Minding What We Say
Thomas E. Frank

Proclaiming Salvation—Making Disciples
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Introduction

A Matter of Decency

Is there such a thing as a decent human being? I read this question in the introduction to a book on spiritual direction a few years back, and it has haunted me ever since. Decency would appear to be a scarce commodity in these days of relentless genocide, partisan politics, undisguised greed and self-absorption. As we shudder at the thought of these evils, we tell ourselves that we know many very good people. But decency is not about goodness in the sense of niceness or innocence or good will or even vulnerability to danger or oppression. Decency is harder than that. It is primitive and elusive. It drives at the core of a person. Essayist Joan Didion set decency on a dark, deserted highway in Death Valley in the form of a couple who stopped at a wreck, got help for the injured person, and stayed to protect from predators the body of the dead one. Shades of Antigone. Arthur Miller put decency in Salem, Massachusetts during the witch trials (with strong analogies to the McCarthy investigations in 1950s) in the form of John Proctor, a ruined man who staked his life on his own sense of honor, and lost. Decency lived in the person of Miep Gies, who saved the diaries of Anne Frank because they were private, and if Anne returned she would not want her secrets to be spread around.

The question of decency takes us back to the wellsprings of morality, but it also touches on one of the most basic assumptions of Christian theology—the question of human nature. This is usually a biblical topic, leaning heavily on that primitive story of origins in which humanity was created in the image of God, fell into sin, and was redeemed in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We may
add to it add to it To add complete that version we may turn to a defew cultural or philosophical sources that can be blended with the Christian gospel. But no matter how we arrive at our concept of human nature the point is the same: this is a n extremely potent generalization. Our vision of the human supplies the raw material of "the human situation" addressed by the gospel. Sinners in the hand of an angry God? Children of God worn down by external evil? Average Joes and Janes who just need a firm foundation? Notice how quickly diagnosis turns into tactics. Christian theology labors to construct an adequate picture of Everyman/woman; Christian evangelism will use the sketches as a blueprint for action.

So it is interesting to see the writers on evangelism in this issue disclose their vision of the human. From Thomas Frank we get a portrait of the human being as a speaker, a conjurer of the word, a meaning-framer. This honest woman or man knows that the experience of forgiveness, assurance, and the yearning for holiness are deeply personal events in search of language (and not just a set of principles in search of corroboration). The right words are able to conduct individuals into community and—when the time is right—allow them to participate in God's love for humankind. It was so in Wesley's time and it is so today. Frank is concerned with right language, but the vision behind the concern is broad and daring—nothing less than the linkage between the human and the divine.

Bishop Klaiber writes about the people, the souls, who need the gospel in a particular way, and in doing so he reaches all the way back to the early Church and its needs. Those who live in danger and poverty, who struggle to find meals, need it as the Kingdom of God. Those with an overwhelming sense of having gone wrong in life need the gospel as the Cross which offers God's unconditional love and forgiveness. And those with a diminished sense of their own value and worthiness need the gospel as the Word Made Flesh which promises adoption of lonely and alienated people as sons and daughters of God. In each case, what is human becomes clearer through the lens of broken relationship with God, which God has reached out to remedy.

W. Stephen Gunter's essay on evangelism and theology reminds us explicitly of the connection between moral impulses and the origins of personal faith. In his exploration of prevenient grace, Gunter traces the inner paths of God's work on a human spirit, and describes them with a theological balance and spiritual pragmatism that Wesley would
have understood and approved. Tore Meistad moves us into the social and political realm of the question by his portrait of the contrast between the Wesleyan and the Lutheran view of the human in community. They are two vastly different conceptions, and Meistad helps us see what is at stake when we trade Wesleyan theological balance—hard as it is to maintain—for Lutheran theological dualism, deeply rooted as it is in basic Protestant thinking.

The question of human nature also works its way through two good articles by Douglas Ruffle and Kenneth Davis. Ruffle’s well-written, accessible exposition of Wesley’s Arminianism explains the delicate question of human freedom as the ability to respond and to thwart the activity of God in their lives. Davis addresses the question of evangelism most directly, taking his own experience in Honduras and in the U.S. Hispanic community as a case in point. It is this portrait of common humanity, our ability to love and to feel each others’ wounds and misfortunes, that we need to remember as we pray for and offer aid to the people of Honduras following the devastation of Hurricane Mitch last fall. Ray Collins’s reflections on Matthew, although geared to the summer months, can help us think of Jesus as the visitor, the traveler, who sees into the depths of the human heart, and in whose service we may see ourselves most clearly. I commend all these articles to your serious and prayerful consideration. May they enrich your faith and proclamation in 1999 and beyond.

Finally, I want to offer a word of thanks to you for the time and support you have offered this journal. This is my final issue; I leave to take up my own writing and occasional teaching. It has been a great privilege to work with the writers of this journal on behalf of its readers, whom I hold in the highest esteem. For 10 wonderful years, I thank you all.

Sharon Hels
Thomas E. Frank

Minding What We Say: Rhetoric in Christian Conference

“This surely was one of Mr. Wesley’s most tender, bold, risky, and hopeful imperatives. The statement came at the very beginning of the Large Minutes, the plan of procedure and discipline for the conferences of Wesley’s day. Thus, it set the tone for what Methodists understood by “conference.” Is this imperative still plausible for United Methodists today?

The statement invokes utmost seriousness in the “presence of God,” but it raises a host of questions and objections. What does it mean to speak freely? Should I not always guard my speech in order to be certain not to offend other people? How “free” should speech be? Many people live in societies that suppress speech or only recently have permitted open speaking, particularly about the government. To these people, “free speech” is precious and all too rare, something

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worth fighting for. Other people, like myself as a U.S. American, have found that “free” speaking is often careless, that words “freely” spoken are worth exactly what I paid for them. Too many people talk much about little or say many things that others do not need to hear.

And further, what exactly is in my heart? How do I know? Often I find out what is in my heart by speaking, and often I do not like what I hear myself saying. Speaking from the heart reveals my anger and my innocence. Much of what is in my heart is language that I have adopted for myself uncritically from the culture of words and symbols around me. So what is really mine to say?

And why the heart? This word is used as a metaphor, that is, a word objectively different from the thing to which it refers but used to stand for it or to bring a certain aspect of it to light. In the case of the heart, what is that point of reference? In the traditions following Wesley and his journals, we speak of having a “warm heart,” by which we mean not heartburn (physical pains of indigestion) but rather something spiritual stirring within us. By heart we try to express the inexpressible, the mystery that moves us, a love that is beyond words. Our “hearts” hold us to plain, honest speech, which is possible only “in the immediate presence of God.”

The complexity of Wesley’s simple phrase brings us to think about a very difficult subject: the manner of our speech, the structure of our expressed language, in short, our rhetoric. This subject is complicated enough within a single language. To address it between or among languages is much more so. Yet I believe it to be critical to our understanding especially of the role of conference in our United Methodist polity.

A broad definition of rhetoric has three aspects:

- our choice of words (especially important when translation of words is going on)
- figures of speech such as metaphor or analogy (one thing is like another thing) which we use to evoke a response, express a feeling, or bring out a meaning that cannot be seen directly
- the structure of argument through which we try to say things that are true and persuasive to others

If I say to you, for example, that it is “springtime” in the United Methodist Church, I intend to evoke images of blue skies, gentle breezes, singing birds, budding trees, flowers bursting up from their
bulbs into the bright sunshine. But I want you to consider the church through those images as a living being with new life flourishing. A whole argument is implicit in the metaphor as I try to convince you that the image is apt. Upon hearing about “springtime,” however, I suspect many listeners would roll their eyes or sigh in frustration. They might even counter with images and evidence of “winter” in the church—gray rain, chill, and death.

Our rhetoric goes largely unexamined. Sometimes I think what U.S. Americans mean by “free speech” is that one should be able to say anything one pleases and not have the words questioned by anyone else. We want to be taken seriously but not necessarily to be held accountable for what we say. This lack of care with what we say and how we say it has hurtful consequences for our church. We think about this hurt usually in terms of trying not to say things that will offend others. For example, we generally share a sense that it is not appropriate to make jokes or use expressions that will hurt a person of an ethnic or cultural heritage different from our own. But there is much more worthy of examining in our rhetoric.

Rhetoric in Postmodern Societies

We must first acknowledge the features of contemporary culture that contribute to rhetorical issues in the church. In Western societies especially, the twentieth century has brought a vastly accelerating “time-space compression,” in geologist David Harvey’s terms. Computers, jet travel, video, and countless other technologies have had “a disorienting and disruptive impact... upon cultural and social life.” Knowledge can travel instantaneously. Cultural forms can be stylized and traded interchangeably.

In the case of denominations as large voluntary associations, the authority of church offices and officials, once reinforced spatially by social and geographic distance and the relative inaccessibility of certain knowledge and resources, has been vastly diminished. Authoritative filters such as church traditions and accepted practices are bypassed by a flood of Internet data bits, television and radio sound bites, and alternative ways of speaking and acting offered by other organizations (especially business corporations) and religions. As people are pelted with new and sharply relativizing information, with little criteria for sorting it through, they develop what sociologist
George Simmel once called "the blasé attitude" for screening out unwanted data. Loyalty, commitment, or obligation to the organization is less and less ascriptive—inherited or assumed. The organization must prove its relevance or effectiveness in every immediate circumstance. Moreover, "time-space compression" induces a contemporary-mindedness in which anything that happened "before us" falls away into an imponderable well of past experience. Organizations such as churches that depend on an innate sense of "historical continuity and memory" struggle mightily to teach their own practices, including their traditional forms of rhetoric. Meanwhile historic differences and distinctions are washed out as sources from the past, like the architecture of "postmodern" buildings, are "quoted ... in any kind of order." A loss of depth understanding of the past produces an inflation of language in which people make insupportable claims about what founding figures taught or about a golden age when churches were full and families were wholesome and happy.

Thirdly, as space compresses, what would have seemed to be an opportunity for common discourse becomes instead the occasion for fragmentation and erection of sharper boundaries. Local self-determination is the rallying cry. Parties or caucuses form around buzzwords and slogans. The core function of religious bodies as "communities of memory" disintegrates as local associations assert their independence and adopt their own rhetoric.

Rhetoric in Organizations

Rhetoric plays a constitutive role in organizations, especially in the cultures of large national or international associations. One might even argue that organizations are essentially rhetorical in nature. As George Cheney proposed in his study of Roman Catholicism, "Much of what organizations do is rhetorical or persuasive and much of what is rhetorical in contemporary Western society is organized."

From the corporate or collective side, rhetoric enables a complex organization to manage the "multiple identities" of its various constituencies or "stakeholders." By developing a corporate "we" that uses a certain grammar and vocabulary, a large organization attempts to demonstrate the common purpose and values of diverse groups within it.

From the individual side, rhetoric enables a person to identify with an organization. Knowing the language both facilitates participation..."
and reinforces the individual’s identification with the goals and interests of the association. In Cheney’s words, drawing on philosopher Kenneth Burke, “Our corporate identities are vital because they grant us personal meaning and because they place us in the matrix of the social order.”

Thus, denominations have developed a distinctive grammar and lingo of phrases, references, and acronyms that express a corporate identity of shared meaning. United Methodists continue to use a lively, fluid vocabulary much of which has been passed from generation to generation. *Appointment, circuit, itineracy, bishop, ordination, conference,* all are terms that have been in currency throughout Methodist history. *Society, traveling preacher, temperance, or holiness* are terms associated (for better or ill) with Methodism of years past. Apportionment and local church are terms that originated in Methodism’s era of incorporation in the early twentieth century. *Class meeting,* a Methodist original, has made something of a comeback. Neologisms such as *discipleship* and *spiritual formation* spring into use as the denomination takes up new interests and directions.

A second function of rhetoric, inseparable from its role in identity and identification, is its capacity to construct situations and interpret perceived reality. Our rhetoric carries within it a framework for selecting a particular issue as important, for understanding the logic of that issue, and for persuading others that our framework is compelling or true.

**Rhetoric in Contemporary United Methodism**

Let us examine some words and phrases currently in use among United Methodist people that would benefit from critical analysis and fuller understanding:

- **classical Christianity**
  This phrase evokes the image of “classics,” those texts or ideas that originated in an earlier “golden age” of generativity and achieved wide enough consensus to be taught to new generations. The phrase appears to ignore, though, the struggles and conflicts out of which one idea comes to triumph over another. Usually only the aspects of earlier times with which the speaker is in agreement count as “classic.”
Presumably today one is not appealing to practices of slavery or exclusion of women from public life that often marked ancient times.

But what exactly is classic? Constantine? Tertullian? The church councils with all their political machinations as well as their finely tuned creeds? All of the councils, or just some of them? What about later figures such as Augustine, Aquinas, Hildegard von Bingen, Teresa of Avila, Luther, Calvin, and Wesley? Are all of these theological giants with all their particularities and differences to be lumped together as classics? Or just certain ones, or certain writings? Since devout Christians have many different ideas of what is “classic,” this phrase cannot be used to shortcut the hard work of theological conference.

- heresy
  This word has been used with increasing frequency in recent years, sometimes accompanied by other terms such as abomination. The former has a more intellectual sense, as of ideas or opinions wrongly held. The latter adds the feeling tone of repulsion or taboo. Heresy suggests that there is a standard of truth, or arbiter of truth, against which to measure theological discourse. The “orthodox” present the “right” teaching inside the community of believers. The “heretics” normally are also members of the community and deeply formed by it. But since they now advocate “false” teachings, they and/or their ideas are to be excluded. This insider-outsider dynamic rings a jarring tone in a theological tradition like Methodism that has put primary emphasis on finding out together, in conversation or conference, “what to teach, how to teach, and what to do.”

- openness
  This seemingly unobjectionable term has become a buzzword in a church that speaks often of its diversity. Openness is associated with civil or human rights; all persons, the UM Constitution states, are “eligible” to participate in “any local church in the connection.” Many people advocate this as a “right.” Oddly enough, the Constitution does not use rhetoric of Christian hospitality. One might ask if the more compelling
question is not whether all persons are "welcome" in any local church. Even the term inclusive implies that some people are already "inside" with the power to include others. Open may suggest someone inside "opening" to others.

Moreover, in their zeal for "openness," many speakers do not express a balanced sense of expectations. What exactly is the way of life into which United Methodists are openly inviting people? Wesley's societies were certainly open to anyone, any person who came seeking "to flee from the wrath to come." But once part of the society, they were called into a discipline of holy living. What is that discipline for today? This must be the subject of conference.

• chaos

Chaos theory originated as a mathematical formulation to measure predictability. Scientists and mathematicians found it interesting at the time (over a decade ago), but most have long since moved on to other theories of predictability. Chaos became a powerful metaphor for many people outside the physical sciences, however, as a word that captured their experience of established institutions giving way to uncertain new forms. The popularized theory of chaos in organizations like the church promises that disorder has an inherent order to it, particularly if one follows certain principles. To understand those, of course, one must turn to the "expert" who can diagnose the emerging order or at least make the continuing disorder seem more hopeful. What is missing from "chaos" talk—or many other forms of "systems theory"—is analysis of the substance of belief and practice that would actually explain what brings and holds people together in a continuing community of faith.

• quadrilateral

While this word appears nowhere in Wesley's writings or in the Book of Discipline, over the past 25 years it has become a key term in United Methodist self-understanding. Its strength as a rhetorical device is its appeal to a balanced theological method. It offers multiple criteria and bases of authority that have enabled many voices with varied points of view to continue in conversation. Its weakness is its status as a rhetorical device, which inevitably led to the critique that it
reinforced an image of "equilateral." This led to a General Conference debate over the primacy of scripture. Even in this debate, though, United Methodists managed to avoid a literalism of words that has proved so divisive in other communions.

- **making disciples**

  This phrase made popular by contemporary church growth literature and the *Book of Discipline 1996* claims a basis in Matthew 28:19-20—"make disciples of all nations, baptizing them . . . and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you." Of course, the formation of persons who will follow Jesus in his commands, namely, love of God and neighbor and witness to the signs of God's reign in the world, is indisputably the Spirit's work through the church's practices. The problem lies in our words. In the Greek original of these verses, *disciple* is an imperative, with *baptizing* and *teaching* the participles that explain what the imperative entails. The word *make* is added by English translators simply to convey the imperative sense of the Greek.

  As a denominational slogan, however, *making* implicitly becomes an economic metaphor, colluding rhetorically with the production mentality of Western commercial societies. The more product, the more value created and the more notoriety. Big congregations are more "successful" because they have "made" more disciples. The word *disciples* is also striking, since it seems wholly to have replaced *holiness* as a description of the Christian life. *Disciple* becomes a noun (an object with identifiable attributes or beliefs) supplanting the verbs of Christian practices.

  The phrase as a whole thus emphasizes the human institutions of church, not the triune God, making people into something and focuses on the people formed ("disciples") more than on the Holy One in whom they live and move and have their being. But few voices even debate the theological logic of the phrase "making disciples" in a church so intent on reversing perceived losses of members.

- **niche**

  With this word comes a whole construct of the world as a marketplace. Religion is a commodity that must be effectively
marketed to consumers. To achieve this one must identify the "niche" or "target group" in the potential audience and devise the message to appeal to the needs or wishes of the "niche." There is a certain hard realism about the term, as if one were nodding and saying, "We just have to face it, it's a competitive world; and besides, we already have a niche, we just haven't been talking about it that way." This implicitly denies, of course, that how we speak about things makes all the difference.

• crisis

No rhetorical device has been more popular in this generation than the appeal to an impending "crisis." If one can convince an audience that their situation constitutes a "crisis," then one can perhaps move them to take decisive action in the direction one is advocating. This requires that the audience adopt the premise that this particular situation, and not some other one, is the real "crisis" or that this reading of the evidence establishes beyond a doubt that a "crisis" exists.

"Crisis" rhetoric is essentially a form of drama. It creates a buildup of negative factors or conflicting elements; identifies a point of denouement or resolution; and shows a new direction that will follow from the speaker's ideas. The most common form of this dramatization in the UMC uses membership statistics to induce a sense of failure, loss, decline, and impending death. Detailed examination of the data, such as the role of a lower birth rate (a factor significant enough to account for the numbers, according to some sociologists), is not in the script. The script is about action that right-minded people will take to "turn this thing around" and stop "losing" members (implying that people are "leaving," a claim for which there is some anecdotal but limited statistical evidence).

Many other rhetorical terms and devices could be added to this list. United Methodist writers and speakers pronounce and repeat many other words in ways that could benefit from more critical thought or judgment of appropriateness. All of us find it easy to borrow phrases from popular culture with little attention to expressions from within Christian traditions that more authentically shape dispositions of the Christian life. "I feel your pain" replaces "The sufferings of this
present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us" (Rom. 8:18). "Be all that you can be" supplants "Grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ" (Eph. 4:15). "We welcome you this morning to the fastest-growing church in Metro County" preempts "I was glad when they said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the LORD!' " (Ps. 122:1).

Constructive Principles of Rhetoric

This brings us to a final question: What should we do in order "to speak freely whatever is in our hearts?" How do we move beyond mouthing words or figures of speech that we have heard or have picked up from various cultural expressions and speak plainly and authentically with one another in Christian conference?

Here I suggest that we remember a key term in rhetoric that is also an expression with utmost significance for the proclamation of God's Good News: **kairos**. In rhetoric **kairos** means the moment of fit when a speaker says just the right word at the right time. In discerning the **kairos** a speaker or writer is seeking the most appropriate word that is proportional to the situation she or he is addressing. Advertising often plays off this sense of proportion in order to get our attention or make us laugh. When we hear a radio jingle for "the event of the century" and then get the details on a Toyota sale, we smile, groan, or turn it off. The principle of proportionality requires us to search carefully into the circumstances before we use words like *shock, dismay, sick, conspiracy,* or *war.* The less we care for our words, the more we are subject to hype and language inflation that eventually dissipates our listeners' trust.

The companion principle to proportionality in discerning **kairos** is justice. When we think of justice we are thinking again of fit, of a person receiving a "proper measure" adequate to what the situation merits. The biblical prophets described justice as everyone being able to sit in peace under his own fig tree, or every orphan, widow, or refugee having enough on which to live (which becomes a real problem in a capitalist economy based on an inherent ethic of "get all you can get"). Similarly, just words are fair, adequate, and fitting to the circumstances and to the person being addressed. The principle of justice requires us to search carefully before we use words like *traitor, heretic, wacko,* or *extremist.*
Kairos is also a word central to Jesus’ preaching of the gospel of God’s Reign. His first sermon, according to Mark (1:15), was the simple announcement: “The time (kairos) is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent (metanoiete), and believe in the good news.” In this case the kairos names a decisive point in time, a turning point, a time when something is at last coming to fruition. The Gospels use the word in connection with harvest (e.g., Matt. 13:30); Paul uses it with the metaphor of pregnancy (Rom. 8:18-23). What is about to happen, what is decisively coming to pass, must be discerned. Jesus wept over Jerusalem, “you did not recognize the time (kairos) of your visitation from God” (Luke 19:41-44). And to discern requires a mind (nous) turned around or upside down from above or beyond itself (meta)—a revolution of mind, a new mind, a mind that was in Christ (Phil. 2:5).

So what time is it in the church? What is the kairos now as we continue to speak with one another in Christian conference?

First, I urge United Methodist people to avoid the language of abstraction and generalization. We need to pay attention to the narratives and experiences of the actual, particular individuals we meet in the “connection” and dispense with labels and types. Some people will say that this approach is too subjective. But I would argue that many of our abstractions, especially those that create political drama turning our collective narrative into episodes of suspense and denouement, in fact distort the world into the frame of the interpreter. Only by knowing and conversing with one another can we name what binds us together in life experience and faith.

Second, the kairos is here in which we must claim and build upon the theological method characteristic of John Wesley. He was both catholic and evangelical, both Reformed and pietistic. He constructed a theological synthesis in which both doctrine and personal experience, both sacrament and private prayer were honored. He preached a “catholic spirit” through which he insisted that it is possible for us to be both passionate about our particular congregations and our ways of worshipping, baptizing, and serving and compassionate for others with whom we share essentials of faith in the love of God and neighbor.

Love is the keystone, the master link in the chain that holds us in connection. This is the third point of kairos. It is time for us to delight in the Christian affections, particularly the disposition to love one another that precedes our speech and proceeds through it. It is time for
us to imagine our faith freshly, to write new songs while singing the old, to write new poems while relishing the old.

Theologians and leaders of other traditions have long made sport of teasing the Methodists: “They have no theology, those singing Methodists.” But I say that this is the kairos for poetry in our church as it was in Charles Wesley’s day, in this sense: we need common, shared metaphors that will help us name our faith together. We do not need more ideology in the church. We need more poetry.

Eighteenth-century English society shared some features of our own “postmodern” societies. Tracts and pamphlets laced with hyperbole rolled off the local presses of many towns and villages. John Wesley was continually engaged in controversies and made liberal use of exclamation points to hold and sway readers’ attention. He regularly admonished his followers in strong language, indicative of often heated tensions within the Methodist community.

All the more important, then, was the richness and depth of Charles Wesley’s poetry. Here he framed the images and conveyed the inherent logic of Christian faith as Methodists understood it. Here he built an arbor of words in which he hoped Methodist people could stand together in love.

All praise to our redeeming Lord, who joins us by his grace, And bids us, each to each restored, together seek his face.

He bids us build each other up; and, gathered into one, To our high calling’s glorious hope we hand in hand go on.

The gift which he on one bestows, we all delight to prove, The grace through every vessel flows in purest streams of love.

E’en now we think and speak the same, and cordially agree, Concentrated all, through Jesus’ name, in perfect harmony.  

He wrote this in 1747. Who will write for us?
Notes

4. Harvey, Postmodernity, 54, 58, 61, 85.
5. Ibid., 44, 47, 117.
8. For further historical study of Methodist rhetoric, see Russell E. Rickert, Early American Methodism (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1991).
13. I am indebted to Professor Theodore Jennings for this insight.
The Mission of the Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ." With this statement "The Local Church" section of the 1996 Book of Discipline begins.¹

In later times church historians may deem this as one of the most important disciplinary changes made by the 1996 General Conference. Such a clear and biblically founded goal should help us in the United Methodist Church as a whole to focus with more determination on what is really our charge and to avoid dissipating our energies on every issue before us.

Nevertheless, we have to admit that this sentence—although it is almost a quotation from the Great Commission in Matthew’s Gospel—is hardly a traditional Methodist slogan. In fact, when Mr. Wesley discussed with his helpers what special mission God had given to the people called Methodists, he used two quite different phrases. One was this: "You have nothing to do but to save souls." Wesley never tired of impressing this notion upon his preachers. The most astonishing example of it may be found in the Large Minutes, Question 26,11:

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You have nothing to do but to save souls. Therefore spend and be spent in this work. And go always, not only to those that want you but to those that want you most. Observe: It is not your business to preach so many times, and to take care of this or that society; but save as many souls as you can; to bring as many sinners as you possibly can to repentance, and with all your power to build them up in that holiness without which they cannot see the Lord.

The last sentence of this quotation leads us to Wesley's second characteristic definition of the purpose of Methodism: "What may we reasonably believe to be God's design in raising up the preachers called Methodists? Not to form any new sect; but to reform the Nation, particularly the church; and to spread scriptural holiness over the land."

Making disciples, saving souls, reforming the nation, and spreading scriptural holiness over the land: four different descriptions of the task of a Methodist church! How are they related to one another and what sort of mandate do they give for our work today? The Discipline tries to put them all together by saying, "Whenever United Methodism has had a clear sense of Mission, God has used our church to save persons, heal relationships, transform social structure, and spread scriptural holiness, thereby changing the world. In order to be truly alive, we embrace Jesus’ mandate to make disciples of all peoples."

I would like to explore the biblical roots of this statement, which must be clear if the church's mission is to have its full resonance in today's world. I will do this by delving with three questions:

1. What is the biblical meaning of salvation?
2. What is the biblical description of the mission of the church?
3. What does this mean for our task as United Methodist Church today?

What Is the Biblical Meaning of Salvation?

"What must I do to be saved?" the jailer in Philippi asked Paul and Silas, according to Acts 16:30. What he originally meant may be disputed. Was he asking for help in a difficult situation? Did he need protection once he discovered that he had obviously maltreated the messengers of a mighty God and had provoked God's wrath? Or did...
he, having basic doubts about his condition in the face of God, therefore ask with regard to his eternal salvation?

The Greek word *soteria* ("to be saved") has a broad field of meaning. This is taken into account by most translations. "Your faith has made you well" is a formula which is often used by Jesus and could be translated literally: "Your faith has saved you." We find this translation in Eph. 2:8: "By grace you have been saved through faith," and in many other places where the context seems to indicate that a religious connotation is at stake. To be saved means primarily to be rescued from the wrath that is coming (see 2 Thess. 1:9; Rom. 5:9). But soon the formula comes to describe the more general acceptance into the salvific communion with God (John 3:17). The point is that biblical language has no unified concept for what we call "salvation" today.

Furthermore, no single biblical term conveys the entire breadth of the early Christian notion of salvation. Everything that is told about God's saving activity for his people in the stories of the Bible, in both the Old Testament and the New, is relevant to the question. In my book *Call and Response* I have attached the crucial points of the New Testament teaching of salvation to three areas of tradition. Although such classifications may appear overly schematic, I want to keep to them in order to be able to represent the data as differentiated as is necessary and as clearly as possible.

*The Gospel of the Kingdom.* The essence of Jesus' teaching on salvation is found in his announcement of the coming of the kingdom of God. The Synoptic Gospels are unanimous in their witness that Jesus' proclamation that "the kingdom of God has come near" (Mark 1:14) stands at the very center of his teaching. Whereas John the Baptist's teaching emphasized that the Kingdom would bring God's judgment, Jesus declared that the kingdom would bring God's salvation. Another basic summary of Jesus' teaching, Luke 4:18-19, reflects the proclamation in Isa. 61:1ff. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (cf. Luke 7:22). What is meant by this may be explained best by the first Beatitude: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God" (Luke 6:20, probably the original version of this Beatitude; cf. the parallel phrase in Mark 10:14, which says that the kingdom of God belongs to the children).
Jesus promises that those people who may no longer expect anything from the society they live in may expect everything from God; that their lives will be enriched by the communion with God in his Kingdom and under his gracious rule. Their daily needs will not be forgotten; those who are hungry and weep are blessed and, therefore, promised that they will have enough to eat and will be able to laugh again. But whereas this bounty is promised for the future, the verb tense of the blessing of the poor is open. This may indicate that the promise is already beginning to be realized by the proclamation of the nearness of the Kingdom of God.

Jesus shows the present reality of salvation through the immediate coming of the Kingdom in another instance. The saying "But if it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the Kingdom of God has come to you" (Luke 11:20) is very important for understanding Jesus’ calling. The Greek text indicates that Jesus may well have originally used a particular Aramaic word which expresses almost graphically the idea that God’s reign stretches out so close to human beings that it touches this world and its needs. Although it still does not embrace all things, in Jesus’ healing and liberating actions the Kingdom has already come.

These and similar words outline the need to which Jesus’ saving activity responds: alienation from God which results in enslavement to the destructive power of evil. This alienation may manifest itself in diseases and also in the social ostracism and marginalization of people with problems or in need. The personal guilt of these afflicted persons is not ignored or trivialized. But their personal guilt does not affect this larger view of human need: men, women, and children come into the picture not only as perpetrators but also as the victims of more comprehensive structures of evil from which God’s reign liberates and saves.

In Jesus’ teaching and action, therefore, two things are happening: first, people are already experiencing in their lives the saving power of God’s Kingdom. At the same time all that they now witness is only an incomplete token of a future fulfillment, the beginning of the overwhelming abundance of the Kingdom of God.

The Word of the Cross. “God has raised Jesus from the dead.” As the fundamental experience and confession given to the disciples after Jesus’ violent death, this sentence became the central confession of the early church and the foundation of its calling. It speaks first about
God’s act toward the Crucified One but obviously includes the notion that, with the raising of Jesus, God’s eschatological work of raising all the dead has begun.

But this statement in itself does not explain the meaning of Jesus’ death. Early Christians, guided by scripture (especially Isaiah 43 and 53) and probably by the recollection of Jesus’ own comments, soon began to understand Jesus’ death as the vicarious sacrifice of his life. Through the acceptance of our guilt and sin by Jesus as God’s anointed one, his death effected atonement and reopened our communion with God. The confession quoted by Paul in 1 Cor. 5:3-5 shows that this notion of Jesus’ death and resurrection became fundamental for the Christian conception of “salvation in Jesus Christ.”

The problem of guilt becomes crucial in this context. Especially for Paul, this means more than simply resolving difficulties brought about by transgressions of the law. After all, such transgressions are only the symptoms of the fundamental sin of all human beings since Adam, that is, rebellion against God in which they place their own being—in all its fragility and transitoriness (or, as Paul calls it, their “flesh”)—at the center of their existence and therefore miss their true vocation to live their lives in the presence of God.

Because Jesus died the death of a sinner and thus accepted alienation from God and the curse of the law, he took upon himself (that is, he “bore”) the deadly consequences of unsettled guilt. At the center of God’s saving activity is forgiveness of sin; but forgiveness is only part of the much more comprehensive process of reconciliation, as well as the inauguration of a new communion with God (2 Cor. 5:18-21). This same concept can be expressed with the terminology of justification. In Hebrew-biblical legal thought justification means a verdict of not guilty; but the declaration “He or she is justified” includes also a positive judgment: “He or she belongs to our community.”

On the theological level this means that when we are justified God acquits us, for the sake of Jesus Christ, from the charge of having failed to reach the goal of our life (which is to live in God’s presence). He abolishes our failure by accepting us into God saving communion and by giving our lives the right direction and the right goal.

It is important to notice that this theologically based notion of failure can assume different forms in a human life. Some may transgress the law outright, violating both God’s will and the rights
and living space of others. Others may manipulate the law covertly and maintain the appearance of justification. But their own achievements are made absolute; the memory of their own shortcomings is suppressed; the will of God is missed; and the potential of others is hindered—and all this in a much more subtle and hidden form than that of the open transgression of the law.

The message of justification does not apply only to situations in which people deliberately seek God's gracious acceptance; it also speaks to those who struggle in general for meaning and worth in their lives. It proclaims salvation to those who are aware of their brokenness in lives that are spoiled and lost and to those who pretend that they have "justified" their own lives through success, property, power, reputation, or efficiency but who nevertheless sense—that this is not true life. True life is always God's gift. That is the message of justification through Jesus Christ, even for the people of our time.

The Word became Flesh. The third line is connected closely with the second. It is marked by the fundamental confession of the Johannine tradition: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life" (John 3:16). The Johannine phraseology of God's "giving up the Son" in this text corresponds to a similar pattern of a God's "sending the Son" (1 John 4:9-10, 14). We find here the further statement that the Son is given up unto death. The purpose of these formulaic structures is to describe the saving effect of the Son of God's adoption of our human nature. We find a similar dynamic in Paul, although he emphasizes the death of Jesus Christ (cf. Gal. 4:4-5; Rom. 8:3-4 with Rom. 8:32; Phil. 2:6-8; Gal. 2:20).

The whole tradition is closely connected with the title "Son of God"; the deep connection between Father and Son is expressed by the words only or own. God gives himself through the Son. This soteriological scheme also imputes a motive to God's saving activity: love (John 3:16; 1 John 4:9-10; Rom. 8:37-39; Gal. 2:20; Eph. 5:2; cf. Rom. 5:8). The deepest evidence of God's love is the fact that the Son has given himself into the world and unto death!

Whereas the Johannine "sending of the Son" formula describes the saving effect of the sending in terms of atonement and vicarious death (cf. 1 John 4:10; Gal 4:4-5), the formula of the "giving up of the Son" characterizes God's saving action in a much more comprehensive way.
In Rom. 8:31-39 this formula appears with another statement of God's motivation for acting on human behalf: God is "for us." Through the Son, God enters into human need, even death, the deepest and most extreme distress of human existence. The Son's abandonment of self authenticates God's yes to us, which is valid even when all external circumstances seem to speak against it—be it our own sin (vv. 33-34) or the heights and depths of human existence (vv. 38-39).

According to this tradition, what salvation gives is life: life with God, eternal life. Even more remarkable, the Gospel of John dares to say that all who by their faith in Jesus Christ have been received into the communion with God have this life already. God's becoming human, even "flesh," fills the "lack of God" in human beings. Now, even after we have fallen short of the doxa of God (Rom. 3:23), the glory of God is seen again in the face of Jesus Christ.

The proclamation of salvation in this tradition responds to the God-forsakenness of human beings. Of course, it is not that God has forsaken them but rather that they have forsaken God; this is the source of their isolation, loneliness, and forlornness. People are lost not only in the eschatological sense, that they are doomed to the final condemnation, but also in an ontological sense, living in loneliness and isolation amidst the infinite cosmos. It is this dreadful human "angst" that attacks, weakens, and erodes the foundations of our lives. The pain of this experience drives us to secure and defend our lives for ourselves—a path that leads to aggressiveness toward others and the end of real life with them.

Salvation is the gift of a new existence from God; it is the gift of becoming children of God: "God sent his Son ... so that we might receive adoption as children" (Gal. 4:4-5) (or in the words of "Amazing Grace," "I once was lost but now am found ... "). With this gift we regain our original trust in God, which conquers "angst." We are authorized and empowered by God to be mature and responsible, providing the basis for a new relationship to the people with whom we live.

We have seen that the New Testament speaks in different ways about salvation, but all agree that salvation is rooted in the encounter with the saving God. It is the coming of God's kingdom in the work and teaching of Jesus which delivers the oppressed and exalts the poor. It is the revelation of God's righteousness in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ which justifies sinners and reconciles enemies. And it is the light of God's glory in the person and life of the
Son of God which stills the hunger and thirst for life and heals the deep anxiety of being lost in a hostile world.

Likewise, we have seen that God’s saving activity and its proclamation meet different human needs. Again, there is also one common denominator. Alienation from God leads to the deadly alienation of human beings from themselves. This alienation is felt differently by those who are possessed by evil spirits than it is felt by those who boast that they lead righteous lives; it will be felt differently by children or women who are marginalized than it will be felt by those who are rich and honored but are in danger of losing their lives because they care only for themselves. To use examples from our time: the single parent struggling to support herself and her children in an urban slum will need to hear the gospel message of salvation in a different manner from that of the business man who has fallen in love with his own success or the one who is dying of AIDS or the well-to-do woman who spends her time at the gym and the beauty shop.

But it is the same Gospel that is preached to each of them. The church is not a drugstore selling special pills for each disease; it is not a supermarket with discount coupons for special needs. The church offers to everyone the gospel which proclaims the saving God. This God has spoken the divine yes to each of us, while saying no to many things we do or suffer from. To meet God and God’s love through the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and in the life of the church is salvation is real life.

What Is the Biblical Description of the Church’s Mission?

Our second question has to do with the biblical guidelines for the mission of the church, its primary task in reaching out for other people. What objectives of this mission have to be achieved in order to fulfill the mission, and how are those who are not yet saved included within the process of salvation?

If we look into the New Testament, we will find three different types of the commission which suggest the horizons of Christian activity in the world.

Proclaiming the kingdom of God. When Jesus of Nazareth sent out his disciples, he commissioned them “to proclaim the kingdom of God
and to heal* (Luke 9:2; cf. 10:9; Matt. 10:7-8). These first missionaries of Jesus were to proclaim the good news that God’s kingdom has come near to the poor and to perform acts of liberation and healing for those who live in distress and despair. Although the geographical horizon of their mission did not reach beyond Galilee and Judea, its theological horizon was extremely broad. It implied that while there may be people who exclude themselves by their denial of the message (cf. Matt. 10:12-13), the effectiveness of the mission does not depend on the listeners’ reactions. They are expected only to remain open for God’s healing and liberating power. That is what the Synoptic tradition calls faith! Of course, that Jesus called some directly to follow him shows that the reality of God’s coming kingdom is not without consequences for the personal life. But initiation into the Kingdom of God is basically the activity of a God who reaches out especially to those who are not able to help themselves: the poor, the children, those who are possessed by evil spirits, the sick, and the lepers.

Making disciples. The Risen Lord’s commission to his disciples broadens the geographic scope of the mission into the universal: “Go into all the world and proclaim the Good News to the whole creation” (Mark 16:15; although this is a part of the so-called “secondary ending” of Mark’s Gospel, it represents old tradition). At the same time, the goal of the mission becomes more specific: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations” (Matt. 28:19). To be a disciple of Jesus is no longer a special call for some who are called into an exemplary relationship of life and work with Jesus. Rather, to be a disciple is the description of the fundamental life-giving relationship with Jesus and with all he has lived for us. The tradition which Matthew passes on in the Great Commission makes quite clear how the nations are to be “made disciples”: “baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.”

Making disciples therefore means to incorporate a person into the reality of God’s saving act in the death and resurrection of Jesus by the sacrament of baptism (which includes, according to the understanding of early Christianity, also the initial faith) and to lead him or her on the way of following Jesus’ commandments. According to this model of the Christian mission the goal of the missionary activity is inclusion in the church. But making disciples is much more
than just recruiting new church members. It is immersion into the reality of God’s love in Jesus Christ and introduction into the lifelong process of learning the consequences of this love, that is, following in the footsteps of Jesus. To participate in communion with Jesus Christ is a reality which creates new life. It is an experience which shapes our life according to his example. And that is the essence of discipleship!

**Preaching the faith.** If we look into the reality of Christian mission as represented in the epistles of Paul and the missionary speeches of Acts, then the focus of the missionary work becomes even sharper. The goal of all preaching is the call to repentance and faith for all who listen (cf. Acts 2:38; 3:19; 16:31; Rom. 1:16; 10:10, 14-17). It is the call to accept personally the reconciliation which God has wrought in Jesus Christ and which is proclaimed in the gospel. Or, as Paul puts it in 2 Cor. 5:18-20—the *magna carta* of evangelistic preaching—"in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God!" The *invitation to faith* is the call to salvation and the invitation to a life in peace with God.

How do these three different types of the commission of the church relate to one another? Does their sequence represent the gradual narrowing of the gospel of Jesus first as the proclamation of God’s unconditional and liberating activity, then to a church-dominated concept of salvation, and then further to an individualistic view of the necessity of personal repentance and faith? Or does this sequence guide us into a deeper and deeper understanding of the gospel, widening at the same time to include all of humankind, as well as sharpening the focus right down to the innermost depth of the human existence? In fact, missionary movements have often chosen one or the other of these models.

The first one serves as a pattern for the understanding of mission within liberation theology as well as for evangelistic activities within the charismatic movement which derives from it the emphasis on a "twofold commission": to preach and to heal. The second type served as model for the conversion of whole tribes or nations and as justification of the situation in state churches, or what is called in Germany *Volkskirche*, where almost all people are baptized as infants.
in order to be educated later on as Christians, a method which often leads more to a superficial Christianization than to an authentic evangelization of the people. In a different way the church growth movement has chosen the "discipling" of people as the major objective of its missionary endeavor (cf. DAWN: Discipling a Whole Nation). The third model represents the pattern of evangelism which is typical for the whole evangelical movement. The call to faith is interpreted as a call for personal "decision," an understanding which is challenged by representatives of the Barthian Wort-Gottes-Theologie (Word-of-God Theology), which claims that we have only to tell the people that God has already decided to save them in Jesus Christ.

I am deeply convinced that all these different patterns of the commission of the church within the New Testament are determined and shaped by one basic concern: impressing God's saving love on all human beings and including them, with all aspects of their lives, in the domain of God's reconciling and healing action in and through Jesus Christ. These three New Testament models for mission are not alternatives from which to choose; they are aspects of the same commission. We may emphasize different aspects in different situations, but we should never separate them from one another or play them off against one another.

* Wherever we find people who are oppressed and possessed by evil spirits of money, power, addiction or greed, wherever we meet human beings who are marginalized and ostracized, exploited or misused, poor or disabled, we are called to proclaim to them that God's reign is at hand and to set up signs of love and hope, of justice and healing among them. Our first task is not to ask people for their personal response to this message. The more important thing is that their battered lives are reached by the reality of God's saving and loving presence and that they are ready to receive what God has done and will do for them.

* Wherever people are caught in a deep crisis of self-esteem—if they try to justify their lives by religious achievements, by money, power, honor, beauty or success, or they despair about their failure to find real value within their lives or when people are haunted by open or repressed guilt, we are called to tell them that God has said yes to their lives in Jesus Christ, and that in Jesus' death God has taken on himself all the nos which people experience as threatening their lives. What matters now is God's yes to us, which justifies, esteems, and...
validates our lives, whether we are threatened by the no which is spoken by our guilt or the no through which we feel judged by others, or the no which our own hearts speak against us. Because this message aims at our self-awareness it asks for a personal response. The gospel of justification comes to its fulfillment when people believe that their lives are accepted by God. The message of reconciliation becomes effective when people realize and accept that they are reconciled.

* Wherever people are suffering from isolation and alienation, wherever they are longing for personal growth and maturity, we are called to show them the path of discipleship. The call to follow Jesus leads into a community of learning and sharing, of mutual support and creative critique. Those who try to make disciples invite people into this community of followers of Jesus and ask for the commitment of their whole lives as a part of the body of Christ and instrument of the love of God.

Although I have singled out different conditions of people with their need of different aspects of the gospel, it should be evident that we cannot really divide people into separate groups or put them into different boxes or drawers, suggesting that they need only one aspect of the gospel. All need the whole gospel as the expression of the all-embracing love of God—but not all need it with the same emphasis at the same time.

What Does This Mean for the Task of the United Methodist Church?

Methodism first began with the commission to preach the faith. “Preach faith till you have it, and then, because you have it you will preach faith,” was the famous advice of Peter Boehler to John Wesley. What we sometimes call his conversion at Aldersgate Street Wesley himself remembered as his personal assurance of salvation, sola fide. John Wesley once wrote to “John Smith” that “None is a true Christian till he experience it” and cites his Aldersgate experience as the reason why he preaches only salvation by faith. I hope that we as United Methodists will not interpret the definition of “making disciples” as it is given in Matt. 28:19-20 (“baptizing them . . . and teaching them . . .”) in a narrow sense, thinking that baptizing infants and nurturing them in a Christian community is the full extent of our
commission to make disciples. 11 The quest for a personal faith is still at the heart of our mission.

Indeed, it is one of the distinguishing marks of Methodism that it does not confine the task of "making disciples" to the simple call to conversion and the assessment that those who become believers are saved. John Wesley gives "John Smith" a remarkable rationale for his own preaching: "[it is based on] such a love of God and men as produces all inward and outward holiness, and springs from a conviction wrought in us by the Holy Ghost of the pardoning love of God." 12 This is John Wesley's theology in a nutshell. It shows us how the task of making disciples by teaching (and learning) to obey everything that Jesus has commanded us was fulfilled in Methodism. The Wesleyan path of Christian discipleship is nothing other than scriptural holiness as God's gift and as a permanent challenge to let our lives be filled and shaped by the love of God. And because there is "no other holiness than social holiness," 13 it was always clear to Methodists that we can take this path only together with others. To create in our churches a lebemmum of grace, that is, a space for the living out of God's grace and love, where people may find freedom as well as guidance for developing what God has meant for their lives, where people may grow into the maturity of love—that is a genuinely Methodist way of making disciples.

But the horizon of the mission is broader than the quest for a personal faith and a common pilgrimage as disciples of Jesus. When Wesley defines why God has raised up the people called Methodists, he says first, "To reform the Nation (resp. the Continent), especially the church," As far as I know, he never clearly explained how this should happen. Maybe he thought this would be the natural consequence of "spreading scriptural holiness over the land." But this is a clear indication for us that in Methodism "to proclaim the Kingdom" has always meant more than only proclaiming the faith and striving for personal holiness. The Good News for the poor is surely a very personal assurance that God loves each human being, however miserable the circumstances of her or his life may be. But Good News for the poor must also include the promise of a life which is adequate for people who are created into the image of God, as well as the conviction that God calls and empowers us to struggle for liberation and justice.

Therefore, when we define the mission of the church as the making of disciples, we include both the call to faith which is always personal but never remains private and the proclamation of the kingdom, which
reaches out to those who desperately need the presence of God's liberating love and justice in their lives. The Book of Discipline sets forth this dual aspect of this process for carrying out our mission: We make disciples as we:

—proclaim the gospel, seek, welcome and gather persons into the body of Christ;
—lead persons to commit their lives to God through Jesus Christ;
—nurture persons in Christian living through worship, baptism, communion, Bible and other means of grace;
—send persons into the world to live lovingly and justly as servants of Christ by healing the sick, feeding the hungry, caring for the stranger, freeing the oppressed, and working to make social structures consistent with the gospel, and
—continue the mission of seeking, welcoming and gathering persons into the community of the body of Christ.¹⁴

What is necessary to foster this process? I will mention three issues which I think are important.

1. Rediscovering the power of the gospel. We often wonder how we will be able to communicate the message of the gospel to thoroughly secularized people. The first step, I think, should always be to ask ourselves whether we ourselves really live from the gospel and rely on its power. We can offer to others only the food we ourselves are living from. I am convinced that when we are really moved by the gospel—as church and as individuals—it will be much easier to include other people within our faith. The love of God which fills our hearts will transform into the love of those who still do not know the gospel. Paul once disclosed as the key to his missionary "success" his determination "to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us" (1 Thess. 2:8).

2. Reclaiming our connection as a community of those who together follow Jesus. This means that we are a community of those who seek and those who believe, of those who learn and those who teach. We understand that we will not all be at the same place in this process of learning and that we will have to change sides from time to time. This process should begin on the local level where we still need more small groups (classes, discipleship groups, house churches), where people can speak openly and confidentially about questions and sorrows, and where all search for answers from God's word. This process should continue in our Annual Conferences and throughout the whole...
connection. How can we as a whole denomination be a community of mutual learning and support? That biblical words such as confessing, reconciling, and transforming have become partisan slogans is not a good symptom of the situation of our common discipleship.

3. Regaining our call to those who are outside our precincts. We are sent to the poor and to all people who do not fit into the patterns of success or efficiency which are valid in our society. The Episcopal Initiative on Children and Poverty or the Special Program on Substance Abuse and Related Violence may help us as a denomination to work within this perspective. But general programs are not enough. We still have to identify the groups in our local or regional context that most need our attention and care. In my country, Germany, those who come first to mind are unemployed young people (from unskilled laborers to fully educated academics) who are in danger of becoming a lost generation.

I would like to close with some questions following Rom. 1:13-17. In v. 14, Paul says that he has a responsibility to bring the gospel to all people: "I am a debtor both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish." To account for his "eagerness to proclaim the gospel" to the people of Rome, Paul says, "It is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith" (v. 16). Paul adds that this is true of "the Jew first" and also of the Greek. How do we experience in our own lives the saving power of the gospel? Does our experience motivate us to include others in our faith and invite them to be disciples of Christ? Let us continue to look for those people to whom we are eager and unashamed to say that the saving power of the gospel is also meant for them.

Notes

3. Ibid., 299.


10. Ibid, 182.

11. I am still anxious that our baptismal study “By Water and Spirit” may have this effect!

12. Ibid, 183.


John Wesley has traditionally been known as an evangelist and denominational founder rather than as a theologian, at least in the technical sense of that word. However, those who know the Wesley corpus well have begun to reevaluate his theological contributions, especially given current developments in praxis-oriented theological thinking, which is more congenial to Wesley’s frame of mind. The praxis which continually interested Mr. Wesley was what we usually refer to as evangelism—although we should note that it is anachronistic to speak of evangelism during Wesley’s time, since the term in its current sense is largely the product of the late nineteenth century.

Wesley’s thought helps us understand the natural connection between the practice of evangelism and serious, praxis-oriented theology. For Wesley, evangelism and theology are connected at the roots. Even Wesley’s vocabulary for describing the theological enterprise evokes the topic of evangelism as we might define it today: a set of intentional activities or experiences that enables people to be consciously and conscientiously Christian. Wesley often writes, as he
does in his “Letter to Dr. Middleton,” that there is only one thing that really matters: “genuine Christianity, whether we speak of it as a principle in the soul, or as a scheme or system of doctrine.” The dominant note in Wesley’s theology was therefore soteriological, that is, concerned with the universality of the gospel claim: “The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance” (2 Pet. 3:9). Referring to this verse in his Explanatory Notes on the New Testament, Wesley emphasizes that one should not conclude that “the time fixed for it [salvation] were past... [for it] shall surely be fulfilled in its season.” Salvation is the only real issue, and God will bring it to pass.

The particular question that concerns us in this essay is the Wesleyan account of how God brings it to pass and what role, if any, we have in God’s saving activity. The classic Protestant principle holds that salvation is sola fide and sola gratia, but the Wesleyan expression of this truth recognizes that salvation does not occur in individual isolation or in an existential vacuum (i.e., faith and grace only, not faith and grace all alone). There is a crucial difference between soteriology as a meta-theological category which may be explored only by scholastic methods and soteriology as a living reality—God’s love enfleshed—that demands a synergistic working among creatures and Creator. The latter is clearly the Wesleyan vision.

In order to understand the nature of salvation as a living reality, it is necessary to use theological terms, specifically, a doctrinal category (prevenient grace) and a praxis category (deeds of mercy). This is not as straightforward a task as it might seem, however, since theologians since Wesley have often misconstrued the meaning of both terms, causing difficulties in appreciating the unique Wesleyan heritage of mission-oriented theology/theologically-oriented mission. I will suggest that evangelism rooted in the Wesleyan traditions would be better served by doing evangelism as far as we can in Wesley’s own style: by connecting the theological precept of prevenient grace to “deeds of mercy,” which, as Mr. Wesley was fond of saying, were to be desired above deeds of piety.

The Problem

We begin with the difficulties involved in defining prevenient grace adequately. Wesley used the phrase prevenient grace, or “preventing
grace” as he was prone to express it, quite literally (it is based on the Latin praevenire, to come before, to go before, or that which precedes). In order for us to see how we reach the set of conclusions described above about Wesley’s theological use of this concept, we look first at how prevenient grace has been defined by scholars in the twentieth century. We find that every writer makes an almost exclusively voluntaristic application of this term, referring to prevenient grace primarily as God’s restoration of human freedom from the limitations imposed on human will and action by “original sin.” The accent falls, then, on the power of God that enables the sinner to repent. This definition assumes that humanity’s sinful estrangement from God renders every person incapable of responding to salvation overtures apart from God’s “enabling grace.” It is this tendency to abstraction, making grace an abstract, static conception of God’s “power,” that concerns us here.

Now granted, the most prominent Wesleyan theologians in the twentieth century have defined prevenient grace in a way that reveals the extent to which deeds of mercy (and acts of charity) have informed Wesleyan practice. But even scholars writing on Wesley’s social ethics have given way to an abstract understanding of prevenience—tending in this case to err in the opposite direction by emphasizing human moral agency. In fact, they all do what virtually every Methodist since the rise of the “social gospel” has tended to do: confuse the deeds of mercy with the gospel that offers regeneration and transformation. This is a mistake Mr. Wesley never made. To appreciate Wesley’s firm grasp on these subtleties, we will survey the latest attempts to describe the theological dimension of evangelism in Wesleyan terms using the language of prevenience. All these positions are interesting and important in themselves, but they pale in comparison with a fresh reading of Wesley himself.

**Significant Twentieth-Century Interpreters of Prevenience**

*Colin Williams.* In reference to the “very great significance” of prevenience in Wesley’s soteriology, Colin Williams implies that, to a certain extent, prevenience qualifies Wesley’s emphasis on total depravity:

> Thus because God is directly at work within even the natural man, man is responsible; not because he is naturally free to do
God's will, but because he resists God's grace. This is not to say that this prevenient grace, apparent in the conscience, is enough to enable man to turn to God in faith. Further gifts of grace are necessary to enable man to come to repentance and then to justification.4

The sense of this is that God has taken the initiative to intersect with life in such a way that the natural human inclinations away from God do not preclude a sensitivity to the things of God. Williams carries his logic to its soteriological conclusion, namely, that prevenient grace's restoration of human freedom to respond to its own "revelations" as well as to promptings from God may lead to "a response to the [prevenient] grace within us bring[ing] a further gift of grace," resulting in faith and justification.5 Williams knows quite well that this entrance into reconciling and justifying grace is not without its obstacles, especially the problem of human sinfulness. But for this, too, prevenient grace has an adequate answer. Prevenient grace may bring the person to recognize his or her sinful condition and enable one to do works of repentance, even prior to an actual saving faith.6 Williams sees this gracious enabling as potentially comprehensive, enabling one not only to "hear" the demands of the Law but also to "see" the promise of the gospel. Further, by the "hearing and seeing made possible by prevenient grace, man is given the freedom to accept or reject the redeeming grace which enables him to walk in the way of salvation."7 For Colin Williams Wesley's concept of prevenient grace is properly defined as the restoration of freedom to respond to God's offer of grace, to come to repentance and its fruits, and to accept or reject the gift of justifying faith when freely and universally offered by a seeking and saving God.

William Cannon. The position of Colin Williams—like that of Harmon Smith,8 whom we do not discuss here—is similar to, but not quite the same as, the perspective taken by William Cannon.9 For Cannon, repentance—defined as the coming to an acute awareness of sinfulness and an emerging desire for faith and pardon—is necessary before saving faith is possible, because of sin and depravity.10 Under the rubric "The Key to the Solution: Free Human Responsiveness," Cannon teaches that prevenient grace enables the sinner to come to repentance, even "to the point of producing works meet for repentance" as evidence of sincere desire for faith.11 Indeed,
prevenient grace is the source of a “positive” or “active human responsiveness” which makes one able to cooperate with God in the reception of faith. When God freely offers the gift of salvation to the repentant, there is a grace-enabled freedom to decide whether to resist or not to resist, “whether he will accept or reject God’s offer.” In this manner Cannon keeps a delicate constructive tension between divine initiative and human response, although I would prefer that he refrained from language that seems to make the individual the center of the issue: “The key to the solution of this difficulty must be sought in man himself.” Cannon knows that we cannot save ourselves, but he does not hesitate to assert “that man is the sole determinative factor in the decision of his own justification.” John Wesley would not like this human centered language!

At this juncture there are two important points to be made. Both Williams and Cannon are correct that, for Wesley, prevenient grace is related to the issue of conviction for sin and the ensuing repentance (or the lack thereof). This insight accounts for our belief that God will hold the individual accountable. However, these interpretations are still inadequate on two fronts: they describe neither the way prevenient grace leads to repentance nor any recognizable human context in which this “process” may be plausibly said to take place. Both Cannon and Williams declare the personal freedom and ability through grace to respond to grace, without showing either the nature of that freedom or the nature and context of the penitent one’s response to grace.

In a journal article derived from his doctoral dissertation, Earl P. Crow asserts that “preventing grace is communicated to all men for the recovery of that which they lost in the Adamic fall.” This recovery includes freedom as the basis for repentance and doing the works of repentance prior to faith and justification. This, however, is not very helpful in addressing our concerns. Determining what was “lost in the Adamic fall,” let alone its recovery by prevenient grace, asks for even more speculative thought than we encountered in Cannon and Williams.

We encounter a slightly different nuance in the writings of Lycurgus Starkey, who speaks specifically of the role of the Holy Spirit in relation to prevenient grace. Starkey makes reference to restoring powers of discernment and strengthening the human will. Similarly, Harald Lindström uses language about
foundation of liberty and personal enabling, and Robert Monk, looking at how Wesley was influenced by Puritan sources, interprets him very similarly to the preceding scholars, making special reference to prevenient grace's restoration of a “measure” of responsibility for personal salvation by “enabling” the individual (through a measured restoration of the corrupt will) to accept or reject “God’s saving grace when offered.” All in all, we are still left with a supremely theoretical and speculative version of the nature and process of prevenient grace.

J. Weldon Smith. Although, like our other interpreters, J. Weldon Smith wants to preserve a relationship between prevenient grace and human freedom, he differs from almost all others in that he sees prevenient grace is the human ability to discern between good and evil. It is also the source of that moderate degree of freedom in fallen humanity which makes it possible for one to avoid actual sins and to feel a personal sense of guilt for any sins that are committed. Smith argues that this definition of prevenience should be properly viewed as a “formal” grace which, in providing the possibility for not sinning, renders the individual guilty and responsible for acts of sin. However, he does not regard the dynamic of prevenient grace as a preparation for or an anticipation of faith. This “formal grace” contains an ingredient of “active grace” given to every creature which grants freedom when he or she subsequently receives the gift of saving grace. Freedom in this case means the ability to turn away from continued sinning and to turn toward God, thus cooperating in the plan of salvation. Smith’s version of preventing grace, as the basis of a measure of freedom, is in fact a freedom which involves not our coming to faith but our coming to sanctification after faith. In the end Smith offers no solution to the question of how the unregenerate receive or attain saving grace. While this is a suggestive line of reasoning, it should be noted that this is a much more restricted use of prevenience than Wesley himself would endorse. While he would grant that prevenience continually goes before us on the via salutis, he probably would not be very enthused about the notion that it simply picks up some time after justification.

Robert Cushman. Cushman’s creative use of prevenience also differs significantly from treatments we have seen so far, although it has
remained a “minority opinion” among modern interpreters of Wesley. Cushman suggests that prevenient grace in Wesley should not be viewed primarily as an enabling grace related to correcting the corrupted will; it is, rather, the foundation for an authentic human self-knowledge, for a consciousness of personal sin. The gift of prevenient grace enables a person to recognize the good and be aware of one’s own distance from that good, and, indeed, to recognize his or her impotence to overcome our sinful predicament. This grace-enabled consciousness gives rise to an increasing sense of uneasiness that culminates in a despair of ever rescuing oneself. In this despair one turns to hearing the Spirit’s call to faith. In Cushman’s scheme, faith and justification are contingent not upon graciously empowered cooperation in accepting the offered salvation but rather upon the “annihilation” of all the individual’s vain attempts to secure them on one’s own. The role of prevenient grace is to lead one through despair to a state of non-resistance to saving grace not by giving the individual a personal freedom to cease resisting but by convincing him or her of the helplessness and inadequacy of independent human effort.

This is a very perceptive nuance on Cushman’s part, and it constitutes a corrective shift from the voluntarism that pervaded Methodist theology by the middle of the twentieth century. Cushman avoids treating prevenience as an abstraction. Furthermore, he includes a theologically defined context for the process of salvation: God has instrumentally (through a messenger or otherwise) taken the initiative, and human beings are therefore confronted with and the need to make a choice. Other theologians have been less successful in conveying the dialectical nature of this “gospel moment.” Methodist theologians had increasingly resolved Wesley’s penchant for holding two disparate things in tension (in this case “divine initiative” and “human response”) in the direction of human ability. In criticizing these views, David Shipley even suggested that they had come very near to a practical denial of the depravity and inability of human nature. What Shipley only implied Granville Henry made explicit when he asserted that the evolution in interpreting prevenience had resulted in positions “identical” with the view of natural free will. In the most comprehensive treatment of this issue, Robert Chiles has described how the movement was in its final stages going from “free grace to free will.” The practical result of this can be seen in various
forms of evangelism and revivalism in which the call to repentance is couched in terms of “you can if you will” so “come on down.”

Albert Outler. Of course, we must not neglect the thinking of the person who has written and spoken more about Wesley’s theology in the twentieth century than anyone else, Albert Outler. In a volume that addresses evangelism and Wesley’s thought, Outler reminds us, “The Wesleyan version of a Christian synergism begins and ends with God’s sovereign grace, but it also includes man’s divinely created free will, limited but real—corrupted and perverted by sin but never cancelled.” It is crucial to notice the emphasis on God’s sovereign grace that is held in tension with “man’s divinely created free will.” Like Wesley, Outler is trying to say two things at once; and not having fully succeeded the first time, he tries again: “God’s prevenient grace is so crucial. It is not just that God loves us no matter what . . . but that his grace surrounds and anticipates us in every crisis, from birth to death, creating and holding open possibilities of growth and healing and self-fulfillment. No man is on his own, and no man can save himself or anybody else.” In a subsequent publication Outler fleshes out his interpretation of Wesley’s passion “to find a third alternative to Pelagian optimism and Augustinian pessimism with respect to the human flaw and the human potential.” With characteristic lucidity Outler points out, “What is original here is Wesley’s stout upholding of the sovereignty of grace but not its irresistibility. . . . Sinners can do literally nothing to save themselves. . . . The chief function of prevenient grace, therefore, is to stir the sinner to repentance (which is to say, to a valid self-understanding of his/her sinfulness).”

Although it seems to me that repentance should have a less psychological and a more theological definition than “valid self-understanding,” Outler does hasten to add in the next paragraph that what happens in repentance is the realization “that it is God, for Christ’s sake, who can and who has forgiven all our sins and broken the power of sin and death in our hearts.” Thus, Outler has tried to hold together the two poles of the Wesleyan dialectic, and he has also succeeded in not speaking of prevenient in merely an abstract manner. What he has not done any more satisfactorily than the other theologians, however, is to contextualize the area of prevenient’s activity.

Rob Staples. Rob Staples takes this entire discussion and gives it a decidedly Wesleyan “spin” by placing it in the context of the
sacraments. While this does not address specifically our primary topic of evangelism, we must not forget that John Wesley taught that the Eucharist as well as baptism were "converting ordinances." Wesley's sacramental soteriology is perhaps best summed up in his insistence "that the Lord's Supper was ordained by God to be a means of conveying to men either preventing, or justifying, or sanctifying grace, according to their several necessities." Viewed in this context, three statements from Staples speak powerfully about his view of Wesley's soteriological application of prevenient grace: "The doctrine of prevenient grace holds that there is a continuity between nature and grace rather than a radical discontinuity. . . . It is important that we understand that it is God's prevenient grace that saves us. . . . It has performed its ultimate function when it brings us to Christ for justification." Thus, even—or we should say especially—in the sacramental context, prevenient grace has the characteristic Wesleyan usage of being salvation-centered. For God may well use the context of the sacraments to do this saving work in us. For our purposes in this essay, the important point is that the sacrament itself is a ministry of prevenient grace and may, indeed, become the means of justifying and sanctifying grace.

Randy Maddox. If we change our focus of attention to the "deeds of mercy" arena, it is incumbent on us to look closely at the work of Randy Maddox, specifically his comprehensive treatise on Wesley's theology, Responsible Grace. In Maddox's interpretation of Wesley, we encounter what I believe to be "more true" to Wesley than to perhaps any of the previous perspectives prior to Staples, namely, the location of prevenience in the arena of the relationship between the savior and the sinner, and especially in Holy Spirit-centered, christological, and moral terms. While it is true that none of the scholars mentioned would deny the comprehensive theological centering of prevenience, they are not, it seems to me, careful enough in making this explicit. Early in his analysis, Maddox lays the foundation for this soteriological centering of prevenience by pointing out that "in keeping with his epistemological commitments, Wesley denied that humans have an innate idea of God stamped on our souls" and that "no one has access to God apart from the gracious restoration of Divine self-revelation"; and this restoration takes "place in a continuum of progressively more definitive expressions, beginning with a basic knowledge" and reaching "definitive expression in

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The topic here is knowledge of God, and the point is that without the initiative of prevenient grace the creature would have no ability to know or recognize divine activity. The word God would be merely a cipher. On this point Maddox is one with virtually all interpreters of Wesley, that this dilemma is due to original sin.  

Maddox is careful to distinguish two ways in which Wesley appropriates the category of prevenient grace to impart saving knowledge: "a broader and a narrower sense, reflecting different traditions upon which he drew." However, rather than speaking in abstract, voluntaristic terms as so many have done, Maddox senses Wesley's soteriological predilection when he says, "In its broad sense, Wesley invoked the prevenience of grace to affirm that every salutary human action or virtue, from the earliest expression of faith to the highest degree of sanctification, is grounded in the prior empowering of God's grace." And in the narrower use of prevenient grace, Wesley is designating a "specific Arminian doctrine about God's saving work in fallen humanity prior to justification . . . to counteract the logical necessity with which his affirmation of total depravity seemed to lead to the Calvinist doctrine of predestination," which, of course, was an abomination to Mr. Wesley.  

While Wesley could make a formal separation between these two uses of prevenience and even though there is a chronological distinction in usage, too, depending on whether you are reading the "early" or "later" Wesley, Wesley's intent was to integrate the more narrow sense of grace as forensic justification with the broader sense of grace as the cleansing power of God that heals our polluted nature and empowers us to grow in that saving grace:

By "the grace of God" is sometimes to be understood that free love, that unmerited mercy, by which I, a sinner, through the merits of Christ am now reconciled to God. But in this place it rather means that power of God the Holy Ghost which worketh in us both to will and to do of his good pleasure. As soon as ever the grace of God (in the former sense, his pardoning love) is manifested to our soul, the grace of God (in the latter sense, the power of his Spirit) takes place therein. And now we can perform through God, what to [our natural selves] was impossible . . . a recovery of the image of God, a renewal of soul after His likeness.
Maddox's well-nuanced insights into the nature of Wesley's soteriology are reflected in his comment on this sermon: "Wesley's integration of the two dimensions of grace was not merely a conjunctive one. The emphasis on pardon was incorporated into the larger theme of empowerment for [salvific] healing. Thereby, God's unmerited forgiveness became instrumental to the healing of our corrupt nature [and] ... the Christological basis of grace was made more evident..." The estranged creature in need of redemption received not some abstract or metaphysical property mysteriously added to the volition but an expression of God's renewed and restoring presence in his or her life, which initiated a saving relationship. One of Wesley's favorite verses about this increasing renewal in the image of God is 2 Pet. 1:4: "Ye may become partakers of the divine nature." On this verse he comments in his Notes that this means believers are "being renewed in the image of God, and having communion with him, so as to dwell in God and God in you." This is the loving purpose of God's preventing grace, which initiates, patiently and continually sustains, and will ultimately consummate God's saving work in us.

Wesley and the Deeds of Mercy

As opposed to virtually all his interpreters, John Wesley consistently emphasized the practical results of grace. In an account describing the process of evangelization, which includes reference to those who later "fall away," Wesley asserts, "All this may easily be accounted for. At first curiosity brings many hearers: At the same time God draws many by his preventing grace to hear his word, and comforts them in hearing." This last phrase about "comforting them" would seem to imply that they were "discomfited" (reminiscent of Cushman's point about prevenient grace giving rise to feelings of salvific inability and helplessness), but it is interesting to notice the other dimension here—a both/and dialectic between the "natural" and the "gracious." There is the "natural curiosity" of some and the "gracious drawing" of others. Wesley goes on to add a third dimension of instrumentality: "One then tells another." In other words, there are at least three dimensions of instrumentality that bring people to the hearing of the gospel: (1) natural curiosity; (2) the prevenient leadings of God; and (3) invitations from other other seekers for salvation. Wesley draws his
conclusion: "By this means, on the one hand, curiosity spreads and increases, and, on the other, drawings of God's Spirit touch more hearts; and many of them more powerfully than before." This meaning of the last phrase, "more powerfully than before," is ambiguous. Is it a reference to the possibility that there were previous occasions or ministries of prevenience? I believe that this is precisely what Wesley means because he knew of a multitude of ministries of prevenience that were awakening thousands to the universal call of the gospel—deeds of mercy.

In our effort to understand Wesley's theology of prevenience we have now made the crucial transition from volitional abstraction to salvific application. But the picture is not complete until we add the dimension of Wesley's teachings on the role of prevenience in deeds of mercy, more commonly called good works. When thoughtful believers engage in acts of charity, a very practical question will ultimately arise: What part do these good works play in salvation, both of the recipient of these kindnesses and of the charitable believer who offers them?

The first fundamental premise for Wesley is that, in harmony with the teachings of the magisterial Reformers, all the works of the natural or sinful and unjustified humans are "un holy and sinful themselves" and that "only corrupt fruit grows on a corrupt tree." Wesley's stated logic on this point is that deeds derive their quality from the nature of the one performing the act; deeds are evil because the individual is evil: "The heart of man is desperately wicked." Wesley's metaphorical expression is that individual sins were only the leaves and fruit growing on an evil tree. Through the Fall human moral likeness to God was completely lost. Wesley's assumption is clear: "Thou canst do nothing but sin, 'till thou art reconciled to God."

With regard to the salvific value of any good works, this corruption of human nature is irreparable apart from God's gracious intervention. People cannot change their nature through personal striving or any religious or moral effort. The "free will" of the "natural person" is free only to sin in everything: "Such is the freedom of the will—free only to evil." In the face of the self-evident truth that people of no faith still do good works, Wesley's perspective is that before God, who is ultimately the judge of all righteousness, all morality, all righteousness, mercy, and truth that possibly exist outside the Christian faith are worth nothing in regard to salvation. And so while Wesley is able to proclaim forthrightly, "God works, therefore you can
work... God works, therefore you must work," not only are these of no salvific effect, the person dead in trespasses and sin neither sees nor desires to please God by doing good works. In such a state, exhortations to righteousness-seeking activity fall on deaf ears.

Although his specific intent is not the same as ours in this essay, Manfred Marquardt's words help to sharpen the issue with regard to evangelism: "Since the essential significance of God's will is hidden, the individual can not perceive the discrepancy between God's claim upon his creature and the individual's ethical behavior, nor is the creature aware of being subject to God's judgment." There is only one solution to this damnable state of affairs for Wesley, and that is, of course, prevenient grace.

This contextualization of prevenient grace in human activity, with the pursuant question of self-righteousness and personal salvation, illustrates a vital point about the theological nature of evangelism. Early Methodists were very effective evangelists because of their skills in this area, and we can learn much from them at this point. But before we draw any conclusions, we need to see how Wesley's evangelism embodied his theological premises about the relationship between grace and deeds of mercy. As Wesley found ways to incarnate grace, we can see the abstract notions of grace recede into the background of his thinking.

While some may consider this nothing more than a rhetorical question, allow me to refer to a set of ideas and plans that were put into practice early in Wesley's spiritual pilgrimage and carried out faithfully for sixty years thereafter. In a long letter to Richard Morgan, an Oxford peer and member of the "Holy Club," Wesley gives an apologia for the Oxford Methodists by describing rather comprehensively the charitable activities of the Club and their rationale for engaging in them. This apologetic is accomplished by means of four rather comprehensive sets of questions, of which the following might be considered highlights:

1. Whether it does not concern all men of all conditions to imitate him [Christ] as much as they can who went about doing good?

   Whether all Christians are not concerned in that command, "While we have time, let us do good to all men"?

   Whether we shall not be more happy hereafter the more good we do now?
Whether we can be happy at all hereafter unless we have, according to our power, fed the hungry, clothed the naked, visited those that are sick and in prison, and made all these actions subservient to a higher purpose, even the saving souls from death?

II. Whether upon these considerations we may not try to do good to our acquaintance?

Particularly whether we may not try to convince them of the necessity of being Christian?

Whether of the consequent necessity of being scholars?

Whether we may not try to persuade them to confirm and increase their industry by communicating [taking Communion] as often as they can?

III. Whether upon the considerations above mentioned we may not try to do good to those that are hungry, naked, or sick? In particular whether if we know any necessitous family, we may not give them a little food, clothes, or physic [medical care] as they want?

Whether we may not give them, if they can read, a Bible, [or] Common Prayer Book . . . ?

Whether we may not enforce upon them more especially the necessity of private prayer, and of frequenting the church and sacraments?

Whether we may not contribute what little we are able toward having their children clothed and taught to read?

IV. Lastly, whether upon the considerations above mentioned we may not try to do good to those that are in prison? In particular whether we may not release such well-disposed as remain in prison for small sums?

Whether we may not, as we have opportunity, explain and enforce these upon them especially with respect to public and private prayer and the blessed sacrament?44

From the preceding it is obvious that John Wesley never thought about any separation between social gospel and spiritual gospel, because it evidently takes both dimensions before you have the whole gospel. Not listed among any of the deeds of charity above, which are clearly seen as grace-filled deeds of mercy, is one final activity of Wesley’s for which he was most notorious: field preaching44. It was there that the Spirit of God spoke to people who had never heard of
baptism or sacrament, or who at least had never considered that it was meant for them. In the voice and countenance of Wesley the hearers came face to face with the seeking love of God, and they were graciously awakened. Truly this was a ministry of prevenient grace.

Conclusion

Evangelism “Wesley style” begins incarnationally, with direct involvement in the lives of those being “preveniently graced” toward entrance into the kingdom of God. The point is this: Deeds of mercy no more constitute the whole gospel than prevenient grace can be equated with justifying and sanctifying grace. But deeds of mercy have a legitimate place in a Wesleyan theological understanding of salvation—and it is at the beginning of the journey of faith. Indeed, it is this “concretizing,” “existentializing,” or “incarnationalizing” of grace in the deeds of mercy, the praxis of love and mercy, that is most profoundly instrumental in bringing people to faith in Christ as the Savior of the world.

A word of rejoinder is in order here. A good beginning may be half the battle, even in the journey of faith. But seeing the gospel in action via deeds of mercy is not the same as living in the full vitality of and enacting the power of the gospel. In the end, people have not been evangelized if they have only participated in the praxis of prevenient grace—and this holds equally for the recipients as well as for the purveyors of prevenient grace.

In Wesley’s theology all of the deeds of mercy should, it seems to me, be theologically defined as ministries of prevenient grace—the beginning of salvation. This contextualization does more than simply remove the doctrine of prevenient grace from the realm of the abstract, a decidedly Wesleyan move. In face-to-face encounter with the gospel in its social dimension, grace becomes the power and presence of God. Grace has been incarnationalized into a helping, healing, challenging, convicting, calling presence. This is an offering of salvation that every human being can see and understand.

This way of conceiving prevenient grace is, of course, not offered to replace the more meta-theological concept of the enabling power of God to the sinner; however, it is to suggest that conceiving of the call to faith in this manner transcends the abstract and rather impersonal.
idea of “getting saved” that usually is understood as evangelism—
handing a “gospel” tract to strangers on a street corner and asking
them if they would like to accept Christ as their personal Lord and
Savior.

Contrast these actions with Wesley’s regular visitations in the
Oxford jails, his never failing to offer a prayer and suggestion to the
prisoners that they are “worthy” to participate in the further means of
grace—Holy Communion. Compare the distant, sanitized preaching
of modern tele-evangelists with Wesley’s sunrise field preaching to the
Bristol coal miners. Witness also the food for the hungry, the
schooling for the underprivileged, and the interest-free loans for the
broke but enterprising and responsible. Here is no abstraction about
the power of God; this is the power of God seeking and saving the lost
of the world. Here one confronts the concrete demands that leave
every recipient of these ministries of prevenience “cold” in the
realization that there is indeed a realm of righteousness which
produces righteousness and that they are not yet citizens of this realm.
These ministries of prevenience are the incarnate clothing of
aggressive love demonstrating that the realm of God’s righteousness
produces righteousness that is actively seeking to cure the systemic,
life-destroying evil that inhabits our world. And these deeds of mercy
were not done anonymously!

But the amelioration of the social needs is not all of the gospel, any
more than prevenient grace is justifying and sanctifying grace.
Meeting physical, emotional, and social needs may be defined
theologically as ministries of prevenience. This incarnationalizing of
grace should never be done by the Christian without being bathed in
prayer and intercession that the deeds of mercy may indeed become
personal salvation deeds of prevenience for the recipients of this
awakening grace. And in all true humility we offer to the recipient a
prayer that they may experience knowledge of the true giver of all
righteousness. Then while we are offering God’s graciousness, we
might even feel free to offer the most gracious of all invitations: the
converting ordinance of Holy Communion. This would be a most
Wesleyan form of evangelism.
Notes

PLEASE NOTE: No attempt has been made to render citations in these sources more amenable to inclusive language. The reader is requested to insert person or another appropriate noun or pronoun when the word man appears.


3. Although now somewhat dated, the most comprehensive discussion of prevenient is Charles A. Rogers, "The Concept of Prevenient Grace in the Theology of John Wesley" (Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 1967).


5. Ibid., 43.

6. Ibid., 59, 61.

7. Ibid., 54.


10. Ibid., 109-10.

11. Ibid., 113.

12. Ibid., 114-17.

13. Ibid., 105.

14. Ibid., 117.

15. In his Duke dissertation Rogers also recognizes these deficiencies (pp. 10-11), but his attempts to provide clarification remain in the abstract realm of enlightening natural reason, thereby, it seems to me, exacerbating the tendencies to make the individual the center.


27. Ibid., 37, 38.


29. Ibid., 1:280. See also the 1746 sermon “The Means of Grace,” *Sermons* (Outler) 1:376-400.


32. Ibid., 74-93.

33. Ibid., 84-85.


35. Maddox, 85.


45. The references are multitudinous in the Wesley corpus, but the following are representative: *Journal* (Heitzenrater), 21:427, 4 Sept. 1763; 22:106, 30 Sept. 1767; 22:348, 6 Sept. 1772; 23:298, 15 Mar. 1784. For a broader discussion of field preaching and the “problems” it caused Wesley, see my discussion in *The Limits of Love Divine* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1989), esp. 32-33, 112, 138-9, 141-4, 156.
Systematic Theology and Ethics in the Wesleyan Tradition: Some Methodological Reflections

After almost 150 years of Methodist preaching in Lutheran Scandinavia, research has shown that the message of the United Methodist Church can hardly be characterized as Wesleyan (Dysjeland 1987). But the fact is that this message never has been purely Wesleyan. In Norway, Lutheran theology and the Holiness tradition have been influential on Methodist preaching from the beginning. From the 1930s on, these elements have proven to be more influential in Methodism than have its Wesleyan roots (Meistad 1994).

In 1992 I published a textbook in systematic theology and ethics for the United Methodist seminaries in Scandinavia. My intention was to offer to the students an alternative foundation for their theological reflection and to replace some of the Lutheran books which were being used to educate UM pastors in Scandinavia. The time has come to revise that text. The UMC Annual Conference in Sweden then invited me to write a catechism for adults in the Wesleyan tradition. It

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seemed to me that both projects called for a thorough reconsideration
of the Wesleyan approach to systematic theology and ethics.

This task is not limited to the message of Wesleyan theology and
ethics. It also deals with the methods used for theological reflection,
including 1) the formulation of basic issues, 2) the philosophical or
theological frames of reference used for this reflection, as well as 3) a
consideration of its primary sources. Scandinavian and the
Continental European theologians must also engage in a comparative
discussion with Lutheran methodology.

So far, however, this comprehensive methodological analysis seems
to be nonexistent. The aim of this paper, therefore, is to analyze
Wesley’s methodology and the forms with which he presented
his theology. While Wesley never explicitly discusses his
theological methodology, it developed over time and is
organically integrated into his experiences of his personal
religious journey as well as into the development of the
Methodist movement. Consequently, his theological method
cannot be understood without reference to his activities put
within a historical perspective.

But the notion of a textbook poses a lingering question for anyone
who wishes to understand and apply Wesley’s brand of thinking in
contemporary life. Wesley never wrote a systematic presentation of his
theology in the form of a textbook—and there is reason to believe that
this came from a deliberate choice based on Wesley’s understanding
of the character of theology as distinct from philosophy. This implies
that he renounced the use of the methodology of classical systematic
theology. Should we conclude from this that a systematic presentation
of the Wesleyan theology and ethics in the form of a textbook is in
itself a deviation from the Wesleyan tradition? In that case, how shall
we present a Wesleyan theology and ethics for those who want to
teach and learn it in our time?

Wesley’s Use of Classical Christian Doctrines

In a significant but unpublished paper, Thomas Langford\(^1\) establishes
that Wesley’s mode of theological reflection was to apply classical
Christian doctrines to specific situations. His theological method was
“holistic and interactive” (Langford n.d., 8). Rather than debating the
principal doctrines of classical Christianity, he assumes and retains

\(^1\) Thomas Langford, unpublished paper.
this doctrinal inheritance and applies it to the concrete situation and condition of his hearers. To Langford, it is this evenly balanced relationship between theology and the context in which the gospel is heard that is distinctive of Wesley’s theology. Langford also indicates that later Wesleyan theology has found this balance difficult to maintain.

Wesley never attempted to codify a universal Methodist message valid for all times and in every situation. Nor did he attempt to construct a contextual theology based upon particular conditions of human experience. He also resisted the division between theology and practice by holding them together. Langford describes Wesley’s position: “Theology underwrites Christian proclamation and Christian living; Christian experience, as faithful living, helps set emphases in theological construction. Each requires the other, each enriches the other, each flourishes only as it is bound to the other” (Langford, 20).

Consequently, Wesley’s theology and methodology are dynamic in nature, given the continuous application of the gospel, which is preserved by Christian tradition, to new experiences and contexts. In Lutheran terms, however, Wesley is committing a primary theological error: he is confusing law and gospel.

Creation and Salvation in a Theological Methodology

In the Lutheran context the issue of theological method largely deals with the relationship between law and gospel. For Luther himself, “law” and “gospel” are concepts of great symbolic significance, encompassing not only biblical law and gospel in the narrow sense but also salvation and creation, faith and works, and the nature of righteousness. At the heart of Luther’s theological method is a sharp distinction between the two (Meistad 1999). This distinction between law and gospel penetrates all aspects of Luther’s theology, soteriology, cosmology, and ethics. Luther begins his theological reflection by distinguishing “works” from “faith” as a condition of salvation. But some works are necessary, however; society will always depend on the works of the civil stations and offices. These works, therefore, belong to the domain of creation, but they are not required for salvation. This leads to Luther’s doctrine of the two kingdoms, the secular and the spiritual. In light of this theological methodology the most serious
theological mistake is to confuse the two kingdoms, because this threatens both God's sovereignty in salvation and God's created orders. A dualistic distinction between the spiritual and the earthly therefore ensues:

two kinds of righteousness—
• the Christian's own righteousness in the secular kingdom, and
• the alien righteousness of the spiritual kingdom, in which Christ's righteousness is imputed to the Christian through faith apart from works (the Christian as *simul iustus et peccator*);

two kinds of works, of which neither is a condition of salvation—
• the works in the stations and offices of the secular kingdom, when the Christian is "in-office," and
• the works for the Christian's neighbor in the spiritual kingdom as fruits of faith, when the Christian is "in-person";

two kinds of human wills—
• the free will in the secular kingdom, and
• the will in bondage in sin in the spiritual kingdom;

two kinds of ethical recognition—
• the moral instruction offered in the secular kingdom by human reason, the imperial law, and the natural law, and
• the enlightenment of the Spirit in the spiritual kingdom;

two kinds of governments—
• the law or "the sword" in the secular kingdom, that is, the right of the civil authorities to punish the disobedient, and
• the grace of the gospel in the spiritual kingdom.

Luther's list of dichotomies continues to the very heart and soul of the Christian person, who is spiritual and secular at the same time. This is spelled out in all of Luther's works (*LW*)—for instance, in his comments on violence as dealt with in Matt. 5:38-41 (*LW*, 21:109-10): "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; . . . and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile."

According to Luther, Christ's message in this passage, and indeed in the entire Sermon on the Mount, is exclusively directed to Christians-in-person and not to Christians-in-relation. The message applies only to the spiritual kingdom, and Luther even warns against its application in the secular kingdom. "Turning the other cheek"
would destroy the social order in the secular kingdom; clearly, it is applicable only in the spiritual kingdom.

Luther's distinction between works in the two kingdoms ultimately rests on the distinction between creation and salvation. When the law applies to creation (the "first" use of the law), human works are welcomed, but they contribute nothing to salvation. When the law applies to salvation, however, its only function is to inform the person that s/he is a corrupt sinner (the "second" use of the law, in the spiritual kingdom); coram Deo, in the presence of God, works are of no significance. The gospel and salvation relate exclusively to the spiritual kingdom.

Wesley's approach to Matt. 5:38-41 is different. He immediately identifies the acts prescribed by Christ as deriving from the inherent righteousness of the Christian, or the holiness of life (Meistad 1999, 178). To begin with, his hermeneutics indicates that Christ's words should be interpreted in their literal meaning. If the meaning is obscure, he consults parallel or other scriptures. Here he reads John 18:22-23, which recounts the trial against Christ and Christ's verbal protest against the accusations directed at him. However, the narrative continues to show that he does not act contrary to the physical violence against him. Wesley concludes that the interpretation of Matt. 5:38-41 cannot be literal, as if Christ were forbidding all verbal protests against violence (Notes, 34). Therefore, it is necessary to interpret the text in light of its application in a specific context, in this case Wesley's personal experience of persecution of the Methodist movement. Consequently, he develops explicit recommendations that the Methodists should protect themselves against persecution by taking their cases to the police authorities (cf Meistad 1999:114-116).

Two observations are important at this point. First, Wesley is not willing to abandon a literal interpretation of a scripture until he finds scriptures that indicate otherwise. He begins here by insisting that Christ's words on nonviolence are to be interpreted literally; although Christ in his trial formulated a kind of protest, he did not resist the violence that he experienced. Secondly, Wesley relates the scripture to his own context by using the scriptural parallels as a foundation for a protest against the persecution of the Methodists. Thus, he both maintains an absolutistic interpretation and relates scripture directly to his own situation as he experiences it.

Luther, too, interprets this scriptural issue in light of his context. However, based upon his distinction between creation and salvation,
he applies Christ's words to one limited sphere of life only, the spiritual. Wesley does not recognize that kind of distinction. His view that the actions prescribed by Christ are acts of social holiness shows that, for Wesley, the works of a Christian come out of salvation, not from the orders of creation. Furthermore, he believes that the Christian is empowered by God's grace to face up to the hard times of persecution.

While Luther's basic theological method distinguishes sharply between creation and salvation, Wesley unites the two. Like those of the Byzantine fathers, his theological reflections on salvation begin in God's goal for creation and not, like the Latin fathers, in the human fall in sin. Wesley does not share Luther's position that God's will for creation is embodied in the social order as such. On the contrary, Wesley held that the social structure may be sinful no less than persons. For this reason salvation may require changes in persons and in social structures. In my opinion, this is one of the most distinctive elements of his theological methodology.

Where Wesley shows a more positive attitude toward the law in connection with Christian life he is in opposition to Calvin no less than to Luther. Both Wesley and Calvin link the fulfillment of the law to sanctification. But while Calvin affirms the Christian's literal observation of the commandments, Wesley is more concerned with fulfilling its spirit. Besides, Wesley's approach to the law is not oriented to formal legal statutes. Any scripture may be interpreted as a part of the law when that scripture contains an imperative for Christian life. The same scripture may be interpreted as part of the gospel when it is seen as promise.

Consequently, Wesley establishes a hermeneutical dialectics between law and gospel, as observed in his interpretation of Matt. 5:17-20, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. . . . For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." Wesley here declares that there is no contradiction between law and gospel. Cross-referencing Christ's commandment of love, he clarifies his point that this commandment is not possible to fulfill apart from the promise of the gospel to be filled with divine life (WW, 1:554-5). His interpretation of the law is determined by his understanding of the gospel and not the gospel in light of the law. The dialectic established is one of commandment and promise. Like Luther, Wesley is
concerned to ensure an evangelical understanding of the law; however, he accomplishes this not by removing law from the realm of the Christian life but by interpreting the law in light of new life in God and empowerment by the Spirit.  

It follows that the twin concepts of law and gospel are just as significant to Wesley’s theological methodology as they are to Luther’s. But rather than distinguishing between creation and salvation, Wesley focuses on their interrelations. His dialectics between command and promise results directly from his strong eschatological and pneumatological orientation, which allows for the realization of the divine reality in everyday life. By seeing salvation as elaborated within the framework of cosmology, Wesley can assert that salvation extends to all aspects of created life.

Wesley’s Theological and Methodological Development

Wesley scholars have traditionally focused on Wesley’s personal, spiritual, and theological development leading up to May 24, 1738, the Aldersgate experience. It is only in the last couple of decades that scholars have looked at the considerable theological development in Wesley that took place after this date. This later development, in my opinion, is far more significant in dealing with the theological issues of contemporary Methodism. Up to 1738 Wesley’s theological development was formed by his personal spiritual struggle. From the release of the revival, following his open-air meetings in Bristol from 1739 on, his theological approach developed in response to the needs of the Methodist revival. The search for a pattern of development of Wesley’s theological method(s) cannot be dissociated from the needs of the revival movement.

Wesley’s theological methodology developed in four phases. These phases (shown in the table below) should not be understood as successive, self-contained stages that Wesley left behind as he moved on. Phase 1 did basically end after Wesley’s Aldersgate experience in 1738. But elements of Phase 2 remained through the phases to come, even as the focus moved to new aspects of his theology. In my estimation, therefore, this development is a matter of focus, or emphasis, rather than a change of substance. Furthermore, the event that caused a transition from one phase to another is just as interesting as the phase itself.

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**Phase 1: 1725-1738**

Wesley’s theological reflections started at the time of his first ordination, at which time he devoted himself seriously to Christian living. These efforts took shape within the context of Anglican moralism. Wesley became highly disciplined in his religious exercises, which included works of piety and works of mercy. His numerous engagements in social relief as well as his desire to become a missionary to the Native Americans had one basic motive, namely, to save himself. In this phase, Wesley’s soteriology was essentially semi-Pelagian; that is, he believed that if he dedicated all his life to God, God would add the grace necessary to salvation.
Phase 2: 1739-1750

In the initial phase of the Methodist movement Wesley’s theology was constructed on his experience of assurance of salvation, May 24, 1738: that salvation is full, free, and present, conditioned by Christ’s work for us. The focus is on the salvation of individual persons.

Not long after the revival began, however, Wesley found it necessary to clarify the differences between his own position and the antinomian interpretation of the Christian religion as professed by the Moravians of the Fetter Lane Society. His focus on Christ’s work for us was supplemented with Christ’s transforming work in us. Consequently, he laid a heavier emphasis on works of piety (the means of grace) as well as on works of mercy, understood as good works toward the Christian’s neighbor as the fruits of salvation. His concern to avoid antinomianism was expressed in many ways: (1) in the formulation of the General Rules of the Methodist societies, (2) its place on the agenda of the first annual conference, 1744, (3) his pamphlets on the issue, and (4) his addressing the issue of the law in two series of sermons around 1750, the 13 discourses on The Sermon on the Mount (1748 and 1750, in which the law was discussed more or less implicitly),10 and also in three sermons that explicitly dealt with the issue of the law (1750).11 For this reason it is natural to date a new phase beginning around 1750.

Phase 3: 1750-1770

In this phase Wesley increasingly emphasized the need for faith to bear fruit. God’s goal for salvation is not fulfilled with the salvation of the Christian as an individual soul, since God’s grace embraces the neighbor as well. The faith of sanctified Christians is expected to show up in their works. He supposed that the evils of society would be removed as Christian faith expressed itself in action. Obviously, by this stage his concern for social change had increased.12 But he was still operating within an individualistic framework, since he had not yet learned to contextualize grace as he did in the next phase. In this period Wesley, as a good representative of the era of the Enlightenment, engaged in the production of literature for popular education.13

The Wesleyan position against the antinomians was fully clarified by this stage. His positive attitude toward the law as an expression of God’s will for Christians was apparent as well.14 This third phase begins with statements at the Methodist annual conferences of 1744.
and 1745 to the effect that works are necessary to the Christian life, as are works of repentance (Outler 1964, 138, 148). The climax of this phase was reached with the statement of the Annual Conference, 1770, that works are necessary to salvation (Minutes, 1:96-97), after Wesley had stated that works are necessary to sanctification (Sermon 43, “The Scripture Way of Salvation,” IIW 2:164).

Phase 4: 1770-1791
At the beginning of the 1770s Wesley’s theological perceptions concerning the methods used to fight social evils changed significantly. Until this time, he had assigned the responsibility for social change to the good works performed by sanctified Christians. He then began to look for other means as well, namely, changes in the structures of society. Reflecting on the scarcity of provisions for the poor during the tough winter season of 1772-73, he called for Parliamentary action, such as regulations, laws, duties, and taxes. If enormous social problems were to be fought effectively, structural evils would have to be addressed using political and economic means.

What caused such a turnaround in his thinking? The most obvious reason was his disappointment over the great number of Methodists who made fortunes for themselves but failed to consider their neighbors in need. Wesley had to face the fact that an increasing number of rich Methodists took his advice on earning and saving money but disregarded his injunction to give to the poor. Giving to the poor—the only theologically significant part of the Methodist work ethic—simply did not work according to its author’s intentions.

Another reason was Wesley’s increasing emphasis on eschatology. Throughout his career as a revival preacher Wesley understood his personal role (as well as that of the Methodist movement) as an imitation of the messianic ministry of Christ, who regarded his own ministry as the fulfillment of the prophecies of Isaiah (61:1ff.). But at the end of his career as a preacher this eschatological emphasis came to dominate his sermons. Waiting for the coming kingdom of God, he envisaged the consummation as a cosmic renewal binding him to work for the present relief of people. Increasingly for Wesley, creation and its consummation in the kingdom of God became inseparable (Logan 1985, 363). Referring always to God’s original intention in creation, he envisioned a restored world in which peace and justice prevailed.
Additional Observations on the Phases

As I mentioned at the beginning of this article, these phases are constructed over against the general problem of tracing Wesley's theological development, which has not been heavily researched. My decision to draw a dividing line around 1750 is based on my own observations rather than on scholarly discussion. Following Ted Runyon's research on Wesley, the "Candler School" has opted for a dividing line of 1770 (see, for instance, Maddox 1994; Lee 1991; and Jennings, 1990). The later date is supported by Logan's suggestion that in his later sermons Wesley elaborated his inaugurated eschatology, which implies that his theological reflection had become more contextually oriented. Again, contrary to my suggestion, an old tradition affirms that Wesley remained a conservative all his life (for instance, Semmel 1974), which moots all proposed transition dates. Further research will verify or falsify the developmental phases suggested in this article.

If we return to our original question about the possibility of systematic and methodological discussions of Wesley's theology, then the issue of phases in his theological development has obvious implications. I am positive that a theological development can be documented. In that case a basically unanswerable question arises: Which phase reveals his "canonical" theology? It is probably more relevant to observe that the different phases seem tailored to different theological issues. The early phase addresses the question of personal salvation, and the later phases show progression in dealing with the social implications of salvation. This also applies to methodology; Wesley's theological evolution shows an increasing emphasis on the vital connection between theological reflection and social needs, whatever the topic at hand. In my estimation, this emphasis should be basic to contemporary Wesleyan theological methodology as well.

What Kind of Theologian Was Wesley?

The fact that Wesley does not discuss his methodology makes it necessary to draw this from his works, opening the question to various interpretations. But it also provides a creative challenge to Wesleyan theologians, who have greater freedom to explore the constructive
tension between the Wesleyan heritage and the contemporary context, whatever it might be.

One way to assess the theological presence of John Wesley, as we have seen, is to contrast his thought with that of Martin Luther. Although they worked in very different times and social contexts, the differences between their theological views result primarily from their choices to appropriate different strands of their common tradition. For example, Luther's and Wesley's distinct views on the relations between creation and salvation originate in the paradigmatic differences that exist between the Latin and Greek traditions of Christian theology (cf. Gonzalez 1989). Luther's theology and methodology are rooted mainly in the forensic theology of the Latin fathers, who conceived of God as a lawgiver and a judge, human persons as transgressors of the law, and salvation as forgiveness. Wesley's theology and methodology, on the other hand, come out of the Greek fathers' conception of God as shepherd, physician, and father, human persons as patients, and salvation as healing and participation in the nature of God. It follows from these differences that the Western tradition will operate with a dichotomy between the spiritual and the secular and with an eschatology that is oriented towards the future judgment and the consummation. The Greek tradition, on the other hand, will recognize that the divine reality is penetrating the secular and natural world and consequently that the eschatology is inaugurated. Anyone who wishes to interpret Wesley's theology and methodology adequately, as well as to participate in the future development of Wesleyan theology, ought to acknowledge the importance of the Greek tradition in Wesley's theology.

It is also important to assess correctly Wesley's rejection of classical theological methodology. Maddox has described Wesley's theological method succinctly: "He dealt with issues as they arose in his spiritual life or his ministry among his people; he dealt with them drawing on the sources and criteria most relevant to the particular situation or audience; and, he usually dealt only with the specific aspects of a doctrine at issue" (Maddox 1994:47). But this does not make Wesley a contextual theologian in the postmodern meaning of the term, allowing him to make the context as such one of his sources for theological reflection. Instead, his personal and historical context made demands on him and called forth a theological response. Like the fathers of Christian antiquity, Wesley developed his theology by dealing with issues that were raised in his specific historical situation.
Theology, in this case (as Langford has pointed out) refers to the classical theological issues and doctrines. Wesley’s theological practice offers a corrective to contextual and postmodern theologians who tend to reduce the significance of the Christian tradition in favor of the immediate context.

Wesley is neither a systematic nor a contextual theologian but a trinitarian one. The triune God and the fullness of God’s works are the basis of his theological reflection; God as creator, savior, and life-giver embraces the entire world with grace. The trinitarian focus in his theological system binds creation and salvation together; losing this trinitarian focus would put the unity of God’s essence at risk.

First and foremost, however, Wesley is a theologian of incarnation. His theology is rooted in the incarnation as a historical and theological fact. Wesley continuously probed for signs of God’s grace incarnated in specific persons and social-historical contexts; this is particularly evident in the fourth phase of his theological and methodological development. The basic question, How is God’s grace incarnated in the human, social, and natural world? is more than a theoretical exercise. Rather than deducing conclusions from philosophical a priori, he analyzes the experience of how God actually embraces persons and societies with love and transforms them.

With Grace and Experience as Basis

No theology may claim a Wesleyan heritage unless it affirms as its focal points God’s grace and the experience of it. Maddox (1994:18) expresses this basic orienting perspective as “responsible grace.” God’s initiative in salvation is obvious, but the human response is necessary as well. I believe this is a necessary starting point for the quest for Wesley’s theological method.  

But it is also the key to a contemporary theology forged in the Wesleyan tradition. In writing of Wesley, Maddox presupposes that salvation is both experienced and realized in human life and society. This insight has deep roots in our Christian past: the biblical authors offered accounts of their experiences of God’s actions, and centuries of church tradition shows how Christians’ experiences have been interpreted in light of the scriptures. Because of this, experience and context should inform contemporary theological reflection directly. Inductive method and analysis of experience should replace the
deduction from philosophical a priori. Methodist preachers must resist the temptation to answer questions which fellow Christians have not asked. They should make a concerted effort to reflect more systematically on specific human and social experiences in light of the gospel and the Christian—and Wesleyan—tradition.

The 1992 General Conference adopted a document for study around the church called “Grace Upon Grace”: God’s Mission and Ours. This is a most important theological document, not only because it sets forth the mission commitments of the United Methodist Church but because it exemplifies the interpretation of Wesley’s theology in our contemporary context. Quoting John 1:16, its title correctly focuses on grace as the pivotal concept. The document identifies the missions of the church as a response to this abundant and transforming grace of God. It confesses a life changed by grace, seeks a church formed by grace, and envisions a world transformed by grace.

The Way of Salvation and the Fruits of Salvation

In my understanding, Wesley’s theology can best be presented systematically by using two conceptual models: the way of salvation (understood as God’s gracious dealing with human persons) and the fruits of salvation (understood as the human response to God’s grace). Like all concepts, of course, these can be problematic. If the way of salvation is interpreted too mechanistically, it may lead to a rigid pattern of spiritual experiences predefined by a revivalist tradition. Likewise the fruits of salvation may be interpreted too narrowly as behavioral patterns predefined by a moralist tradition. Regardless of these possible distortions, these concepts lie at the center of Wesley’s theology as well as methodology. Based on these organizing principles, a fuller elaboration of Wesleyan theology should include:

• God as the creator of life. God’s universal (prevenient) grace is the basis for human, social, and natural life; all living creatures live and exist as a result of God’s creating and sustaining grace. Wesley affirms that God’s grace is omnipresent and that no one is lost because God’s grace is unavailable but rather because it is not used (cf. WW, 3:207, 385).

• God as reconciler. God’s restoring (justifying) grace indicates that every person who desires salvation will come to a point where the broken relationship with God is healed because of God’s
unconditional forgiveness. As a human experience, this settlement may take place as a dramatic crisis or conversion or as a result of a harmonic development and maturing.

- **God as Spirit and sustainer of life.** God's transforming (regenerating, sanctifying, glorifying) grace indicates that God's grace is a re-creating power no less than a forgiving one. Grace leads faith to a holy life and into the struggle for the realization of God's goals for humanity, society, and nature.

- **A transformed believer, a transformed church, a transformed society, and a transformed creation.** Discipleship is the essence of the Christian life of the believers; the Christian's holiness of heart and life should be manifested as the incarnation of God's gracious love to the world. Mission is the essence of the life of the church; it should demonstrate that it does not exist to itself but to the world that God loved.

This structure is faithful to the trinitarian as well as to the incarnational emphases of Wesley. Each of the three perspectives indicated above points to one person in the Trinity but not to the exclusion of the others. It also establishes how God's grace is made flesh in the context of the human, social, and natural world. The revivalist focus upon the human being as a person is united with the social and global consequences of salvation.

**Conclusions**

It should be possible to give a systematic treatment of the principles foundational to Wesley's theology and ethics. This presentation could be based upon the analysis of a classical Christian doctrine, such as Christology (Cannon 1946) or sanctification (Lindström 1961); it could be presented as a systematic induction of Wesley's soteriology (Meistad 1992); or it could evolve from integrating concepts such as "responsible grace" (Maddox 1994) or discipleship (Watson 1985). Such a project would be of interest for the historical understanding of Wesley. However, it would not cover the full range of Wesley's thoroughgoing methodological balance between doctrine and contemporary challenges.

For my own part I am more and more skeptical about any textbook project. At its best, a theological textbook would be a descriptive contemporary systematic theology coming out of the Wesleyan tradition.
tradition. But theology confined to the form of a textbook can hardly be completely faithful to the creative methodological tension which exists between experience and theology, context and doctrine. The potential for any textbook to give off authoritarian overtones is particularly damaging for the finely balanced spirit of Wesleyan theological inquiry.

Perhaps teachers of Wesleyan theology should withdraw traditional textbooks and replace them with introductions to Wesley’s methodology. This might encourage and enable the reader to reflect theologically for her- or himself on the basis of personal experiences in light of scripture and Christian tradition. This tactic would also be faithful to the non-confessional and incarnational tradition of Wesleyan Methodism, which defined its theological heritage through sermons, liturgies, and rules rather than formal definitions of faith—and therefore clarified the message of the gospel to human persons in different ages and contexts.

The Wesleyan theological tradition as a whole opens up to and invites theological reflection by the community of believers. We have every reason to think carefully about any presentation of systematic theology and ethics that would limit that reflection, or even close it.

Bibliography

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Notes

1. This article comes out of a paper which I read at The Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies, for the Wesley Study Group, 1997. In the present form, it is revised in light of responses which I have received. I am grateful to professors and students at Wesley Theological Seminary, Washington, D.C., for their comments; Professor Ted Campbell has been particularly helpful.

The concept "methodology" is in this article used as more than the description of one single method for theological reflection or scholarly analysis. A theological
methodology is made up by a body of working methods and practical procedures and comprehensive theoretical perspectives basic to the methods used. Added together they make up a characteristic integrity, a methodology. Wesley's methodology may therefore include several theological methods. In this article the concept is also used for the theological analysis of his use of methods, too.

2. Its title in English would be “The Way of Salvation: Theology and Ethics in the Wesleyan Tradition.”

3. Tom Longford has graciously given me permission to use this article.

4. Holifield (1986, 109-10) demonstrates how Wesley in his moral thought always returned to a doctrine of creation, which he kept together with the two dimensions of God's graciousness, justification and sanctification. For this reason he was able to incorporate love and law in his ethical reflection without separating them from each other.

5. This is also documented by Lee (1991, 205).

6. This conclusion is partly based in a discussion following below; see the notes arguing for “Phase 4” in the development of Wesley's methodology.

7. Althaus (1981, 261-6) argues that, to Luther, God's word cannot be categorized as either law or gospel, as the very same word strikes the sinner as both law and gospel. Insisting that the law and the gospel are functions of the one and the same word, he reestablishes another dialectics between law and gospel than that used by Wesley. Luther's focus is on how God's word leads a person to recognize sin, affirming that persons may feel the judgment of God from the examples of Christ's love and compassion no less than from the commandments of the law. In this light a biblical text describing the promises of salvation may be experienced by the sinner as judgment, and in this way function as the second use of the law. This is an entirely different way of conceiving the functions of law and gospel than Wesley's dialectics between commandment and promise.


9. Cf., Question/Answer # 18-23 (Outler 1964, 139-40).


12. Evidence for this may be found, for instance, in sermons 48-50, all published 1760, “Self-denial,” “The Cure of Evil-speaking,” and “The Use of Money” (WIF, 226-80), and sermon 51 from 1768, “The Good Steward” (WIF, 2:281-98).


14. In his two dialogues “Between an Antinomian and his Friend” (WIF, 10:266-281, published 1743) Wesley maintains that Paul in Gal. 3:13 establishes that we are redeemed from the punishment due to our transgressions of God's law but not from the law as such. In the dialogues the fundamental theological issue is that of imputed versus imparted, or inherent, righteousness. While the antinomian and his friend (Wesley) agree that justification is imputed by faith, they part on the issue of inherent righteousness. The antinomian insists that the believer has no inherent righteousness, and Wesley that the believer is made holy in heart as well as in life. In his sermon 20, “The Lord Our Righteousness” (WIF, 1:444-63), he implies that the
doctrine of the imputation of Christ’s righteousness to the believer serves as “a cover for his (the antinomian’s) unrighteousness” (WW: 1:462).

15. In Wesley’s sermon 111, “National Sins and Miseries” (WW: 3:561-70), published 1775 and revised 1784, he combines the ideas of personal/individual, and social/structural sins.

16. 9 Dec. 1772, Wesley wrote a letter to the editor of Lloyd Evening Post about the problem (later also published in Leeds Mercury Dec. 29). Dec. 31, he devoted his prayer for the poor in particular: “Being greatly embarrassed by the necessities of the poor, we spread all our wants before God in solemn prayer” (WW-L, 5:495). 20 Jan. 1773, he expanded the newspaper letter and published it as a pamphlet, The Present Scarcity of Provisions (WW-L, 5:53-59). He repeated some of his concerns mentioned here to the newly elected Prime Minister William Pitt in a letter 6 Sept. 1784. He was still occupied with tax and other regulations to improve the social situation, in particular to prevent the distilling industries (WW-L, 7:234-36).

17. This is indicated by a number of sermons:
1900: In sermon no. 131, “The Danger of Increasing Riches” (WW: 4:177-86).

18. This is evident right from his first open-air sermon in Bristol, 2 April 1739, as indicated in his Journal: “Mon. 2. [April, 1739]—I... proclaimed in the highways the glad tidings of salvation... The scripture on which I spoke was this (is it possible any one should be ignorant that is fulfilled in every true minister of Christ?), ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He hath anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor’ [Luke 4:18-19/Is. 61:1-2]... “ (WW, 19:46). For a more-detailed discussion, see Meistad (1992a).

19. Campbell (1995/96:64) acknowledges the significance of Greek influence on Wesley’s theology; however, he seems to emphasize even more the prominent Roman Catholic and Anglican precedents for his stress on holiness.

20. Unfortunately I did not have the opportunity to read the most significant textbook written by Klaiber & Marquardt (1993) in my preparations for this paper. The title and contents indicate that the same observation is basic to their book.

The word evangelization and its cognate, evangelism, have been in the English language since the seventeenth century. In 1626, Sir Francis Bacon used the term to refer to “the preaching or promulgation of the Gospel.” I will draw upon this definition, be it ever so broad, in this essay. When modified by the word mission, evangelization takes on the connotation of “being sent.” Mission evangelization, therefore, is the activity of one sent into the world to preach or promulgate the Gospel.

The question I would like to place before us today is, What can we learn from John Wesley’s theology of mission evangelization? Of course, Wesley did not use the term evangelization. Instead, he spoke of “the general spread of the gospel” or the spreading of scriptural Christianity. Wesley’s era preceded the great missionary expansion of the Protestant Church in the nineteenth century, and his understanding of the world was circumscribed by his times and the common prejudices of the day. His Methodist Societies did not have a “Mission
There is no question, however, that Wesley was on a mission; indeed, he was single-minded in his pursuit of it throughout his long life.

In this essay I intend to look at Wesley’s theology of mission evangelization through:

- his general understanding of missions;
- his vision of spreading holiness and happiness throughout the earth;
- his concerns about the state of the church in his day and how those concerns can serve as lessons for a present-day perspective on mission evangelization.

In this kind of exercise there is often the expectation that some new angle or approach might cast a whole new light on our usual view of the topic. In contrast, I see this exercise as an opportunity to remember something vital and still illuminating about Wesleyan thought that can bridge the centuries and speak to the challenges of our day.

Wesley and the General Spread of the Gospel

Wesley wrote one sermon dealing specifically with the general spread of the gospel. In it he articulated a vision for world missions: that “uninterrupted holiness and happiness shall cover the earth.” Entitled “The General Spread of the Gospel,” this sermon depicted the world as full of ignorance about Christ. A Mr. Brerewood, who served as Wesley’s investigator, reported that only five in 30 people in the world were even nominal Christians. Even this calculation might have been a high estimate, said Wesley, since new nations had been discovered after Brerewood made his findings known.

Wesley revealed his eighteenth-century European bias in saying that Western churches have “preeminence over [non-Western] . . . they have abundantly more knowledge: they have more scriptural and more rational modes of worship.” Yet—and this was the real point he was trying to score—even Westerners were as far from holiness and righteousness and the mind of Christ “as hell is from heaven!” Therefore, Wesley asked, how was it possible to reconcile the sorry state of humankind with the wisdom or goodness of God? He answered this question by affirming confidence in God’s desire to respond to the world and “be jealous of his honor.” Here Wesley articulated a vision statement for the general spread of the gospel: “The loving knowledge of God, producing uniform, uninterrupted
holiness and happiness, shall cover the earth; shall fill every soul of man.” Wesley’s distinctly Arminian theology asserted that humans have a definite say in their own destiny. God gives humans this ability, since it is God’s grace working in the individual that allows him or her to respond to God’s love. Nevertheless, humans are charged with the responsibility to choose life or death set before them.

Wesley saw the same grace at work in the conversion of nations. “Now in the same manner as God has converted so many to himself without destroying their liberty, he can undoubtedly convert whole nations, or the whole world; and it is as easy to him to convert a world, as one individual soul.” Wesley pointed to the humble beginnings of Methodists in Oxford as a case in point. Holiness became the key word for a movement that began to spread to wider and wider circles, from Britain to Ireland to North America. Wesley asserted that God will continue to carry on his work in the same manner. He envisioned that work spreading out to America and throughout Europe. Wherever it went, it would spread “the experimental knowledge and love of God, of inward and outward holiness.” First it would spread among countries where there was Protestantism and Roman Catholicism, and then to the “merely Popish,” and on to the remotest parts of the world.

If human beings have the ability to respond to this spreading of the gospel, then they also possess the capacity to thwart it. For Wesley, the great stumbling block against the spread of the gospel was murmuring among Christians. By this Wesley meant behavior that reflected poorly on one’s faith. South Americans today might talk of someone whose actions or lifestyle give a mal testimonio, a poor witness. Wesley called for the opposite of this, which was an authentic personal witness of the truth of the gospel through one’s life. Those who are not Christian, argued Wesley, will be drawn to the truth of Christ by “seeing the Christians steadily and uniformly practice what is agreeable to the law written in their hearts . . . .” When the obstacle of “murmuring” is removed, Christians will have more authority and their witness will be stronger. When the world sees the holy lives of Christians, it will not be able to resist the gospel.

The problem remained, however, how to reach those nations where the gospel was completely unknown. In Reasonable Enthusiast Henry Rack writes that Wesley’s attitude on missions varied from one occasion to another. Like the Methodist movement itself, Wesley often responded to enthusiastic initiatives of his workers rather than
beginning them himself. Rack's position is borne out by a Wesley journal entry written in 1784. A proposal to send missionaries to the East Indies was presented to him. He brought the matter before his preachers, and they "unanimously" rejected it on the grounds that they had not received a divine call for such a mission.

But only two years later, Wesley responded positively to Thomas Coke's proposal to lend support to missionary activity "in the Gaelic-speaking Scottish Highlands and Islands; in the Channel Isles; in the West Indies; and in North America." Coke had also begun to think of India as a mission field. Coke's understanding of "mission field," however, was slightly different from that of Wesley and most of his followers. Coke, a forerunner of the missionary movement of the nineteenth century, was interested almost solely in taking the gospel to new and unexplored realms. For Wesley, "mission field" also included persons living in the midst of Christianity close by. The purpose of Methodism was to bring "real" Christianity wherever it was lacking, at home or abroad.

In this sense the world was, indeed, John Wesley's parish; for no country had been completely Christianized under these terms. The infusion of "real" Christianity was needed everywhere. Wesley wanted to eradicate merely "nominal Christianity" wherever it existed.

A letter to Freeborn Garrettson underscored this point as it applies to overseas missions. Wesley expressed his pleasure at the American Methodist's initiative to visit Nova Scotia. "Let none of them rest in being half-Christians," Wesley wrote. He urged Garrettson to acquaint those he gathered there "with the whole Methodist plan and to accustom them . . . to the accurate observance of all our rules." He urged Garrettson to exhort Nova Scotians to go on to perfection. "The more explicitly and strongly you press all believers to aspire after full sanctification, as attainable now by simple faith, the more the whole work of God will prosper," wrote Wesley.

Wesley was also concerned for the social welfare of persons being evangelized in the mission field. Such concern always came as a "fruit" of holiness. His dual emphasis of holiness and its fruits is seen in his correspondence with Garrettson. In a letter dated Nov. 30, 1786, Wesley asked Garrettson, "How do the inhabitants of Shelburn, Halifax, and other parts of the province, go on as to temporal things? Have they trade? Have they sufficiency of food, and the other necessities of life?" When Wesley indicated in a postscript to this
letter that he would send financial assistance for the construction of a
building in Nova Scotia, he showed his willingness to financially
undergird overseas missions.\textsuperscript{13}

Wesley did not spell out how the general spread of the gospel would
be carried out. That was left to his heirs in the faith and others who
would begin the great missionary expansion of the nineteenth century.
What he did was to express hope that God would make sure that this
mission was accomplished.

Holiness and Happiness

We turn now to what Wesley meant by \textit{holiness} and \textit{happiness}, two
terms that are inextricably linked in his thought. At the conclusion of
his treatise on "The Doctrine of Original Sin, Part I," John Wesley
made a simple statement with regard to the general plight of
wickedness in the world: "Men are unhappy, because they are
unholy."\textsuperscript{14} No inhabitant of the earth had escaped this unhappy
condition in his view. He surveyed manifestations of evil in all parts of
the globe, saving his most acerbic indictment for his homeland, where
English soldiers were clear examples of "profound ignorance and
barbarous, shameless, shocking impiety."\textsuperscript{15}

\textit{Holiness} means "inward and outward conformity in all things to the
revealed will of God." \textit{Happiness}, for Wesley, is life lived to the
fullest in service to God and humanity.\textsuperscript{16}

Wesley used various terms to make his point about holiness. He
talked of "perfection" and "sanctification." In his sermon on the
subject, Wesley said that "Christian Perfection is only another term for
holiness."\textsuperscript{17} The essential task of the church was to spread scriptural
holiness among all people.

Wesley organized Methodist Societies to spread scriptural
holiness. A Methodist, according to Wesley, "is one who has 'the
love of God shed abroad in his heart by the Holy Ghost given unto
him.'"\textsuperscript{18} For the Methodist, "God is the joy of his heart, and the
desire of his soul . . . . He is therefore happy in God, yea, always
happy, as having in him 'a well of water springing up into
everlasting life.'"\textsuperscript{19}

Because of this love of God, the Methodist keeps the commandments
of God and serves others, striving to do good by "feeding the hungry,
clothing the naked, visiting those that are sick or in prison."\textsuperscript{20} Such
service unto others, Wesley insisted, infused persons with happiness complementing the goal of laboring "to do good to their souls."  

For Wesley, the attainment of holiness came through Christian discipline. In 1743 he published the pamphlet "The Nature, Design and General Rules of the United Societies," in which he specified the disciplines to be practiced by Methodists. Leaders of classes were to collect an offering for the poor from the members, as well as inquire how the members' souls were prospering. The single requirement for admission into the societies was "the desire to flee from the wrath to come, to be saved from their sins." This desire would manifest fruits that show evidence of the believer's desire for salvation. Holiness and happiness were two sides of the same coin. On one side, believers adhere to the commandments of God and avoid "evil of every kind," such as drunkenness, fighting, usury, and needless self-indulgence, among others. On the other side, believers engage in social ministries among fellow human beings, seeking to do good to all persons.  

Wesley's mission was to spread scriptural holiness over the land. In his pamphlet "Advice to the People called Methodists," he defined the movement as one of bringing "real" Christianity into Christendom. In "The Principles of a Methodist Farther Explained," he sought to bring a religion rooted "in the heart, in the inmost soul, but ever showing itself by its fruits." Wesley envisioned real Christians manifesting inward holiness and outward fruits of love.  

Perhaps nowhere do we see the relation between holiness and happiness stated more succinctly than in Wesley's sermon "Scriptural Christianity." The body of this sermon considered three views of Christianity: 1) what happens when Christianity begins to work in the individual; 2) the spread of Christianity from one person to another; and 3) Christianity covering the earth.  

Wesley described the process by which Christianity worked in individuals. Convicted of sin, the individual repents, believes in Jesus, receives the "Spirit of adoption," and begins to call Jesus "Lord," (affirming that Christ now lives within). In this way, the individual experiences "Peace with God," a state in which fear no longer resides. His or her soul rejoices in God, and, being loved by God, he or she truly loves others. The process is infused with humility and the concerted effort to avoid doing harm to others. One is conscious of the need for God's nurturing grace and thirsts to do good.  

Christianity is spread from one to another when the light of Christ shining within shines for others. Once again we see Wesley's
emphasis on a “lifestyle” evangelization. For the Christian imbued with holiness and happiness, there was a burning desire to have others enjoy the gift of grace offered through faith in Christ. One yearns to bring others into the fold for Christ, warning others to flee from the wrath to come.

Christianity covers the earth in the vision of the prophets who saw a Christian world. The Apostle Paul saw the Gentiles included in God’s plan. Now all the world is open to God’s Good News. The prospect of such an accomplished prophecy envisions the fulfillment of peace, righteousness and mercy over the earth. Cruelty disappears as all live by the Golden Rule. Harmony among people prevails as everything is subdued to the reign of the Lord. Violence is no more.

Such is the vision of scriptural holiness bringing salvation to all the earth. But Wesley saw obstacles in the path of the realization of this vision. At the conclusion of his sermon “Scriptural Christianity” Wesley asked questions to his contemporary listeners. He wanted to contrast the vision of “Christianity which covers the earth” with present reality. If we ask the same questions today, would they bear any different answers? “Where does this [Scriptural] Christianity now exist?” “Are those in authority ‘filled with the Holy Ghost’?” “Are there, in all your actions, dignity and love?” “Is there written on your forehead and on your heart, ‘Holiness to the Lord’?” “Do those who teach youth remind those . . . that the one rational end of all our studies, is to know, love and serve ‘the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom He hath sent’?” Wesley implored his hearers to reflect seriously on these questions. Is our age so different that these questions are not relevant?

To the ministers, Wesley asks, “Are we then patterns to the rest . . . do we know God . . . do we know Jesus Christ?” Wesley speaks not only to clergy but to anyone who intends to be Christian. So many, Wesley laments, “are a generation of triflers . . . How few of you spend, from one week to another, a single hour in private prayer!”

These questions indict as they are raised. Wesley concluded his sermon with an appeal to God to “take us out of the mire,” so that Christianity, “scriptural Christianity, should be again the religion of this place.”

Lessons

What is the trajectory of Wesley’s theology of mission evangelization today? What lessons can we learn? I would like to suggest three
lessons as we seek to make a bridge of understanding between Wesley's theology and the challenges of our own day.

First, we are challenged to recover the essential happiness that is rooted in service. I suspect that our present-day definition of happiness would be quite different from the kind of happiness that Wesley envisioned for Christians. In the affluent West, we tend to equate happiness with leisure time and the acquisition of consumer goods, as well as with personal achievements and loving, satisfying relationships. Wesley would have us think of happiness as rooted in a life of service to others: feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting those who are sick or in prison. Would not the mission evangelization of our churches be more vital if we could rediscover the essential happiness that is rooted in service? Yet happiness is not restricted to the service one renders to others. There is an inner joy to the one who leads a holy life. Indeed, true happiness, true joy in life, occurs when holiness of lifestyle intermixes with selfless service to others who are in need. This happiness, if grasped, is the best antidote to "murmuring," Wesley's term for a downbeat witness, which is unappealing to the uninitiated and is perhaps the greatest obstacle to effective evangelization.

Second, we are challenged to keep holiness of heart and lifestyle—that is, both inward and outward holiness—central to our theology and our daily living. The gift of Wesleyan theology and praxis is in the inextricable link between personal holiness and social responsibility. Wesley was concerned to bring "real Christianity" into Christendom. His was not unlike the quest of Kierkegaard, the nineteenth-century Danish theologian. Both Kierkegaard and Wesley fervently sought a Christianity that could live up to the requirements of the gospel. Wesley fought to save others from the wrath to come and at the same time attend to the social ills of the world. In his early Oxford days, Wesley visited the sick, poor, and imprisoned. His last letter, written just six days before he died, implored William Wilberforce to continue the parliamentary fight to abolish the slave trade in the British Empire. Throughout his writings he insisted that the fruits of righteousness should follow justification by faith. In his fourth sermon on the "Sermon on the Mount" he asserted that Christianity was a social religion. Holiness of heart and life keeps in balance the joy of personal salvation and the happiness of attending to the world's social problems.

Third, we are challenged to eliminate any distinction between mission that is "right here" and mission that is "over there." Clearly,
Wesley saw the need to bring “real” Christianity to Britain. He saw no distinction between the promulgation of the gospel in what he referred to as “heathen” lands and the urgency of preaching to the soldiers in his homeland. The mission field was as close as you could see or as far as you could imagine. The World—near and far—was indeed his parish. Today this Wesleyan perspective is as valid as ever. All the world is a mission field. The globalization of mission activity means that there are no longer distinctions between “foreign” and “home.” All are claimed by the gospel.

Were we to take Wesley’s theology of mission evangelization seriously, much time, money, and energy would be placed in our mission efforts to help bring “real” Christianity, with a strong focus on “holiness of heart,” into Methodism, both in our own countries and elsewhere. Similarly, we would join with mission partners at home and abroad to assist others in the pursuit of holiness and happiness covering the earth. Training and leadership development would be concerned not only with teaching skills that could help produce effective clergy and laity for organizational and administrative purposes but also with the spiritual life of our leaders, their “holiness of heart.”

Can we embrace Wesley’s vision statement for world missions in our day? Can holiness and happiness take hold of the people called Methodist? Can we make a bridge of understanding from Wesley’s day to our own in such a way that our leaders and followers become living, compelling testimonies to their faith, irresistible to others? Can we recover the happiness of service and the holiness in lifestyle? The answer to these questions is the challenge before us as we seek to be faithful to the gospel message in our day.

Notes


2. Ibid., 279.
3. Ibid., 283.
4 Ibid., 285.
5 Ibid., 284-5.
7 *Works*, 4:266.
8 Rack, 476.
9 Ibid.
10 The famous quote, “The world is my parish,” came in a letter to James Hervey explaining that since Wesley was appointed to a University and thus to no particular parish, he looked upon “all the word as my parish.” See A Compend of Wesley’s Theology, ed. by Robert W. Burtner and Robert E. Chiles (New York: Abingdon Press, 1954), 261.
13 Ibid., 72.
15 Ibid., 226.
16 “Advice to the People Called Methodists,” *BE*, 9:123.
18 *BE*, 35.
19 Ibid.
20 Ibid., 41.
21 Ibid.
22 Ibid., 70.
23 Ibid., 72.
24 Ibid., 123.
25 Ibid., 229.
27 Ibid.; 34-35.
28 Ibid.; 42.
29 Ibid.; 45-47.
30 Ibid.; 47-49.
31 Ibid.; 50-51.
32 Ibid.
I confess that I am an amateur, that is, one who is motivated by love—or in this case, _amor_: I have a genuine passion for the oldest, fastest-growing, and soon the largest ethnic group of Christians in this country, the U.S. Hispanic community. Those of us who are not Latino/a have much to learn from them. If we are privileged to minister in their context, then we must understand and adapt our ministry to their worldview.

But this can be difficult. Seminaries offer little appropriate preparation; there are no professional organizations for cross-cultural pastors; and supportive literature for non-Latinos and non-Latinas who minister to increasingly Hispanic Christian churches is sparse. The reality is that as pastors we are often cultural amphibians: never insiders to the communities we serve and, because of our deep commitment to them, always on the margins of the culture from which we come. On the cusp of ecclesial life, we have personal struggles to overcome, a public role to negotiate, much to learn from Hispanics, and much to share and compare among ourselves.

Because of the complexity of these issues, I would like to divide this article into four sections: (1) my personal journey into cultural differences; (2) reflections on the public role of the cross-cultural

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My Personal Journey into Cultural Differences

As a missionary in Honduras, I adapted fairly quickly to the lack of potable water, electricity, and familiar food. That is because I had some control over my situation: I could boil the water, plug in batteries, and bus to the capital for my "Dunkin' Donuts."*

But there was much that I could not control and therefore found unsettling. That list is more expressive of my cultural background: the lack of privacy, the accepted intermingling of personal with professional activities, and the hissing. Yes, hissing! I hiss at a strange cat I want to drive off. Hondurans, however, hiss to attract another person's attention. When they hissed at me, I felt like a cat being shooed away. Even more frustrating were appointments with doctors or lawyers; when talking with me, for example, my lawyer might be interrupted at any point by his carpenter, his in-laws, and vendors of every description. What I considered disrespect for professional boundaries, personal space, and good manners had to be continually reassessed if my ministry among Latino/as was to be effective. Of course, I tried to remember that many Hispanics, without an insider's knowledge, might well consider my own Anglo culture odd. Case in point: I once coaxed a private school in Chicago into recruiting more Hispanic students. While I could not convince them to hire Hispanic teachers or put more money into scholarships, I did convince the principal to meet with interested parents. After hours of visiting homes and distributing brochures, I finally gathered a few hundred local Latino/as to meet her. She walked into the meeting wearing jeans and no jewelry or makeup and spent much of the meeting seated with her feet propped up on a desk. I tried to convince myself that the meeting was going well, but my intuition made my stomach churn as if from hot chiles. And, in fact, the recruitment was a disaster. For many Anglos, such as the principal and me, her appearance and carriage expressed convivial informality and welcome, as if to say that the impersonality of the institution could be overcome by the warm, personal approach of one of its authorities. But the audience that day
considered her casual demeanor to be disrespectful. There was a lesson for me in this experience: Just as I can misunderstand Latino/as as parishioners, they can find me unintelligible as a pastor.

Reflections on the Public Role of the Pastor in Cross-Cultural Ministry

While I must always monitor my personal journey when ministering to people who are not of my own culture, I need also attend to the public aspect of my ministry as well. There is, of course, a connection between the two, since the pastor is one person. That nexus of public and private, which is always at the center of the privilege and the pathos of this endeavor, informs my reflections.

One basic assumption is that it is the pastor who must wrestle explicitly with cross-cultural issues in the context of his or her ministry. Parishioners may or may not have to deal with language problems, prejudice, or cultural misunderstandings outside the church setting. They should not have to do so in a ministerial relationship with their pastor. The responsibility to adapt falls squarely on the pastor. He or she has experienced a call to ministry and answered it, and it is he or she who is accountable to the community for whom s/he was called. If pastoring entails communication, then it must involve the whole person. Therefore, culture and personal experience are of paramount importance. A particular Latino/a community may interpret the world and process information one way, and the minister another. When a pastor is unaware of these differences, places no importance on them, or refuses to adapt to them, miscommunication is inevitable.

A pastor must deal with personal issues which cause these conflicts in such a way that they do not spill into the public ministry. For the cross-cultural minister to do this, s/he must first become aware of his or her own personal attitudes and values about what seems "normal" and "only right" in the practice of ministry, because these attitudes and values may not be shared by the parishioners. After gaining awareness, the pastor must reflect critically on those values and attitudes. Which are based solely on class or cultural idiosyncrasies? Which are truly gospel based? A good source of guidelines to carry out reflection of this kind is Manuel Ortiz's One New People: Models for Developing a Multi-ethnic Church. This book includes a helpful
definition of multiculturalism: "The end or goal of multiculturalism should not be increased cultural sensitivity or inclusivism so that no one is locked outside the gate (although that is extremely important). Rather, it should be to see the church, by way of multiethnicity, inclusivism and cultural sensitivity, bring about biblical reconciliation, justice and righteousness in church and in society." As Ortiz explains, without this goal and the means to it, the pastor is a captive of culture who is unable either to critique prophetically her or his own country and class or to preach a liberating word to persons of different socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds.

The pastor who seeks out the experience of reflecting on life with persons different than him- or herself gains the perspective needed to do this self-critique. Theologian Arturo Bañuelas explained the process this way: "The task of theology today is not to answer the question: 'Who is God?' Rather the question today is: 'Whose God?'" When one finally encounters God in a foreign face, the cross of cultural clash becomes a tree bearing new life. For me, perhaps the greatest blessing of learning Spanish and working with Latina/os is simply the liberating realization that the horizon of human experience, and thus God's revelation, is not encompassed by cultural icons such as Billy Graham and Fulton Sheen. It also includes Caesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta. Only through an empathetic encounter with the other do I really begin to know myself and my culture of origin. Just as one cannot see the candles which light the path to church on Christmas (i.e., luminarias) unless the church is dark, so one cannot appreciate the "Godlight" from other cultures without consciously dimming the brightness of one's own society.

**Luminarias Have Encountered on This Path**

When illuminated by the gospel, every cultural group has its shadows. This is often obvious to someone of another country. However, the opposite is also true. Respectful dialogue with a different culture provides the pastor a perspective from which to better critique the darkness within his or her own culture. Just as one cannot see the distant stars when surrounded by too much electric light, so the reflective personal journey and public ministry provide the needed contrast to appreciate other luminarias.

Based on my own cross-cultural experience and research, I would
like to give attention to the luminarias which have lighted my path: (1) the value of the discounted; (2) the rejection of the tyranny of technology; (3) the acceptance of destiny; and (4) the ecstasy of aesthetics.

1. The value of the discounted. At a meeting of Hispanic leaders in California I suggested that our closing prayer be done as a procession. The younger Hispanics thought the idea was much too old-fashioned. But their elders reminded them that pilgrimages, home altars, etc., were precisely what had kept the faith alive when clergy were scarce and liturgists nonexistent. Why not allow the domestic church, including youth and children, the theologically unsophisticated, to take leadership by celebrating these symbols of the faith? Virgil Elizondo and others see the Hispanic community in the U.S. as sociologically singular because they are twice discounted. The dominant society in this country relegates them to the margins, and those South of the border also consider them culturally impure. Elizondo points out that Jesus himself was twice rejected—the Jewish community of Jerusalem thought him a Galilean peasant, but the conquering Romans found him threatening. Like the U.S. Hispanics, Jesus was rejected by his own and by the conquering powers. Out of this both Protestant and Catholic Hispanic theology have developed a theological theme of double rejection leading to divine election. In more humble terms, we can use an image from the marketplace. Like a good shopper, God sees the value of the discounted.

2. The rejection of the tyranny of technology. I accept the tyranny of the clock (even the demands of electronic mail), and I am frustrated when a wedding or other ceremony is delayed. But more than one currillista or carismático has asked me, “What is more important for worship—that the community is ready or that the clock is?” I realize that respect for another person’s time is important. But are there not moments when a pastor can conform to the timeline of the community, especially a community which may have to work long hours and deal with lengthy commutes and crumbling mass transit? Moreover, time is a theological concept. As Christians we believe we live in a time continuum which leads to eternity. It may be less than Christian always to think that something precious is lost or robbed by tardiness. Where your clock is, there your heart will be also.

3) The acceptance of destiny. Hispanics are often accused of fatalism when they actually believe in destiny. If one values harmonious relations with nature over the technological conquest of
nature; accepts that there are certain universal principles that the
human cannot or dare not compromise; and concedes human frailty
and frailty, then is one a fatalist or a realist? Is there any aspect of
life which cannot be changed and therefore must be endured? Is there
value to that endurance? Most of us are familiar with the famous
"Serenity prayer" ("God give me the courage to accept things that
cannot be changed, the strength to change things that can be changed,
and the wisdom to know the difference"). If Anglo culture in the U.S.
is particularly good at implementing the second petition, perhaps
Latino/as are particularly good at the first.

4) The ecstasy of aesthetics. Last semester I helped a student with a
paper entitled "Introduction to Philosophy." It presented principles of
logic such as, "A statement cannot be both true and false." With all
due respect to philosophy as the handmaid of theology, does this point
of view adequately describe the reality we experience? What about the
value of paradox? Many Christian first principles appear
self-contradictory (e.g., Jesus is both God and human). I raise this
question precisely because I have come to know mestizos, i.e., people
who are not of pure blood (e.g., Spanish and native American) but are
a biological and cultural mix, a living paradox in a world of racial
"first principles." Living this sometimes clashing, seemingly hybrid
(e.g., common indigenous, African and Iberian roots), and sometimes
syncretistic reality often leads to an exuberant acceptance of
ambiguity and an almost congenital desire to be inclusive. Witness the
baroque and even rococo nature of much Hispanic art.

By contrast, the severe simplicity and austere orderliness of the
dominant society reflect what Justo González calls its "naive reading of
history." North Americans' inability to deal with ambiguity and sin led to
a "destiny" of continental conquest based on greed, violence, and forced
labor. As a result of both Spanish and U.S. conquests, Latinos and
Latinas have long had to accept the cultural contradictions that are their
legacy from the past. They are heirs to both saintly Spanish missionaries
and Spanish rapacious conquerors, to Native American earth-wisdom and
human sacrifice and to African enslavement and freedom. The desire to
hold all this tension in harmony—such fullness of vision—leads to a
cosmic inclusiveness in art, music, and religious expression. The arrows
of the ecstatic are flung from the bows of the aesthetic.

I have spent almost twenty years guarding the sparks of ministerial
experience and using the breath of personal reflection to coax them
into the light of these luminarias. I now offer some practical advice to others who may not have the privilege of bearing this tinderbox.

Practical Pointers: The Rule of Dumb

*Ignorant* or *inexperienced* would admittedly be better words than the common understanding of *dumb* as foolish and clumsy. But sometimes that is exactly how one feels stumbling through a second language or bungling a sensitive cultural moment! I will never be Mexican or Puerto Rican or Cuban and have a such a deep, unself-conscious understanding of Hispanic culture. And although I greatly admire their histories and cultures, I also need to explore what it means to be a white, middle-class, meat-eating Midwestern male. God is with me, too. It is precisely through the blessing of these other communities that I have the distance actually to critique who I am, to value that which is gospel, and to struggle to convert that which is only historical accident. This cultural distance, this perspective on myself and my society, has been a boon; and I am forever grateful to the Latinos and Latinas who have allowed me into their lives.

While I continue my personal struggle, however, I must strive—at the very least—to do no harm. Accepting the fact that I will never be an insider, I attempt to serve by adapting, evaluating, learning from my parishioners, and modifying my first impressions and inherent prejudices. Even my mistakes have brought me new insights which can be applied to the context of cross-cultural ministry. I include among them the two most significant:

1. A methodological assumption that my parishioners' experience is as valuable as any book or seminary training. I engage parishioners in a continual dialogue with myself, their peers, and the Christian tradition in order to reflect together critically on this experience. Therefore, I do not evaluate a member's own beliefs but rather encourage our ability to integrate this plurality.

2. An assumption that each person's context (culture, race, gender etc.) has practical pedagogical applications. Therefore, I try to employ the lessons I have learned from my interaction with Hispanics:
   - Encourage cooperation rather than competition. Since Hispanics tend to be very family and community oriented, this approach builds on the strengths of their cultures.
   - Use appropriate physical and verbal reinforcement. What I may
consider neutral behavior (e.g., rare expressions of approval) may be interpreted as coldness by this “high context” population.

—Allow for a variety of evaluation techniques chosen by the community. This communicates a desire that we all succeed rather than an expectation that someone will be shamed. The question is not who is to blame but what we can do to solve a common dilemma.

—Seek to make explicit and immediate the practical consequences of theoretical concepts. Since there may be expectations that the authority figure (the pastor) be directive, this guidance helps people relate to and understand abstract ideas without compromising curiosity.

—Consult widely with religious educators, always trying to include a menu of material from which people will find readings that both reinforce the validity of their experience yet challenge their interpretation of it.

—Create an office and church environment that is respectful and friendly. I use decorations, music, snacks, etc. which make congregants feel at home.

—Practice and encourage a hermeneutics of suspicion. Did U.S. Christianity begin with the thirteen colonies? Is popular piety always superstitious?

—Be aware of and adapt to differences in cultural norms for decorum and discipline. For instance, if a Hispanic does not look the pastor in the eye, it may be not a result of guilt but an expression of respect.

—Remember that some students learn better with circular rather than linear thinking. If a group values cooperative learning rather than competition between individuals, it may repeatedly return to previous themes until each member has grasped them, even if that means not proceeding sequentially.

Conclusion

I continue to find cross-cultural ministry challenging. Certainly, my ability to resist all my own best advice and lapse into previous, uncritical patterns can be very frustrating. I have come to accept it as a constant battle I may never win.

But I have moved beyond the first, unsuccessful coping strategy, what my colleagues term “trying to be more Hispanic than the Hispanics.” This is both impossible and unnecessary. It is impossible
because I cannot be other than what God made me. It is unnecessary because love bridges otherness; it does not obliterate it. Thus, I must treat myself as I hope to treat my parishioners, with care and patience, openness and wonderment, good will and a willingness to learn good skills. This includes accepting the fact that I am still a gringo after all these years.
For most people summer months are vacation months. Some use their vacation time to travel. They like to visit cities and towns that they have not previously seen, to see the sights and see how the people live. Many tourists believe that some places deserve a return visit. There is so much to do and see in places like Paris and London, New York and Los Angeles. A single visit does not allow the visitor to do justice to such interesting sites as Washington or Beijing, Bar Harbor or Tahoe. Places like this call the visitor to come back. When, in addition, the visitor meets interesting people in the places that he or she has visited, there is even more reason to make a return visit. A once-in-a-lifetime visit to any city or town does not allow the traveler as much opportunity as he or she would like to maintain contacts with friends and acquaintances and to meet new and interesting people.

People-watching is an important pastime for many travelers. Many a visitor to Paris counts as his or her favorite moment the time spent sipping a cool drink or glass of wine in a sidewalk café on the Champs Elysées and watching the people go by. And there is something special about standing on the Mall in Washington, somewhere between the Lincoln Memorial and the Capitol. One can look at the children at play, chasing balloons or engaged in an informal game of soccer. Or

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one might choose to look at the somber faces of the people standing in line to visit the Wall, the Vietnam Memorial.

On the other hand, there are some people at whom the traveler is almost forced to look. The visitor to Washington can hardly escape the vision of the street people pushing all their belongings in a stolen shopping cart on the streets or of the young drug addict definitely on a high but seemingly condemned to a meaningless existence. Leaving the old city of Jerusalem by the Damascus Gate, who could forget seeing a beggar with missing hand or foot, perhaps severed in punishment for a violation of the strict Muslim law (Shariah)? The crowds forced into the subways of Tokyo by the professional "pusher" and the homeless, helpless, and hungry of Calcutta are sights that one can never forget. Nor can one forget the expressionless faces of the Chinese masses quilted in blue or the lack of enthusiasm for life reflected on the faces of those who rode the Moscow underground in the days before the Iron Curtain fell.

If some people use their vacations to visit interesting places, other people like to use the summer vacation as a time to get away from it all. These are the people who like to go to the shore or to the mountains. There they can commune with nature and breathe in the fresh air, be it that of the mountains or the sea. They can look at the sky and be enraptured by the beauty of the nature God has created. They can see the birds in the sky, the fish in the sea, and the animals, large and small, that roam the woods. There they can listen to the sounds of nature, the cooing and the cawing of the birds, the roar of the ocean or the gentle sounds of the lake as its waters lap the rocks by the shore.

In the mountains or by the waters, people can live a simple life. For people who do so, summer is a time to catch one's breath. This is particularly true for those who live in the cities or those whose life is characterized by a hectic schedule of business meetings and quick business trips which leave one frazzled and often feeling alienated from friends and family. These kinds of people often like to use their summer vacation as a time to be with their families and close friends in an atmosphere that is more relaxed than the world in which they live their day-to-day lives.

This coming summer's series of lections provides both those who read the Gospel passages and those who listen to them with a portrait of a Jesus who shared the common human experience. Propers six through nine place Jesus in the setting of his travels throughout the
Galilee. His travels took him to Chorazin and Bethsaida (11:21), as well as to other places, unnamed and untold. To be sure, the evangelist was somewhat carried away when he described Jesus as visiting all the cities and villages (9:35), but he wanted to capture something of the extent of Jesus' travels throughout northern Palestine and the enthusiasm that accompanied Jesus' visits to the places where he set foot.

In his travels he visited various synagogues. Undoubtedly, none of these synagogues were as elegant as the third-century C.E. synagogue whose extensive remnants still stand in the seaside town of Capernaum that Jesus chose as his home (4:13) and base of operations. Nonetheless, even a relatively small synagogue would have stood out in some of the little villages that Jesus visited in his travels from town to town. As he traveled, Jesus observed the children at play (11:16). Having been raised as a village artisan, he looked at nature and took note of the farmer at work (13:3-4, 24).

In his travels Jesus met some interesting people, a few of whom were to become his disciples. Enthusiastically he told the people he met the good news about the coming of the kingdom. Jesus had something to say, and Matthew gives us the impression that some of the people were eager to hear it (13:2). On the other hand, not all was well with the populations that dwelt in the places that Jesus visited. As still today in some of our large cities with teeming populations, there were the sick and the handicapped. Some were maimed, lame, and blind. These were people to whom Jesus reached out, not by offering alms or giving a small monetary gift so as to soothe his own conscience but by giving the gift that he alone could give, the gift of health and wholeness. To be sure, the evangelist's enthusiasm continues as he describes Jesus curing every disease and every sickness (9:35), but we have to allow the evangelist's own enthusiasm for the story that he was telling to grasp us as it had grasped him. The listener who might want to fine-tune the details of what "really happened" has really missed the point of the narrator's story.

Much as the modern traveler, Jesus observed the fickleness of people (11:17). He was moved by the sight of disheartened masses of people. These were the people who felt harassed and helpless (9:36), who had no heroes and no one to lead them. Deep within himself Jesus felt pity for these crowds. At the sight of those for whom there seemed to be no real future, Jesus felt compassion within the very core of his being.
Jesus was not, however, a crowd-pleaser. He knew that he couldn’t please all of the people all of the time. No matter how he lived some people would criticize his lifestyle (11:18-19). What he had to say would cause divisions; even within families his message would provoke serious disagreement. Nonetheless, doing what he did and saying what he said cast Jesus in the role of a prophet. As Micah before him, Jesus could experience the alienation that his message would bring and trust only in God (compare 10:35 with Mic. 7:6). As the Baptist, whose message about the coming of the kingdom he echoed (compare 3:2 and 4:17), Jesus’ lifestyle was open to criticism. There simply wasn’t a way for God’s messenger to please all the people all of the time. Nonetheless he was a prophet, and in his compassion on the crowds he was the eschatological representative of God (see Ezekiel 34). Such is the picture of Jesus that the evangelist gives us as we look at these summertime readings.

June 13, 1999—Third Sunday after Pentecost
Matt. 9:35-10:8 (9-23)
Ps. 116:1-2, 12-19
Gen. 18:1-15
Rom. 5:1-8

Stephen Langton was the thirteenth-century archbishop of Canterbury who divided the New Testament into the chapter divisions that we still use. Were he alive today, he most likely would have started chapter 10 at 9:35 rather than at 10:1. New Testament scholars who are more keenly interested in the evangelist’s editorial techniques than was Langton are well aware that 9:35-38 is a transitional passage which serves as an introduction to the second major teaching discourse in Matthew’s gospel narrative.

The discourse itself, the so-called mission discourse, is brought to a conclusion in 11:1, where the evangelist writes, “when Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples.” His mention of the twelve disciples recalls a similar mention of the twelve disciples in 10:1. This double mention of Jesus’ disciples neatly encompasses the entire discourse into a single narrative unit.

The so-called Sermon on the Mount (5:1-8:1) was the first of the major teaching discourses in the Gospel according to Matthew. Matthew provided that Sermon with a brief narrative introduction that speaks of Jesus and the crowds (5:1-2). He will do the same thing in
13:1-2, his introduction to the discourse in parables (chapter 13). In this light the compilers of the lectionary were quite correct in suggesting that 9:35-38 functions as the introduction to the great missionary discourse from which the Gospel lections for propers 6, 7, and 8 are taken.

The introduction presents Jesus as having fulfilled his own mission in the land of Israel (note the presence of the synagogues in the opening verse, 9:35). His mission was accomplished in word and deed. He proclaimed the coming of the kingdom and cured those who were suffering from various maladies. His mission had directly touched but a limited number of people. The crowds were on the horizon of Jesus’ accomplishment of his mission. They stood in need of prophetic figures who could bring to them the message and power of the kingdom of God if Jesus’ ministry was to be accomplished among them. Echoing the biblical motif of the sheep without a shepherd (Num. 27:17; 2 Chron. 18:16; Judith 11:19; cf. Zech. 10:2), the Matthean Jesus presents the situation of the crowds in eschatological categories as he evokes the harvest (see 6:26 and 13:30, 39). He urges his disciples to pray to the Lord of the harvest (see Luke 10:2; John 4:35) so that what had begun with Jesus might be continued among the crowds. In this way the Israelites’ traditional hope for the constitution of the people as God’s flock was to be realized (Ezek. 34).

The eschatological horizon is maintained as the evangelist presents Jesus summoning his twelve disciples. In some respects the fact that they are twelve is more important than their names. “Twelve” evokes the twelve tribes of Israel and their patriarchal patronyms. As Jesus commissions the twelve (compare with 28:16-20) to go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, he begins to constitute the eschatological Israel as God’s chosen people (see 19:28). The twelve were to have a role in the constitution of that people, just as the twelve patriarchs had a role in the constitution of historical Israel. This is an important feature of the Matthean narrative. In the Gospel according to Matthew, the “disciples” are “the twelve.”

To the twelve disciples—and one might note that in the Gospel according to Matthew the disciples are not so much people who follow after Jesus as they are people who have been taught by Jesus, his specially instructed pupils, as it were—the mission of Jesus himself is entrusted. As Jesus cured (9:35), they were given the power to cure (10:1) and the mandate to cure (10:8). As Jesus proclaimed the
coming of the kingdom (9:35), they were to proclaim the coming of the kingdom. Indeed, they were to repeat the very message of Jesus (see 28:20), announcing that the kingdom of heaven has come near (4:17), just as Jesus himself had echoed the message of John the Baptist (3:2). Like Jesus (15:24), they were to fulfill their mission only among the lost sheep of Israel (10:6; cf.10:23). The twelve were expected to be like Jesus in what they said and did. Their mission was to be exactly like his, in word and in deed.

Matthew provides the reader of his Gospel with a list of the names of the twelve (10:2-4), a list he has borrowed from Mark (3:16-19). At the head of the list stands the name of Simon, to whom Jesus had given the nickname “Peter.” In 16:16-19, the evangelist explains the meaning of this sobriquet. At the bottom of the list stands the name of Judas Iscariot, soberly portrayed as the one “who betrayed him.” The tragic story of the betrayal will be told in the Passion narrative (26:14-16, 21-25, 47-56; 27:3-10). The evangelist Matthew has somewhat modified the order of the ten names that appear on the list between Simon Peter and Judas Iscariot.

In Mark’s list the names of Peter, James, and John appear at the beginning. Then comes the name of Andrew. Mark highlights the three disciples who are, as it were, Jesus’ inner circle. In Matthew’s list, however, the name of Andrew is moved up to the second rather than the fourth place. Mark tells his reader about the nickname given to James and John. Jesus called them “Boanerges, that is, Sons of Thunder” (Mark 3:17), but Matthew does not mention this nickname. The changes that Matthew has made on Mark’s list are subtle but very important for his story about Jesus.

What has Matthew accomplished by omitting the nickname given to John and James? First, he has characterized John simply as James’s brother. A story about the pair and their role among the twelve will be told in 20:20-28; it is not a story which was to bring them honor. Matthew also leaves the reader with the impression that Simon alone received a nickname from Jesus, and the omission draws attention to Simon’s nickname and highlights the explanation of it in 16:16-19. Finally, Matthew has simplified his list. He begins the list of the twelve with the names of two pairs of brothers, Simon and Andrew, James and John. The gathering of the twelve appears to be a family affair. This is perhaps a not-too-subtle reminder that the twelve patriarchs were brothers. Fraternity was a feature of the constitution of the twelve disciples, a group called together by Jesus to reflect and
bring to its eschatological conclusion the function of the patriarchs of old.

Another significant feature of the evangelist’s list of the twelve is the identification of Matthew as the tax collector. Matthew is the only one of the twelve whose profession is identified in 10:2-4. The author of the Gospel according to Matthew is truly a man of letters. The various parts of his story relate to one another. When he uses his editorial skill to rework the text that he has from Mark, he does so with a purpose.

The evangelist’s identification of Matthew as a tax collector (10:3) recalls the story of the calling of the tax collector (9:9-13). The traditional story (Mark 2:13-17; Luke 5:27-32) clearly portrays the tax collector as one whom Jesus called to be a disciple. “Follow me” (9:9) is an invitation to discipleship. The tax collector did follow Jesus, and in doing so he was clearly earmarked as one of the disciples. Earlier tradition identified the tax collector by name (Mark 2:14; Luke 5:27). Matthew does as well, and has therefore included the name of the tax collector on the list in 10:2-4. The evangelist considers his list of the twelve to be a comprehensive list of Jesus’ twelve disciples. By calling Matthew a tax collector, the evangelist has been able to get onto the list of the twelve the names of all disciples whose story of their call was known to tradition. These were Simon and Andrew (4:18-20), James and John (4:21-22), and Matthew, the tax collector (9:9-13).

In Mark’s list of the twelve (Mark 3:16-19), on the other hand, there is no identification of Matthew’s profession; nor could there be. Mark identified the tax collector as a man named Levi (Mark 2:14). Luke followed Mark’s example by similarly identifying the tax collector as a man named Levi (Luke 5:27). This was not acceptable to the author of the Gospel according to Matthew. If the tax collector was truly a disciple of Jesus—and there could be no doubt that he was—then his name had to appear on the list of the twelve. So the evangelist changed the name of the tax collector from Levi to Matthew.

By changing the name of Levi to Matthew, the evangelist was able to portray a consistent vision of the twelve disciples and their role in the history of salvation. Doing so, he earned for himself the nickname of Matthew. His story about Jesus was anonymously written, as were all four of the canonical Gospels. Nonetheless, early Christian tradition identified the author of his narrative as Matthew. His tale
about Jesus has been forever known as the Gospel according to Matthew.

The evangelist calls the disciples whose names are listed in 10:2-4 “the twelve apostles.” This is the only time in his entire Gospel that the evangelist uses the word apostle, a term that he most probably found in Mark 3:14. Elsewhere “Matthew” identifies the group as twelve or the disciples. That they were apostles suggests that they are to be sent on a mission; and, indeed, the mission is described in the instruction that Jesus gives to them in 10:5-15. As Jesus’ own mission, it was to be a mission in word and in work and directed exclusively to the house of Israel. The twelve were not initially to go to the Gentiles, not even to the half-breed Samaritans (10:5). That was later to change (Matt. 28:16-20), but it was important that the twelve be portrayed as having Jesus’ own mission.

Four features of the charge given to the twelve stand out. First of all, the disciples were to carry no money or other provisions (10:9-10). This narrative detail suggests the urgency of the mission and the total dependence of the missionaries on the Lord (cf. Luke 22:35). That Matthew indicates a range of monetary coinage, gold, silver, and copper, whereas Mark and Luke do not (Mark 6:8; Luke 9:3), seems to imply that there was some amount of affluence in the community for whom the evangelist revised the Mark’s Gospel.

A second feature of the mission is that to a large extent it is to be home-based (10:10^-12). This characteristic reflects the role of the house church in early Christianity. Not only was the home a significant locus for evangelism, the home of those who had become Christian provided traveling missionaries, like Paul, with a place that they might use as they made their missionary rounds.

A third feature of the mission is that it would be divisive (10:13-14). Just as did Jesus’ own ministry in word (13:10-17) and work (12:22-32) so the disciples’ mission in word and work would lead to division and controversy. On the households that accepted their mission, the benefits that they were to bring, summed up in the rich biblical notion of “peace,” would descend. On those who refused their mission such peace would not abide. With a dramatic and prophetic gesture, the disciples were to shake from their feet even the dust that came from the home and villages of the incredulous.

Finally, the mission of the disciples is an eschatological one. On the horizon stands the day of judgment, an awesome day indeed. Unlike his predecessor Mark, whose narrative he has revised for a Jewish
Christian readership, the evangelist Matthew uses a biblical image to underscore the eschatological significance of the mission. Graphically, he describes the terror of the day of judgment as worse than that which occurred in the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrha (Gen. 19:24-25; cf. 2 Pet. 2:6; Jude 7).

The divisive results of the disciples’ mission suggests that they will, in fact, be persecuted. The experience of persecution is described in a pericope (10:16-23) that has been incorporated into the longer version of the Gospel lection for proper 6. The persecution of those who follow Jesus was the subject of the long beatitude that Matthew has included in the Sermon on the Mount (5:11-12; cf. Luke 6:22-23). The evangelist highlighted this remembrance of Jesus’ words by condensing it into the eighth beatitude (5:10), which he uses to draw to a close his catechetical series of eight beatitudes (5:3-10).

In describing the theme of persecution in 10:16-23, Matthew continues to highlight the eschatological character of the disciples’ mission. The motifs of “the end” and of the coming of the Son of Man (10:22-23) present the Parousia as the horizon against which the disciples are to see their mission. The disciples are to go only to the house of Israel. They would experience persecution in the treatment that they were to receive at the hands of local councils—the Sanhedrin of Jerusalem was the great council—and synagogues. This reflection was of importance for Matthew’s Jewish Christian community, which was caught up in the internecine struggle of the various Jewish groups that were vying with one another in the years that followed the destruction of the Temple, a sign and source of Jewish unity.

Even as Matthew underscores the Jewish focus of the disciples’ mission, he intimates that it is being conducted in the presence of Gentiles (10:18). This is a hint of things to come (see 28:16-20). A wisdom motif describes the human precariousness of the disciples’ situation (10:16). In comparing this saying with the one found in Luke, one might note that Matthew speaks of sheep (cf. 10:36) rather than lambs (Luke 10:3). Despite the danger, the disciples should not worry. What they have to say will be an inspired message which will be given to them by the Spirit (10:20). Among the Synoptists, Matthew most often describes God as Father. In 10:20 he characteristically describes the Spirit, which is the source of the disciples’ prophetic utterance as the Spirit of “your Father” (cf. 6:9).
Although the message comes from the Father, it will provoke serious division within a single household (see the Gospel lection for proper 7, Matt. 10:34-39). Since the household was the cell of society, both in Jewish society and in the social structures of the Greco-Roman world, division within the household had serious implications and ramifications for society as a whole. The turmoil within households that arose from the disciples’ preaching of Jesus’ prophetic message was serious indeed, but it was but one expression of the serious division that gripped Judaism in the decades after the destruction of the Temple.

June 20, 1999—Fourth Sunday after Pentecost
Matt. 10:34-39
Ps. 86:1-10, 16-17
Gen. 21:8-21
Rom. 6:1b-11
This short passage on division and discipleship is a useful complement to the pericope on persecution (10:16-23) that was part of the longer reading of the Gospel lection in proper 6. Those who had not focused on that section of Matthew’s Gospel in the homily delivered within the context of proper 6 might well use the material in those verses of Matthew as background and reference material for a homily to be based on this series of short sayings. The two pericopes take up a theme that is recurrent throughout Matthew’s Gospel, namely, that the disciples of Jesus, like Jesus himself, can expect to experience serious difficulties.

They will be persecuted precisely because they are disciples of Jesus, for the sake of Jesus (10:39). “For my sake” (heneken emou, 5:11; 10:39), says Jesus, they will be persecuted. In the long beatitude the evangelist spells out the kind of maltreatment to be expected by the disciples of Jesus: “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account” (5:11). In being calumniated they share the fate of Jesus, who also experienced lies being told against him with dire consequences (26:60-61). Luke’s version of the long beatitude suggests that expulsion from the synagogal assembly is yet another form that persecution takes (Luke 6:22).

The lection that is assigned to proper 7 actually consists of five short sayings that the evangelist has joined together in a short pericope
whose general theme is division and discipleship. This unit of material comes towards the end of the missionary discourse (chapter 10). It describes the difficulties that those who follow Jesus can expect to experience.

The first saying is one that Matthew has taken over from the sayings source known as Q (cf. Luke 12:51). The point of the saying is highlighted by its antithetical structure. Its real emphasis lies on the second part of the antithesis, “I have not come to bring peace,” a thought that Matthew emphasizes still further by contrasting peace with the sword. “I have come” is a formula that the evangelist uses to describe the mission of Jesus (5:17; 9:13, [11:19], [18:11]). The structure of the formula in 10:34 is exactly the same as that of a similar formula in 5:17, where the evangelist emphasizes that Jesus came not to abolish the law and the prophets but to fulfill them. The evangelist used the mission formula not to describe Jesus' intention so much as to describe what happened as a result of his mission. The result of Jesus' mission was that his disciples would not experience peace. They would not immediately experience the fullness of covenant blessings.

Apparently peace was something that the disciples had been expecting when they embraced Jesus as the Messiah. Was not Jesus' message one of peace (5:9; 10:13)? Jesus' words, “do not think that I have come,” presuppose that the opinion which he was about to deny was an opinion held by his interlocutors. Describing Jesus' mission in 10:34, the evangelist intended to put to rest any hope for an earthly utopia on the part of the disciples of Jesus.

To explain how this unlikely result might happen, the evangelist quotes words from the prophet Micah (Mic. 7:6) which had appeared in the Q material that Matthew is using in 10:34-35. A reader familiar with Matthew's editorial techniques may well have expected the evangelist to have written, “This was to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet Micah” (cf. 8:17), but this familiar refrain does not appear. The words of the prophet speak of a period of difficulty and extreme turmoil just before eschatological deliverance. The notion that there would be an experience of great evil before the coming of the kingdom is an idea that is also reflected in the literature of intertestamental Judaism (cf. Jub. 23:16, 19-20; 1 Enoch 100:2; 4 Ezra 6:24). Jesus' disciples, so Matthew was to have them know, should expect to experience difficulties in the time that preceded the Parousia. The troubles
would strike at the very fabric of the social structure, even the unity of the family itself.

The other three verses in this lection speak of the cost of discipleship from another point of view, that of the radical commitment demanded of the disciples of Jesus. A first saying continues the theme of the disrupted family relationships sometimes caused by discipleship. Familial piety, honor, and loyalty within the family, so highly valued within Judaism (see the Decalogue, Exod. 20:12; Deut. 5:16), was not to be esteemed more than one's loyalty to Jesus (cf. Deut. 33:9; Exod. 32:29; 4QTest. 16-17). Allegiance to Jesus takes precedence over family unity. The end-time divisions that affect the family (10:35-36) should not deter the disciple from his or her (note the presence of both the man and the woman in the evangelist's citation of Micah) loyalty to Jesus. Jesus' words are a sort of commentary on the applicability of the prophetic utterance about the end time to the situation of himself and his disciples. They cast discipleship in an eschatological mold.

The next two sayings (10:38-39) speak even more radically of the demands of discipleship. The disciple must be ready to follow Jesus even to death. He or she must be willing to put one's life on the line for the sake of the kingdom that Jesus came to announce and inaugurate. This is the meaning of taking up one's cross and following Jesus. The saying was reformulated in a church community that remembered Jesus' redemptive death on the cross. It has little to do with the patient endurance of the normal difficulties in life.

As v. 37 is a kind of commentary on v. 36, so v. 39 offers further reflection on the radical demands of discipleship expressed in Jesus' saying about the cross. It contrasts the gift of eternal life with the potential loss of temporal life. Those who lose their life for Jesus' sake (heneken emou, cf. 5:11; 10:39) will receive the reward of life eternal.

June 27, 1999
Fifth Sunday after Pentecost
Matt. 10:40-42
Ps. 13
Gen. 22:1-14
Rom. 6:12-23

The previous passage in the mission discourse had spoken about the radical demands of discipleship. This final pericope in the discourse
returns to the narrower theme of apostleship (10:2) and the hospitality to be accorded to traveling missionaries. The apostle is one who has been sent on a mission. The apostle is an emissary, or a legate. The Christian institution of the apostolate reflects the Jewish institution of the shalih, which indicated that the emissary was to be treated as if he or she were the person who had sent the emissary on the mission (cf. m. Ber. 5:5; Mek. Exod. 14:31; 18:12).

Even today ambassadors represent the country from which they come. They are to be accorded the respect and honor due to the country which they represent. In public assemblies, it is not politically correct to mention the name of an ambassador. They are introduced as “His (her) excellency, the ambassador of the Kingdom of Belgium.” The names are not mentioned because they are present at official functions in their representational roles rather than as the individuals that they are. One who receives the ambassador receives the one who has sent him or her (10:40; cf. John 13:20).

Reception of the Christian missionary is, in fact, the major theme of this pericope. The verb “to receive” occurs six times within its three verses. Receiving is more than merely offering hospitality. Receiving is a matter of welcoming and, when a prophet is the person being welcomed, it is also a matter of accepting the prophet’s message. “Prophet” and “righteous” are terms used by the evangelist to describe the Christian missionary. The parallel sayings in 10:41 are found only in the Gospel according to Matthew. Righteousness is one of his favorite themes (cf. 1:19; 3:15; 5:6, 10). Matthew’s idea is somewhat different from that of Paul. For the evangelist, who reflects the biblical tradition in this regard, the righteous are those who are in a right relationship with God and God’s people.

Receiving a reward is likewise a Matthean theme (cf. 5:12, 46; 6:1, 2, 5, 16; 20:8). The reward is God’s gratuitous gift to those who do God’s will (see the parable of the laborers in the vineyard, 20:1-16). In the light of the immediately preceding pericope (10:34-39), there can be little doubt that the reward of which the evangelist writes is the gift of eternal life (10:39). Reflecting the hot Palestinian climate of the twelve apostles’ missionary territory, Matthew imaginatively speaks of the one who receives them as one who offers them something cool to drink.

The apostles have been sent on a mission and deserve the respect owed to an emissary. Nonetheless, they are “only disciples.” Matthew indicates that the apostles are not only disciples; they are also “one of
these little ones.” The parallel and earlier text in Mark 9:41 describes the disciples merely as “you.” Matthew’s expression is both traditional and very Matthean (cf. 11:11; 13:32; 18:6, 10, 14). In this context the motif anticipates the discussions about who is the greatest of Jesus’ disciples (18:1-5; cf. 20:20-28).

Since the evangelist uses “one of these little ones” to describe the weaker and marginalized members of the community (18:6, 10, 14), the saying in v. 42 has additional implications. It implies that the “haves” within the community should provide the “have nots” with their basic needs. The rationale is simple. Even the “have nots” are among the disciples of Jesus. They are the little ones in God’s flock. It is sometimes necessary for the leaders of the community to make a radical and seemingly rash decision to care for them (18:10-14). Even the apostles were not to forget this.

July 4, 1999—Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

Matt. 11:16-19, 25-30
Ps. 45:10-17
Gen. 24:34-38, 42-49, 58-67
Rom. 7:15-25a

Today’s Gospel lection (cf. Luke 7:31-35) presents Jesus commenting upon two contrasting responses to the gospel message. “This generation” is an incredulous and evil group of people (cf. 12:39, 41, 42, 45; 16:4; 17:17; 23:36; 24:34) who do not accept the message of the coming of the kingdom no matter in what prophetic form it comes. Both John the Baptist and Jesus proclaimed the coming of the kingdom (3:2; 4:17). The Baptist was an ascetic figure (3:4; 9:14). In their rejection of him and his message, people caricatured him as someone possessed by a demon. Jesus, on the other hand, joined people at dinner (9:10-13), so he was derided as a gluttonous drunk who hung around with sinners. The evangelist’s point is that this generation is adamant in its refusal to receive the gospel message. Nothing will bring them to believe. They are as fickle as a group of children at play. Jesus’ parable has a proverbial ring, but the proverb is not otherwise attested in extant literature. It speaks of children playing the flute, as at a wedding, but no one would join in the dance. In contrast it speaks of children singing a dirge, but no one would join in the funeral procession. There is simply no way for a prophetic figure to convince people who are adamant in their refusal to believe.
Jesus' commentary on the situation is a saying that comes from the wisdom of the ages. It may well have been an aphorism that was commonly used prior to its incorporation into the Q material from which the evangelist had taken this pericope. Ultimately, it portrays Jesus in the role of personified Wisdom (Sophia), rejected by the people (cf. 1 Enoch 42:2) but recognized and vindicated by his deeds (11:2-6). The wisdom motif continues in Jesus' prayer, which the evangelist has also taken over from the sayings source (cf. Luke 10:21-22). The prayer of praise is addressed to the Father, Lord of heaven and earth (cf. 6:9-10). It praises the Father for revealing his wisdom to his children. These are contrasted with the wise of this generation who do not accept the Father's revelation.

The invocation of God as Father in the prayer leads to a reflection on the relationship between the Father—who is mentioned five times in 11:25-27!—and Jesus, the appointed Wisdom figure who brings the Father's revelation to the little ones. The verse (11:27) has a Johannine ring. Some interpreters speak of it as a Johannine logion; others describe it as a bolt of lightning from the Johannine sky. The logion is unique in Matthew's Gospel in its portrayal of the singular relationship that exists between Jesus and the Father. Jesus is uniquely qualified to bring God's revelation to people because of the unique relationship of mutual intimacy that exists between him and the Father. In the wisdom tradition, personified wisdom is portrayed as being singularly in the presence of God. The logion in 11:27 portrays that intimacy as a mutual intimacy. Within Matthew's story about Jesus this saying highlights what is at stake when one accepts or rejects the message of Jesus and his appointed legates. What is accepted or rejected comes from the Father himself.

This Johannine logion is followed by an invitation that echoes the conclusion of the book of Sirach (Sir. 51:23-30). It shares much of its characteristic vocabulary with that piece of wisdom literature. Within Judaism the image of the yoke was related to wisdom and the Torah. Those under the yoke were those who accepted the discipline of wisdom and the Torah. The invitation extended in 11:28-30 is an invitation to join Jesus' school (cf. 5:1-2; 28:19-20), the circle of his disciples. As it appears in the Gospel according to Matthew, it seems to be an invitation to pious Jews who were not affiliated with Jesus' school (cf. 23:4). At the time that Matthew's story was being written, the newly founded house of Cephas
(16:16-19) was vying for recognition as the authentic interpreter of the Torah with the older and better established houses of Hillel and Shammai. The experience of being a disciple of Jesus was not merely an academic exercise. It was also—and still is!—a matter of following the teacher’s example. As Jesus himself (11:29; cf. 21:5), disciples are to be gentle and humble in heart (5:5; 18:4; 23:12).

July 11, 1999
Seventh Sunday after Pentecost
Matt. 13:1-9, 18-23
Ps. 119:105-112
Gen. 25:19-34
Rom. 8:1-11
Matthew changes the scene of his story as he begins the great discourse in parables. Jesus is portrayed as seizing the opportunity of addressing a large crowd of people by getting into a boat so as to be able to talk to them. The boat serves as his pulpit as it were. Jesus is portrayed as one who teaches. Once the boat puts out from shore, Jesus sits down to teach. Sitting was the traditional posture of teachers in the Jewish culture of Jesus’ day (compare 13:1 with Mark 4:1; Luke 4:20 with Luke 4:16; cf. Matt 5:1). So it was that Jesus sat down to teach as he addressed the crowds. A good teacher, Jesus used short and captivating stories as his favorite teaching device. Our tradition has come to describe these stories as parables.

In his classic description of a parable, C. H. Dodd said that a parable was “a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt of its precise application to tease it into active thought.” The parable of the sower enigmatically speaks about the coming of the kingdom of God. While there are some obstacles to be overcome, the kingdom of God will eventually come to fruition. The kingdom will come in its fullness.

The parable’s gentle agricultural imagery is less startling than the graphic images of much apocalyptic literature, but the point is similar: God’s kingdom will ultimately triumph. Despite the difficulties, God’s kingdom will come with an almost unexpected fullness. To make this clear, with a simplicity that comes from one’s ability to tell a good story, the parable contrasts three situations of agricultural frustration with three situations of
agricultural fruitfulness. Six lots of seed are sown. Some 190 lots of grain are to be available for the harvest.

Early Christian tradition treated this seed parable as an allegory (cf. Mark 4:2-9, 13-20). The tradition appended to the story an explanation of its imagery that focused not on the abundance of the harvest to come but on the fact that some of the seed did not come to fruition. Seed falling on the path, on the rocks, and among the thorns was interpreted in the light of the various kinds of difficulties that early Christian missionaries encountered. One impediment is the mysterious Evil One, who impeded the work of Paul (cf. 2 Cor. 2:11; 11:14; 12:7; 1 Thess. 2:18). Faithful Christians are encouraged to pray for deliverance from the clutches of this Evil One (6:13). Another source of difficulty comes from within, in the form of affliction and persecution. Some who hear the gospel are enthusiasts who fail to endure when troubles come their way. A third source of difficulty comes from within. Some who hear the message of the kingdom (13:19) do not really grasp it. Anxiety and a desire for wealth deter them from discipleship.

Following the early church's interpretation of the parable (cf. Mark 4:13-20), Matthew interprets the good ground as the faithful Christian whose life manifests the fact that the message of the gospel has taken root within his or her heart. The many "fruits" that he or she produces (cf. 3:8, 10; 7:16-20; 12:33; 21:19, 34, 41, 43) are an expression of their commitment to the gospel.

The parable and its interpretation should be held in a creative tension. The message of the parable is that the kingdom of God is coming. It will come and it will be effective. God will accomplish his will. He will reign supreme. The Christian must never lose his or her basic conviction in faith that God will conquer, that God will reign. This conviction should encourage any preacher of the gospel, whose ministry inevitably encounters some of the difficulties illustrated in the explanation of the parable. Matthew has offered the explanation of the parable in the form of Jesus' response to a question. It is a kind of catechesis or advanced education. One who interprets the parable to a contemporary audience might well follow the example of the evangelist by pointing to some of the difficulties that Christians are bound to encounter as they try to grasp the message of the gospel and allow its power to shape their lives.
Immediately after the traditional parable of the sower, Matthew offers his readers an agricultural parable that does not otherwise appear in the canonical Gospels. It does, however, appear in the Gnostic Gospel of Thomas, which seems to have borrowed the story from Matthew (cf. *Gos. Thom.* 57). Taken from the evangelist’s special source, the parable speaks of the presence of evil in the world. Unlike the explanation of the parable of the sower, which immediately precedes (13:18-23) this pericope, the parable of the wheat and the weeds is addressed to the crowds (13:24). In traditional Matthean terms, it speaks of the kingdom of God as the kingdom of heaven. The evangelist has adopted this kind of terminology in deference to the religious sensibilities of his Christian Jewish audience, which held the transcendence of God in high esteem. Even when writing about God as “Father” Matthew maintains a reverence for the transcendence of God by describing God as the heavenly Father (cf. 6:9).

The parable of the wheat and the weeds was most likely formulated some time after Jesus’ death and resurrection. It is a kind of response to the “delay of the Parousia.” The disciples of Jesus were convinced that he was the Messiah, the anointed of God (16:16). The popular expectation was that the coming of the kingdom of God, in which the Messiah had an important instrumental role to play, would entail political deliverance for the nation of Israel. In some respects the disciples of Jesus shared the populist hope that the coming of the Messiah would entail the freedom of the land of Israel and the fulfillment of Israel’s nationalistic hopes (cf. 16:21-23; 20:20-28; 26:51-54).

The story itself is simple enough. There is a contrast between an anonymous “someone who sowed” and his anonymous enemy, a contrast between good seed and weeds, and a contrast between wheat that is ripe and fully grown weeds. The parable actually consists of a story within a story. Within the parable itself an instructive dialogue between the householder and his slaves has been added to the story about the growing plants. The imagery of the dialogue is only thinly veiled. The householder is Jesus. The enemy is the Evil One. The
slaves are the disciples who are constantly going to Jesus for further instruction (cf. 13:10, 34). The harvest is the last judgment (cf. Joel 3:13; Hos. 6:11; Jer. 51:33; Rev. 14:15-16; 4 Ezra 4:28-29; 2 Apoc. Bar. 70:2).

Back in the house—in both Matthew and Mark, the house is the privileged locale for Jesus' instruction of his disciples—the disciples ask Jesus about the meaning of the parable. Matthew has patterned the sequence of the story told in public (13:24) and the explanation offered in private (13:36) after the sequence of the parable of the sower and its explanation (13:3, 10). The explanation treats the parable as an allegory. Jesus explains the significance of seven features of his parable (13:37-39). The reader surely recognizes the hand of the evangelist Matthew at work in this interpretation.

Organizing things in groups of seven is one of the evangelist's favorite literary techniques. There are, for example, seven parables in chapter 13.

Having outlined the explanation of the story (13:37-39), Jesus, the teacher, gives a running commentary on the meaning of his tale. His commentary does not give equal treatment to each element in the outline. Its purpose is to explain the general thrust of the parable. As far as the present is concerned, the disciples of Jesus are to know that both the Son of Man and the devil are at work in this world. Jesus' identification of the householder as the Son of Man prepares for the apocalyptic scenario that is to follow (13:40-43; cf. 1 Enoch 46:3-8).

The identification of the enemy as the Evil One and as the devil recalls the devil's opposition to Jesus' mission (4:1, 5, 8, 11), the Evil One's opposition to the effectiveness of the gospel (13:19). Both the Son of Man and the Evil One are at work in human history. As a result, the world is populated by good people and evil people, children of the kingdom and children of the Evil One.

Characterized by the coexistence of good and evil, human history stands under the threat of eschatological judgment. This is the central point of the parable. Matthew employs some of the symbols of traditional Jewish apocalyptic as well as some of his own favorite motifs (God as Father, the faithful as righteous) to make his point (cf. 25:31-46). In the apocalyptic tradition angels appear as the agents of God's eschatological judgment (cf. 1 Enoch 63:1). Matthew associates angels with the coming of the Son of Man (16:27). They are to have both a salvific (24:31) and a punitive role (13:41-42). One feature of Jewish apocalyptic writing is its use of traditional biblical motifs.
Matthew's "little apocalypse" describes the fate of the evil in terms that recall Zeph. 1:3, especially in its references to "gathering" and "stumbling blocks," rendered in the NRSV as "causes of sin." Its description of the lot of the faithful recalls Dan. 12:3 and the language used to describe the transfiguration of Jesus (17:2).

The message is clear. Human history stands under divine judgment, no matter how difficult it may be for a faithful believer to understand how it is that a good God can tolerate the co-existence of good and evil in our world. Let anyone with ears listen to how the Matthean Jesus explains the problem of evil. Even a summer time traveler should heed this message.

Bibliography


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