire regions, in South Asia primarily, given to poverty. The 1997 UN Human Development Report tells us that Asia is the continent with the largest number of poor people today. The region of South Asia, East Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Pacific alone, it says, accounts for 950 million of the world’s 1.3 billion income-poor people. This gloomy but completely accurate picture is compounded by the projected population explosion in the poorer parts of Asia.9

One can only conclude that, despite Fukuyama’s Western capitalistic triumphalism after the fall of communism, a third-world agenda is still necessary even in the Asia Pacific region. Nigel Harris explains the significance of this concept:

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, the idea of a third world was beginning to emerge. At that time it did not refer merely to a group of countries ... but rather to a political idea. After the terrible deprivations and destruction of the second World War, the globe had become divided between two apparently terrifying alternatives, Washington and Moscow, capitalism and socialism, the first and second worlds. The third world, newly created from the wreckage of the old, offered a different plan for humanity, a third alternative.10

In the midst of the sometimes booming Asia Pacific region the poorer third world is a real and significant presence. The agenda of this third world, therefore, needs to be taken seriously by all concerned Asians. The Asian Christian community, being dynamically connected to the larger regional community, must therefore do its theology and theological praxis with a completo view of the Asia Pacific reality—the “have nots” as well as the “haves.” Authentic third-world Asian Christian theologies need to address both the winners and the
losers in the coming so-called Asian Renaissance. Our question, then, is this: What is the word of the true and Trinitarian God for both the Asian Christian community and the larger Asian community, obsessed as it is with acquiring wealth in order to gain power so as not to be dominated but instead to dominate?

Evangelization for Asia Today

In light of the current contextual realities of the Asia Pacific regions, it appears that not all forms of Christian evangelization are not appropriate or relevant:

A merely external institutionalized Evangelization would be concerned only with adding to the membership of a given church by formal adhesion to it without inner conversion. Such an evangelization can go hand in hand with an acceptance of injustice and lovelessness; in fact with even their conscious and unconscious promotion. This may build a church, but obstruct God’s work on earth. It may build a certain brand of “Christianity” but injure humanity and God’s kingdom.11

The same report also notes that this type of evangelization is nothing more than

an act of spiritual aggression by an outside agent, a forced imposition of something unwanted, or at best it is an act of paternalism and condescension on the part of “those who have” toward the “have-nots.”12

Consequently, true and welcomed evangelization for Asia today must 1) take seriously the cultural-religious context and framework by which our proclamation will be understood and judged; 2) contribute to the quest for Asian humanization seen today as liberation, development, and community building (i.e., the redemption of society and individuals); 3) build “critical mass” not only from the affluent elite but also from the grass roots, bringing about the further Asianization of the Asian Christian community; 4) remain rooted in the same conviction as John Wesley, that “the knowledge of the Three-One God is interwoven with all true Christian faith, with all
vital religion.” Otherwise, we have nothing but ourselves to offer our fellow Asians.

The Asian Community and Trinitarian-Inclusiveness

In spite of Asian cultural diversities, the Asia Pacific region appears to have certain characteristics in common:

Even the change brought by political modernization and economic development in Asia have not eradicated the features of Asian cultures that distinguish them... these include “collectivism,” strong identification as members of groups; “consensus,” the harmony of group life by avoiding confrontation; “hierarchy,” acceptance of authority based on superior-inferior rankings; and “power as status,” in order to generate order out of chaos.”

What is at issue here between East and West is actually the “rights of the individual,” which seem to be sacrificed when Asians emphasize “collectiveness,” “consensus,” “hierarchy,” and “the status quo.” The Eastern point of view is that the human rights of individualism will result in societal chaos and need to be checked by the Asian-preferred values enumerated above. Hence both East and West engage each other from an “either/or” position.

The linkage between Asian communal values and Asia’s cultural-religious traditions seems hard to deny. But the traditional religions that once supported these values no longer have an ideological monopoly in the region.

In addition to traditional cultural and religious values, the “educated” Asian has benefited by the new personalist and secular values such as (humankind’s) unique personality, (personal) dignity and social justice, scope for responsible participation, autonomy and value of this world, of the present age, of life here below; advantages of the separation between church and state. Besides the process of secularization, the spread of mass education, modern means of social communication and the marvels of technology have altered the relationships, thought-patterns, value-systems and style of life,
Consequently, Asia is now in the mood to consider and receive any new truths and ideas which will provide a more believable explanation of reality than their traditional religious philosophies. All Asia, both rural and urban, is willing today to consider the example and message of the Asian Church, to see if practical moral spirituality can make a quantum leap forward through the God of Jesus Christ.

But perfect community can be found neither in the East nor in the West, in first, second, or third world. It is only in God—the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—that perfect community can be seen. Therefore, the more we are transformed into the image of God, the Trinity, the better community life can become. The human community can find its true identity and greatest fulfillment only when the inclusive Trinity becomes a social paradigm for all human communities.

The community of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit becomes the prototype of the human community dreamed of by those who wish to improve society and build it in such a way as to make it into the image and likeness of the Trinity.

The triune mystery of mutual delight in one another, therefore, has everything to do with the very meaning of our own humanity, with our inmost call to live in love and in love for one another rather than in fear and isolation and domination.

The Asian community must be called to be inwardly and outwardly converted to this true and Trinitarian God, who alone can make possible for all a community where collectivism, consensus, hierarchy, and the status quo will not lead to perverse domination and the snuffing out of individual creativity. It is the inclusive Trinitarian God that makes it possible for us to have the power and courage to be, belong, and become.

Through the reconciling work of Christ and the empowering witness of the Spirit we experience God as Father. Unlike dictatorial paternalism, to experience and know God as Father is to find out who we really are. The sense of identity and self-worth will empower us to resist being dominated.
In the arms of my Abba, I find my beginning and my end, my name and my identity, my family roots and heritage, my own personal meaning and irreplaceable reason for existence. It is to enter into the very heart of God and to find here my own ultimate origin and identity. 17

People who know who they are and why they are here will not be so easily told what to do by others seeking to dominate them. Being converted gives us the courage to be.

The courage to belong (collectivism and consensus) is very often seen as being antithetical to the courage to be (individually). When the courage to belong is emphasized, the individual is threatened. The individual loses the power for creative free choice, resulting in becoming nothing but a lone digit in the whole system—the state of depersonalization. However, when individuality is so emphasized that the one with the courage to be does not have the courage to belong, the individual lives in a state of powerlessness and loneliness. It is in the Trinity that we can have the power and courage to be and belong at the same time.

... because we have come from the triune God of interpersonal love, it is literally not possible for us to gain our human fulfillment as selfish individualists. Our trinitarian faith calls us to commit ourselves to one another, to choose time for and with one another; to listen and speak with respect to one another. 18

God the Trinity also calls us to become, become more secure and less manipulative. We become manipulative when we feel endangered. We feel endangered because of previous hurts within us that are still unresolved. God’s power must make us secure enough to relate graciously with others. But only the one touched by Grace can be gracious toward others. God’s transforming power is therefore the power that comes from experiencing God’s love in Christ Jesus through the Holy Spirit (Rom. 5:5).

If we could realize how tenderly the triune God rejoices to be God for us, no trouble can finally destroy us. Children sleep in their parents’ arms even while everything around them is in confusion and chaos. We, too, are held in the arms of the triune...
God: regardless of how frightened or anxious we feel, because we are held in these arms, everything is well.\(^19\)

Having powerfully made us secure, “our trinitarian faith calls us to a conversion from patterns of using human persons as objects, from valuing things over people.” However, “most important of all, the triune God is healing for our brokenness and for the wounds deep within us that prevent us from loving and living in mutual respect and care for one another. The trinity is the very power for our breakthrough from a self-centered existence to a life of mutuality and self-giving.”\(^20\) Once we are made whole within, we will find strength to appreciate those whom the meritocratic society has written off as “failures.”

*Our trinitarian faith of its very nature impels us to relate to every human person, to the most insignificant or poor, to the most deformed or helpless, to the weakest among us, out of the trinitarian vision and values of interrelational love and mutuality.*\(^21\)

It is in this empowered sense of inner security that we are enabled to change whatever is not humanizing in our present context. In the strong name of the Trinity we are then able to preserve whatever it is in these contexts that humanizes relationships between individuals and societies. The triune God helps us not to be afraid to become what it is for the betterment of all. Consequently the Asian Church must loudly proclaim the truth of the Triune God in word and life for the good of the future of the Asia Pacific region. “The church and the world will be transformed when we ourselves are converted by our trinitarian faith.”\(^22\)

**Conclusion**

If the Trinity is truly the revelation of God as God really is, always was and forever will be, then no culture or civilization can claim it to be theirs exclusively. This truth is theirs and ours as well, inclusively. To imagine that the truth of the Trinity is the mere product of the genius of any one civilization is to engage in an infringing of
"intellectual copyright" against the actual owner of this life-giving and sustaining truth: God Almighty.

The truth of the Trinity is like life, sunshine, fresh air, and clean water—given by God for all humanity to enjoy, experience, and be sustained by. All who withhold God's good gifts to humankind engage in aggression against both God and the entire human family. The world is our parish still. Surely the sentiments of John Wesley would be a fitting conclusion to this paper:

I know not how anyone can be a Christian believer till... God the Holy Ghost witnesses that God the Father has accepted him through the merits of God the Son: And, having this witness, he honors the Son, and the blessed Spirit, "even as he honors the Father." Therefore, I do not see how it is possible for any to have vital religion who denies that these Three are One. And all my hope for them is... that God, before they go hence, will "bring them to the knowledge of the truth."

(Sermon LV "On the Trinity")

Notes

5. Naisbitt, Megatrends Asia, ix.
6. For a recent critique of this scenario and a possible alternative see Newsweek, 21 July 1997, p. 2. The writers contend that the coming Asian renaissance will be focused on India rather than the more Confucianist countries of the region.
17. Ibid., 89.
18. Ibid., 108.
19. Ibid., 98.
20. Ibid., 108.
21. Ibid., 113.
22. Ibid., 122.
Some time ago, a theological colleague who is not a Methodist asked me what courses I was teaching. When I told him I was teaching a course in United Methodist doctrine, his quiet response was, "That must be a short course." Methodists have a reputation among some other Christians for being short on doctrine. It is widely believed that a walk through the Methodist doctrinal pond would hardly get one's feet wet. It is not only other Christians who have this impression, of course; many Methodists share it and take it either as a point of pride (the dominant view, so far as I can see) or as a reason for self-reproach (a minority view, whose influence waxes and wanes periodically).

H. Richard Niebuhr once observed that debates about the authority of the Bible are unproductive when it is assumed that the question is a quantitative one ("How much authority does the Bible have?") rather than a qualitative one ("What kind of authority does it have?"). I believe that estimates of Methodist doctrine often go astray for much the same reason. We readily fall into the quantitative way of thinking and have earnest discussions about how much doctrine Methodists have or should have. We would be helped by a clearer apprehension of what kind of doctrine Methodist doctrine is. My aim here is to work toward this clearer apprehension.

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I believe that the standards of Methodist witness and practice, and particularly John Wesley's doctrinal sermons, convey an important insight into the character of Christian doctrine. By this, I do not mean to call attention to purportedly distinctive Methodist doctrines; on the whole, when it comes to the content of what Methodists believe and teach (or should believe and teach), I agree with those who find it more accurate to speak of distinctive Methodist doctrinal emphases.2 But in any case, my main concern here is not with any distinctive content. Instead, I want to pursue a Wesleyan or Methodist understanding of the fundamental character of Christian doctrine and a way of holding and deploying doctrine—you might say, a characteristic way of being doctrinal—that follows from that understanding. I believe that we should explicate this Methodist understanding and use it more carefully, for the sake of clarity as to both who we are doctrinally as Methodists and what contribution we might make in this way to the wider Christian community.

In his classic *The Meaning of Revelation*, written nearly sixty years ago, H. Richard Niebuhr writes:

*A critical historical theology cannot, to be sure, prescribe what form religious life must take in all places and all times beyond the limits of its own historical system. But it can seek within the history of which it is a part for an intelligible pattern; it can undertake to analyze the reason which is in that history and to assist those who participate in this historical life to disregard in their thinking and practice all that is secondary and not in conformity with the central ideas and patterns of the historical movement. Such theology can attempt to state the grammar, not of a universal religious language, but of a particular language, in order that those who use it may be kept in true communication with each other and with the realities to which the language refers. It may try to develop a method applicable not to all religions but to the particular faith to which its historical point of view is relevant. Such theology in the Christian church cannot, it is evident, be an offensive or defensive enterprise which undertakes to prove the superiority of Christian faith to all other faiths; but it can be a confessional theology which carries on the work of self-criticism and self-knowledge of the church.*3

168

QUARTERLY REVIEW / SUMMER 1998
What Niebuhr was advocating here, under the alternate names of a critical historical theology and a confessional theology, was an approach to theological work that took very seriously the "local knowledge" of a particular religious tradition and community, its own ways of knowing what it knows, its own access to reality, the "reason" informing its own life. Theology begins not with an arrogant effort to "make sense" of a religious tradition by subjecting it to supposedly universal standards of intelligibility but rather with a patient attempt to learn and explicate the sense already present in it. That may not be all that theology has to do, but it is an indispensable beginning.

The notion that a religious tradition has something like a grammar has been around for quite some time. It was a familiar metaphor in medieval theology. Martin Luther is said (by J. A. Bengel and, following him, John Wesley) to have remarked that "divinity is nothing but a grammar of the language of the Holy Ghost." The metaphor was given new life in certain strands of twentieth-century Anglo-American theology and philosophy of religion under the influence of Ludwig Wittgenstein's comparison of philosophical analysis to grammatical investigation, and it gained wider currency with the publication and reception of George Lindbeck's *The Nature of Doctrine* (1984). It is now fairly common to hear doctrinal formulations compared to grammatical principles, catechesis compared to grammatical instruction, and theology described as an investigation of the grammar of the language and life of a religious community.

Some of the values of the metaphor are readily apparent. Just as the word *doctrine* can refer either to the technical principles stated formally in doctrinal pronouncements and handbooks or to those principles as they are embodied in the teaching activity of the church and in the lives of its members, so the word *grammar* can designate either the formulated conventions of linguistic use or the features of language and linguistic ability that those formulations codify. Grammatical formulations both describe and in some circumstances regulate the use of the language, but a fluent speaker need not be able to recite the rules he or she observes when exercising linguistic competence. Conversely, a knowledge of the grammatical formulations does not insure competence in the language. Mastery of the language and conscious knowledge of the "rules" describing such mastery are two different things, and they do not always coincide. Likewise, understanding Christian doctrinal formulations and understanding things Christianly are two different things.)
Learning grammar can mean either learning the grammatical formulations or acquiring competence in the language. If the aim is acquiring competence in the language, then learning the rules of grammar may have a quite limited role to play. Traditional approaches to second-language teaching overemphasized a mastery of the formulations while giving little attention to practice in listening and speaking the language itself. They appear to have been less effective in fostering actual linguistic ability than more recent approaches, which stress exposure to the living language—hearing and imitating competent speakers and having one’s mistakes corrected, with only an occasional explicit invocation of grammatical principles. Similarly, teaching someone doctrinal formulations and teaching someone to understand things Christianly are two different things, and the role of the first in the second needs some careful pedagogical attention.

Several contemporary theologians, utilizing this grammatical metaphor, have made a strong claim concerning the unique role of the doctrine of the Trinity in the language and life of the Christian community; namely, that it is the key element in Christian grammar, or (as one of them, Walter Kasper, puts it), “The doctrine of the Trinity is the grammar and summation of the entire Christian mystery of salvation.” According to these theologians, if we are to seek what Niebuhr calls “an intelligible pattern” in Christian faith and practice, we should look first to the doctrine of the Trinity.

As an exploratory exercise, I want to pursue this suggestion with particular regard to one theme in the thought of John Wesley. I will call this theme Wesley’s doctrine of the human vocation. (I am not aware of his ever having used the term human vocation, but it is useful in bringing out some connections.) But before turning to this, I need to say something about Wesley’s approach to doctrine in general and to the doctrine of the Trinity in particular.

Wesley’s own attitude toward doctrine has long been a matter of contention, partly because of the varied character of his own pronouncements on the subject and partly because of the varied interests and commitments of his interpreters. My object here is not to go into this issue in any depth but only to set out what I take to be Wesley’s principal commitments.

At a number of places in his writings, Wesley made clear his conviction that religion (or “true religion”) is not to be identified with mere doctrine or “opinion.” (Though he occasionally distinguished between “doctrine” and “opinion,” he often used these two terms as
... neither does religion consist in orthodoxy or right opinions; which, although they are not properly outward things, are not in the heart, but the understanding. A man may be orthodox at every point; he may not only espouse right opinions, but zealously defend them against all opposers; he may think justly concerning the incarnation of our Lord, concerning the ever blessed Trinity, and every other doctrine contained in the oracles of God. He may assent to all the three Creeds. ... He may be almost as orthodox as the devil ... and may all the while be as great a stranger as he to the religion of the heart. ¹⁰

The point is echoed and then supplemented in an important direction in the sermon "On the Trinity": "Persons may be quite right in their opinions, and yet have no religion at all. And on the other hand persons may be truly religious who hold many wrong opinions."¹¹

Notice that he says "many" erroneous opinions; he does not say that the truly religious may be wrong in all their opinions. He elaborates a few paragraphs onward: "We cannot but infer that there are ten thousand mistakes which may consist with real religion; with regard to which every candid, considerate man will think and let think. But there are some truths more important than others. It seems there are some which are of deep importance ... some which it nearly concerns us to know, as having a close connection with vital religion."¹²

What we appear to have here is something quite close to a "grammatical" understanding of doctrine. Knowing the content of Christian doctrinal propositions is one thing; knowing God, or having "a heart right toward God and man,"¹³ is another. A person may have a fine grasp of the first, and be nowhere near the second. But the propositions are not pointless: rightly used, they can be instrumental to the knowledge of God. They represent, and guide, proper Christian usage. It is not the propositions as such but the lived understanding or competence they represent that is of main importance.

If we think of this lived understanding in the Christian community as the doctrinal substance and an individual Christian's more or less explicit grasp of it as "opinion," this would seem to correspond
roughly to one of Wesley’s ways of distinguishing occasionally between *doctrine* and *opinion*: *doctrine* is the grammar of the church’s language, while *opinion* is the individual Christian’s conscious understanding of that grammar. If, alternatively, we think of the more essential or vital Christian doctrines as doctrines, and the less important ones as opinions, this would represent another, though even less common, occasional Wesleyan usage. (Wesley himself is responsible for a certain amount of the difficulty his interpreters have on this score.)

However it is stated, Wesley did recognize a distinction between more and less important doctrines. Even when it came to the more important ones, however, Wesley was reluctant to claim that an *explicit* knowledge of them was essential. There is danger in explication: danger that we will place too much emphasis on having it all worked out the right way at the expense of vital religion. Like the ancient church, he was inclined to think of these most important doctrines as the ones that cannot be safely *denied* rather than as the ones that must be consciously *affirmed*. Denial, for him, seems to imply a conscious rejection of a vital grammatical principle, a decision not to honor it in one’s Christian understanding. In the case of the more important principles, that decision has seriously disruptive effects.

It is commonly observed that John Wesley did not have much to say about the Trinity. It is also commonly observed that Wesley “thinks constantly in Trinitarian terms”; his thought and speech, like the hymnody of his brother Charles, are suffused with usages of the triune name of God and with the understanding that the one God with whom we have to do is “Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.” He found explications of the doctrine highly problematic. At the same time, he considered the doctrine of the Trinity (at least in the bare-bones version of it he finds in the First Epistle of John: “the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost . . . are one”) among those “more important truths” which it “nearly concerns us to know.” He avoids any claim that it is “fundamental,” because of his reservations about lists of “fundamentals”; but there is no doubt of the seriousness with which he takes it.

According to John Deschner, the doctrine of the Trinity belongs to Wesley’s “presupposed theology”: as such, it informs both the “articulated theology” of his preaching and writing and the “enacted theology” of his leadership of the Methodist movement; but it is rarely
the object of direct and explicit attention. Wesley’s relative silence on this doctrine has also been attributed (perhaps dismissively) to his pietism, that is, to a conviction that “abstruse doctrines are better believed devoutly than analysed rationally” and to a practical decision on his part in that he consistently followed his mother’s early advice to him about preaching: “Be very cautious of giving definitions in public assemblies, for it does not answer the true end of preaching, which is to mend men’s lives, not to fill their heads with unprofitable speculations.” These are not mutually exclusive explanations, and each bears some truth; but they may not yet do full justice to Wesley’s way of being trinitarian—neither to the reasons for his reticence about the doctrine nor to its unique importance in his thought and practice. These matters are worth some further exploration.

Wesley’s one published sermon devoted to the subject of the Trinity was evidently an exercise of duty, and a considerable portion of it is spent in explaining why talking about the Trinity is a bad idea. That is because those who attempt it have a difficult time restricting their talk to an acknowledgement of the fact of God’s triune reality but find themselves veering into talk about the manner of that reality. That “the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost” are one is an important truth revealed to us for our benefit. “It enters into the very heart of Christianity; it lies at the root of all vital religion.” How they are one has not been revealed. It therefore does not concern us to know this; indeed, it is a mystery beyond our understanding. Wesley endorsed the sweeping judgment of Jonathan Swift that all who have tried to explicate this doctrine have done more harm than good: they “have utterly lost their way; have above all other persons hurt the cause which they intended to promote, having only, as Job speaks, ‘darkened counsel by words without knowledge.’”

Although Wesley’s (and Swift’s) negative judgment on this enterprise was not limited to any particular period, their own seems to have been a particularly inauspicious age for explications of trinitarian doctrine. Since the late seventeenth century, British treatises on the Trinity had been notorious for falling into heresy, either deliberately or inadvertently, largely through their efforts to rationalize what Wesley would call the “manner” of God’s being three in one in a way that would meet newly emerging criteria of intelligibility. William Sherlock’s well-meaning “vindication” of the doctrine of the Trinity against contemporary Socinian attacks, published in 1690, is a stock example of the problem: it seems to have backfired in just the way
Wesley describes. The *Dictionary of National Biography* wryly notes: "If the Socinians gained any advantage in the controversy, it was from Sherlock they got it. . . . This book had the singular effect of making a Socinian of William Manning [a Congregational minister who became an influential advocate of Socinian views after reading Sherlock] and an Arian of Thomas Emlyn [a Presbyterian whom the *DNB* identifies as the first Unitarian minister in England]."24 As the influence of Locke and Newton grew, it became more and more difficult to make any sense of the Trinity—or to give any room to it in one's mental universe.25 Wesley's favorable attitude toward William Jones's *The Catholic Doctrine of a Trinity* (first published in 1754) is surely related to the fact that Jones avoids any explanation of the "how" of the Trinity and simply gathers together the biblical texts that (as traditionally construed and connected) prove the divinity, the distinctions, and the unity of the three persons of the Godhead. Jones is content, that is, to state the fact and not to inquire into the manner of God's three-in-oneness.26

Merely stating the fact of the Trinity in scriptural terms may avoid the dangers Wesley saw in more reasoned explications of the doctrine, but it may also fail (as Wesley admits it did in Jones's case) to give much indication of what that fact has to do with human and Christian life.27 It does not yet show how, as Wesley claims, "[t]he knowledge of the Three-One God is interwoven with all true Christian faith, with all vital religion."28 How is this claim justified?

Note his language here: "the knowledge of the Three-One God." It is not the mere knowledge *that* God is triune but knowledge of the triune God that Wesley finds at the heart of Christian faith. What does it mean to know the "Three-One God"?

In his 1780 sermon on "Spiritual Worship," Wesley characterizes the Christian religion as the happy and loving knowledge of the true God:

*[F]or as none is now, so none was ever happy without the loving knowledge of the true God. . . . [T]his happy knowledge of the true God is only another name for religion; I mean Christian religion, which indeed is the only one that deserves the name. Religion, as to the nature or essence of it, does not lie in this or that set of notions, vulgarly called "faith"; nor in a round of duties, however carefully "reformed" from error and superstition. It does not consist in any number of outward
Note the qualifying expressions: this is “happy knowledge,” it is “loving knowledge,” and it is knowledge of “the true God.” It is not just happenstance that Wesley chooses these three qualifiers for the knowledge of God Christians are given to share. The knowledge of God is for Wesley a participation in the life of God (religion is “the union of the soul with God, the life of God in the soul of man”\textsuperscript{30}), and that means a participation in God’s truth, in God’s love, and in God’s happiness. The knowledge of the triune God is, we might say, a triune knowledge.

This threefold pattern occurs repeatedly in Wesley’s references to the human vocation—that is, to what human life is for, what we are meant to do and to become as human creatures. To be created in the image of God, he says in a sermon published in 1782, is to be “designed to know, to love, and to enjoy [our] Creator to all eternity.”\textsuperscript{31} The image of God was the theme of the first sermon Wesley preached at Oxford, in 1730; and there, in somewhat different terminology, the same three features occur, supplemented by freedom as a fourth. The image of God, as exhibited in our first parents, consists first in an understanding that is “just,” “swift,” “clear,” and “great”; second, in “rational, even, and regular” affections (“if we may be allowed to say ‘affections,’ for properly speaking he had but one: man was what God is, Love”); third, in liberty, a “perfect freedom implanted in [human] nature and interwoven with all its parts”; and fourth, in happiness (“Then to live was to enjoy.”).\textsuperscript{32} If we understand freedom as a sort of transcendental feature, a condition of the possibility of understanding and love and happiness, “interwoven” (as Wesley says) with all the rest, this fourfold explication might be harmonized with the more common threefold one.\textsuperscript{33}

Clearly, each of these three capacities can be exercised only in freedom, just as each of them is a relational capacity. Understanding, love, and delight are all “transitive”; that is, each has an object.

Indeed, in the theological context, each is supremely relational, in that our relationship to God is also a relationship to everything else that is. Knowing God, loving God, rejoicing in or giving thanks to
God—each capacity is exercised in responsive (and responsible) relationship with God and creation.  

These characteristics emerge clearly in Wesley’s handling of the metaphor of God’s “light” in this connection. In a comment on John 1:4b, “and the life was the light of men,” in his *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament*, he says, “He who is essential life, and the Giver of life to all that liveth, was also the light of men, the fountain of wisdom, holiness, and happiness to man in his original state.” The metaphor receives more extensive treatment in the series on the Sermon on the Mount in his sermon on Matt. 6:19-23: “The light of the body is the eye: if therefore thine eye be single [i.e., healthy], thy whole body shall be full of light” (Matt. 6:22). According to Wesley, the “light” which fills a person whose eye is “single” consists first in “true, divine knowledge,” “wisdom,” “understanding”; second, in “holiness,” “the light of the glorious love of God,” “the love of God and man”; and third, in “happiness,” “comfort,” “peace,” “rejoicing,” “rejoicing evermore, praying without ceasing, and in everything giving thanks,” *enjoying* whatever is the will of God concerning [one] in Christ Jesus.” These are all relational realities, created and sustained by the inflowing light of God and directed back to God. They also involve our freedom. We know freedom in the light of God and exercise that freedom in the fulfillment of our vocation to know, love, and rejoice in God. We may also use (and forsake) that freedom in turning from the light; and when that happens, knowledge, holiness, and happiness are replaced by their opposites: “ignorance and error” in place of understanding, “ungodliness and unrighteousness” (i.e., evil affections) in place of the holiness of love, and “misery” ("destruction and unhappiness”) in place of joy.

In his whole treatment of this theme of our “chief end” as human beings, there is very little explicit indication of a correlation between the three facets of our vocation and the three “persons” of the Trinity. Wesley does not give us a developed doctrine of the *imago Dei* as an *imago Trinitatis*, for instance. Suggestions of a correlation between the threefold pattern of our vocation and the triunity of God only emerge as he moves to talk about our recovery of the image of God, our restoration to our vocation to understanding, love, and thanksgiving—in other words, about salvation, the heart of his “articulated theology.”

Wesley knew and honored the ancient principle that *opera Trinitatis ad extra indivisa sunt*: everything that God does “outwardly,” that is,
with regard to creatures, is to be ascribed to the entire Trinity; and we are not to ascribe any such act of God to any one of the Trinitarian persons exclusively. If we speak, for instance, of sanctification as the work of the Holy Spirit, this is not to be understood as excluding the involvement of the other two persons in sanctification but instead is a way of calling attention to a particular relationship between what is distinctive about this “person” of the Trinity (as we understand these distinctions on the basis of scripture) and this particular divine work. The technical name for this kind of association between a particular person of the Trinity and a particular work of the entire Trinity is appropriation. Wesley regularly and deliberately practiced this manner of speaking, not least in his language about salvation. He will, for example, readily “appropriate” justification to the Son and sanctification to the Spirit, or utilize a general narrative scheme summarized by Geoffrey Wainwright thus: “The Father saw the human need for salvation, the Son supplied it, the Holy Spirit applies it.”

However, Wesley’s way of correlating “persons” of the Trinity and aspects of God’s working goes beyond this. A hint of what more is involved comes early in his discussion of salvation in the 1765 sermon, “The Scripture Way of Salvation.” Salvation begins with “preventing grace,” and Wesley’s description of that phenomenon in a single lengthy sentence gives it a striking trinitarian shape: Preventing grace is “all the ‘drawings’ of ‘the Father’, the desires after God, which, if we yield to them, increase more and more; all that ‘light’ wherewith the Son of God ‘enlighteneth everyone that cometh into the world’, showing every man ‘to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with his God’; all the convictions which his Spirit from time to time works in every child of man.” There is here, we might say, a foretaste of happiness, a yearning for God, associated with the “Father”; an incipient knowledge of God, in which the “Son” somehow figures; and the first stirring of the will and affections toward the possibility of newness of life, attributed to the “Spirit”—all in connection with prevenient grace. The correlations are made more explicit and extensive in a brief description of the dynamics of salvation in a later sermon:

This eternal life then commences when it pleases the Father to reveal his Son in our hearts; when we first know Christ, being enabled to “call him Lord by the Holy Ghost”; when we can
testify, our conscience bearing us witness in the Holy Ghost, "the life which I now live, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me." And then it is that happiness begins—happiness real, solid, substantial. Then it is that heaven is opened in the soul, that the proper, heavenly state commences, while the love of God, as loving us, is shed abroad in the heart, instantly producing love to all mankind: general, pure benevolence, together with its genuine fruits, lowliness, meekness, patience, contentedness in every state; an entire, clear, full acquiescence in the whole will of God, enabling us to "rejoice evermore, and in everything to give thanks." 141

What is going on in these accounts of God's working is more than a matter of "appropriations." Note, in the quotation just given, that all three "persons" are involved, distinctively, in our coming to the knowledge of God: the "Father" reveals the "Son" (at the same time, and in another sense, the "Son" can be said to reveal the "Father"); and this knowledge is received and appropriated "in the Spirit." The one event of our knowing has its source in the "Father," its substance in the "Son," and its realization in the "Spirit." We are brought to participate in God's own knowledge of God's self. This knowledge is the ground of our happiness, for it is the knowledge of the love of God for us, restoring us to life as we come to delight in God. We are brought to share in God's own joy.

At the same time, God's love toward us becomes God's love working in us as it is "shed abroad in the heart" and becomes our love toward all that God loves. We are brought to participate in the love of God. There is, so to speak, a mutual indwelling of our understanding, love, and happiness, which is itself a mirroring of the divine perichoresis, the participation of the persons of the Trinity in one another. Geoffrey Wainwright makes the point well: "In sum, our salvation is for Wesley the differentiated but united work of the Three Persons of the Godhead; it sets us into an appropriate relation to each Person, and it gives us . . . a share in their divine communion. The Holy Trinity appears, therefore, as both the origin and goal of soteriology." 142 We are made for this Trinitarian communion; our rejection of this vocation has its own dismal threefold shape; and our restoration to it by the grace of the Three-One God takes it to a new level of meaning.
This way of understanding the triune pattern of God's action and the triune character of our human destiny came to both John and Charles Wesley, I suppose, as they took in (or were taken into) the "depth grammar" of the biblical canon. Of course, they were taught that grammar not by "scripture alone" but by a community (or set of communities) of speakers of this Christian language, including their parents, their contemporaries, the authors of the Book of Common Prayer and other shapers of the discourse of their church, and the framers and interpreters of early catholic Christian doctrine. In John's case at least, the influence of early Eastern Christianity upon his grasp and articulation of the key trinitarian pattern may have been substantial. But the pattern itself is pervasive. It is only illustrative of its power that when, in "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling," Charles describes what it will mean to see the face of God, it comes out as our being "lost in wonder, love, and praise."

How might this exploration inform our understanding of doctrine in the Methodist traditions? Its chief contribution might be in its illuminating the instrumental character of doctrinal statements. To help in considering this, let us call to mind a threefold distinction in the meaning of doctrine. What we might call "objective doctrine," that is, doctrinal statements and formulations (similar to grammatical principles and paradigms), can be distinguished from what we might call "subjective doctrine," that is, the conceptual substance of the lived understanding of the faith (similar to the actual grammatical structure of a language as it is used by competent speakers); and both can be distinguished from what we might call "active doctrine," that is, the teaching activity in which, usually by means of doctrinal statements of one sort or another, doctrinal competence is fostered.

Ordinarily, when we hear the word doctrine we think of doctrinal statements (objective doctrine). An appreciation of the other senses of the term may assist us in understanding what those doctrinal statements are actually for: they are points of reference whereby we may measure, in some respects, the adequacy of our attempts to communicate the Christian faith; and they are guides to Christian understanding. They have their role, then, in those activities of teaching and reflection in which the conceptual capacities sustaining the knowledge and love of God are developed and strengthened. A key test of their own adequacy is their effectiveness in those activities.

The report of a recent study commission of the British Council of Churches reflects an understanding of the role of doctrine, and of the
doctrine of the Trinity in particular, that seems quite consonant with
the Wesleyan insights we have been exploring when in its conclusion
it observes that "the difference between the life and death of Christian
worship depends upon its recovery of a trinitarian dynamic," and then
goes on to say, "Our concern is not that trinitarian words and phrases
should be incorporated in liturgies and hymns in a merely cosmetic
way, but that worshippers should celebrate and be drawn into the life
and relationships of the triune God." We might well learn some
things from John Wesley's own doctrinal practice to help the churches
toward this goal.

Notes

1. See James M. Gustafson's introduction to H. Richard Niebuhr, The Responsible
2. See "Doctrinal Standards and Our Theological Task," The Book of Discipline of
the United Methodist Church, 1996 (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing
House, 1996), §60, p. 43.
13.
4. John Wesley, Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament (London: Epworth,
1950), 9.
5. A parenthetical remark in the midst of Wittgenstein's main discussion of his sense
of "grammar" in the Philosophical Investigations is reminiscent of the statement
Bengel attributed to Luther: "Grammar tells what kind of object anything is.
(Theology as grammar.)" Ludwig Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, trans.
York: Crossroad, 1986), 311. Nicholas Lash, drawing on Kasper's work, has pursued
this claim in some promising directions. See, for example, his Believing Three Ways in
One God: A Reading of the Apostles' Creed (Notre Dame, 1992) and The Beginning and the End of "Religion" (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1996). Thomas Torrance develops the point independently in
The Ground and Grammar of Theology (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia,
9. Randy Maddox has given us a very thorough, balanced, and illuminating
treatment of Wesley's utterances on the subject, and of how they might be brought into
a reasonably coherent relationship. Randy Maddox, "Opinion, Religion, and Catholic
12. Ibid., 376.
13. Wesley, “The Way to the Kingdom,” 223. Wesley has several characteristic ways of describing “true religion”: e.g., “true religion, in the very essence of it, is nothing short of holy tempers” (“On Charity,” Sermons, Outler, vol. III: 306); or “love of God and man” (“On Zeal,” ibid., 313); or “the knowledge and love of God” (“Spiritual Worship,” Ibid, 99). These more or less imply one another, given Wesley’s understanding of the key concepts involved.
18. John Deschner, Wesley’s Christology: An Interpretation, 2nd ed. (Dallas: Southern Methodist University, 1985), xvi-xviii.
23. Ibid., 377.
26. “The Scripture is the only rule that can enable us to judge, whether [Arianism] or the Catholic Doctrine of the Trinity is more agreeable to truth; therefore I have confined myself to this unexceptionable kind of evidence for the proof of the latter, and have made the Scripture its own interpreter.” William Jones, preface to the 2nd ed. (1767) of The Catholic Doctrine of a Trinity (London: F. & C. Rivington, 1801), viii-x.
27. Various Methodist scholars (e.g., Lycurgus M. Starkey, Jr., Geoffrey Wainwright, and Randy Maddox) have called attention to Wesley’s commendation of

27. "Mr. Jones's book on the Trinity is both more clear and more strong than any I ever saw on that subject. If anything is wanting, it is the application, lest it should appear to be a merely speculative doctrine, which has no influence on our hearts or lives; but this is abundantly supplied by my brother's Hymns," Letters, Telford, vol. 6: 213.


34. Wesley had what is to my mind a deeply unfortunate tendency to speak disjunctively about our relationship to God and creation. In "The Image of God," our first parents' choice was "to enjoy either the Creator or the creation" (p. 295); in "Spiritual Idolatry" (1781; Sermons, Outler, vol. III: 103–114), the either/or is pursued relentlessly. The intention may have been to warn against inordinate relations to the creation, and perhaps we are to understand that—as Wesley makes quite clear in other places—love to God includes or implies a proper love toward God’s creatures; but the disjunctive rhetoric suggests otherwise and has had unfortunate (if unintended) effects.


37. Ibid., 615–616. In "The Image of God," the same sad story is told in connection with the Fall: the understanding was slowed and confused; the will, having lost the guidance of the understanding, was "seized by legions of vile affections"; "liberty went away with virtue" so the human creature was captive to those vile affections; and happiness was gone, misery arrived. Wesley, "The Image of God," Sermons, Outler, vol. IV: 298–299.

38. His contemporary Jonathan Edwards, whose language manifests a strikingly similar trinitarian grammar, does so, as do Augustine and the Cappadocians in their own ways.


42. Wainwright, "Why Wesley Was a Trinitarian," 35.

My wife and I like gardening. We also like to show our garden to friends and visitors. Obviously, we speak proudly of the flowers; and, at the proper season, we offer our guests fresh fruit from the trees or a taste of the jelly we have made. These are things newcomers can appreciate. They are visible, tasty, and attractive. When people show interest, we can talk about what it takes to grow the garden, how the soil is to be treated, and how the real effort is put into tending the hidden roots of each plant and tree. Flowers and fruits must be carefully watched and protected from diseases, but they can grow healthy only if the hard work has already been done at the level of the soil and the roots. It is impossible to have a nice garden if you are not willing to get some dirt under your fingernails! More confident visitors might get a look at the corner where the organic fertilizer is prepared, where the sight and the smell is quite different. But perfumed flowers and sweet fruits cannot do without it. And when someone becomes interested in gardening themselves, they will have to get acquainted with the use of the tools and different techniques according to the kind of plants and soils, times, and seasons.

Sometimes I think that preaching is quite similar and that when I have to prepare a sermon I engage in a similar procedure. The task of
the preacher is to show the flowers and give people a taste of the fruits of
the gospel. She or he will have to work carefully to present the flowers, to
make the fruits available, and to be aware of certain diseases that spoil
communication. But the real content, the true hard and invisible work, is
done at the roots, digging into the soil of the biblical text with the tools
provided by centuries of Christian experience, acknowledging the
different kinds of genres and expressions, and taking into account times
and seasons. Sometimes dealing with the fertilizer (congregational
conflicts, theological contradictions, even the problems of interpretation
in the texts themselves) is not altogether pleasant, but it is part of the
growing process of the witness of the church that nourishes our
preaching. Correctly handled, it will help to build a prodigious and
variegated garden.

I also take advantage of things I learn in my spare hours in the
backyard in my teaching task, communicating with pastors-to-be. For
example, despite all their hard work with the soil, gardeners recognize
that the root and dirt are not attractive by themselves—it is the
outcome that counts. It would be quite nonsensical to dig out the
plants in order to show the intricate roots to beginners. Likewise,
preachers can get entangled in elaborate explanations of exegetical
details that bore the congregation and ignore the text’s ultimate
purpose. The preacher is to show humbly the outcome of the silent
and previous work done with the text without the need to impress
everyone in the audience with her or his biblical expertise. On the
other hand, flowers do not grow from a vase. Without the hard work at
the scriptural roots, you might offer a dazzling bouquet of colors, but
they will soon fade away. “Light” preaching may be fashionable and,
perhaps, attractive. It may make you popular for some time. But it will
not drive people in the search of an integrated witness or spark the
desire for a more profound understanding and practice of the word of
God. We all have heard sermons ornamented with charming images,
clever stories, and up-to-date opinions; but when you look back, you
ask yourself where the gospel was.

Finally, we have to recognize that no matter how hard we work and
how careful we might be, there is a “given,” something that comes to
us from the outside and that we can not manage. Just as our garden
depends upon the quality of the seeds, seasonable rains, and the sun
and climate, so our communication in the Lord depends upon spiritual
qualities beyond ourselves. Without the gift of God’s Spirit that we
ask for in prayer, without the warm love that unites us in the


QUARTERLY REVIEW / SUMMER 1998
communion of the saints, and without the voice of Christ that we should hear in scripture and in our needy brothers and sisters, the best intention and the most embellished speech will wither.

Plants develop differently in different environments and climates. I am aware that my own context enhances certain facts, brings forth particular concerns, and permits perspectives other do not have. At the same time, it prevents other perspectives from coming to the fore. Living in the far south of Latinamerica makes us particularly sensitive to the voices of the poor, the oppressed, and the victims of diverse forms of exclusion and discrimination. It makes us more aware of issues related to power and corruption. The effects of the global economy, with its outcome of accumulative wealth in one section of the world population and the growing impoverishment and violence in the rest, as well as the ecological consequences of this, are more visible in our part of the world, though they are present everywhere.

Notwithstanding, people still search for the joys of life, whether in charismatic religion (not only Christian), in “fiestas,” dances, or popular sports. Everyday life cannot go on if sunshine does not appear somewhere, sometime. What we will share in these pages is marked by this particular “climate,” in the hope that it will stimulate our colleagues elsewhere to see new possibilities in the ways they cultivate the homiletics of the day. I offer, then, some insights into the texts of the lectionary from our particular standpoint. They are not necessarily guidelines for preaching but are more in the line of “root work” that might help to ripen the flowers and fruits of the gospel in the hands of sister and brother preachers from other latitudes.

November 1, 1998—All Saints
Luke 6:20–31
Ps. 149
Dan. 7:1–3, 15–18
Eph. 1:11–23

“Jesus is, first of all, a creator of new relationships that break into the hardened structures of rigid schemes of separation... and enables those who are ready to be moved, to continue building a community in which persons despised or discriminated can acquire a new identity.”

The beginning of the Sermon on the Plain contains two sections: 6:20-26, with the beatitudes and woes, and vv. 27-31 (which really
extends to v. 38), which refer to unconditional love. In Luke\(^2\) the four beatitudes and four woes take the place of the eight beatitudes of the Matthean version of the Sermon on the Mount (in which the woes are postponed to chapter 23 and directed against the scribes and Pharisees). Scholarly debate has tried to establish which is closer to the original—or at least to an earlier version—without coming to an agreement. Some doubt that there was only one earlier version. They propose that there may well have been more than one record of Jesus’ words or that Jesus himself expressed different versions of these sayings in different moments and contexts of his ministry.

In any case, these words are now inserted in very different Gospel contexts—not so much because of the place they have in the structure of each Gospel (since there we find some similarities) but mainly because the whole intent of Luke is different from that of Matthew. This is important, since there has been a tendency to read Luke’s version of the beatitudes in the light of the better-known Matthean version. These differences depend not so much on the variations when both renderings of the beatitudes are compared side by side (“poor” vs. “poor in the Spirit,” second person vs. third person, etc.) but on the whole intention of the Gospel message. We can speak of what we will call an economic axis running through the whole of Luke’s Gospel, from Mary’s song in the birth narrative all the way into the Passion Week, finding its structural center in the option: God or Mammon (Luke 16:13).\(^3\) This economic axis marks Luke’s first book (but not so his second, Acts) in such a way that no single pericope can be read without considering economics in the background. Not that every word in Luke is to be understood as a materialistic speech; but, rather, that everything is embedded in a tissue in which the economic option for God or money is a bright thread that runs through the whole design of the Gospel.

The beatitudes and woes are no exception. In fact, they build explicitly on the economic axis. The first blessing, which can be postulated as the title of the whole pericope, marks the way for understanding the rest.\(^4\) The poor (\(p\)t\(o\)choi) are those who are now hungry, who now weep, who are now hated, reviled, excluded by “men” (NRSV: “people”).\(^5\) Later we shall explore what the term \(m\)en means in this context. The second and third blessings develop the conditions of the first, as the second and third woes describe the rich people of the first. By means of this parallelism Luke has resignified
the blessings in order to make them meaningful outside of the apocalyptic frame in which they normally appeared.

We can trace the origins of the blessings to Israelite and early Jewish wisdom literature. In that context, the blessings assert God's good will towards the faithful. Those who keep the ways of the Lord, who follow the path of Wisdom, are blessed with peace, a prosperous life, and a stable family. The Book of Proverbs and certain psalms offer good examples of this retributive principle. Nor was economic axis absent in those earlier texts. But later, as many concepts of Wisdom literature came into question and needed to be reelaborated, they were recast in line with the apocalyptic trends that emerged in Second Temple Judaism. The Jesus movement is related to such apocalyptic views. Now God's blessing is no longer visible in the well-being of the righteous, but it becomes a reward that will come afterwards to the faithful in the manifestation of God's wrath and justice, as a prize for their endurance in the time of suffering and persecution. In this apocalyptic theology the economic aspects lose some of their significance, but the political dimensions are enhanced. During the period of formative Judaism after the destruction of the Second Temple, blessings became a way of prescribing appropriate religious behavior and the correct interpretation of the Law. All this was taking place at roughly the same time that the Gospel beatitudes were taking shape.

As a literature of reversal, the apocalyptic texts propose a complete overturn: those who appear to be blessed in this world will be condemned in the next, and those who are oppressed in this life shall receive God's benediction in the next. But Luke, like John, is among those New Testament authors who clearly tries to make sense of the gospel beyond the immediate apocalyptic expectancy. The fact that the first beatitude is formulated in the present tense while the following use the future is a footprint of this struggle. The scheme of reversal is not dismantled, but it must be tempered by the awareness that all does not depend on the imminent return of the Lord. The addition of the woes, the way these are phrased, and their completion with the following pericope are, as we will see, the means by which Luke manages to perform his task.

The woes, on the other hand, have their own literary history. Their antecedents can be found as early as the pre-exilic prophets. Here again, the economic angle is prominent. In that literature the woes take the place of cursing oracles, which anticipate the Lord's
punishment on Israel for her sins of violence and oppression against the poor, the needy, the feeble, or “God’s People” (though these last ones probably come from later insertions and from exilic and postexilic times). Once again, in the Gospel “woes,” the influence of apocalyptic reversal, can be seen. The chastisement that awaits the rich and the satisfied is to be deprived of what they now enjoy; it is not a condemnation to the torments of Hades after death, as we find in other texts. Instead, it is that their own future will most certainly include the experience of poverty and humiliation that the blessed are suffering in the present.

Because of the diverse origins of blessings and woes, the merging of these formulas of benediction and malediction can be seen as a later and unusual literary tactic, although some examples of it can be found in apocryphal, sectarian, and rabbinic literature. The particular combination in our text, however, is unique in the New Testament. By deliberately shaping the traditions this way, Luke means to recover the prophetic dimension of apocalyptic literature without the apocalyptic worldview. Thus the reversal of fortune between the rich and the poor is not postponed until the Day of the Lord, but it becomes a dimension of the already present Reign of God (Luke 17:21). Nor does this text attempt to convey the “essentialist” ethic that being poor is good and being rich is bad. Instead, Luke points to the relationship between the rich and the poor—the absurd contradiction that permits some to hunger and cry while others laugh and take their ease, ignoring the needy. By combining blessing and woe Luke overcomes the simplistic dualism between the haves and the have-nots and emphasizes the relational dimension of human life. The parable of “Lazarus and the Rich Man” (Luke 16:19-31) is another way of addressing the same issue.

The first and second blessings and woes are clearly based on the economic axis. The third blessing and woe are more apt to be interpreted psychologically, but we should avoid doing that. Even though poverty is far from being the only cause of sorrow, it creates a context in which grief becomes aggravated, for the resources to overcome painful personal situations are more difficult to obtain. But from an exegetical angle there is a more compelling reason not to psychologize this text: these words were meant to evoke the Exodus tradition of the God that hears the cry of God’s enslaved people and is moved to act. In James we find a similar expression, where the cry of the unpaid laborers is heard (5:4). In the Gospel account we find an

188 QUARTERLY REVIEW / SUMMER 1998
admittedly simplified pattern in which the rich banquet while the poor suffer. With few exceptions, the poor, women, and outcasts in the fields are crying out from the pain of sickness, hunger, and death, while rich city-dwellers live in pride and self-assurance.

While the first three blessings and corresponding woes reflect the situation in Jesus’ time, the fourth appears closer to the situation of the Christian community when Luke’s Gospel was being composed. Persecution “on account of the Son of Man” may have occurred to the poor and the not-so-poor followers of Jesus alike. Prestige and shame, central values of Mediterranean culture and social organization, are included in the theme of reversal and overturning. The economic axis yields to other forms (ideological, religious) of exclusion and discrimination. But this last pair gives us a key to unlock the meaning of the others or at least get a glimpse of Luke’s interpretive framework. For when “men” become the active subject of the harm done against the blessed (vv. 22 and 26), we can venture to say that, in Luke’s structural pattern, it is they who cause the poverty and provoke the cry of injustice from God’s blessed people. On the other hand, those who are well considered by “all men” are compared to false prophets of Israel, that is, prophets who do not serve Yahweh or those who do not have a genuine word of the Lord and thus mislead God’s people into ungodly practices.

The prophetic announcement of the gospel is the assertion that God’s Reign begins by dignifying the destitute. At the same time, God’s Reign is an impeachment of all human-created oppressive structures, beginning with the economic practices that create hunger, that provoke the cry of God’s beloved humble people, and that threaten with persecution and exclusion all those who act in solidarity with them on account of the Son of Man. It also denounces the false prophecies of those who claim in their riches, pride, and self-satisfaction that everything is all right, all the while exercising discriminatory power. “¿Cuándo querrá el Dios del cielo, que la tortilla se vuelva?” asks the Spanish Civil War popular song.

If things ended here, the beatitudes would be simply another example of religious social protest. But we must not ignore the fact that the blessings and the woes are part of a larger discourse. In Luke, as in Matthew, the blessings open the Sermon, but the texts that follow create different effects. For Luke, the connecting line is the idea of enmity. After Luke’s Jesus states that “men will hate, revile and exclude you,” and praise the successors of the false prophets, he sets
the stage for the continuation of the discourse. The transition is smooth: a conjunction links the last sentence of the woes with the following verses, incorporating it into the larger framework of Jesus’ speech. The audience is the same and so are the verbs (second person plural). The voice of the narrator does not intrude, as it does in v. 39. The beatitudes, the woes, and the instruction to love one’s enemy are to be read together, for they lend meaning to one another.

At least the first part of the instruction is directed towards the subjects of the initial sentences, the blessed. Clearly, rich people, who are well-fed, happy, and have enough prestige and power to expel others, need never worry that the poor might abuse them or strike them on the cheek. It is the defenseless poor and the weak who must fear the loss of their basic necessities (coat and shirt, in our translations) at the hands of others, or their cursing and reviling. True, one can imagine a wider audience for the exhortation to give to those who ask something from you or to refrain from demanding the return of what has been given. But once again the economic axis is made clear. If the first sentence of this paragraph (love your enemies) is to be considered as the title and the last sentence as the concluding remark, then it is clear where enemies come from: unequal economic relationships. Those who are abused, stripped of their living conditions, and despised through discrimination will normally feel a growing anger towards those who deprive them. The rich consider the poor to be their enemies only when the poor protest and rebel; then the conflict is overt and the enmity is visible. But the rich are constantly using to excess the goods that the poor need for survival, so that the grounds for protest are permanently there, though at times concealed in ideological mechanisms. And those who prophetically defend their weaker neighbors, exposing unjust situations and joining them in solidarity, will be hated by the rich and powerful who are threatened by their accusation.

To summarize: after using the beatitudes and woes to establish the fact that 1) the cause of enmity exists in the realms of economic exploitation of political power and of cultural discrimination; 2) the Reign of God is not a neutral meeting space in which to negotiate the differences, but it is clearly bent towards the poor, the hungry, the powerless and discriminated; and 3) the necessary outcome is the reversal of the present asymmetrical relationship—after all this, the text considers what to do about the conflict. It is not just a matter of protesting and demanding that wrongs be redressed. At least in Luke,
the question is rather how to lead one's life, since time passes and the
longed-for reversal does not occur. In order to respond to that
situation, I think, Luke links these two passages, which were probably
separated in his sources. He understands Jesus' message to be
essentially this: that despite the unjust and sinful situation of the
world, which causes the poor and weak to suffer most and which must
be changed because God's will requires the reversal of the present
state of affairs—human beings cannot live in perpetual quarrel.
Furthermore, hatred will not bring about the changes that God desires.
Love is needed to overcome injustice, endurance can be the only
response to violence, and solidarity is the way of unity. It is the poor
and weak, and perhaps only they, who can recover this human
dimension. For if the rich and powerful had been willing to exercise
effective love and do away with oppressive structures and practices,
then things might have been different. But as we learn in the woes,
they can expect no future because of their vast contentment with what
they already have. Those who long for nothing will perceive all
change as a threat. Therefore, the promoters of change are seen as
enemies to be persecuted and expelled.

Until God's glory is finally and entirely manifested, and the reversal
is completed, while the rules of the game are still dominated by
humanly created power structures, the followers of the Son of Man are
instructed to establish new forms of human relationships. They are to
empower the love commandment and create alternatives to
accumulative concepts of economy. They cannot expect to be praised
for doing it. Quite to the contrary, they probably will experience
misunderstanding, hatred, and persecution. But they should not
considered themselves "the victims." The blessed people of God
includes the real victims of poverty and injustice (the first three
blessings), but it also extends to all those who join the community that
rejoices in the Son of Man.

Probably, most of the membership of our Methodist Church (and
this is true for the Methodists of South as well as North America) are
not really part of the blessed poor and hungry or of the self-satisfied
rich and powerful. Most of us are part of an "in-between, no
blessing—no woe" middle class—and it is mostly for us that the fourth
blessing and the love instruction are relevant. We are called as
witnesses of Jesus, and because we act on that account, we are to
speak and act as witnesses and apostles of God's action in this world.
The reciprocity principle that concludes our text we ourselves must
enact as a prophetic sign, helping victims to build a new identity. For in last analysis victims are nothing more than scapegoats who permit unjust systems to continue undisturbed. Our text is an announcement that Jesus brings to humanity the possibility of new relationships, anticipating God’s Reign in love, endurance, and solidarity.

November 8, 1998—Proper 27
Ps. 145:1–5, 17–21
2 Thess. 2:1–5, 13–17
Hag. 1:15–2:9

"Faith and hope in the resurrection have to be translated into an active engagement to defend life . . . The faith in the Resurrection does not takes us away from history, quite to the contrary, it makes us to deeply incarnate in it, supporting the conviction that its ultimate sense is in life."°

The concept of resurrection was probably developed in Judaism during the Seleucid persecution of the Jews in late postexilic times. In the Old Testament, only the Book of Daniel contains a possible mention of a general resurrection (12:2, 13) in terms comparable to those of the New Testament. In 1 Sam. 28:11–19, where King Saul asks the medium at Endor to summon the spirit of the dead prophet Samuel, we are dealing with another concept, the idea of a diminished, shadowy, feeble life after death in the nether world, a notion common to many ancient Near Eastern cultures. This idea can also be found in the Odyssey, when Odysseus calls upon the spirit of the dead Achilles to consult with it. In 2 Macc. 7a a moving story of the seven martyred brothers and their faithful mother, we have the clearest mention of resurrection and the firm faith in renewed bodily life. But it is reserved to the faithful, while the unholy will know no hope. This idea still holds largely true for some New Testament witnesses, as the Book of Revelation.

If, as some studies claim, the sect of the Pharisees was born during the time of the Maccabean revolt, having antecedents (or parallels) in the group that generated the Book of Daniel, it should be of no surprise that they held this idea, although modified by their new context and social function. The Sadducees, to the contrary, claimed—correctly—that they could not find any support for the idea.
of resurrection in Scripture, so they ridiculed it. The question posed by the Sadducees puts Jesus in a tight spot, because either position he might take would make him an enemy of the other party. Let us study with some detail the form and intention of the question.

The text reports that the Sadducees begin their discourse by calling Jesus “Teacher.” We are on questionable historical ground here: the Sadduceans, whose set was composed mostly of upper-class large landowners, would scarcely address as “teacher” someone like Jesus, a rural artisan of uncertain origin and low schooling profile. On the other hand, the title might have been used facetiously to show Jesus' inability to respond adequately to these religious issues. Whatever Jesus answers, they think, he will show he is no reliable teacher; for he could never be a teacher for the Sadducees given his social background, and he has already alienated the Pharisees in his answers to their questions. Confronted with both, he will have a political ally in neither. The Sadducees' main concern was in protecting their economic and political position, since their group held the office of the Supreme Priesthood and the majority in the Council, endorsed by a strategic alliance with the Roman occupation army.

The question proper begins with the appeal to Moses. It is like a provocation: Moses, the real teacher, is set against this amateur, improvised, popular wizard. Then the story is built, a story that certainly enhances patriarchal values and takes no account of the condition of the woman: she is only to receive one brother after the other in order to beget a son for the sake of the name of her first husband. Quoting the so-called “Levirate Law” (Deut. 25:5ff), the story, which seems quite artificial, is designed to show the absurdity of the concept of resurrection. It might be farfetched to relate this story to the aforementioned Maccabean seven martyr brothers, but there are some symbolic coincidences. The seven brothers, considering the sacred value of the number, the successive death of all the men, and the survival of the woman—the mother in the case of the martyrs, the widow in the gospel story; and the will of all to live according to the Law. If “The Story of the Seven Faithful Brothers” illustrated the faith in resurrection in the Maccabean account, the same title is used to show its nonsense in the Sadducean version. The Judah and Tamar story (Gen. 38) might provide the origins of the motif that inspired this tale (by the way, showing the practice of levirate marriage prior to its written form in the Mosaic Law).
case, it defied the idea of a resurrection that could mean a return to a bodily life. If irony or even sarcasm shaded the Sadducees' question, then Jesus' answer does not fall short in subtlety either. He begins by stating the difference between the children of this age and those of the new eon. In Luke and elsewhere in the Gospels, Jesus uses the expression "children of this world" as a contrast to those who are "children of light" (Luke 16:8). In this case a contrast is made between those who are or are not "worthy" of the new eon and the Resurrection. For them, unlike the Sadducees, the issue is not the founding and maintenance of an institution designed to perpetuate the family name. True eternal life, as we shall see, is related to other things. The passage mentions angels not in order to construct a doctrine of angelic beings or to speculate with the characteristics of the life after death, as some have thought, but to illustrate the true nature of those who are called to be witnesses of the Resurrection. They become "angels" in the original sense of the word: messengers of God. Those who are worthy of the Resurrection are children not of this age but of God. They are engendered not by the laws of nature but by their life in faith. The expression "they cannot die" is difficult to interpret. It probably means that the life of the resurrected is eternal—consequently, according to Jesus, it is useless to speculate on who will be married to whom in order to have children.

Reading between the lines, Jesus is saying something like this: "With your question you are showing that you are not worthy of the Resurrection, and furthermore I will show you that you are not even worthy heirs of Moses." Therefore, he appeals to the same authority they recognize, the same authority that was at the beginning of their own question: This is what Moses said. But he does not mention a secondary law, as they did. Instead he goes straight to the heart of Israelite religion: the particular moment when God calls Moses to free God's enslaved people and reveals God's name for that purpose. Strictly speaking, it is not Moses but God who says that God is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Exod. 3:6). The reference to the forefathers is made again in God's speech after revealing the "I am who I am" tetragrammaton (Exod. 3:15). If we take God's sentence in its strict sense, God is to be known as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob through the ages. In Exod. 6:2-13 it is again God who uses the name in reference to the forefathers. And in the second version of the calling of Moses, in Exod. 6:2-13, it is God who speaks of Godself as
the One who appeared to the patriarchs and was known to them as "El-Shaddai."

The mention of God as God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob does not appear in Moses’ mouth in the whole narrative. So Moses is quoted as the author of the book of Exodus, but it is God who defines God’s name by the appeal to historic dealings.

In the Exodus narrative, simply to name the patriarchs evokes a remembrance of the time in which they had land and freedom, a remembrance of the God of the Promise, of the God present in everyday life. For Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, God was not the remote being that should be mediated through elaborate rituals and laws and the final warranty of stable powers but a disturbing and fascinating presence, one that continually mingles in everyday life, creating the unexpected. Jesus wants to talk of the God who cares for the lot of the living more than for the speculative games of people who cannot think of a future different from their present. The life of the resurrected is based in the name of the God of the Land, Liberty, and Promise. For those who trust in this God are the true heirs of Moses. It is the God of the memory that keeps them alive, a God that can intervene in history to make people free, to give them back their land, to fulfill the promise of blessing, delivered to Abraham for all the families of the earth (Gen. 12:3).

In his answer Jesus avoids the trap that would divert him into a discussion about the patterns and qualities of life after death or the ways of the resurrection (a trap that many Christian preachers fall into). He emerges as the teacher they could not imagine him to be. He is a teacher of life, and because of the meaning of life, the sense of the Resurrection. For the Sadducees, whose principal concern was to avoid anything that could alter their privileged position, a future different from the present order of things meant nothing, or even worse, a menace. There is no need for a resurrection, since there is no value for them in an abrupt intervention of God. The Sadducees, therefore, recall Moses as the authoritative leader that established a priesthood and laws to perpetuate family rights. For others, like the Pharisees, for whom life was a detailed fulfilling of elaborate bylaws and a watchful care of ritual purity, resurrection was separated from everyday life—as they themselves were separated from the worries of the poor peasants, of enslaved women, of the wandering, uprooted families expelled from their villages by the debts due to Roman taxation, and so on. The Pharisees thus recall Moses as the lawgiver. But Jesus recalls the Moses who heard the voice of God near the
burning bush, the God who could not bear anymore the cry of God's oppressed people, the God who moved Abraham by a promise and a blessing, who cared for Isaac, who fought with Jacob. This God gets involved in the lives of those whom others have despised or forgotten to bring them back to freedom and blessing. This God provides land to the landless, a family for the barren woman, luck for the orphan. Because this is a God of life, of real life as it is lived in hurt and hope, the longing for a time of plenitude, of resurrection, makes sense. It is not the abstract defense of life as a principle or of resurrection as a religious notion. It is the sense of a life of struggle and joy, of love and care, that becomes so meaningful as to trust the God that overcomes death.

November 15, 1998—Proper 28
Luke 21:5-19
Ps. 118
Isa. 65:17-25
2 Thess. 3:6-13

Imagine what would happen if someone were to stand in the middle of Wall Street and announce the failure of the U.S. financial system, a defeat so final that not a single brick of the New York Stock Exchange would stand on top of another. The end of the world! Panic and death! Wars and plagues and famines would start; insurrections would occur. What makes you think that Wall Street is more solid or eternal than the Temple of Jerusalem and the economy that surrounded it?

Once again these texts present a special challenge to Luke's theology; for he has to deal with the core of apocalyptic speech, of which he is not really fond. In his selection of the material for his Gospel he seems to understand that it is not possible to ignore these words. At the same time, he wants to reckon squarely with the experience of Christians for whom the idea of a sudden and catastrophic end of the world is beginning to fade away. As this experience grew more widespread in the Christian movement, so did dissension about the true interpretation of Christ's presence in the faith community. Some groups began to point to a particular leader or to certain esoteric practices as the only way to salvation. On the other hand, harsh persecutions were taking place. With the crafting of his Gospel, Luke is trying to fulfill two tasks at the same time: a) to give a faithful, coherent, and orderly account of the Jesus event for
newcomers to the faith community (Luke 1:1-4) and b) to make it relevant for communities of second- and third-generation Gentile Christians, whose life experiences and cultural backgrounds differ greatly from those of Jesus' original audience. The Christians of Luke's time have different questions and concerns, and they need other images and symbols of God's reign and promise. Luke's task in that sense is not so different from our own duty as preachers. But he had the liberty to adapt the text in ways that we, who have a fixed canon, do not have. The only way left for us to rebuild meaning into difficult texts, without losing touch with the original sense, is interpretation.

The larger context of this passage is organized by Luke as a long dialogue between Jesus and different groups of people from Jerusalem. It takes place at the Temple yard (Luke 20:1) and concludes with this apocalyptic sermon and a new reference to the Temple, forming an inclusion with Luke 21:38. The first subsection has a break at Luke 20:40, where the author states that people dared not ask Jesus further questions after the discussion with the Sadducees (see the discussion above). So from 20:41 onwards it is Jesus who establishes the agenda.

A new subsection starts at 21:1, where the Temple setting is mentioned again. Jesus takes this occasion to remark on the contrast between the gifts of the rich and the meager offering of a poor widow. We may notice once again that the economic axis is set at the opening of the text about the Temple. The distinction between the rich and the poor is emphasized, and it will shade the following discussion. The poor widow has to give "all the living that she had" (v. 4), as the true followers of Jesus will have their lives taken away (v. 16); "but when this things take place, you know your redemption is drawing near" (v. 28). The apocalyptic discourse proper runs from v. 8 to v. 36. In 21:5 no question is posed to Jesus, but he gathers some comments from the people in order to introduce a critique of the Temple. Jesus' comments about the poor widow's offering can also be considered a criticism of the economic practices that relate to the Temple. Verses 6 and 7 link the destruction of the Temple with the eschatological discourse.

We will not enter into detail about the structure of the larger text, but we can propose a way of reading the shorter text that we have in the Lectionary. It can be structured in a concentric pattern:

At Destruction of what seems strong

When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, he said, "As for these
things that you use, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down."

B: The proliferation of false witnesses

7 They asked him, “Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?” 8 And he said, “Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, ‘I am he!’ and, ‘The time is near!’ Do not go after them.

C: World suffering and conflicts

9 When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified, for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately.” 10 Then he said to them, “Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; 11 there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven.

C*: Suffering of the Faithful

12 “But before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name.

B*: The conditions of true witnesses

13 This will give you an opportunity to testify. 14 So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance; 15 for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict. 16 You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. 17 You will be hated by all because of my name.

A*: Endurance of what seems weak

18 But not a hair of your head will perish. 19 By your endurance you will gain your souls.”

If we look at A, B, and C, we find that they deal with the world outside the faith community, while C*, B*, and A* are related to the faithful. This general scheme does not hold all the way through, since in B there is a sentence that is directed to the faithful, while in B* there is a sentence about those who stay outside the faith. This is a complex structure, since a narrative framework is overlapping with a pedagogic discourse due to the double task of Luke’s purpose. But without getting into the details, we can note that there is a structure of opposite pairs that develop the confrontation pattern that we find in the previous verses (21:1-4).

Sections A, B, and C are contrasted with C*, B*, and A* in pairs. We shall examine each of these pairs in their own meaning.

We will begin with what constitutes the center of our text: the
section C-C'. When we find this kind of structure, it is usually the center of the chiasm that lends meaning to the whole. In this case, the issue is the conflicts and sufferings of the created world, on the one hand (C), and the sufferings and conflicts of the believing community on the other (C'). Some of the early Christians seemed to be obsessed about the end of the world and saw in every event a sign that it was already here. But Luke, without discarding the idea of an end time, is more prone to consider the question of what to do in the meantime. After the Jewish war of 66–70 CE and the destruction of the Temple, some thought that the end of the world was clearly at hand. But time went on, and Luke is probably writing when those catastrophic events were already becoming part of the past. The conflicts and suffering of this world are part of human history, a history that God seems not to be too eager to bring to an end. Yet as Christians we must consider them seriously. In the midst of wars and insurrections, when plagues and hunger strike, we should not be terrified or prepare ourselves for the end of the world or frighten others with our religious speculation. These events are simply part of a history for which we, as human beings, are responsible and in which we are called to intervene as Christians to witness in the name of Christ.

So the warning in C' is in order. Before history passes away, and while these things occur, the Christian witnesses take part in those sufferings. Even more, many of them experience suffering because of the name of Christ. It is a fact, though many ignore it, that there are more Christian martyrs in the twentieth century than in any other era since the second century! In Latin America, as in other parts of the so-called "Third World," quite a significant number of Christians of many denominations, lay and clergy alike, are imprisoned, persecuted, threatened, and killed because of their faith and their struggle for a just world. This took place in Germany and other European countries during the years of the Third Reich and the Second World War, when many Christians were involved in actions against anti-Semitic prejudice and policies; and it was also the case in South Africa during the long and difficult struggle against Apartheid. When the Christian witness is made relevant in situations of oppression, discrimination, or the abuse of power or corruption, then Jesus' warning turns into harsh reality: people get arrested and persecuted, and they are brought under trial by the powerful. Some are even betrayed by those they had considered friends.

The sections B-B' are related, in fact, to the nature of this witness. In B, reference is made to false witnesses. They pretend to be the
Christ or claim to have a privileged knowledge of the places, times, and seasons of his manifestation. True followers are to be warned against these pretenders. Those who are true testimonies of the Savior's name cannot always choose the time and place, but they are sometimes forced into witness by situations created by others. Jesus does not rely on humankind defense strategies. It is his presence that will give them the words and attitudes fit for the occasion. Jesus is promising not that because of the gift of wisdom his followers will be able to overcome their accusers but only that their opponents will not be able to contradict their witness. The coherence of the word preached and the attitude in life make the witness firm, even if many times these are not enough to put an end to suffering, injustice, and persecution. Moreover, Jesus warns that the response of the powerful of this world to that strong stand in his name can be hatred.

So finally we come to the A-A' sections. These now can be seen in their most profound meaning. The contrast is clearly stated: the fragility of what seems strong, the strength of what looks fragile. The stones that look firm in their place and are beautifully ornamented will come tumbling down. The temple institution, with its lifetaking system of collecting the last pence of the poor to keep the power structure of the priestly class, will not be able to hold together, to overcome the test of the war. It is not simply a prophetic oracle about the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple. It is a word to put us on guard against confidence in human-created institutions that pretend to be eternal, while at the same time they conceal mechanisms of oppression and discrimination. This Temple, with its symbols of a power structure that left Gentiles in the outer court and allowed women only to the second yard, but reserved the inner circle for "men of the elected people" and the altar for the priestly families only, will fall.

But not a single hair of the humblest of Jesus' persecuted followers will perish. Life is gained not by money, power, or strong institutions but by love, coherent witness, and endurance. The Jerusalem Temple was destroyed, but Christians have built, instead, thousands of other temples, ornamented churches and luxurious cathedrals. Some new priestly circles live on the offerings of poor widows. Many preachers claim to be the only valid representatives of the Christ. Do not follow them! But the true witnesses, the martyrs of this age, those who cannot choose but are called to testify in situations of grief and sorrow, those who are moved to express and act in love on behalf of
the discriminated-against and persecuted, those who take the risk to live in solidarity with the least of God's children, they know that they are sustained by the God that will not allow a single hair of their head to perish; for true love never perishes.

November 22—Proper 2
Luke 1:68-79
Jer. 23:1-6
Col. 1:11-20

So many things have been written about Jesus' execution, so many detailed studies have been produced, and so many scholarly discussions about its meaning are still under way, that it would be arrogant from my side even to attempt to summarize them in the limited space of this comment. It would be equally impossible to try to consider all the facts and nuances of this narrative. To return to my opening metaphor: since so many people have worked the soil at the roots of this text, I will concentrate on the stems and buds, selecting some phrases that are meaningful for me and that have been significant in my pastoral experience, and use them as a basis for some homiletic reflections.

I have always been somewhat uneasy with the way most Christian preachers and teachers have used v. 34a: 'Then Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.' Time and again these words are quoted with the automatic interpretation that Jesus forgave those who were harming and killing him at the Cross. The obvious consequence, then, is that good Christians should do the same: forgive those who harm us, be patient with people who offend us, pray for those who wrong us. The Lord's Prayer and the "love your enemy" instruction are called in support of this interpretation. After Pope John Paul II recovered from a failed assassination attempt several years ago, he appealed to this passage to explain why he was willing to forgive the man who tried to murder him. But I have to admit that in my personal experience there have been times in which I felt that I would be false to myself and to the gospel if I used this text for a similar purpose.

Of the different pastoral assignments I had before I began teaching, two were particularly intense because of the close relationships I had
with victims of diverse kinds of abuse. One of these circumstances was my participation in the Ecumenical Movement for Human Rights during the time of the military dictatorship in my country, Argentina, 1976–1983. There I met almost daily with the mothers and fathers, wives or husbands, and the children of the imprisoned, tortured, killed, and "disappeared" by the regime. Afterward some of these women became known worldwide as the “Madres de la Plaza de Mayo,” and Sting, the English pop music star, honored them with the song “They Dance Alone.” Would it have been judicious, at that time, to counsel them to forgive the torturers and killers instead of encouraging them to demand justice and freedom for the political prisoners and to investigate what happened with the disappeared and their children? Would it have been wise to calm their just anger with words of reconciliation as some religious leaders did, instead of showing solidarity with them in their suffering and struggle? I was totally convinced then, and I am still now, that such a shy attitude would have only provoked more injustice and repression, and would have brought about more abuse of power. It was the strong stand that many of them made at that time that called international attention to the situation, mobilized solidarity movements throughout the world, and got international Courts to question the military regime; and as a result, the brutalities of the "death squads" with which the dictators intimidated the people were at least partially curbed.

The other occasion in which I felt the standard use of this prayer was totally inadequate came some years later, when I became involved as a pastor attending a group of very poor women in an ecumenically-sponsored housing project. They were mostly working women, housemaids, and mothers of several children who seldom had any familial reference. They had been ill-treated by their former husbands or mates. Some of them did actually have a male companion, but only one who was as poor and destitute as they themselves were; and it was usually the woman who took the initiative to provide for the children. Should I, as a pastor, have encouraged those women to forgive the men who had raped them or abused their children, leaving them behind when things became difficult? Should I have told them to be patient with employers who exploited them and cheated them in their wages, taking advantage of their scarce knowledge of the laws and the value of things? Should the victims always forgive the victimizers because Jesus on the cross forgave those who were killing him? My answer was no! The God we pray to is a God that hears the cry of the
oppressed, a liberating God that cares for the poor, for the orphan, for the widow—a God of justice who does not tolerate the abuse of the weak. How can we preach a message of empowerment to dignify the lives of these marginalized and victimized people and then contradict it at once by saying that victimizers really do not know what they are doing, that we should not be too harsh on them and forgive them? These questions come to my mind every time I read this passage.

But then I realized that, if we look closely at the exact wording of Jesus’ prayer on the cross, it says something different. Jesus does not forgive his torturers! He is not willing to legitimize this act of horror by exonerating the abusers! He does not say, “I now forgive...,” as the current interpretation usually understands these words. No, he prays to the God he calls “Father” to do it. He cries to the Father, who is to judge every human action, that when that judgment comes, God might show pity for them. They are guilty, and Jesus does not wash away their guilt with his prayer. They should be judged and will be judged by God for this impious and unjust murder! I hear Jesus saying, “Sorry, Dad, even if I preached love of the enemy, and if I taught to pray the forgiveness of debts, I cannot forgive them now. For if I do, I will legitimize every act of abuse; I will excuse all victimizers and leave every victim without the right to claim injustice. They think that they are killing just another man, one of the many dispensable poor people that they push aside on the road of life at their convenience. Judge them for all their crimes. But since I still believe in love and I consider the value of forgiveness, I pray to you to have mercy on them on the Day of Final Judgment. Do not consider the fact that they are executing your Beloved Son, your Chosen One; for they do not know that this is what they are doing.”

Is this coherent with the whole narrative? Or it is simply a subtle way to avoid the fact that I cannot accept the total dimension of God’s forgiving love and take the benefit of an ambiguous wording to shun its implications? Some details of the Lucan Passion story allow me to think that I am not totally offtrack in my interpretation. Luke’s account differs from the other Gospels at several points. Among those differences we should count a) that Luke does not have the people join in the scoffing at Jesus, and b) the dialogue between the two criminals crucified with him. Both of these details are important for our hermeneutic approach because they show that, in Luke’s
perspective, there is in the ordinary people an attitude towards the crucified Jesus that is different from that of the powerful.

"The people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him," says v. 35 of the Lucan account. The author clearly wants to indicate a contrast between the attitude of the people that followed Jesus and that of the "leaders"—strictly speaking, the rulers, or "chiefs," which can name as well the Roman magistrates and the Jewish hierarchy. In doing this, Luke is consistent with his previous account, for in v. 27 he already stated that "a great multitude of the people, especially women, bewailed and lamented him."\(^{20}\) This is also in line with the end of the narrative, which recalls the multitude expressing their deep feelings for what has happened (v. 48). The powerful, whether it be the Roman soldiers, Herod and his court, or the priestly hierarchy, have sneered at Jesus from the beginning of the story. After Jesus' death only one Roman soldier is able to recognize the divine relationship. But the whole multitude of simple people who knew Jesus from Galilee or who learned to admire him when he taught at the Temple returned home beating their chests, a sign that they realized the dramatic meaning of this movement. Luke is the only Gospel to mention this fact.

We find the same two attitudes in the so-called criminals that were crucified with him. According to Mark and Matthew, they both joined in the mockery. But Luke makes a distinction. One of them follows the rulers in their derision of Jesus, but the other one rebuked him. It will take a long discussion to enter into the details of the dialogue, so we will limit ourselves to the attitudes. Each of the "criminals" represents a way of relating to Jesus. The first man, whom tradition has called "the bad thief," joins in the kind of taunts that Luke puts in the mouths of the rulers. Although he is certainly their political enemy, he nevertheless considers power in the same way they do; and he scorns Jesus for his inability to use it to save himself. Unwittingly, this man has become an ally to his enemies. Likewise, we have seen many people today who have a "good cause" but ruin their lives and the lives of others because they cannot differentiate their own methods from the violence they are trying to combat. The "good thief" challenges his comrade: he becomes aware that Jesus is being murdered as part of an unjust and unconditional use of power by the rulers—probably part of what motivated them to join the bandit's gang that countered the aristocratic priestly circles and Roman presence, though, at that time, in an unorganized way.\(^{21}\) He knew from the beginning what would happen if they got caught, and he now accepts

204 QUARTERLY REVIEW / SUMMER 1998
that those were the rules of the game. But those rules should not apply to Jesus. He counts Jesus’ crucifixion as one of the many arbitrary deeds of the powerful. In that sense, he joins the feeling of the people over against the rulers. He is confident that Jesus represents another kind of justice, that of the ancient God of justice of the Israelite people (consider his “Do you not fear God...”), the God that cares for the weak and oppressed; and, therefore, he asks Jesus to remember him when the reign of justice is established. We should not spiritualize this passage too much: as we saw in Luke 20:27ff, the idea of a bodily resurrection developed in a war of resistance, and it is possible to think that this “good thief” is thinking in those terms. Jesus’ answer confirms for him that he is on the right path.

When all of this is put together, we find that the Lucan crucifixion narrative is built upon a distinction that exonerates simple people from any participation in the decision-making that resulted in the mockery and death of Jesus and puts all the blame on the powerful and those who follow that same pattern of thought. The poor people just watch what is happening defenselessly; they lament and then walk away in grief. Jesus suffers, remits to God’s mercy in the Day of Judgment the consequences of the action of his torturers and executioners, and approves with a promise the words of that person next to him that, even at the time of his death, calls on him to affirm God’s Reign and justice. In the ecumenical lectionary, this text is set to accompany the Roman Catholic Feast of Christ the King because of the inscription at the Cross. It is an excellent stimulus to help us examine, both in our political realm and in our everyday relationships, how we use power, what kind of power we use, whom we should support and forgive, and when we should appeal to God’s mercy but stay firm in our claim for justice. The spiritual dimension of this passage flows from, and not contrary to, the consideration of real-life, everyday issues.

Notes

1. René Krüger, “La proclamación de una inversión total. La estructuración de Lucas 6:20-26,” Revista de Interpretación Bíblica Latinoamericana, n. 8, Santiago de Chile, 1991, p. 28. I owe many ideas about this text to René, who is a friend and colleague at the Bible Department at ISEDET, Buenos Aires.

2. For the sake of brevity we will call “Luke” the author of the third Gospel and use...
he when we refer to Luke. This does not mean that we ignore the discussion about the authorship of the Gospel or the claim of a women’s tradition as part of the sources of the Lucan narratives.


4. When compared with Matt. 5:3, it is not only the fact that the words “in spirit” give a totally different approach to the blessing but also that those words alter the sense of the whole paragraph, since there it is a blessing among others, the first of a series. The adjectives and other modifiers in the following sentences produce the effect of a catalog. Thus the blessings as a whole create the idea of a “list of virtues” (Diels), or “ways of life in community” (Bonhoeffer) by which Jesus’ followers are rewarded in the Reign of Heaven. Ulrich Luz, in his Commentary on Matthew 1-7 (which I read in the Spanish translation) recognizes Matt. 5:3 in an original pre-Q version as the title for the first three blessings, but then, he writes, with the addition of the others the whole was “displaced towards a parenetical scope.” So in Matthew’s Gospel the beatitudes come to be a subjectivist ethical discourse, he maintains. As we will see, this is a completely different working project than the one that sees prophetic judgment informing Luke’s text. Given this difference, we will make no further comments on the Matthean parallels.

5. I am aware that the New Revised Standard Version renders “people” in v. 22 and “all” in v. 26, where the NRSV translates “men” for the original anthropoi in both cases. I will use the word men for the sake of clarity in the exegetical analysis, taking notice of the difficulties it creates when we try to work with inclusive language.

6. “Then will the God of Heaven turn over the ‘pancake’?” The stanza continues: “that the poor shall eat bread, and the rich shall eat . . . .” well, “organic fertilizer” will be an indicative, though not strict, translation!

7. That is why I previously commented that the pericope should be extended to v. 38. The break at v. 31 can be justified homiletically by the importance of the saying of Jesus at that point, which constitutes the nucleus of his teaching in this text. The discursive structure continues, forming a concentric scheme which parallels, in inverse order, vv. 27-30 and 32-38. But for preaching we can use some liberty in establishing breaks where biblicists see unity. After all, going back to my initial metaphor, sometimes what seem to be different plants are united by the same root!


9. The Lessons from the Catholic Lectionary that correspond to our text are taken from that chapter.

10. By the way, it should be noted that, in opposition to the story made up by the Sadducees, in the story of the story of Tamar and Judah, as well as in the story of Ruth, where the law of levirate marriage is also applied, it is the women who take the initiative to ensure familial continuity.

11. The problem here is not the idea of life after death, because as it has been explained in the case of the story of Saul and Samuel, this was a current belief. The conflict is about the idea of resurrection that means a bodily life with many of its prerogatives. This was the background for its development during the Maccabean war: if God is righteous, those who were loyal to God’s law up to the point of giving their lives before denying God should be compensated by partaking in the final triumph of God’s Reign. Only resurrection could make this possible. In that understanding the concept developed also in many Christian and non-Christian apocalyptic circles.
12. The name appears translated in our versions as "The Almighty," which is a possible but dubious rendering. In any case, it indicates the survival of a very ancient tradition that links the God of the legendary patriarchs with the new Mosaic religion.


14. *The Death of the Messiah* by Raymond Brown and the following discussion by John D. Crossan in *Who Killed Jesus?*, arc, as far as I know the English bibliography, two updated books which provide an evaluation of our textual evidence on Jesus' trial and death.

15. These words are missing in some of the sources and are thus considered by some scholars as a later interpolation. Since there are also ancient manuscripts that have them, and considering that they are usually in our regular versions, plus the fact that they have become part of the traditional "Seven Words of the Cross," it is our decision to keep them as part of the text. The doctrinal and ethical importance of this prayer in the ecclesiastical tradition justifies our comment on them.

16. It is estimated that almost 30,000 people were "disappeared," that is, kidnapped by military death squads acting under cover and never reported as imprisoned or dead. Little by little it was possible, after the fall of the regime, to find some of the corpses in N.N. tombs or to learn what happened to the missing. Some of the children, kidnapped at a very young age or born to imprisoned mothers, were "adopted" by retired army officers without the knowledge of their surviving parents or grandparents.

17. This is the way in which offerings of the Churches in the North reach the poor people in our countries. These acts of solidarity, though many times anonymous, express "the universal communion of believers" and should be appraised in that sense.

18. We are not trying to consider "what actually happened" at Golgotha. Each Gospel account is embedded in its own theological framework, which gives meaning to each particular understanding of the Jesus event. The details that each Gospel writer decided to include or exclude in his (her?) account are to be considered within that narrative. The comparison between the different theological approaches is a second step. We cannot doubt the historicity of Jesus' execution on the cross, but it is part of the freedom and inspiration of the Gospel writers to emphasize certain facts according to the emphasis each one of them wants to bring to the story.

19. Luke uses the word *evildoers*—rendered "criminals" in the NRSV, while Matthew and Mark use the word *bandits*, which is more appropriate. Death by crucifixion, considered the most shameful and painful, was reserved for slaves and political foes. Vulgar thieves were executed by hanging. The fact that these two persons were crucified indicates that they were condemned as political rebels, and therefore the word *bandits* (the same word Josephus uses for the rebels that take refuge in the mountainside to attack commercial and Roman caravans) is the best choice. The inscription "King of Jews" indicates that Jesus was also perceived and executed as a political rebel.

20. How could it be that the same people who in vv. 13-23 demand Pilate to crucify Jesus can now lament his execution? Probably we have two explanations: one is given by a textual variant in v. 13, quoted in the Jerusalem Bible—at least in the Spanish edition, that states that Pilate called "the rulers of the people," instead of "the rulers
and the people" of our version. The second explanation comes from a topographical approach: Where did the people convened by Pilate meet? It is obvious that if it was at the courtyard or in front of the Pretorium, these were places where there was limited access, and only those identified with the governing circle could enter. So, the "crowd" that asked for Barabbas was clearly a select lot, quite distinct from the ordinary people who flocked around Jerusalem at the time of the Feast and who respected Jesus as a prophet and teacher (21:38).

21. Following R. Horsley and others, I do not think that at that time there was an organized Zealot party with peasant’s guerrilla warfare, but that there were spontaneous local movements, integrated by people who were expelled from the countryside and then joined in gangs hostile to local rulers and their Roman allies.

22. Most commentators see in these words a recognition of sin and a "conversion." I consider them instead a critique of the unfair process held against Jesus and an affirmation of the (human) sense of justice of this "good thief."
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