Revitalizing Theological Reflection in the Congregation
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Keeping Faith in a Postmodern World

HENDRIK R. PIETERSE

Christians believe that reading the "signs of the times" is crucial to faithful witness in the world. That makes Christian theology and practice fundamentally hermeneutical activities, characterized by a dynamic of "mutually critical correlations" (David Tracy) between Christian tradition and cultural context. This Christian dynamic of making meaning has always been a delicate art, but it has become a daunting undertaking in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In the highly fragmented cultures of the West, many theologians, influenced by postmodern intellectuals like Derrida and Lyotard, argue that constructs like "Christian tradition" and "cultural context" are too monolithic to do justice to the complexities of interpretation in today's pluralistic world. It is time, they say, to recognize that all interpretation is highly contextual, diverse, and local. No one can speak for everyone.

The United Methodist Church has not been immune from this debate. Indeed, many United Methodists welcome the postmodern critique of "meta-narratives" (Lyotard) and the celebration of particularity, diversity, and contingency. Fearing a slippery slide toward nihilism, other United Methodists call for a hermeneutic that will carve out a securely defined—perhaps even uncontestable—theological and doctrinal identity for the church.

Clergy find themselves in the middle of this struggle; after all, they are the ones called to the task of "equipping [laity] to fulfill the ministry to which they are sent..."1 Thus, we ask, What resources do clergy need to ensure their ongoing theological competence in this complex and often confusing world? Where do they turn to hone the theological and intellectual skills they need to prepare the church to think and practice the faith in a fragmented age? For the past twenty years, Quarterly Review has aimed to provide a forum where United Methodist and other clergy—as well as interested laypeople—can raise and debate issues of significance to the church's theology and...
ministry. Through articles exhibiting impeccable scholarship and provocative theological content, as well as resonating to the multiple ministry contexts of an increasingly pluralistic world, *Quarterly Review* has sought to stimulate and nurture the ongoing intellectual growth of ministers of the gospel.

In our own attempt to read the signs of the times, we at *Quarterly Review* have concluded that sensitivity to the growing complexity of ministry in the new millennium calls for a fresh approach—one that is carefully focused yet multidimensional. The result is the newly designed version of the journal you are holding. Let me say a word about the new format.

Each issue features a major theme, with five articles devoted to an in-depth exploration of several of its aspects. The section titled *Outside the Theme* carries an article not related to the issue theme yet pertinent to the intellectual life of Christian leaders. The *Church in Review* allows two thoughtful persons to share their musings about an issue or event that impacts the theology and ministry of The United Methodist Church. The two-part section titled *A Word on the Word* furnishes busy clergypersons with practical resources for preaching and teaching. The first part is the Lectionary study, providing the preacher with useful exegetical insights into Scripture. In the second part, called "Issues In," a scholar examines the latest trends, issues, and publications in a particular field of study as a way of helping readers stay abreast of the latest knowledge and developments in a variety of scholarly domains. Carefully selected books for review assist those in ministry to build a theological library fit for our demanding times. We sincerely hope that this multifaceted format responds adequately to the changing demands of ministry today, while maintaining the scholarly integrity and insight you have come to expect from *Quarterly Review*.

The theme of the current issue, "Revitalizing Theological Reflection in the Congregation," is an apt one for ministry in our postmodern times: How can we nurture a theologically competent laity, equipped to give an account of the hope that is within them (1 Pet. 3:15)? Happy reading!

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*Hendrik R. Pieterse is the editor of Quarterly Review.*

**Endnotes**

In this essay I take up the question of the relationship between theological reflection and vital piety, as this relationship has been constituted in North American Methodism, particularly in the United Methodist tradition. Recent scholarship on John Wesley has emphasized Wesley's concern for what we might call "a theologically informed piety" or, as he called it in his preface to *A Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists*, "experimental and practical divinity." This phrase points to Wesley's concern with "the way of salvation"; that is, with justification, the new birth, and going on to perfection (sanctification or holiness)—the ultimate end of which was the renewal of God's image in humankind and in the world.¹

As Wesley would have been the first to maintain, however, understanding the way of salvation is not the same thing as experiencing salvation or being saved. This distinction suggests what I take to be the difference between "theology" and "piety." Theology is an intellectual activity. It is theoretical, insofar as it is abstracted from practice, although it may, and in the Wesleyan tradition typically does, focus its attention on practice. Piety is a form of practice. Where the task of theology is to reflect upon the things of God, piety engages God directly through practices such as worship, prayer, service, or social action. Piety, in other words, refers to what we might call the "lived experience of God"; that is, an engagement with God that includes more than simply thought or discourse.

I would argue that vital piety as the lived experience of God typically
exists in a dynamic and interdependent relationship with an implicit theology, if not always with explicit theological reflection. The process of formation whereby a lived experience is constituted is complex. Neither is it simply rationally learned, nor does it simply arise spontaneously. Rather, individuals within a group internalize a theological worldview quasi-consciously as they gain practical knowledge of the practices of a group (for example, through worship, class meetings, social action, annual conferences) in which an implicit theology is embedded. Communities, in turn, cultivate and maintain a set of practices through which they understand, locate, and experience their theological vision and socialize their members to recognize what counts as sacred in that community.  

The need for explicit theological reflection is most apparent, I suggest, when the process of formation breaks down, as a result either of dilemmas emerging from within the tradition or of challenges posed from without. Explicit theological reflection provides a way to defend, reinterpret, modify, or develop communal practices so as to resolve the dilemmas or meet the challenges. When this is done elegantly, a community experiences a sense of continuity with what they take to be the heart of the tradition and the freedom to set aside what they take to be extraneous. Less elegant solutions typically produce either a sense of theological discontinuity or theological rigidity.

**Methodist Theology and Piety in Four Movements**

In thinking as a historian about the relationship between theological reflection and vital piety in the history of American Methodism, I reflect in what follows on how Methodists have responded over time to the dilemmas and challenges posed to their Wesleyan inheritance. This response can be examined in terms of four distinct periods.

- 1760–1830: Theology and piety were joined much as they had been under Wesley’s leadership but were weakly defended intellectually.
- 1830–1890: Theology became more scholastic, and practice was increasingly attenuated in relation to Wesley.
- 1890–1920: “Liberals” and “conservatives” were divided in response to the challenges of the Enlightenment, with liberals reformulating theology and piety in ways that largely broke with Wesley and conservatives restating it in narrowly conventional ways.
- 1930 to the present: Methodists exhibit renewed theological interest in
Wesley, a practical concern for liturgical renewal, and continuing tension between liberals, conservatives, and neo-Wesleyans.

I view the challenges posed during the third period as the most difficult. Although many Methodists rose to the theological challenge posed by the Enlightenment, the solutions they offered were, in my view, less than elegant. Turn-of-the-century liberals ruptured the community's sense of continuity, while conservatives retreated into theological and practical rigidity. This legacy informed the fourth period up to the present. A desire for a more elegant solution may be welling up within the denomination. As a historian and a denominational outsider, I suggest that continuity requires engagement with the tradition on the level of practice, while openness to change requires careful theological reflection on what is and is not essential to its practice.

From my own reading of Wesley, I would argue that the distinctions between formalism, enthusiasm, and "genuine" or "real" Christianity was crucial to his own understanding of salvation as lived out in practice. Working out the distinctions between them forced Wesley to reflect theologically both on dilemmas internal to the movement and challenges posed from without. To put it simply, Wesley believed that real Christianity was not just a matter of assent to doctrine or participation in the rituals of the church or obedience to behavioral norms (formal or nominal Christianity). Rather, for him real Christianity consisted in an assurance of God's pardoning grace that could be known not directly through the ordinary senses but only through a new "spiritual sense," awakened at the time of the "new birth." Through this new sense, real Christians were able to perceive the reality of God's loving presence in their inmost selves or hearts (the Holy Spirit witnessing with our spirit that we are children of God). A genuine transformation of perception initiated the process of sanctification (going on to perfection or perfect love). An authentic experience, thus, of necessity gave rise to a transformed life (fruits of the Spirit) and, as a result, could be tested in practice. Wesley condemned as "enthusiasm" experiences that did not lead to a transformed life. In sum, genuine Christianity, for Wesley, entailed an authentic experience of the Spirit and resulted in genuine fruits. It was a third way between formalism (apparent fruits or form without the experience or power of the Spirit), on the one hand, and enthusiasm (an alleged experience without the fruits), on the other.3
Wesley believed that Methodists in particular were called upon to “understand, explain, and defend” the doctrine of the “witness of the Spirit” to the world. When critics charged him with enthusiasm for upholding this doctrine, Wesley responded in a twofold manner. First, he employed circular reasoning: The power to distinguish between true Christian experience and enthusiasm was grounded in a new spiritual sense accessible only to those who had had an authentic experience of the new birth. Second, he employed pragmatic criteria, that is, the fruits of the Spirit. Relying ultimately on the pragmatic criteria, Wesley sought to avoid enthusiasm in practice through the use of small groups (bands, classes, and societies) with lay leaders designed to promote genuine Christianity. Strict standards and practical guidelines were used to correct or, if necessary, weed out those who were not evidencing the fruits of the Spirit. The meaning of genuine Christianity was conveyed through sermons, hymns, and testimony. In the context of conferences and class meetings, both preachers and people testified to their own experience and were, in turn, formed by the experience of others. In England, these practices were rooted in a liturgically and sacramentally oriented church.\footnote{1760-1830}

1760–1830
Recent work on the period from 1760–1830 indicates a high degree of continuity between Wesley’s vision and early American Methodism in terms of theology and practice. To be sure, there were some tensions and challenges from within the movement along the lines of race, class, and religious practice. However, the movement reveled for much of this period in its status as a rapidly growing, upstart movement led by relatively uneducated preachers bound to Wesleyan theology and practice, albeit resistant to Wesley’s direct leadership. The movement appealed to the less educated and was looked down upon by those in denominations with highly educated clergy, such as the Congregationalists and Presbyterians. Stories of evangelistic triumphs wrought by the power of the Holy Spirit, such as those told by itinerant Peter Cartwright, were used to shore up the esteem of the Methodists and disabuse the respectable of their pretensions.

During this period, Methodists of European and African descent in the movement’s multiracial heartland in the Chesapeake Bay region elaborated the “shout” tradition as an expressive variant on Wesleyan themes of new birth and sanctification. Toward the end of this period, the shout tradition
found a home in the popular camp meetings and racial tensions within the movement led to the formation of separate African Methodist congregations and eventually to separate denominations.\(^5\)

1830–1890

During the second of the four periods, 1830–1890, Methodists gained respectability and became more like their evangelical neighbors. The distinctive structures of Methodism were gradually attenuated: preachers traveled less, class meetings declined in importance, and standards for membership were relaxed. Phoebe Palmer led a successful movement that explicitly reflected on the nature of holiness, reinterpreted the tradition and its practices, and revitalized the Methodist understanding of sanctification for an increasingly bourgeois church.\(^6\)

Palmer's theological reflections on holiness were prompted by her own lack of experience. As she put it, the Spirit did not operate upon her heart in the same manner in which she conceived it to be operating on the hearts of others. Her "altar theology" represented a breakthrough for those who did not experience the feelings traditionally associated with the "witness of the Spirit." Her famous "shorter way" to holiness was comprised of a series of steps, beginning with consecration, and followed by the recognition of God's promises in Scripture, the acceptance of God promises for oneself, and public testimony to one's acceptance of the promises. The crucial twist was her determination to "take God at his word [in Scripture], whatever her emotions might be."\(^7\) Based on her renewed theological understanding, Palmer established her famous Tuesday meetings for the promotion of holiness and a holiness periodical that she edited with her husband. Both Palmer's understanding of holiness and that of the earlier shout tradition were taken up into the National Camp Meeting Association for the Promotion of Holiness by John Inskip in the 1860s and continued to inform the more conservative side of the tradition.

1890–1920

Certain weaknesses were built into the American Methodist movement from the outset as a result of the movement's divorce from the larger churchly context in which it had been embedded in England. For much of its history, American Methodists viewed both liturgy and theological education as liable to "quench the Spirit" and thus a threat to vital piety. During its first hundred years, the American church largely ignored the
Sunday Service, based on the Book of Common Prayer, provided by Wesley in favor of a simplified service based on Scripture reading, preaching, and hymns. Until well into the nineteenth century, most Methodist preachers were trained through an apprenticeship system and later a "course of study," rather than in theological schools. This meant that Methodist preachers for the most part engaged with Scripture, tradition, and reason through Wesley's own writings and those of other Methodists rather than in the more direct and expansive fashion that Wesley himself, as a university-trained Anglican priest, had employed.8

These limitations, coupled with Wesley's own relatively superficial engagement with the challenges posed by the Enlightenment thinkers of his era, left the Methodist church ill prepared to respond in a distinctively Wesleyan fashion to the external challenges posed by German biblical scholarship, historical critical methods, and the rise of the social sciences. Thus, rather than engaging that which Wesley saw as the Methodist movement's distinctive contribution—its emphasis on true Christian experience rooted in the witness of the Spirit—prominent intellectually oriented Methodists at the turn of the century either sidestepped or attacked this fundamental Methodist claim in order to promote an understanding of Christianity which they considered more viable—philosophically, socially, and scientifically. The contributions of the Boston Personalists, such as Borden Parker Bovme, to a philosophically informed Protestant modernism are well known, as are the contributions of ethicists, such as Harry Ward, to the Methodist social creed and the Methodist Federation for Social Service. The contributions of George Coe, a pioneering psychologist of religion and religious educator, although less well known, are at least as crucial in terms of understanding the transformation of Methodist practice.

A Methodist layman, a student of Bowne's at Boston University, and Ward's close friend and colleague at Union Theological Seminary, Coe used the new empirically based psychology of religion to undermine the legitimacy of the traditional conversion experience and lay the foundation for a new education-centered paradigm for theological education. Coe, like his contemporary Edwin Starbuck, published an important empirical study of conversion in the late nineties. Coe's article, which examined the experiences of 74 predominantly Methodist college students (50 male and 24 female), appeared in 1899, two years after Starbuck's. The first books they wrote—Psychology of Religion (Starbuck) and The Spiritual Life (Coe)—both
appeared in 1900. They were frequently reviewed together as the leading examples of the new psychology of religion and widely read by more liberal Protestant clergy. Coe found that over half the students in his sample had had a dramatic conversion experience and more than a quarter experienced "mental and motor automatisms," that is, the striking dreams, visions, or involuntary bodily movements associated with old-time Methodism. When the original study appeared as a chapter in *The Spiritual Life*, Coe added that he had found "the same general results in an examination of scores of cases of seeking for the experience commonly called 'entire sanctification.'"9

Coe's central concern was less with people who had had traditional conversion experiences than with persons who had expected to have such experiences and did not. This was not an abstract issue for Coe and many of his liberal Protestant contemporaries. Coe, like Phoebe Palmer and a disproportionate number of other liberal leaders of his era, did not have a conversion experience of the expected sort. Although he was the son of a Methodist minister and was raised at a time when, as he put it, Methodists "laid great store by 'testimony' to a 'personal experience' of 'conversion' and 'witness of the Spirit' or 'assurance' that one had been pardoned and 'accepted' of God," Coe was never granted the experience he had been led to expect. The absence of such an experience caused him considerable distress as an adolescent, and it was only as an undergraduate that he finally "cut the knot by a rational and ethical act." Where Phoebe Palmer worked through the perceived deficiencies in her experience theologically, based on her own exegesis of Scripture, Coe worked his through scientifically, based on empirical research and the secular concept of "temperamental differences."10

Temperamental difference, Coe claimed, is what "distinguishes holiness movements from the ordinary life of the churches. A holiness band or sect that separates itself from the general life of the church is organized and held together chiefly by temperamental affinities."11 By recasting what had been signs of "the power of God" or "the witness of the Holy Spirit" as manifestations of a particular temperament, Coe reinterpreted the traditional Methodist understanding of religious experience in nontheological, scientific terms. In so doing, Coe created space within Methodism for a variety of temperaments and, at the same time, relativized the traditional understanding of conversion such that it could be compared (unfavorably)
with what Coe took to be a deeper understanding of personal and social transformation based on moral development.

The critique of conversion mounted by the early psychologists of religion laid the foundation for the rise of religious education as a theological discipline. Edward Ames, a psychologist of religion at the University of Chicago, spelled out the underlying connection between the psychology of religion and religious education. Referring to the work of Coe, Starbuck, William James, and others, Ames pointed out that "the earliest work in the field dealt almost exclusively with conversion" because that was where "the whole task of Protestant Christianity has been felt to focus." The stakes for evangelical Protestantism were enormous, since, as Ames went on to say, "the question of methods in religious work turns upon the psychology of religious experience." Setting up revivalism and religious education as opposing methods, he added, "the relative value of revivalism, and of religious education, depends upon the comparative significance of the different types of conversion and upon the means by which they are occasioned." The psychology of religious experience, as understood by Coe, was not simply an adjunct to religious education. Rather, by delegitimating the traditional understanding of conversion, the psychology of religion laid the foundation and created the need for the new modernist emphasis on religious education.

Neither Coe nor Ames understood religious education as simply one aspect of the theological curriculum but rather as its new center. Education, as opposed to evangelism, was the new paradigm for ministry. In this new paradigm for ministry, the minister became a teacher and was encouraged to integrate the latest in historical critical and social scientific research into the life of the parish through sermons, Bible studies, Sunday school curricula, and social outreach. Courses in the psychology of religion were seen as foundational to religious education and were normally offered by religious education faculty and listed under that department. The major vehicle for this new theological vision was the Religious Education Association, co-founded by Coe and William Rainey Harper of the University of Chicago and led by Coe for much of the next fifty years. In 1908, Coe left Northwestern University to fill Union Theological Seminary's newly established position in the psychology of religion and religious education. Over the course of the next decade, Coe wrote the first widely used textbooks in both the psychology of religion and religious education.
A study of more than one-hundred Protestant theological schools in the U.S. and Canada commissioned in the early twenties by the Council of Church Boards of Education suggests that Coe’s influence was widely felt, especially at liberal Methodist and Baptist theological schools and the schools most identified with theological modernism, such as the University of Chicago and Union Theological Seminary in New York. The report described liberal Methodist theological schools, such as Garrett, Candler, and Boston University, as placing an “[u]nusual emphasis . . . upon religious education and psychology of religion.” While the liberal schools in the denominations with the most pronounced historical commitment to revivalism (such as the Baptists and the Methodists) replaced their traditional emphasis on conversion with an emphasis on religious education by the 1920s, conservative theological schools and schools associated with liturgically or confessionally oriented traditions (such as the Episcopalians, the Lutherans, and the Presbyterians) resisted this development.\(^\text{16}\)

Sketchy data suggests that there was corresponding decline in conversion and sanctification experiences among Methodists during the early decades of the twentieth century. As noted above, about half the students studied by Coe in the 1890s reported dramatic conversion and sanctification experiences. In a study of rural, Midwestern congregations in the early teens, Coe’s student Anton Boisen found that the goal of the congregations was still the traditional one of saving souls. Reflecting back on his research in 1935, Boisen commented that then “[e]ven large and influential bodies, like the Methodists [as opposed to ‘holy rollers’], taught their people to expect a period of ‘conviction of sin’ followed by a more or less clear-cut ‘baptism of the Holy Spirit.’” Now, in the thirties, he said, “the conversion experience has pretty much dropped out of the picture, so far as the liberal Protestant churches are concerned. The evangelists who forty years ago were so very plentiful are no longer much in evidence, and an inquiry among a group of prominent liberal ministers revealed among [new members] . . . not a single case of a sudden transformation of character of the type that Starbuck has described.”\(^\text{17}\)

Intellectually, early-twentieth-century Methodist theological liberalism is usually understood as breaking with Wesleyan theological understandings and replacing them with either philosophical (Boston Personalism) or sociological (Social Gospel) categories. It was the psychology of religion and religious education, however, that most directly challenged the tradi-
tional Methodist understanding of "true Christian experience" (that is, "the scriptural way of salvation") and the concomitant emphasis on conversion and sanctification in terms of the life of the church and the practice of ministry. The rise of the psychology of religion and religious education coincided with the virtual disappearance of conversion and sanctification in the more liberal Methodist congregations and replaced that traditional understanding with a very different formation process. In other words, the liberal wing of the tradition, which is dominant in The United Methodist Church, experienced a virtually complete break with the tradition on the level of experience or formation during the early decades of the twentieth century.

1930 to the Present
The fourth period—1930 to the present—has been characterized by increasing diversity with respect to theology and practice. Relative to the denomination's Wesleyan heritage, the rise of "neo-Wesleyanism" in the thirties resulted in renewed attention to Wesleyan studies and to liturgical worship. The former led to the publication of a new edition of Wesley's works, the latter to the publication of the first Methodist Book of Worship (1945, subsequently revised in 1965 and 1980).

The ecumenically oriented movement for liturgical renewal of the last half-century has done much to reconstitute the churchly side of Wesley's vision at the congregational level; however, it has done little to revitalize the evangelical side of the Wesleyan heritage, that is, the distinctive Wesleyan emphasis on conversion and sanctification, on the level of practice. Liberal Methodists tended to resist revitalizing the evangelical side of their heritage, fearing that it would have, in John Cobb's words, "very conservative, if not reactionary, results." But confronted with the debilitating effects of the denomination's loss of a unifying vision, liberal Methodists, such as Cobb, have evinced a new willingness to consider what it might mean to reconstitute Methodist practice in dialogue with explicitly Wesleyan theology.

Theology in Hymns?
Although I take salvation "wrought in the soul" through justification, the new birth, and sanctification to lie at the heart of what it means to be a Methodist, I do not presume to know what form that can or should take in
the present day. That, I think, is the central theological question that we all—clergy, laity, and theological educators—must grapple with in the context of practice. While there has been considerable discontinuity in Methodist practice, the aspect of Methodist practice that both is in touch with the past and still retains at least some of its formative power for contemporary Methodists is singing. The current United Methodist Hymnal (1989), as well as older hymnals and worship books to which congregants have an attachment, may be a place to begin a process of theological reflection on what has or has not been “wrought in the souls” of present-day Methodists. Congregants’ engagement with the theology of the more recent hymnals could also be brought into dialogue with Wesley’s Collection of Hymns for the Use of People Called Methodists (1780), which was arranged to communicate his understanding of “true Christian experience," and the Sunday Service (1784), which he intended to communicate the best of the Anglican liturgical tradition. As traditional means by which Methodists have proclaimed and appropriated the way of salvation, hymnody offers a basis for reflection that holds Wesley’s original vision of Christian practice in tension with the practice of the church today.20

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Endnotes


ANN TAVES


There is a broad sense of malaise currently in The United Methodist Church, at least in its North American setting. And there is a range of diagnoses of the underlying problem. When one looks for points of consensus in these assessments, it is striking how often—across the spectrum of the denomination—the focus turns to bemoaning a paucity of theological concern and theological reflection in our corporate life. More specifically, our lack of theological clarity and consensus at annual and General Conference levels is attributed to a dearth of theological engagement among members in our congregations.¹ The implied mandate is for United Methodists to devote resources (like the present issue of Quarterly Review) to the task of revitalizing theological concern and reflection in the local church.

Those like me who teach theology professionally will likely resonate with this agenda. But they will also know that this agenda must confront at the outset this question: "Why should United Methodist congregations invest in the theological competence of their laity?" We encounter this basic question continually in the various contexts in which we teach. When offering required general education courses in theology at Christian liberal arts colleges, it comes in this form: "Why do we have to study theology? We're not going to be pastors." And when teaching current or prospective pastors we all too often hear the question, "Why do we have to study theology? We're not going to be professors."

Behind the differing forms of this question are some common assumptions about the nature of theology as a human enterprise. At the least, theology is cast as abstract reflection that has little contact with or relevance for daily Christian life. Often there is the further suggestion that theology necessarily involves a style of reflection and discourse that is accessible only to those with professional training. Sometimes even more pejorative insinuations are evident, as in C. S. Lewis's caricature of a
theologian in *The Great Divorce*. The premise of this delightful little story is that a group of persons in hell are allowed to visit the portals of heaven to determine whether they wish to transfer residence to the heavenly realm. The "catch" is that they must finally surrender the vices that currently consign them to the lower realm. Most of the visitors prove unwilling to change (illustrating Lewis's point that "hell is self-imposed"), including a certain theologian. He chooses instead to return to the netherworld to deliver a promised paper to a Theology Society there. The subject of the paper is how Jesus might have developed more moderate views had he lived longer instead of being crucified while still at an idealistic age! Here we see the not-so-subtle insinuation that theological reflection is in danger not only of losing contact with ordinary life but also of becoming a sophisticated way of obscuring or discounting the clear demands of the gospel.

There are undeniably examples of "theology," both at present and in earlier times, which can be marshaled to illustrate these common assumptions. But there is also a more authentic sense and practice of theology running through the history of the church that stands in judgment of these examples. It is this classic expression of theology that we need to revitalize in our churches. An important step toward this goal would be to gain a clearer sense of its nature and dimensions.

**Classic Dimensions of the Theological Enterprise**

The common assumptions about theology just sketched are connected in that they take the activity of professional academic theologians as the standard for defining the nature of theology. But this standard is unduly narrow and anachronistic. Only with the emergence of universities in the Middle Ages did we begin to get persons whose primary vocation was academic instruction in theology. The vocation of noted theologians in prior centuries was more commonly that of pastor, bishop, abbot, or spiritual director—roles devoted to shepherding Christian communities in their engagement with daily life. Broadening the consideration to include these examples from earlier centuries helps us gain a more robust view of theology, a conception that identifies at least five dimensions within the overall enterprise.

The foundational dimension of this robust expression of theology is the *basic worldview* that Christians assume should orient believers' lives in the world. As Paul put it, Christians will perceive things rightly and act appropriately only when they have the "mind of Christ." That this involves
holistic dispositions and not merely intellectual convictions is evident from
Paul's parallel emphasis on Christians nurturing the "fruit of the Spirit." The
mind of Christ fosters—and is reciprocally strengthened by—loving
service of others (Philippians 2). The "orienting" nature of this foundational
dimension deserves special emphasis. A person's worldview is not simply
one set of beliefs and dispositions alongside others that he or she
embraces. These specific beliefs and dispositions frame the perspective
within which the person makes sense of, evaluates, and incorporates all
other beliefs and dispositions. That is why the term theology should not be
restricted to designating only knowledge of God (as the Greek roots of the
word might imply). It is inadequate even to confine it to knowledge of
general religious truths. The word theology names instead the Christian
practice of approaching all of life from, and placing all knowledge within,
the perspective of God's revelation in Christ Jesus.

Paul's passionate appeal for Christians to emulate the "mind of Christ"
reflects the reality that this orienting worldview is not unilaterally infused
by God at one's conversion. It neither emerges effortlessly over time nor
manifests itself spontaneously whenever it is needed. It must be cultivated
as part of the intentional process of growing in Christlikeness. This need
defines the second dimension of the theological enterprise evident through
the history of the church, namely the pastoral task of forming/reforming a
Christian worldview in believers. Since the worldview in question is holistic,
this task has proven to involve a variety of activities aimed at invoking and
shaping beliefs, affections, and character dispositions. The case of the early
church is particularly revealing in this regard. Their theological energies
were necessarily dominated by the task of forming a Christian worldview in
new believers, and they pursued this task with the clear sense that the
cultures within which they lived were bent on instilling quite different
worldviews. In this context they prized most highly as "theologians" those
who crafted such formative practical-theological materials as hymns, litur-
gies, catechetical orations, and spiritual discipline manuals.

The case of the early church also makes clear that the production of
such "first-order" theological materials will inevitably spawn "second-order"
normative theological reflection (a third dimension of the overall theological
enterprise). That is, it will spark debates not only over the adequacy of
particular practices for forming a Christian worldview but also over alterna-
tive conceptions of this basic worldview and alternative proposed implica-
tions of the worldview for concrete action in the world. Thus, for example, a proposed liturgy addressing prayers directly to the Holy Spirit provoked a debate in the early church that led naturally into the range of issues concerning God’s triune nature. Challenges to the longstanding use of predominantly male imagery for God in Christian discourse and symbols provide a current example of the same dynamic interaction between these dimensions of the theological enterprise.

The concern of the three dimensions of theology considered so far focuses primarily on those who have embraced (to some degree) the Christian worldview. A fourth dimension that can be discerned throughout the span of the church is more apologetic and evangelistic in aim, engaging self-consciously those who question or reject Christian beliefs and practices. While this aim has its own integrity, once again we should not overlook the connections between this dimension and those already identified. Dialogue with critics has often helped to clarify aspects and implications of the Christian worldview. Likewise, the questions that outsiders articulate are typically gnawing at insiders as well, and their resolution serves to enable a deeper appropriation and integration of the Christian worldview by believers. Coming full circle, Christians living more authentically in the world are the most effective apologetic or evangel that could be desired.

One further perennial dimension of the overall theological enterprise is the concern to train new generations within the community of believers to carry out the formative, normative, and apologetic dimensions of this enterprise. Through the first millennium this training took place largely by mentoring. As such, it generated few distinctive forms of theological expression. One learned how to engage in first-order, second-order, and apologetic activities under the guidance of a practicing pastor, abbot, catechist, and so on. By contrast, as specialized academic institutions increasingly subsumed this training task in the second millennium, it became common to privilege the curricular forms developed within this new setting (compendiums, summæ, systematic theologies, and the like) as “serious” theology and to consider the instructors in these institutions the “real” theologians.

The Shift to Privileging “Theoretical” Theology

The emergence of these academic institutions and the development of corresponding forms of theological activity are, in themselves, surely not to be lamented. They were natural processes that had actually been unduly
delayed by historical circumstances. And they provided greater time, focus, and scholarly resources for some in the church to pursue specialized aspects of the broad theological enterprise—such as careful linguistic and cultural exegesis of biblical and historical texts. But the specific model that came to dominate academic theology is problematic. The longstanding assumption had been that theology was overall a "practical" discipline (scientia practica); that is, theology focuses primarily on addressing humans and the things that humans do—in light of God. For a variety of reasons, it became increasingly standard within the university to defend theology as instead a "theoretical" discipline—focused first and foremost on understanding God per se.4

The crucial problem with this shift in focus is not that it champions theoretical reflection but that it easily severs the dynamic interaction between the normative dimension of theology and its foundational and formative dimensions. Theoretical considerations about the nature of God, drawing on biblical exegesis and philosophy, have been integral to normative judgment in the church from its earliest days. But the "practical" consequences of alternative conceptions of God and God's relationship to humanity have been equally central in classic Christian normative reflection.5 Moreover, just as it was instructed by spirituality/practice in reaching its decisions, second-order normative reflection was ultimately geared to readdressing spirituality/practice by means of first-order theological activities. It could take very formal expression in conciliar creeds, for example; but its fruitful outcomes were never intended to be restricted to such expression. They were meant to guide how Christians prayed, worked, played, procreated, and the rest.

As the heightened theoretical emphasis supplanted practical considerations in normative reflection, it became natural to identify full-time academic theologians as the ideal—because they were "freed" from the burden of shepherding (even participating in?) the daily life of a Christian community in order to devote full time to theoretical reflection. And it was predictable that their sense of this reflection's being second-order activity would fade. On the one side, there was less exposure to the ways in which the daily experience and practice of ordinary believers could inform theological judgment. On the other side, a professional disdain tended to emerge toward concerns that theological insights be expressed in forms that communicate to and effectively shape the worldview of ordinary
believers: "real" theologians wrote systematic theologies or philosophical apologetic treatises, not liturgies and hymns.

The inverse impact of these developments remains readily apparent outside the academy. Few pastors view their main role as shepherding the theological formation of those in their care or see decisions about worship materials, building programs, and the like as first-order theological activity. They may be more willing to talk about their role in spiritual formation but usually assume that this is quite different from theological formation. And the typical layperson finds any suggestion that he or she has a crucial role in theological formation and reflection within the church quite foreign.

**The Amplifying Effect of Enlightenment Assumptions**

The privileging of theoretical theology was well underway when Methodism came on the scene. Despite glimpses of an alternative in Wesley's "practical" theological activity, influential American Methodists soon appropriated the reigning academic model. This action intensified the disparity sensed between the populist nature of most early American Methodist worship and preaching, on the one hand, and the scholastic or philosophical nature of what was broadly held to be "theology," on the other. This helps explain why many ordinary early Methodists (clergy and laity alike) were proud to declare that theirs was not a "theological" church!

In terms of the classic conception sketched above, this was actually far from true! The point is not just that early American Methodists inherited via their Anglican roots the historic doctrinal outlines of the Christian worldview. It is also that they took the catechetical task seriously, producing and actively using manuals for this purpose. Methodist laity were generally as ready and willing as their traveling preachers to expound upon the exegetical problems and detrimental implications of theological views like unconditional predestination and deism. And the distinctive practical-theological structures of class meeting, quarterly meeting, and accountability to the General Rules were effective for a while in nurturing in the Methodist ranks a "Christian mind" that resisted surrounding cultural practices like slavery.

But over time things changed in the ancestor branches that flow into contemporary United Methodism. The distinctive structures were either abandoned or reduced to mere bureaucratic functions. The typical values of Methodists became evermore like those of the cultures in which they
lived. The concern for formative catechetical instruction, particularly the continuing instruction of adults, faded. And the percentage of laity who felt competent to participate in normative theological debate decreased steadily. In other words, Methodists increasingly became a less "theological" church—in the classic sense of that term—particularly at the lay level.

What promoted this move? The deepening impact of reigning academic assumptions about theology likely played a role but does not seem a sufficient explanation. Echoing a point in the previous essay by Ann Taves, I believe that a major amplifying factor has been the way in which North American Methodists have embraced in an insufficiently discerning manner certain Enlightenment assumptions flourishing in our culture over the past two centuries. I am not suggesting that Methodists are unique in this regard; rather, this is one of the places where we have served as the "most representative" North American denomination. Nor am I suggesting that Methodists should have summarily rejected all Enlightenment assumptions; quite the contrary, the rejection of such assumptions as human equality and individual rights by reactionary elements must be judged as at least as problematic as the uncritical appropriation of certain others by "mainline" Methodists. But it is this appropriation that is most relevant to our present topic.

The Enlightenment period in Western culture is characterized by vigorous advocacy of modern empirical inquiry as a guide to truth. This advocacy emerged as a justifiable reaction to the dominant focus on exposition of traditional texts as the model for learning in the preceding centuries. But the specific ways in which it has been framed have served to obscure—both in the general public and in the church—the classic conception of theology as the discipline devoted to bringing all knowledge into dynamic interrelationship with the truth of God revealed in Jesus Christ.

To begin with, a broadly influential model for inserting new empirical inquiry into the medieval curriculum appealed to the notion that God has provided two "books" of revelation: the Book of Scripture and the Book of Nature. The implication drawn was that while Scripture can be studied by traditional methods, the Book of Nature is more appropriately studied by present empirical investigation. In clearing space for the emerging independent sciences, this model left the suggestion that theology is concerned simply with studying traditional texts. This more restricted conception of theology was reinforced by the growing specialization of the modern
 academy. At the outset of the Enlightenment it was still possible to pursue the ideal of individually comprehending all fields of knowledge. But we have long since conceded that individuals can master only specialized areas. The clear, popular assumption (evident widely in Methodist circles) became that the theologian's characteristic area is study of past religious texts, while the natural and human sciences are "lay" specializations. This leaves the following unfortunate dual connotation: (1) one can be a "theologian" in some adequate sense without engaging the lay disciplines; (2) study of theology is a peripheral, and optional, matter for lay intellectual inquiry.

These connotations would be mitigated somewhat if theology and the other specialized fields were considered of equal value and if specialists in each field were encouraged to engage the others frequently in mutually informing dialogue. But the dominant stream of the Enlightenment pushed in precisely the opposite direction. The recommendation of key figures was not just to introduce present inquiry as a parallel consideration alongside traditional methods and materials; it was also to discount all reliance on tradition. For many this ultimately meant displacing theology from the modern scientific university. And in culture more broadly, it has fostered a "privatization" of theological convictions. These convictions are reduced to matters of "opinion" that individuals are free to hold but that, they are exhorted, should make no difference in their intellectual inquiry, professional activities, or political judgments.

While the Enlightenment assumptions considered so far were undercutting the sense of theology as normative reflection on all knowledge and all of life, other assumptions were eroding appreciation for the dimension of theology as worldview formation. The general Enlightenment optimism about humanity was central in this regard. One form this optimism could take was Wesley's insistence that God's grace is universally available and holistically transformative in human lives. More often, though, it was expressed in terms of the inherent goodness of human nature. The difference between Wesley's conviction and this more common expression is subtle, and his American descendants increasingly blurred the distinction. The crucial point is that when moral goodness is assumed to be inherent, there is little emphasis on cultivating dispositions toward desirable actions. Many will assume that the ideal dispositions emerge naturally, if we do not foolishly thwart them by attempting instead to impose our distorted cultural expectations. Others will suppose that cultivating predispositions is irrele-
vant (if not antithetical) to moral concern, because the essence of true morality is rising above all biological and cultural inclinations in exercising our innate power of rational choice. As a growing number of Methodists embraced such assumptions, they inevitably lost touch with Wesley’s stress on the importance of cultivating within believers an enduring holistic disposition toward Christlike life in the world and his appreciation for the role of first-order forms of theological activity in this venture.

The Need for Investing in the Theological Competence of Laity

The dynamics just traced help explain why many in our churches honestly question the value of devoting major resources to cultivating the competency of laity in theology. When theology is understood as a narrowly specialized discipline of highly abstract reflection on a purely private area of life, what vital contribution could its mastery make to laity? And what possible benefit might they bring to theology? But these dynamics also provide the backdrop for appreciating the growing sense of need to reclaim the classic conception of theology, with its emphasis on both the importance of lay theological formation and the value of lay participation in theological reflection.

Consider first the foundational dimension of holistic, orienting dispositions. There is broad lament in North American culture over a perceived decline of “character” in our citizens. This is helping to call into question the diffuse Enlightenment assumption that dispositions toward honest, humane, and charitable behavior are native to humans and emerge naturally in normal maturation. We are beginning to appreciate again the degree to which character is a product of the formative (or de-formative) impact of our various communities-of-influence. And we are learning that the communities that are most pervasive and intentional in their influence have the most impact. Hence the sad reality that so many of us raised in a community named for the one who “emptied himself for the sake of others” are pursuing life in a way that reflects instead the consumerist motto that “the one who dies with the most toys wins”! Lack of appreciation for the malleable nature of character has left us susceptible to cultural captivity. If we want our members to have greater clarity about and greater consistency in embodying truly Christlike life in our culture, we must own the need to cultivate competent Christlike dispositions.

In moving to the next dimension, it is vital to recognize that laity are
not just beneficiaries of formative attention; they are also major players in
the practical-theological activities that shape the worldview/character of
those in our churches. At the heart of character is a "life narrative" that
frames our sense of self in relation to others, lending coherence to our
dispositions and actions. While this narrative has unique elements, its plot
self-consciously emulates a prototype—imbibed from those who surround
us and/or chosen out of adoration. For Christians, this prototype is the
"Christ story." Sermons and scattered Scripture reading are insufficient for
transcribing this story deeply into our souls. It is impressed more fully
through regular patterns of worship, times of intentional study of Scripture,
the example of mentors who emulate Christ, and a variety of other activi­
ties in which laity are forefront. The effectiveness of these activities is
dependent upon a sufficient core of laity recognizing their theological
dimension and engaging them competently.

The authenticity of the Christ story being impressed through these
activities is also of concern, reflecting the interplay of the formative and
normative dimensions of the theological enterprise. The ability to discern
this authenticity is grounded in knowledge of the whole of Scripture. It is
strengthened by exposure to the long and broad tradition of Christian
interpretation and application of Scripture. This exposure makes one sensi­tive
to the reality that God’s revelation in Christ—while universal in scope—
took specific historical-cultural expression; and it provides the chance to
benefit from the wisdom gained through the attempts in other ages and
cultures to give appropriately translated expression to that revelation. By
contrast, a lack of grounding in Scripture or of exposure to the tradition of
Christian life and witness makes it more likely that we will fail to recognize
cultural captivity in our life and witness. Any investment that increases the
competence of our laity in Scripture and tradition increases the likelihood
of authentic Christian formation in our churches.

Such investment is also vital for formalized normative reflection.
United Methodist polity provides laity a prominent voice in our decision­
making bodies. As John Cobb has reminded us, when we fail to also
provide laity with support in (and expectation of) developing appropriate
theological competence, it increases the likelihood that theological issues
will be decided by cultural and political dynamics. The solution to this
danger is surely not to exclude laity from normative reflection! In the first
place, clergy and academic theologians are also susceptible to cultural and
political influences. More important, such exclusion would represent a surrender to the unfortunate fracturing of normative reflection fostered by the Enlightenment. Normative debates in theology are now commonly framed as forced choices between past authorities (Scripture and tradition) and present authorities (reason and experience). Given the specialization of knowledge described above, this scenario approaches a choice between relying on clergy/theology for guidance and relying on laity/science. John Wesley rightly resisted this framing of theological debates, evidencing some awareness that interpretation of experience and reason is as human—and thus fallible—as is that of Scripture and tradition. He modeled a desire for normative reflection to sustain dialogue between competing interpretations of the various sources of theological insight until a way was found to “do justice” to all the sources (and thus to the contributions of all the church). We need laity from all areas of specialization who are grounded enough in the classic dimensions of theology to be confident and discerning in offering their unique contributions to normative reflection in the church.

We also need laity to own their crucial role in the apologetic dimension of the theological enterprise. In this age of specialization and rapid change, new challenges to Christian claims and values emerge most often in research labs, boardrooms, clinics, and the like. It is laity who first confront these challenges and often laity who are best placed to offer an influential Christian response. This makes it vital that they resist the privatized model of the relation of their Christian convictions to their vocation and that they are theologically competent to participate in forming this response. It is equally vital that the church support them in developing this competence.

Prospects for Enhancing the Theological Competence of Laity

What are the prospects for strengthening this support? The good news is that some excellent resources are being made available to United Methodist congregations and are being used to a significant degree. Programs like DISCIPLE Bible study, Christian Believer, and Covenant Discipleship are proving their value both for promoting formation of authentic Christian conviction and dispositions and for grounding and strengthening participants' capacity to participate in normative reflection.

The prospects are bleaker in the academy. I have formal theological education only partly in mind in this assessment. A variety of voices here
are calling for the recovery of something more like the classic conception of theology. The broader problem is the general isolation of formal theological education from the rest of the university. While some divinity schools stand on university campuses, they rarely require students to engage any field outside the divinity curriculum. More important, United Methodist-related colleges and universities have largely dropped any expectation that nondivinity majors will develop basic competency for bringing theological perspective to their area of specialization. We will have to look elsewhere at present for academic models that prepare laity for serious participation in the theological enterprise.

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Endnotes


2. I am using this term to describe the nature of the task, not to delimit who might engage in it. The tendency (particularly in the Western church) to restrict such formative work to clergy is regrettable and unjustified.


Revitalization is one of the catchwords of our time. Neighborhoods are revitalized. So are organizations, businesses, relationships, and other things that have become a little long in the tooth. Not surprisingly, churches are also in for revitalization. But what about theological discourse? What or who is driving the concern for revitalizing theological discourse in the church?

The first suspects for trying to revitalize theological discourse in the church might be the professional theologians. Yet, while academic theology can still be vital and exciting, it nevertheless often tends to stay within its own sphere. As one colleague put it when asked why the prose of his books was so difficult, "So that only superior people can understand it." The clergy might be another obvious group interested in revitalizing theological discourse in the church. But many are so involved in the more visible things of church life and things further up on the reward structure that, already as seminary students, they tend to give only as much attention to theology as necessary.

At the same time, however, I find plenty of concern for revitalizing theological discourse at the grass-roots level of the churches, even though it may not be called by that name. In everyday experiences of pressure and change, people tend to raise questions that have deep theological significance. When a child dies, for instance, the question of God is one of the first to come up. When there is suffering in ways that we are unable to explain and to rationalize, people wonder about the structure of the world. Whenever our normal means for explaining the world fail, questions are raised that touch on the foundations of our understanding of the Christian faith. Here, it seems to me, we are at the very root of the question of how theological discourse might be revitalized today. What if this time we moved not from the top down (whether beginning with the experiences of...
The elites or with yet another standardized set of ideas) but from the bottom up? Let's take a closer look at the concerns and questions that pop up at the grass roots.

**A New Respect for God**

The biggest hurdle to thinking theologically is neither the complexity of the issues nor the irrelevance of theological thought; rather, it is that people assume they already know all they need to know about God, including Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, and the church. This is the problem not just of religious professionals who proudly present their degrees. Even in conversations among church people notions of God or ideas about the interpretation of biblical texts, for instance, are often referred to in order to end a debate rather than in order to become part of a dialogue. We all know phrases (some turned into bumper stickers) like “God (or the Bible) said it, that settles it.”

Not surprisingly, when there is talk about revitalization in the church, theological discourse does not usually appear on the list of things to be revitalized—even though it may show up on lists of things to be “recovered.” A widespread feeling holds that all that the churches need to do is to market their stock of inherited ecclesial goods—including their knowledge of God and other theological insights—through more appealing worship services, more comfortable accommodations, or better services. And all that this effort would take is to repackage these goods in new and more attractive ways and dust them off, where necessary.

In this situation theological discourse can be revitalized only from the bottom up. The first thing that needs to happen is for us not to fire up the market of theological ideas but to understand the limited nature of our knowledge of God. Well-meaning experts, trying to counter our theological complacency by pointing out new and interesting “facts” about God, will only make things worse at this stage. We first need to become aware of our limits. And isn't it true that we are most aware of these limits when we are in touch with the pressures of life at the grass roots, when we question our preconceived ideas about God and the world?

The first step in revitalizing theological discourse is ultimately a matter of gaining new respect for God. We would never presume that we have full and absolute knowledge of people whom we respect. We are limited in our knowledge of our partners and friends, for instance; and this is what ulti-
mately keeps our relationships alive and dynamic. It is no different in our theological knowledge of God. Revitalization presupposes an attitude of respect.

The biblical book of Job tells a similar story. Here theology is also revitalized through gaining new respect for God. In a situation of extreme pressure, including the loss of Job's wife and children and all that he worked for, the textbook answers of Job's friends, complete with beautiful ideas of God's power and glory, reach their limits and crumble. In Job's situation, the theologians who merely repeat standardized ideas about God are the ones who are least helpful and are unable to understand what's really going on.

A pastoral care approach is equally hopeless in a situation where everything is turned upside down. Job's ordeal leads him into uncharted territory beyond the theological textbooks and the well-meaning efforts at pastoral counseling and ends with a personal encounter with God that restores respect and makes all the difference. Theological discourse is moved to a new level in Job's experience: "I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you" (Job 42:5).

Revitalizing theological discourse has nothing to do with merely dusting off a few doctrines or simply recovering a set of inherited beliefs and memorizing them. Theological discourse is revitalized wherever our doctrines are tested and shaped in the context of new encounters with God in our everyday lives, where the pressure is greatest. Was that not also part of the early Methodist experience? At the heart of it all was the experience of God in situations of pressure. John Wesley saw himself as a "brand plucked from the burning," first as a child when he was rescued from his father's burning parsonage and later as one who was rescued from damnation in order to challenge the powers of evil. The best Methodist theology has always been theology done under pressure, constantly revitalized by seeking out and confronting the most severe pressures of life. These pressures included the life-and-death issues of the day, such as poverty and slavery, and the forces that kept people poor and enslaved, such as the greed and self-centeredness of the powerful.

Theological discourse is revitalized wherever we develop new respect for God, something learned best when people are pushed out of their secure worlds and the security of their doctrinal assumptions and into situations of pressure at the grass roots of everyday life.
Tapping into New Energy Sources

In order to revitalize theological discourse we need to identify new energy sources and tap into them. Well-meaning attempts to pump up theological talk without paying attention to this issue frequently end up ineffective or, worse, end up drawing their energy from the powers-that-be. In the past, theology has often gained influence precisely where it followed the dynamics of the status quo in both church and world. What looked like a revitalization of theological discourse in those situations often was little more than theology riding the waves of the status quo. What might energize the revitalization of theological discourse in the local church today? Let me give a few examples and then see what they have in common.

When people return from mission trips (whether to faraway places or close to home) many portray their encounters with suffering and pain as a life-changing experience. What usually goes unnoticed, however, is that in the midst of this experience serious theological questions are raised. What does this experience say about me and my humanity? Who am I, before God and other human beings? Where is God in all of this? Is God primarily where we think God is—in things ecclesial? What if God is in places where we have never even looked? Theological discourse can hardly be more vital than this. Unfortunately, however, such questions are hardly ever pursued further. By the time we get to the slide presentations we usually celebrate our missional achievements and the generosity of the sending bodies but leave out the critical theological questions. To make things worse, the leaders of the church often don't quite know what to do with such questions either; these sorts of inquiries rarely appear in their theological manuals and transcend the theological maps currently marketed in the clash between self-proclaimed liberals and conservatives.

Sometimes theological discourse is revitalized where Christians gather in small groups. The renewed interest in the traditional Methodist bands and classes through the so-called “covenant discipleship groups” is a case in point. My own experience as a member of such a group a few years back illustrates an experience of revitalization. This group of seven members, all highly dedicated to the church and leaders in their professions, never got much beyond traditional theological ideas. Small groups are not necessarily better at revitalizing things than large groups. We really got going theologically, however, when we decided we would cook for and have dinner on a
regular basis with the people at the local homeless shelter. Creative engagement with Bible and theology picked up precisely at the point where we encountered people who pushed us beyond the limits of our theological comfort zones. Like Wesley and the early Methodists, we experienced how theological discourse is revitalized under pressure.

Theological discourse can experience revitalization from the bottom up even in the theology centers. When students and faculty at Perkins School of Theology in Dallas began going to West Dallas (a desolate area of town marked by poverty and racial marginalization) and developed relationships with the people there, we also experienced revitalization. It all began with a sense that meeting God in West Dallas—under pressure and in the context of the encounter with other people—can change one's life. In this setting people developed new relationships to the traditions of the church, eyes were opened to important themes in the Bible that had gone unnoticed for generations, and new theological questions were raised. No wonder that we met resistance from certain faculty and students precisely at the point where theological discourse was being revitalized in these ways: nobody ever worried about a few acts of charity performed off campus.

Even official church documents are now beginning to tie the revitalization of theology and the church to encounters with the underside. Here lies the real challenge of the United Methodist Bishops' Initiative on Children and Poverty. Unlike many annual conferences that have picked up the document, the bishops are not primarily interested in the question about what else those of us who are well off can do for others. Neither is the point of the bishops' concern for the worsening situation of the children and the poor that we develop more programs. "The crisis among children and the impoverished and our theological and historical mandates demand more than additional programs or emphases," the bishops state. They conclude on the surprising note that "nothing less than the reshaping of The United Methodist Church in response to the God who is among 'the least of these' is required." Wherever we encounter the pressures of life, the vitality of both theology and the church is at stake.

In all these examples theological discourse is revitalized from the bottom up and draws its energy where people encounter God in the tensions of life. The mountaintops, including our academic or ecclesial ivory towers, may not necessarily be the best places to start the revitalization of theology. The German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, partici-
pating in the revitalization of theology under the pressures of Germany's Third Reich (an effort that cost him his life), realized that we need to follow God where God has already preceded us, to the underside of life. Fresh encounters with God where the pressure is greatest—where we are shaken out of our theological safety zones—provide new sources of energy for revitalizing theological discourse. Theological discourse cannot be truly revitalized through well-meaning programs that merely repeat the lessons of the past, no matter how valuable and true they may be.

**Listening in Community**

The revitalization of theological discourse goes hand in hand with a new attitude of listening. While the theological experts may have a hard time learning this lesson (many of us are more used to teaching than to receiving), nobody is off the hook. When we forget to listen to other voices, we often hear only ourselves. Without listening, theological discourse becomes narcissistic by default. At all levels of theological discourse, from the academy to the Sunday school class, there is a constant temptation to get stuck circling around our own interests. At other times, we may also be listening too indiscriminately. Here our efforts to think about God become market driven and are determined by the powers-that-be, by those who speak in the loudest voice. We need to learn when to listen and to what to listen.

In the Methodist tradition following John Wesley, the means of grace mark the most important places where we need to listen. *Means of grace* are channels through which we receive God's grace; they are links through which we are connected to God. Initially, Wesley—rooted firmly in the Anglican tradition—identified prayer, reading the Bible, and Holy Communion as means of grace. Later, he added Christian conference and fasting. In addition, the older Wesley also put strong emphasis on works of mercy as means of grace. Each of these elements provides an opportunity for listening to God and to other people.

Praying to God, in this lineup, is not presenting God with a wish list or performing a religious ritual. Rather, prayer has to do with being in dialogue with God, with speaking as well as listening. Praying means opening up to God, aligning our will with God's will when the going gets tough. Jesus himself set the example in Gethsemane: "Not what I want, but what you want" (Mark 14:36). Praying not only is a personal matter, as
Wesley was well aware, but also takes place in community. Here the dialogue between the self and God is extended to include others who are different, thus intensifying the experience of listening.

Reading the Bible also implies listening and dialogue: not only do we read the Bible, the Bible also reads us. We are shaped in this interaction in ways that we cannot anticipate and that lead us beyond the stereotypical "religious" or "ecclesial" realms into interaction with all of God's creation. Like prayer, the Bible has its place not only in personal life but also in the community. Written by a large number of people and groups who have encountered God in their lives, the Bible needs to be listened to in communities diverse enough to have captured the most severe pressures of life and to have had diverse encounters with God in those situations. The unity of the biblical canon has always been a unity in diversity.

Everything comes together in Holy Communion. Here the Bible is read, prayer and the liturgy (representing the traditions of the church) find their deepest roots, a community is formed out of diverse members, and Christ's presence is encountered in ways that have the potential to revitalize and, at times, revolutionize our theological and doctrinal images. The "open table" tradition of the Methodists, inviting all who repent of their sin and want to live in peace with one another, breaks open our narrow images of community and extends our horizons. Vital theological discourse is not restricted to church members. It also includes all people who are aware of their shortcomings and who seek to find new sources of life, particularly those people at the margins of society whom we often fail to take seriously as brothers and sisters because they do not fit our ecclesial profile.

In this context Wesley's concern for Christian conference reminds us that we need to develop new forms of listening in community settings. The community is not a straightjacket in which everybody is expected to think alike; rather, it is a place that creates space for discourses "seasoned with salt," as Wesley puts it. Fasting might help resist the increasing commodification of life in the twenty-first century where everything is put up for quick consumption. Fasting might teach us that listening is not a mode of consumption like watching a show on TV or picking up the latest gossip. Listening has to do not with voyeurism but with opening up and participating.

At first sight, the works of mercy do not seem to fit in this list. Works of
mercy are usually identified not with an attitude of listening but with “outreach”—with being proactive and doing things for others. This view changes, however, if we follow Wesley’s lead and consider the works of mercy as means of grace. In this light, working together with (not for) the “least of these” provides prime opportunities for listening. We encounter God not only in prayer, Bible reading, and Holy Communion but also in relationships with other people. This may well be one of the most important lessons for our time, because we are not used to listening to those who are different from us. Here the communities of theological discourse are expanded: we cannot think theologically without listening to one another. (Neither can we be fully human, but that’s another matter.) In these encounters, theology is constantly revitalized and we are enabled to listen to God in new ways. Wesley himself was quite concerned about people who were not aware of the works of mercy as means of grace. He suspected that many have fallen from grace for just that reason.

If Wesley was indeed a “folk theologian,” this appellation has first of all to do with his ability to learn from the people and to think theologically in relation to their lives rather than with the ability to translate difficult theological concepts into simple images. Wesley’s example reminds us that the leadership of the church, including the development of theology at the official levels, needs to pay much more attention to communities at the grass roots made up of diverse members who keep their ears to the ground of everyday life and find God there.

**Critical Reflection from the Bottom Up**

Theological discourse is being revitalized in places where we least expect it. In situations of pressure people are beginning to think about God in new ways, inspired by prayer, the biblical writings, Holy Communion, and encounters with others in need. None of us can make this happen, but we need new theological tools that help us evaluate what is genuine and what is not and that help us guide the further development of new theological discourse in our midst. How does theology maintain its commonly recognized task of critical reflection on the witness of the church?

A revitalization process that starts at the grass roots and moves from the bottom up demands radical adjustment in critical theological thinking. We usually proceed from the top down: the more educated are closer to the truth than the less educated; the powerful are more in touch with the way
things are than the powerless, and so on. Commonsense logic tells us that we see and judge best from the top looking down—from the upper levels of the church and society. But what if things were different? The apostle Paul said, “God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are” (1 Cor. 1:27-28). We are beginning to realize that the view from below is often broader than the view from the top. The view from below usually includes the dominant perspective—much of our official communication happens in the dominant language; the cultural and religious symbols of the dominant group are all pervasive; and what is “normal” is defined by those in charge. For this reason, the view from below extends beyond the specific concerns of the underside and includes the concerns of the powers-that-be, without ever being fully conformed to them.

Aware of the blind spots of the dominant perspective, the view from below introduces a critical element: Nobody experiences more severely what’s wrong with the way things are than those who are crushed by these things. We need this point of view in order to evaluate where things have gone wrong and where we need to change. When thinking about God, we need to learn how to listen to the whole story and to see the larger picture, including those parts that don’t get told and usually remain invisible. The apostle Paul understood that the pain of those who are usually invisible is everyone’s pain: “If one member suffers, all suffer together with it” (1 Cor. 12:26). How do our images of God hold up in the tensions of life? What does it mean to proclaim God’s power? For instance, is it true that God is always with those who end up on top?

At this point the common distinction between clergy and laity—as the distinction between teacher and consumer of critical theological thinking—breaks down. Frederick Herzog insists that we need to move beyond the Reformation’s emphasis on the priesthood of all believers to an awareness of the “layhood of all ministers.” Clergy, too, are part of the laity, literally—the people (Greek: laos) of God. This insight serves as a reminder that we cannot evaluate a theological thought without including the diverse points of view of all God’s people, particularly those on the underside who receive little attention.

So, everything comes full circle: Doing theology in the pressures of life—including concern for the other person (which includes the “least of
these") that drove already the founders of Methodism—might open our
eyes to aspects of God’s reality that we have often overlooked and might
sharpen theological judgment. If people who do not love their brothers and
sisters cannot love God, as the writer of 1 John claims (1 John 4:20), then
we cannot assume that people who do not work to gain respect for other
people are able to develop respect for God, either. Even our grandest theo­
logical confessions of respect for God, claiming God as Wholly Other or as
the ruler of all things, are easily pulled in by the powers-that-be, unless
these confessions are reconstructed from below. This touches at the heart
of the critical task of theological reflection.

In this reshaped understanding of critical theological thinking, the
Bible and other texts of the church also play an important role. Many grass­
roots communities make ample use of the Bible, and there seems to be a
growing concern for the wealth of the church’s tradition. Read in the midst
of the pressures of our time, these texts gain new life and a critical edge.
A well-known adage distinguishes between traditionalism as the dead tradi­
tions of the living and tradition as the living traditions of the dead. Here we
are in for a surprise: Living the Christian life and admitting its pressures
opens up new windows into the texts of the church and helps expose the
misuse of the text by those in power.

Theology as critical reflection is not complete without realizing the self­
critical element. Theology is the intellectual exercise of our repentance, as
my colleague Charles Wood keeps reminding students. For similar reasons,
I talk about theology as “self-critical reflection on the witness of the
church.” Those who engage in theological discourse are also transformed.
We are constantly reshaped in our encounters with God, other people, and
the texts of the church. And while theological discourse takes place at
various levels—from expert theological communities to very simple reflec­
tions on the facts of life in light of our encounters with God—there is no
absolute distinction between these levels. None of these levels exists in
isolation. But we all need to begin somewhere; and what better place to
start than where we encounter God afresh in the pressures and tensions of
everyday life?

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Endnotes

1. Churches and even the seminaries often fail to recognize these concerns for revitalization, which emerge "from below." Pastors commonly tend to address questions like those raised when children die as matters for counseling rather than as significant theological issues. Theologians are frequently satisfied with giving textbook answers that have more to do with repeating what others have said in the past than with a constructive engagement of the specific challenge at hand.

2. In the U.S. we still might benefit from the theology of Karl Barth. Barth's main concern was to account for how God is different from us, in that God is surprisingly different from the powers-that-be. For recent arguments to go beyond the neo-orthodox Barth in the North American context see Bruce McCormack, Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development, 1909–1936 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), and Joerg Rieger, God and the Excluded: Visions and Blindspots in Contemporary Theology (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), chap. 2.

3. Revitalizing theological discourse cannot mean simply adapting theology to whatever we may perceive our context to be. I am specifically talking about revitalizing theology in situations of pressure. For an argument to move beyond general notions of contextual theology see Joerg Rieger, "Developing a Common Interest Theology from the Underside," in Liberating the Future: God, Mammon, and Theology, ed. by Joerg Rieger (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 124-41.

4. Mujerista theology talks about lo cotidiano, the everyday experiences of Hispanic women, as the source of theology. See Ada María Isasi-Díaz, Mujerista Theology: A Theology for the Twenty-first Century (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996), 66ff. While not the only source, clearly such experiences of pressure are crucial and have been neglected by traditional theology. See also chaps. 4 and 6 of Rieger, God and the Excluded.

5. The classic example is the Culture Protestantism of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Europe, exposed by Karl Barth and others. In the U.S. context, both liberal and conservative positions gain much of their vitality from the ongoing culture wars in society without offering much of an alternative.

6. A step towards a more serious encounter with theological questions raised in such situations is taken in Beyond Theological Tourism: Mentoring as a Grassroots Approach to Theological Education, ed. by Susan B. Thistlethwaite and George F. Cairns (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1994).


9. According to Bonhoeffer, one of the most important lessons that resistance to the Third Reich has taught him is to increasingly view things from the underside of history. See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. by Eberhard Bethge (New York: Macmillan, 1972), 17.


12. The German exegete Ernst Küsemann has argued that the biblical canon is the foundation not of the unity of the church but of its diversity. See Ernst Küsemann, “Begründet der neutestamentliche Kanon die Einheit der Kirche?” in *Exegetische Versuche und Besinnungen*, vol. 1 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1960), 221.


16. For an extended exploration of how the view from below reshapes systematic theology as a whole, see Rieger, *Remember the Poor*, chap. 3.


18. I address the interaction of our encounters with God, other people, and the texts of the church in my new book, *God and the Excluded*. In chapter 6, I connect this discussion with the Methodist quadrilateral of Scripture, experience, tradition, and reason.
I am haunted by an experience I had as a campus minister with a student who approached me for counseling. Clearly distraught, the student was convinced that he was being pursued by the devil and that the evil one would soon have his soul. The anguished young man was agitated, frightened, and belligerent. His roommate, a fervent believer, preached to him night and day that the capture of his soul was imminent. Sadly, the student’s lack of religious training, eschewed by parents who thought it wiser to let him “find his own path,” left him empty and vulnerable. Over the course of several meetings, I tried every approach I could muster to engage, comfort, and set the young man free: Scripture, prayer, psychology, theology, creeds, church history, common sense, support, and care. Nothing seemed to get through to comfort or guide. In our last encounter, he challenged, “Why should I believe anything YOU say?” Clearly, my ordination credentials, my official status with The United Methodist Church, or the strength of personal authority had not been enough to counteract the intensity of his roommate’s threat.

Few parishioners in our congregations confront us with a need as graphic as this student’s. Yet, a paucity of theological grounding, coupled with lifestyles of ease and sophistication, often leaves our people unequipped or at best terribly underequipped to face the challenges of life’s journey. Consequently, parishioners find it difficult to cope with the many dimensions of health and illness, family and relationships, appropriate wealth, death and dying, social responsibility, and so forth that all Christians experience in their day-to-day living. Their theology (such as it is) is a mishmash of bits and pieces of insight gleaned over the years from whatever source seemed accessible at the moment. As a result, Christians are vulnerable to every new book, teacher, seminar, talk show host, advertisement, or newspaper headline that happens to come along. They find
their strength undermined by doubt, anxiety, and fear. Most believers long
for a closer walk with God and a deeper faith; yet they are not versed in or
at ease with Christian practice and formation.

The Imperative to Teach in a Postmodern World

Heal, preach, and teach. Jesus' demands of his shepherds are straightforward. His own ministry reveals these three priorities again and again. Yet, the same cannot be said of ministry in these times. It should be clear that the need for United Methodist clergy to reclaim the teaching office is urgent and pressing. For while most clergy are clear about responsibilities for leadership in the areas of worship, preaching, pastoral care, and administration, teaching is rarely elevated to the same priority. Too often seen as desirable yet optional—even expendable—in face of the more immediate demands on time, teaching is often haphazard and shallow.

I am speaking confessionally as one who has served as campus minister, district superintendent, and pastor of churches small, medium, and large, with persons of limited formal schooling and with people whose intellectual sophistication in their professional field is at the highest level. In every setting, it has become clear that United Methodists are starving for the nourishment that comes from the depths of our tradition, faith, and theology—for what John Cobb calls "authentic, explicit faith and personal theology."^1

Teaching should be at the heart of ordained ministry. The Book of Discipline makes it clear that the first responsibility of United Methodist clergy is "to preach the Word, oversee the worship life of the congregation, read and teach the Scriptures, and engage the people in study and witness." Why, then, does the teaching office not command the attention and priority of pastors today? A frequent response is, "There is never enough time"; but, of course, there is always time for what one perceives as truly important. It is apparent that a variety of underlying conflicts and uncertainties leave many clergy in a kind of paralysis that blocks their fulfillment of the historic teaching office.

Many of these hindrances might be attributed to the reality that mainline churches as religious institutions in the United States are experiencing radical transformation. In this transition from "Christendom" to a postmodern environment, after more than thirty years of decline in membership and financial base, clergy and laity alike are experiencing loss of status
and, more profoundly, loss of "place" in the social and religious environment. As a result, clergy experience inordinate pressure to "produce," to "grow the church," to show results in reversing patterns of membership decline and dwindling financial support. Clergy scramble to learn the latest church growth techniques, envious of congregations that seem to have found their way and are attracting ever-increasing numbers of dedicated and active adherents. Facing these pressures, clergy reduce and deprioritize the time spent on study and teaching.

But if demands on the clergy's time seem to deflect time from study and teaching, the same can be said for church members and families. For although our people are clearly hungry to learn and grow in faith, they are also precipitously stressed and time starved. When and how are settings for teaching created? How might laity be persuaded to dedicate the necessary time and commitment to learning without its appearing only as an added burden on an already overloaded schedule? For those who deem one hour on Sunday morning to be a major commitment of time, how might the teaching office be reclaimed in ways that do not merely add stress and pressure to already overly fractured lives? Clergy are caught in a dilemma: they are reluctant to ask more of members who are already too busy and whose "disposable time" available for church is most likely already committed to committee work!

The state of their pastor's schedule no doubt reinforces in the laity the notion that study and teaching do not deserve a high priority. I recently conducted an unscientific, informal survey of several colleagues in large- and medium-membership churches. I found only one pastor who devoted a substantial amount of time to study—he studied on a daily basis. The other pastors surveyed approached study in a consumerist, utilitarian manner, allowing the demands of weekly sermon preparation to dictate their study habits. The bulk of these frazzled, demoralized pastors spent their time reacting to pastoral care needs, keeping the machinery of the church in motion, and nurturing worship leadership. Some found time to experiment with new models of ministry and forms of congregational life. (It may be important to note that, sadly, few of these pastors scheduled regular and consistent time for prayer and spiritual growth.)

Another source of internal conflict for clergy has to do with the struggle to determine the proper style of the "pastor-teacher" in the current context in which authority is simultaneously craved and belittled. Some
models present the pastor as educator—the one who "imparts knowledge," especially making sure that doctrine receives proper emphasis. Other approaches stress the need to teach the church's creeds, while yet other models emphasize the importance of returning to "true Wesleyan roots." Each of these approaches assumes that seminary trained clergy bring to the parish a certain repository of knowledge, which he or she should convey to the laity through classes and sermons.

At the same time, other models emphasize the role of Christian formation in contrast to inculcating information. Here spiritual growth is the goal, with the clergy person assuming the role of spiritual guide or mentor, learning alongside the laity.

While all of these perspectives are critically important to the teaching office, I contend that many pastors have neither reflected upon nor thought clearly about these various approaches. Amidst this cacophony of voices calling them to be or act or teach in one form or another, all too often they respond by not teaching much at all.

Our contemporary context presents another hindrance to the confident exercise of the teaching office: it seems an impossible task to keep current with developments in scholarship related to theology, Scripture, ethics, and more. Clergy have always been challenged to keep up with scholarship following graduation from seminary. However, now they face the reality that laity have virtually unlimited access to theological writing through widely available popular writing and divergent Christian media and through endless sources on the Internet. Not surprisingly, the fear of encountering questions for which they have no answers only exacerbates low clergy self-esteem. How should clergy deal with feelings of inadequacy and with limited knowledge and training?

The postmodern context throws the issue of clergy authority in sharp relief. After exploring questions about spirituality on the Internet, a parishioner (new to United Methodism) strongly challenged me recently. Drawn to a variety of very conservative independent sources, he quoted an online "expert" at great length as the authoritative perspective on matters related to "the New Age conspiracy," the "one-world conspiracy," the "apostasy of the mainline church," the "sin" of women in leadership, and a litany of other "evils." Lacking a solid foundation in United Methodist theology and method, this parishioner was easily persuaded by sources that seemed authoritative to him. (He eventually withdrew his church membership.)
The growing complexity of the subject matter to be taught presents another roadblock to revitalizing the teaching office. For example, in an increasingly diverse and multicultural world, are clergy clear about how to teach the Christian faith? I am convinced that many clergy have still to clarify for themselves the place of Christian theology and faith in a multi-religious, pluralistic society. Clergy unable to speak with a clear voice that avoids proselytism, on the one hand, and relativism, on the other, and that articulates respectful engagement from an avowedly Christian position will be reluctant to teach. Similarly, the challenges presented by difficult and complex subject matter, such as issues in biomedicine and ethics, will discourage many clergy persons from taking up the teaching office.

Finally, and perhaps most critically, pastor-teachers must face the underlying fear of teaching during this disconcerting time of institutional malaise. That is to say, we must push ourselves to explore the suspicion that if the institutional mainline church is in decline, perhaps its theology can no longer be taught with conviction and passion. Is our message still faithful? We must push ourselves to ask and answer the same question of the teaching office that Thomas Troeger poses of preaching: What and how do we teach after the "loss of commanding certitude?" Clergy and laity alike are reluctant to embrace the ramifications of living in a post-Christendom era in which the traditional institutional forms of the church have been disestablished. Consequently, they have only begun to explore the implications of this new context for discipleship and teaching.

Pressed on every side, the teaching office has been reduced to a "pantry," a place at the back of the house where supplies are kept. Many of these supplies have been pushed to the back of the shelf and are long out-of-date. To be sure, we keep a few staples and some exotic foods for the occasional nice meal; but more often than not we opt for a snack on the run. And standing in the middle of the pantry is the pastor—sincere and well intentioned, but unclear about the purpose, goal, content, and method of the teaching task and about his or her identity as one called to teach.

**Toward Revitalizing the Teaching Office**

A framework of diagnostic questions proposed by Parker Palmer in his most recent book, *The Courage to Teach*, provides a fruitful springboard for renewing and refocusing the teaching office in the church. Palmer explores the what, how, why, and who of teaching. This "teaching quadrilateral," as
we might call it, is quite helpful in overcoming some of the hindrances to the functioning of the teaching office we outlined above. Let's look at each aspect in turn.

The WHAT of Teaching
The most frequently asked question, says Palmer, is, "What subjects shall we teach?" This, of course, parallels John Wesley's first question to his pastors gathered in conference: "What should the church teach?" In the early days of the Wesleyan revival, the answers to that question came from Wesley himself, through his sermons and later the Articles of Faith, with, as Thomas Langford notes, the annual conference serving as the *magisterium* of the Methodist church.

While there is currently a great deal of debate within the denomination about the proper weight of Scripture and doctrine in our teaching, the basic theological framework for the content of Methodist teaching still holds. This foundational frame can be described as follows: "As United Methodists, we believe our knowing and experiencing is grounded in scripture, informed by Christian tradition, enlivened in our experience, and tested by reason." This deceptively simple formulation continues to provide the "what" of our teaching.

The biblical illiteracy and theological naivete of our people, as Douglas John Hall has named it, is the legacy of the neglect of the teaching office. There is an urgent need for Bible study and for opportunities to learn and use theology, to study the rich diversity of the Christian tradition, and, based on this learning, to perfect the tools we need for relating the historic faith to the issues of our day. Several resources are now readily available to support this work in the congregation. United Methodists are finding the DISCIPLE Bible study and the *Christian Believer* resource very helpful. The Alpha Program (www.alphana.org) has quickly grown into a worldwide resource, used by several denominations to introduce recent Christians as well as longtime members to the basics of Christian faith.

Another model is found in the Center for Christian Studies at Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City and across a network of congregations (see their web site www.christianstudies.org). The Center boasts an extensive curriculum covering Bible, theology, church history, literature and art, and practical theology/Christian living, with approximately eighty classes offered over the course of the year for a small registra-
tion fee. Taught by religious leaders from the region and faculty from nearby universities and seminaries, courses cover basic and advanced topics, providing learning opportunities to hundreds of people each year.

In addition to the learning that this approach makes possible, Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church reports that the Center is the key to their growth in membership and commitment. Most of their new members first became involved in the church through enrolling in a five-week course, wanting to learn and explore faith and spirituality.

In a time of deep and widespread spiritual hunger, the teaching office has again become a vital tool for evangelism and outreach to a new generation unfamiliar with or skeptical of the church. While such an extensive effort might be limited to large urban areas, there is no reason why consortiums of seminaries and congregations cannot mount similar efforts.

The HOW of Teaching

In his important book *The Learning Congregation*, Thomas Hawkins observes, "Leaders are not responsible for teaching people the right or correct version of reality. They are responsible for cultivating learning environments where people transform their everyday experiences into new meanings that can guide their actions and shape their personhood... Tomorrow's church requires leaders who are educators skilled in developing people and their gifts." There is a pressing need to teach for both information and formation; that is, teaching should impart knowledge of Scripture, tradition, and theology, but in a way that engages mind, heart, and experience.

The exercise of the teaching office thus becomes holistic and permeates congregational life. Grounded in courses, classes, seasonal studies, and small groups, a teaching strategy can be implemented to maximize potential for teaching and learning in almost every aspect of the church's ministry. A holistic approach to teaching helps pastors recognize that education occurs in multiple settings and modes. Also, by taking advantage of these multiple opportunities to teach, pastors can deal more effectively with the problem of limited time and cramped schedules.

Teaching opportunities include sermons, youth programs, Confirmation classes, pastoral care, premarital counseling, prebaptismal preparation, one-on-one conversation, committee meetings, and annual meetings. Bulletin boards, newsletters, web pages, signage, and advertisements are all settings
The whole worship service can be conceived as a profound "teaching moment," in which to instruct worshipers about the sacraments, the church year, and obviously Scripture, theology, and church history. Additionally, in the same way that ancient cathedrals taught illiterate people through stained glass, sculpture, design, carving, and art, pastors can explore ways in which the architecture of their sanctuaries and other church facilities present opportunities for teaching.

The people called Methodist should certainly not overlook two additional settings for teaching. One is in our music and hymnody. The tradition of Charles Wesley must be continually re-enlivened, so that hymns and congregational music become a rich source of theological reflection. If congregational music is to teach, it must be taught and supported in a way that makes hearty singing possible by members and visitors unaccustomed to singing the "old favorites" and perhaps unable to read music or use the hymnal. At the same time, the Wesleys' careful teaching of Methodist theology in hymn texts provides helpful criteria for navigating the stormy debates over traditional versus praise music.

Additionally, the wisdom of Wesley's class meeting remains an essential component of Christian formation. As implemented by many Korean and other congregations through Covenant Disciple groups and through the new Companions in Christ resource of the Upper Room, small groups for spiritual growth, accountability, and relationship building are once again a vital location for formation. In this context, Scripture and theology can indeed be translated into vital and living knowledge that informs and transforms daily life and practice.

Ordained ministers can well explore a wide range of options for living out the teaching office within the life of the church, which together help address both the wandering minds as well as the fearing hearts of our people.

The why of the Teaching Office
It would be easy for pastors to answer the "why" question with a facile "because we're supposed to" or "because Jesus did." However, a more substantial reflective response could motivate pastors to develop a comprehensive and consistent plan for teaching that encompasses the whole of congregational life. If clergy could reframe their Disciplinary responsibility to "give oversight to the total education program of the church" into an
embrace of their identity as “stewards of God’s mysteries” (1 Cor. 4:1), a renewed dedication to the teaching office is surely not far behind.

Perhaps we should first ask ourselves what is at stake in embracing or abandoning the teaching office. Shirking the responsibility to teach amounts to an enormous loss—nothing less than the sense of identity, place, time, purpose, and strength of the United Methodist people.

Charles Foster argues that it is impossible to fully discuss the task of church education until we take account of the sense of hopelessness that pervades our communities and our church members. He observes that “for at least the past fifty years, the identification of people in the church with the sources and meanings of Christian faith and tradition has decreased with each succeeding generation.” He then delineates the consequences of this decrease with chilling effect. It is our faith, he argues, which links generations, builds community, constructs meaning, and nourishes hope—a critical, life-imparting process Moore and Sawicki call “traditioning.”

Abandoning the teaching office will have grave consequences, extending beyond the church into the world. Foster constructs a litany of possible consequences:

[D]eclining enrollments in church education classrooms, diminishing influence of congregations on the moral tone of their neighborhoods, persisting racism, sexism and classism in our churches and their larger communities, increasing evidence of biblical illiteracy and theological naivete, increasing reliance on marketing strategies to attract and hold new members, and an overwhelming lack of attention to our stewardship of the earth [which] reveal deep flaws, if not broken educational structures, for the maintenance and renewal of church identity and mission.

In withholding from our people a vital and deep relationship to the Word of God, a theology that informs and transforms life, a lived sense of the church seasons and year, the rich text and phrasing of the prayers of the church across generations, and a life-giving experience and understanding of the sacraments and rituals of church life, clergy are guilty of abandoning their flock to the pseudo-shepherds of despair, intolerance, injustice, and anomie.

We should never forget that for the Methodist people the purpose of theology is a transformed and sanctified life. As Thomas Langford notes,
"Methodism, as the Wesleyan revival movement, held theology to be inextricably joined with practice. To paraphrase Ludwig Wittgenstein: To have a theological language is to possess a form of life." Therefore, he posits, "the goal of our teaching is the sanctification of persons and of congregations... teaching is the sculpting of life." Our believing animates and frames our living, and our living informs and renews our believing. If the teaching of the theology and faith we profess is measured by the life it produces, then the "emancipatory transformation" of our members and of the world should be abundantly evident.

The WHO of the Teaching Office

"But seldom, if ever, do we ask the 'who' question—who is the self that teaches? How does the quality of my selfhood form—or deform—the way I relate to my students, my subject, my colleagues, my world?" After positing this question, Parker Palmer insists that "good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher." This quest for identity and integrity is crucial for the clergy-teacher as well; for at the heart of this journey lie the calling, conviction, and passion to reshape the teaching office into a truly vital springboard for theological reflection and faith development.

Parker asks poignantly, "If we have lost the heart to teach, how can we take heart again? How can we re-member who we are, for our own sake and the sake of those we serve?" The work of re-membering is essential if clergy are to reclaim and empower the teaching office. It is also vital for providing healing and focus to ministry in these postmodern, confusing, model-surfeited yet model-less times. For clergy who are demoralized and dispirited, whose self-esteem is waver ing and sense of calling is shaken by a changing institutional context and an often mean-spirited society (to say nothing of the conflicting demands of equally frightened members), the recovery of identity in the teaching office is much more than one more task to accomplish.

Here is the heart of the matter: Clergy must rediscover the essential importance of regular prayer and study and cleave to adequate time for this work on a weekly basis. One writer urges "love of the Bible" in a way that fills the imagination and mind with biblical images, stories, and truth. Devotional reading of Scripture nourishes this love of God's Word. At the same time, serious, systematic study engages clergy in the same journey of
meaning making into which they are to invite and encourage the laity. John Cobb\(^1\) notes that formal theological education may not have fashioned clergy into adept theologians or encouraged them to think through their own beliefs carefully and clearly and that, therefore, this work must be done alongside the congregation’s study and learning. In this way, clergy model what it means to learn at a rate that keeps pace with change—learning, growing, and changing in the same fashion as the laity they aspire to teach.

It is perhaps easier to count the cost of neglecting the deeper needs of our people than it is to posit the potential benefits of renewal of the teaching office. Cobb argues that lay United Methodists (clergy as well?) “too often . . . take their freedom to think freely as freedom not to think at all.”\(^1\)\(^6\) When this happens, the salt has lost its flavor and the yeast its power to rise up. At the personal, corporate, and institutional levels of church life, the Methodist people have too often not been given access to the true food that gives life or to the living water that quenches every thirst; and as their pastors, the ordained clergy must hold themselves accountable.

After all, the purpose of the teaching office is not merely to provide people with information about God, Christ, and the Word. It is to assist God’s people in faithful believing and living, encouraging and illuminating spiritual paths, ancient and ever new. It is, by teaching and example, to work with God to fashion a people of love and justice, a people ever growing into the identity for which they were created. Some advocate the recovery of a rabbinic style of ministry and self-identity, in which the pastor is a community-based teacher of the faith, steeped in the Scriptures, able to speak and to share the peculiar language of faith and able to help people envision and practice a way of life that is specifically Christian.\(^1\)\(^7\) Foster describes this style as “telling the story continually” so as to put people’s present experience into the context of the heritage of the whole Christian community.\(^1\)\(^8\)

Perhaps the recently created orders for ordained elders and deacons might provide a framework for recovering this rabbinic nature of the teaching office. For while the Discipline has long spoken of the many functions and tasks of ministry, formation in an order focuses clergy on identity, calling, and the support structures necessary to sustain their true profession, even through these distracting, demanding times.

Revitalizing the teaching office might help address in unexpected
ways the anxiety to "grow the church." If the congregations involved in the Center for Christian Studies found extensive course offerings an unintended source of membership growth, then faithful exercise of the teaching office might just address the low clergy morale and stress, as well as the needs of the people. Indeed, Cobb persuasively argues that "if there is a renewal of thinking in the church, there will be church renewal." Going beyond tricks and techniques to the living Word shared freely in communities of seeking and hope, clergy might discover a wellspring of renewal beyond their imagining.

By way of contrast with the student described at the beginning of the article, consider the story of another Christian seeker. This young woman, growing up in a lively congregation filled with opportunities for learning and formation, is now a mission intern in a vital urban setting. Her Christian faith shapes her vocational choices and direction. Eager to be a faithful disciple, she is grateful for a deep and comprehensive grounding in Scripture, theology, and the church's story—a framework for Christian living that is complex, sophisticated, and loving enough for the world in which we live.

This present age, with its ethical demands and dilemmas, its pain and mystery, its injustice and violence, requires rich resources of faith and practice of the would-be disciple. Clergy are entrusted with the teaching office so that the ancient story might be made ever new and subsequent generations might grow into the Way that leads to life everlasting. To this endeavor, a renewal of the teaching office is essential.

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Endnotes


10. Foster, Educating Congregations, 12.


12. Foster, Educating Congregations, 3.


15. Cobb, Becoming a Thinking Christian, 9.

16. Ibid., 142.


19. Cobb, Becoming a Thinking Christian, 10.
Hispanic Lay Theology: Reflections on an Emerging Model

SAÚL TRINIDAD

The history of ministry among Hispanic Methodists in the United States dates back for more than a century. During this period, the ministry grew, thanks to God's providence and to the faithful guidance and efforts of certain pastors, local churches, and annual conferences. At the national level, though, the denomination did not have a missiological and programmatic strategy to respond to the Hispanic challenge. It was only in 1992, after years of effort by Hispanic leaders, that The United Methodist Church, through its General Conference, approved and authorized the implementation of the National Plan for Hispanic Ministry (hereafter National Plan).

This historical perspective is very important, since the development of Hispanic leadership, and especially the efforts to engage laity in biblical-theological reflection, are intricately connected with the process of implementing the National Plan. Implementing the National Plan is creating space and significant opportunities for reflection on faith from a Hispanic/Latin American perspective and experience.

From the beginning, a key aim of the National Plan was to extend existing contexts of Hispanic ministry and to put in place additional settings for such ministry throughout the United States. A further aim is to help make possible a new way of being the church: a dynamic, growing church, as in the days of Pentecost; a church fully incarnated in the Hispanic context; and a church with a holistic ministry. To realize this vision, the National Plan established a model to work with—a transformational methodology—and designed two fundamental and complementary components: "Congregational Mobilization Process" and "Leadership Formation," both with their respective human and material resources.

In this article, I focus on an analysis and description of the training process and/or leadership formation offered along with the implementation of the National Plan, because it is precisely this training process that enables Hispanic lay people—youth and adults, men and women—to experi-
Key Concepts in Lay Biblical-Theological Reflection

Leadership formation, from the perspective of the National Plan, is supported by two key concepts: training and methodology. These concepts serve as the foundation of lay theological reflection and also provoke reflection on the faith among laity.

The concept of "training" is obviously nothing new; in fact, it is well known. Training is understood mainly as the art of making others capable of doing something. The term also indicates the process of providing someone with practical abilities in a certain area. In the case of the church, such areas include ministries like Christian education, evangelism, preaching, and serving as a liturgist. This understanding of the term training is quite proper. Nevertheless, in the context of the National Plan, the concept has a more comprehensive meaning. It implies not only the giving of knowledge and tools that allow for the development of practical skills but also the offering of space and content for the development of the participant's personality. In other words, the training process awakens, promotes, and develops the capabilities inherent in the person in order to affirm his or her self-esteem and his or her right of self-affirmation and self-determination. Thus, training, as used in the process of Hispanic leadership formation, is comprehensive and holistic.

The other concept that is important for theological conversation among Hispanic laity is methodology. In the National Plan, methodología means much more than acquiring techniques. Rather, the term is construed as a biblical, theological, and pedagogical principle that sustains the content, learning process, structure, techniques, and relationships within the training process. In line with its concept of training, the National Plan decided on a methodology of transformation of the individual, the church, and the society. In other words, methodology is understood as a way of being and as a way of acting. I will return to this concept later in the article.

The Training Program for Hispanic Leadership

The "Lay Missioner and Pastor-Mentor Training Program" is a fundamental part of the National Plan. Thus, the main audience of this program is the
laity leaders (men, women, youth, and children) and the pastors who have
decided to redesign the ministries of their congregations under the direc-
tion of the National Plan. Consequently, in preparing the didactic source
materials, care has been taken to consider the experience, knowledge, and
the academic level of the majority of the Hispanic laity.

The Structure of the Curriculum

The curricular structure of the training program is based on a system of
modules. The total number of units in the curriculum is divided into three
interdisciplinary modules. Some of the more prominent disciplines are Bible,
theology, mission, leadership, ministry, preaching, Christian education, and
the socioeconomic and sociocultural status of the communities. Also, each
module combines three basic areas: the methodological area, the cognitive
area, and the area of vocational skills. However, each module focuses on one
of these areas.

Module I emphasizes methodology. It provides participants with a
process to study and interpret the actual data (social status, economics,
culture, religion, and population) of the Hispanic community. It also offers
diagnostic tools for analyzing the church's life and thought (its theology)
and its programs and ministries. At the same time, this module offers the
basic tools for the study and interpretation of God's Word and theological-
missiological concepts. Furthermore, as was mentioned, it includes the
areas of knowledge and skills.

Module II focuses on the cognitive area but does not abandon the
other two areas (methodology and skills). This module seeks to furnish
participants with biblical-theological knowledge and insights about
ministry. But its aim is more than providing theoretical information.
Indeed, the main goal of Module II is to equip the participants with the
basic tools that will allow them to obtain, on their own, the information
and/or biblical-theological knowledge they need to develop their own
ministries. In other words, this module enables participants to learn how to
learn, so that they can obtain information and theoretical knowledge on
their own. Having used the tools to gather the knowledge or information
that they need, participants are then in a position to produce their own
concepts and mental models. Examples of cognitive tools include methods
of self-study, tools for interpreting the Bible, and interpretive tools from a
cognitive discipline related to the participant's Christian vocation. Of
course, as in the case of the other two modules, Module II integrates the search for cognitive information with analysis and interpretation (methodology) and with the use of skills for ministry development.

Module III, consequently, offers practical tools and knowledge to the different ministries of congregational development (evangelization, Christian education, stewardship, administration, and so on) in a concentrated and specialized way, as well as to ministries aimed at community development (addiction treatment, health care, community organization, and more). In Module III, each participant starts (or deepens) the process of theological reflection, based on his or her practice of the ministries and programs in which he or she is already involved in the congregation. This process of reflection is then enriched from a biblical-theological-pedagogical perspective. Module III also serves as an educational program and a process of ongoing biblical-theological reflection on the part of both laity leaders and clergy.

The Content of the Curriculum
Above we mentioned several aspects of the curriculum content. Here, let me offer three additional considerations. Basically, the total content of the curriculum is based on three integral areas: (1) historical, global, and local context—the sociocultural and economic dynamics; the dynamics of education, work, and health; racial/ethnic relations; religious expression; and more; (2) biblical-theological reflection that includes the disciplines of Bible, theology, leadership, and a theology of the church’s ministries (among them evangelization, education, stewardship, and the growth and development of ministries); and (3) the practice of faith and ministry. Even though earlier we mentioned certain disciplines in connection with each of these areas, the reality is that these areas are allied in an integral way, exhibiting a dynamic interrelationship. All three areas—context, Bible, and practical reflection—intersect in an integrated manner as they are lived out in the life of the Christian and of the church.

The Learning Process
The learning process consists of two basic aspects: methodological mediation and a corresponding didactic technique.

Let us look first in some detail at the three elements that comprise the methodology of the learning process: socioanalytical mediation, hermeneu-
tical mediation, and ministerial mediation. These concepts are also known in a more simplified form as to "see," "judge" (discern), and to "act."^8

The starting point for acquiring knowledge with which to transform a particular socioreligious reality is socioanalytical mediation (to "see"). Socioanalytical mediation refers to the process of ascertaining, both scientifically and experientially, the reality of the community's life from the viewpoint of faith. In other words, one sees, hears, and feels the cries of the people from the perspective of how God must see their reality. The study of the community's context thus implies a socioreligious dynamic, based on the assumption that every process of change starts with a recognition of the cause or the root of the human dilemma. This is why socioanalytic mediation constitutes the starting point for reflection on the faith. Now, the experience of "knowing" the context is not only a statistical exercise, cold and indifferent, and/or fueled by the purpose of profiting from it. On the contrary, to know a communal context from the standpoint of a commitment to and practice of the Christian faith is an experience of profound spirituality. It is also a deeply humbling task in that it seeks to identify the real causes of the manifestation of personal and collective sin. This kind of knowing seeks the presence of God amidst the cries of God's people, recognizing that God is present in the context before we are. Thus, seeking God's will means confronting these cries. Didactically speaking, this means that theological reflection starts by describing, analyzing, and reflecting on our personal (individual) and collective (congregation) experiences of life as well as faith practices within a given socioeconomic situation.

What should we do with the results? A general tendency is to immediately look for solutions and answers to the problems or needs that arise from the socioanalytical mediation by formulating or designing ministry programs. The methodology I am describing here does not take this course. Instead, it engages the second form of mediation—hermeneutical mediation.

Hermeneutical mediation (to "judge" or "discern") has three basic aspects: God's Word (the Bible), the theological tradition, and the decisions of the ecclesiastical institution (in this case, the current decisions of the General Conference of The United Methodist Church). What is the relationship between hermeneutical mediation and socioanalytical mediation? The relationship is intrinsic; that is, the conclusions reached through the socioanalytical mediation are submitted to hermeneutical mediation.
The people's cries are confronted with the Word of God. The main question here is not this: What do we want to do as a church? Rather, it is this: What does God want to do with this reality that we have studied? The church will truly be the mediator of the presence of God only when God's will is done. To do this, the church must in humility study and analyze the Word of God in light of the conclusions of its socioanalytical mediation. The Word of God is neither studied in a vacuum nor analyzed out of theoretical curiosity. Rather, the church studies Scripture to seek God's answer for its context.

The results of this biblical study and analysis are also brought into conversation with the Christian church's theological tradition. This is to say, participants ask this question: In what ways have Christians throughout history responded theologically to the challenges of their particular contexts? By asking this question, the participants' biblical-theological reflections are confirmed or corrected by understanding that God speaks through God's body—communities of faith in all times and places.

In a final step, the results of the above reflection are placed in dialogue with the current position of The United Methodist Church.

The exercise in hermeneutical mediation allows God to speak to the participants words of both judgment and grace. It is at this juncture that they find criteria for applying God's Word to their context of ministry.

Participants are now ready to engage the third methodological element, namely, the ministerial mediation (to "act"). This form of mediation allows participants to notice two issues: the nature of their actions and the procedures they use to act. To listen to the cries of the people and to God's call through Scripture constitutes a commitment: we are sent to act. Moreover, every action that comes from the Word of God is transformational. Thus, the nature of these actions (programs or ministries) of the church are of necessity acts of renewal, revitalization, and transformation. In other words, the needs discovered through socioanalytical mediation and submitted to hermeneutical mediation now need to be transformed from God's perspective and God's Word. After all, we act according to God's will.

For it to be effective and pertinent the resulting transformational action must be designed in such a way that it does not lose touch with the vision or the mission of God. Furthermore, it must be implemented in service to God's people. Only then have we completed the spiral of transformation: to see the context with the eyes of God; to judge by discerning God's answer...
for that context; and to act according to God's transforming vision.

The didactic procedure that accompanies this praxis of action-reflec-
tion-action is a technique called the "workshop." During the leadership
training process of the National Plan, the workshop is understood as a
center of productive reflection, where each participant is a subject of the
learning process, not the object of teaching. And the ones who are tradition-
ally called "teachers" (Bible teachers, theologians, pedagogues, and so on)
are reconfigured as companions who facilitate a contextualized biblical-
theological dialogue. The knowledge of the specialists is converted into
elements of transformation and service, not of dominance. During the
process of dialogue, the diversity of opinion, thought, and ideas that are
expended on a particular theme is converted little by little into well-
founded concepts in an interdisciplinary style. The topics for dialogue
come from the participants' own experience, from their own suffering and
life struggles. These topics range from the biblical and theological to the
sociological and economic, from the familial to the eclesiological—
depending on the needs of the participants. The interdisciplinary style
allows the laity not only to talk about theology but actually to do contextual-
ized theology. Of course, this kind of theologizing neither exhibits a lot of
technical or sophisticated language nor references a wide array of theolog-
ical resources. However, as long as it continues to be reflection on the prac-
tices of faith, it is a legitimate form of doing theology. Indeed, it is not only
legitimate theology; it is also authentic theology.

The workshop is also a space for freedom of expression. The partici-
pants express their feelings, thoughts, and ideas by way of songs, prayers,
gestures, socio-dramas, and other forms of communication that allow them
to truly be themselves, to overcome their inhibitions and strengthen their
sense of self-esteem. At the same time, theological reflection becomes an
avenue of liberation and humanization for all the participants, the true
subjects of the dialogue.

The workshop is, moreover, a space for worship and spiritual growth.
At different times during the workshop process there have been moments
of confrontation, confession, reconciliation, renewal of vocational
co erent, and other forms of spiritual rejuvenation. Obviously, the way in
which the workshop is set up and conducted makes learning a slow
process. Generally, regional workshops need six full days to complete. At a
district or local level, a workshop can be conducted over the course of a
weekend or even over several evenings, depending on the availability of the lay participants.

It is too early and the process too complex to systematize in any thematic way the different and various workshops that have taken place until now. Nevertheless, let me mention a number of outstanding aspects of the workshops that have already taken place. First, the laity’s reflexive capacity and their living knowledge of the different ecclesiastical aspects and theological themes that they bring to the dialogue are remarkable. In each workshop, the facilitators discover that the lay people know more about the Bible, theology, church polity, and other themes than these leaders had expected. Drawing on their daily lives and their own experiences in the church, lay participants raise and engage classical theological themes such as God, Jesus, Holy Spirit, church, sacraments, mission, and also Methodism. They also engage other more controversial themes related to the context of ministry, such as machismo, chauvinism, sexism, racism, social injustice, and marginalization. Whatever the theme, the kind of lay biblical-theological reflection emerging here is contextual, liberating, humanizing, practical, and uneasy with ecclesiocentrism. This last characteristic is genuinely felt and is to be expected, because laity are involved in the society more than they are in the church.

The workshop process has barely begun, and there is much to learn about it and from it. Many of the lay participants in the process of theological reflection have begun exploring a call to ordained ministry. Others are already local pastors, while the rest are very active in their congregations, assuming administrative and ministerial responsibilities.

Conclusion

The process of theological reflection among Hispanic laity that starts to emerge in the National Plan for Hispanic Ministry has been in existence only five years; therefore, it is too early to draw broad conclusions. One thing is clear, however: laity need the support and the space to do theology based on practice. As our experience with the National Plan shows, this way of doing theology requires a methodological paradigm shift. It also calls not for professors who lecture but for facilitators who have the ability to mold the technical language of biblical and theological study to the language of the laity and who have the experience and capacity to help laity relate their knowledge to daily life.
The process of Hispanic lay theological reflection has made a good beginning. What it needs now is time and support.

Translated from the Spanish by Amanda Bachus

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Endnotes


3. For more on theology as critical reflection on the practice of faith, see Gustavo Gutiérrez, Teología de la liberación (Lima, Perú: Centro de Estudios y Publicaciones, 1991), 80-83. See also José David Rodríguez, Introducción a la teología (San José, Costa Rica: Departamento Ecuménico de Investigación, 1993), 35-40.

4. Plan Nacional, 3-5.


6. Ibid, 8. A "módulo" is a set of disciplines linked to practice that are reflected upon in a holistic manner.


9. Guidelines for Workshops For Lay Missioners and Pastor-Mentors (Nashville: General Board of Discipleship, 1998), 39-42. Within the National Plan the Spanish term taller (workshop) is reconceptualized not only to denote the prioritizing of active participation on the part of all participants but also to emphasize the conceptual development of these same participants.
I hold all the doctrines of the Church of England. I love her Liturgy. I approve her plan of discipline, and only wish it could be put in execution. I do not knowingly vary from any rule of the Church, unless in those few instances, where I judge, and as far as I judge, there is an absolute necessity.  

In this essay, I argue that Wesley's *Sunday Service of the Methodists in North America*, published in 1784, was not merely an attempt to provide the American Methodists with a form of liturgy for worship; it was also an exercise in political and reformation theology. James F. White contends that Methodist worship, in its historical origins, was fundamentally counter-cultural. One of the striking features of the *Sunday Service* is the way in which Wesley abbreviated the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer* of the Church of England by deleting and omitting sections, Scriptures, and prayers. Also, Karen B. Westerfield Tucker notes that Wesley saw similarities between the ambiance of American Methodism and the situation that his Methodist societies encountered in England. "In many ways," writes Tucker, "the circumstances in America were similar to those which had already confronted him in England, namely, the necessity of marking out a middle ground between Dissent and a dominant 'established' Church." By omitting sections of the *Book of Common Prayer*, Wesley was making the sorts of theological statements that he was not always free to make in the Church of England.  

We begin by examining and comparing the *Sunday Service* and the *Book of Common Prayer* of 1784.
of Common Prayer. Several nuances and shifts in the Sunday Service reveal a consistent and constant pattern in the theological and political fabric of Wesley’s thought and life. The article concludes by noting that Wesley’s formulations for the American Methodists were a double-edged sword. Wesley’s pastoral concern for American Methodism is apparent in his revisions of the Book of Common Prayer. However, I argue that in making these liturgical revisions Wesley was attempting to make a deeper cut into the fabric of eighteenth-century English spirituality. The incision that Wesley was making came straight from a reformer’s heart—a heart that continued to hope and pray for renewal and vitality in the mission and ministry of the mother church that he loved.

The Prayers of the People

Nothing characterized the early Methodist societies more than the discipline of prayer. Certainly the case can be made that the Methodist societies brought a fresh and invigorating call to prayer in the Evangelical Revival of the eighteenth century—both in England and America. Question 11 of the 1780 Conference asks quite unabashedly, “Ought not all our preachers to make conscience of rising at four, and if not, yet at five? (is it not a shame for a preacher to be in bed till six in the morning.)” These devoted Methodist disciples were known to rise early every morning praying for the ministry and mission of the church.

Wesley was a great lover of prayer, and there is little doubt that he was committed to the prayers of the church. In a letter to Walter Churchey, dated June 20, 1789, Wesley states his attitude toward the read prayers in The Church of England and his Sunday Service: “I took particular care throughout to alter nothing merely for altering’s sake. In religion I am for as few innovations as possible. I love the old wine best.” Though one could argue about the extent of Wesley’s innovation, it is surely the case that his alterations were never frivolous or thoughtless. One of the first alterations in the Sunday Service has to do with a change in the order and fabric of “The Order for Morning Prayer.” There are significant alterations in the prayers that Wesley designed for the American Methodists.

First, Wesley structurally altered the sections on morning and evening prayers in the Sunday Service. The Litany was to be used on Wednesdays and Fridays and extemporaneous prayer on all other days. Horton Davies correctly notes that, for Wesley, prayer was a balanced form of read and
extemporaneous prayers. "The essence of Methodist worship," writes Davies, "as it germinated in the fertile mind of its founder was the combination of the advantages of liturgical forms and of free prayers." Wesley saw at a very early stage the tension that existed between the established Church of England and the renewal that was emerging in the Methodist societies. In a lengthy but focused passage, Kenneth Hylson-Smith delineates the differences between the two:

The Church of England laid stress upon the authority of a hierarchical body of ordained clergy, whereas the revival increasingly emphasized the importance of charismatic gifts, and the priesthood of all believers, with the right and duty of all members of the body to fulfill their appointed roles and functions in the life of the whole. The Church of England was concerned to inculcate in its members a loyalty and conformity to institutional practices, and for them to regard the way of salvation as being found, in part at least, within the means of grace and the ministry which the church provided. This was in contrast to the revival which proclaimed a way of salvation open to all by simple faith, obtainable anywhere, at any time, and without the aid of any human or institutional mediator. The Church of England, by virtue of its heritage, historical development, and unique position in relation to the whole establishment, consistently and constantly promoted order and regularity in its services and in its life in general, and required such behaviour of its members. The revival permitted a high degree and variety of individual non-conformity, together with a widespread acceptance of irregularity in its public preaching, worship and other forms of corporate life. The concern was to allow a considerable measure of flexibility in order not to restrict in any way what the revival members viewed as the freedom of the Spirit.

Certainly Wesley grew up with this tension himself. Being raised in a home where both his father and mother had strong political and theological ideas, Wesley saw the conflict of institutionalized religion and Dissenter freedom played out on several occasions. One particular event, occurring in the winter of 1711 in Epworth, illustrates the tension between conformity and freedom in the Wesley household—an event that Wesley surely was reminded of throughout his lifetime. Samuel Wesley, John's father, was attending The Church of England's governing convocation in London. In her husband's absence, Susanna Wesley, in addition to giving individual reli-
gious instruction to her children on various nights of the week, was also conducting evening prayers in her home on Sunday nights. The persistence and passion of her prayers became so pronounced throughout the Epworth village that people began attending in large numbers. To the consternation of the Reverend Inman, the people began missing the morning prayers that he was conducting. His heart bruised, Inman contacted Samuel Wesley and informed him of his wife’s activities. When Samuel asked his wife by letter for an account, her reply was if not impressive surely prophetic for young John. In a letter dated February 23, 1712, Susanna wrote:

If you do after all think fit to dissolve this assembly, do not tell me any more that you desire me to do it, for that will not satisfy my conscience; but send me your positive command in such full and express terms as may absolve me from all guilt and punishment for neglecting this opportunity of doing good to souls, when you and I shall appear before the great and awful tribunal of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The freedom of his mother’s piety and her commitment to the care of souls made an intense impression on John Wesley. We know that Wesley kept an active correspondence with his mother throughout her life. The theological program that Susanna laid out for her children—both in word and deed—shows up prominently in John Wesley’s life and thought.

Thus, when Wesley formulated the morning and evening prayers for the American Methodists, he felt considerable freedom to make significant changes in relation to what should and should not be prayed. Under the heading “Of Ceremonies, Why Some are Abolished and Some Retained,” the 1662 Book of Common Prayer indicates that some ceremonies of the church were abolished because the collected body of ceremonies had proven to be a burden to the people of God. The prayer book states, “Some are put away because the great excess and multitude of them hath so increased in these latter days, that the burden of them was intolerable. This our excessive multitude of Ceremonies was, so great, and many of them so dark that they did more confound and darken, than declare and set forth Christ’s benefits unto us.” Wesley must have taken this prefatory admonition seriously, for when it came to prayers prayed he not only omitted the Venite, the Benedictus, the Magnificat, and the Nunc Dimittis, he also deleted the Absolution and replaced it with a new composition.
Moreover, Wesley’s abridgment of the Psalter is quite astounding. For Wesley, the Old Testament had been superseded by the New; therefore, the Christian must be careful in uttering certain types of prayers. To be sure, Wesley nowhere gives explicit instructions on how the psalms were to be used, leading one to conclude that he obviously was not following any type of *lectio continua*. Indeed, in the *Sunday Service* Morning and Evening Prayer occurred on Sunday alone. William Wade contends that the only possibility left for consideration is that Wesley implicitly intended that American Methodists would use the Psalter in their extemporaneous prayers during the weekdays. However, Wesley considered many of the psalms to be incongruent with the spirit of Christ, noting in his prefatory letter to the *Sunday Service* that certain Psalms were “…highly improper for the mouths of a Christian Congregation.”

But, in preparing the sections on morning and evening prayers for the *Sunday Service* Wesley was doing more than dabbling in linguistic inconsistencies. There is evidence to indicate that he saw the prayer life of the Church of England as lifeless—even though he appreciated and honored the prayers of the church to which he belonged. In a letter dated June 25, 1746, Wesley gives an extended defense of the power of the Spirit experienced in the freedom of the Methodist societies as opposed to the order of The Church of England. “What is the end of ecclesiastical order?” asks Wesley. The reformer then answers his own question:

Is it not to bring souls from the power of Satan to God, and to build them up in His fear and love? Order, then, is so far valuable as it answers these ends; and if it answers them not, it is nothing worth. Now, I would fain know, where has order answered these ends? Not in any place where I have been—not among the tinniers in Cornwall, the keelmen in Newcastle, the colliers in Kingswood or Staffordshire; not among the drunkards, swearers, Sabbath-breakers of Moorfields, or the harlots of Drury Lane. They could not be built in the fear and love of God while they were open, barefaced servants of the devil; and such they continued, notwithstanding the most orderly preaching both in St. Luke and St. Giles’s Church. One reason whereof was, they never came near the church, nor had any desire or design to do so, till, by what you term ‘breach of order,’ they were brought to fear God, to love Him, and keep His commandments.
Wesley saw in the Methodist form of worship a power and vibrancy that touched lives with the grace of God. Could it be that in deleting some of the said prayers of the liturgy of the Book of Common Prayer Wesley was maintaining that the Methodist societies were being more faithful to the spirit of prayer than were the members of the Church of England, who were merely coming to church and saying memorized prayers without ever being affected by what they prayed?  

The Administration of the Lord’s Supper  

Few would dispute that the Wesleyan revival of the eighteenth century was a sacramental revival. From their earliest days at Oxford, the Methodists were caricatured with appellations such as “sacramentarians.” According to one author, Wesley received Communion weekly throughout his lifetime and daily during special seasons of the church year. Not surprisingly, Wesley admonished the Methodist people to commune constantly; and he included a ceremony for administrating the Lord’s Supper in the Sunday Service for the American Methodists. Also, Wesley often spoke of the need for constant communion in sermons, treatises, journals, and letters. For the most part, Wesley left intact the ritual for Holy Communion as found in the 1662 Book of Common Prayer. The changes Wesley did make provide significant support for the thesis that the Sunday Service was an act of political and theological importance. Three items are significant in this regard.  

First, consider the Wesleyan idea that the Eucharist is fundamentally a converting ordinance. Traditionally, the church has held that baptism is an initiating ordinance into the body of Christ. For Methodism, though, the Table has been open to all who understand the need for repentance and fellowship with God. “The Wesleys did not reserve the ordinance for the higher walks of the Christian life,” instructs Bowmer, “but they regarded it as a means of grace to be used at the beginning of the Christian pilgrimage.” This stems from the view of presence that considers the elements of bread and wine as signa exhibitiva. That is to say, the bread and wine are not symbols of a reality in the past but of a present reality in the world in which the church lives. In his sermon “The Means of Grace,” Wesley asserts that Christ was present to the one who receives the bread and cup. There is testimony throughout the history of the church that men and women were converted at the Eucharist—not the least of whom is Wesley’s own mother, Susanna! Of course, this issue proved to be divisive with the Moravians,
who reserved Communion only for those who had full assurance of salvation. For Wesley and the Methodists, however, the Eucharist was an evangelistic symbol that spoke of the call of Christ to reach all of humanity with the redemptive power of God. As such, it was open to all and especially for those who were seeking to explore a new life with Christ.

Second, there was Wesley's understanding of the *epiclesis* in the liturgy of the Eucharist. J. Neil Alexander notes that the addition of the epiclesis may be traced to Wesley's early association with the Non-Jurors. Though a debatable point, there is little argument about the importance that Wesley and the Methodists attached to the work of the Holy Spirit in their evangelical mission. In John and Charles Wesley's *Hymns on The Lord's Supper*, published in 1745, there is a hymn that directly connects the presence of God's grace to the activity of God's Spirit:

Thy hand medicinal extend,
To make my sins and sufferings end
Apply Thy sovereign grace:
Dry up in me corruption's flood
And all my lust of creature good,
And all my thirst of praise.
Faith to be heal'd even now I feel,
I trust that balm infallible
Which Thy own Spirit applies:
Thy love omnipotent display,
And send me thoroughly heal'd away
From earth to paradise.

Wesley was adamant that the Methodist societies were not an enthusiastic sect but a significant display of the power of the Holy Spirit in the life of the church. In his *Advice to the People Called Methodists*, Wesley contends on behalf of the Methodists: “You believe, farther, that both this faith and love are wrought in us by the Spirit of God; and, that there cannot be in any man one good temper or desire, or so much as one good thought, unless it be produced by the almighty power of God, by the inspiration or influence of the Holy Ghost.” Thus, Wesley clearly connected the act of constant communion and the revealing of God's power through the Holy Spirit.

Wesley made a third revision of the *Book of Common Prayer* for insertion
in the Sunday Service; namely, the call for a collection of alms for the poor.
The 1662 Book of Common Prayer contained rubrics about receiving alms for
the poor, but in the eighteenth century this practice had "...largely disappear­
eared from eighteenth century Communion services."24 For Methodists,
taking up a collection for the poor was more than an act of formal worship.
The offering was to be administered to aid and support the poor of the
community. Wesley was deeply concerned about the plight of the poor and
was continually examining his life and lifestyle in order that he might not be
accused of being a "robber of the poor." In a letter to Dorothy Furly on
September 25, 1757, Wesley wrote: "I love the poor; in many of them I find
pure, genuine grace, unmixed with paint, folly, and affection."25 Henry D.
Rack, the noted British historian, succinctly explains Wesley’s affection for
the poor: "What is most striking about Wesley's general attitude to the poor,
is his ready sympathy towards them, coupled with a markedly hostile atti­
tude towards the rich. This was certainly unusual in his day. His attitudes
here were influenced by his religious purpose and the very different
responses he detected among the rich and poor respectively to his
message."26 Another Wesleyan scholar reminds us that Wesley expected the
societies to have a "preferential option for the poor."27 When Methodist
preaching houses were built, they were to be plain and simple so as not to
make the poor feel oppressed or disjointed by the opulence of the wealthy.
At the Christmas Conference of 1784 in Baltimore, the Discipline clearly
echoes this sentiment: "Let all our chapels be plain and decent; but not more
expensive than is absolutely unavoidable; otherwise the necessity of raising
money will make rich men necessary to us. But if so, we must be dependent
on them, yea, and governed by them. And then farewell to the Methodist
discipline, if not doctrine too."28 Wesley’s economic strategy for the
Methodists was to earn all they could, save all they could, and give away all
they could.29 This would prevent them from being captivated by the destruc­
tion of riches. In a sermon titled "The Mystery of Iniquity," Wesley directly
connects the workings of evil with the love of money. Commenting on
1 Tim. 6:10, Wesley proclaims:

"As money increases, so does the love of it"—and always will, without a miracle
of grace. Although therefore other causes may concur, yet this has been in all
ages the principal cause of the decay of true religion in every Christian
community. As long as the Christians in any place were poor they were
devoted to God. While they had little of the world they did not love the world; but the more they had of it the more they loved it. . . . But still remember: riches have in all ages been the bane of genuine Christianity.\textsuperscript{30}

Wesley always kept the poor at the forefront of his evangelical agenda and decried the day when Methodists would forget the marginalized members of society. In writing about Wesley's work in the midst of the economic, social, and ecclesiastical oppression of the eighteenth century, A. Skevington Wood notes, "He helped to keep hope alive in a miserable age."\textsuperscript{31}

Wesley's influence on eighteenth-century spirituality can be viewed, therefore, through his revisions of the Eucharist. Indeed, as has been demonstrated, the sacrament of bread and wine was fundamental to all that Wesley and the Methodists were about as Christians, reformers, and spiritual guides. For Wesley, the Eucharist was nothing less than the presence of a God who was not satisfied with the status quo in the world. I contend that it is only when we understand the political significance of the Lord's Supper that we grasp the proper place of the church in the world. There is little use debating with Wesley about the level of one's piety if one does not take the political dimensions of the Eucharist seriously. Furthermore, there is also little point in boasting about communion if there are no visible signs of repentance in one's \textit{ordo salutis}. For Wesley, the lack of weekly Communion in the Church of England during the eighteenth century meant a genuine lack of conversion in the church. Thus, a fundamental understanding of Wesley's view of the Holy Spirit is to bring to the church conviction, conversion, and commitment. For Wesley, of course, the chief sign of conversion is a regard for and inclusion of the poor in all that the church says and does. When the poor are not primary characters in the history of the church's salvation, grace is not adequately manifested. Richard P. Heitzenrater correctly maintains that a Wesleyan understanding of the poor merges virtue and ethics into a synthesis that is essential to the faith and work of the church.\textsuperscript{32}

\textbf{The Articles of Religion}

Some of the most fertile theological soil in the \textit{Sunday Service} is found in Wesley's editing of the Thirty-nine Articles, which he sent to the American Methodists in 1784, together with the other instructions. The Articles have a rich history in the Church of England, particularly in the efforts to reform
the church, beginning with the Ten Articles of 1536. Structurally the Articles of Religion fall into four categories. Articles 1–8 concern the doctrines inherently necessary to the Christian faith. Articles 9–18 deal with Protestant doctrines of salvation, while Articles 19–31 explicate characteristics of the visible church. Finally, Articles 32–39 deal with matters of discipline in the church. In Wesley's Articles of Religion, the thirty-nine Articles were reduced to twenty-four. As happened to other aspects of Anglican religion in the eighteenth century, the Thirty-nine Articles for most people had become lifeless liturgy. Frank Baker's point is well taken: "Although Anglican doctrine was crystallized in 39 Articles and expounded in 33 Homilies, both these documents were subject to private interpretations, and from their eminence as important but occasionally ambiguous expressions of the spirit of Anglicanism they had shrunk into the dead and forgotten letter of the law." Below is a summary of the Articles that Wesley deleted, along with possible reasons for his decision.

- In relation to the Articles necessary to the Christian faith, Wesley deletes Articles 3 and 8. These creeds were questioned at the 1744 Conference as potentially anti-scriptural. Based on his conviction that Methodists should not endorse anything not found in Scripture, Wesley feels emboldened to delete these Articles.
- In relation to the Articles dealing with the Protestant doctrine of salvation, Wesley omits Article 13, which holds that works done before justification were null and void. Additionally, Wesley removes Article 15, which affirms that Christ was like humanity in all accounts except without sin. Wesley further excises Article 17, dealing with predestination, and Article 18, which stipulates salvation by faith alone.
- In the section of the Articles dealing with the church militant, Wesley considers the following Articles unnecessary for American Methodists: (1) Article 20—the authority of the church; (2) Article 21—the authority of the councils; (3) Article 23—the proper ministering order in the church; (4) Article 26—the efficacy of the sacrament in relation to evil administrators; and (5) Article 29—dealing with those refusing to partake of the Lord's body in the Eucharist.
- In the fourth section, dealing church discipline, Wesley sees fit to omit Article 33, which admonishes people to avoid those who had been excommunicated from the church until penance was given and satisfied. He also deletes Article 35, having to do with the Homilies; Article
36, concerning the consecration of bishops and ministers; and Article 37, dealing with civil magistrates.

Some of Wesley's deletions seem obvious; others lead one to ponder his reasons. For example, the exclusion of Articles 20, 21, 35, 36, and 37 is understandable: all five have to do with some aspect of authority in England and their predominance over the subjects of the British Crown. It would have been futile for Wesley to insist that American Methodists observe these Articles, since America had declared its independence and was on its way to securing its future. Understandable as well were the Articles that Wesley had superseded in ordaining Coke and Asbury, along with Articles describing what Methodists considered to be heresies—in particular, Article 13 dealing with works before justification and Article 17, which promotes predestination. More interesting are the articles that clearly reveal the fundamental difference between the Church of England and the Methodist societies over the meaning of spirituality. Article 33 in the Book of Common Prayer, for example, admonishes faithful members to keep their distance from those who were excommunicated from the faith. By contrast, Wesley and the Methodists were constantly seeking to associate and identify with the outcasts of the community. It was inevitable, therefore, that the Methodists would ultimately be considered a threat to the fabric of The Church of England.

A Reforming Bishop in Our Ranks

What was Wesley actually up to in putting together the Sunday Service for the American Methodists? It is simplistic to answer that Wesley's motivation for producing the Sunday Service was to provide a liturgical, administrative, and doctrinal "program" for the development of Methodism in America. Rather, I argue that, in addition to being concerned about the appropriate development of Methodism in America, Wesley saw himself as a reforming bishop in the Church of England. In a letter written to his brother Charles on August 19, 1785, Wesley makes the bold claim that he too is to be counted among the historical episcopacy. "I firmly believe," writes Wesley, "that I am a scriptural episcopos as much as any man in England or in Europe; for the uninterrupted succession I know to be a fable, which no man ever did or can prove." Wesley notes that he still holds fast to the discipline and doctrine of the Church of England. In considering Wesley's self-conscious appropriation of the episcopal office, what may we
conclude about the importance of the *Sunday Service* of 1784, sent to the United States with Coke and Asbury? Two points are worth mentioning.

First, we should remember that Wesley was primarily a pastoral theologian. He appreciated the growing pains accompanying the fledgling Methodist church in the U.S. and sought to give the American Methodists practical guidelines that would move them on to perfection. We mentioned only the three major revisions of the *Book of Common Prayer*: Prayer, the Eucharist, and the Articles of Religion. There were many other revisions that we are unable to address—his omission of the holy days, the catechism, and the Athanasian Creed, to name just a few. All in all, though, Wesley was concerned with putting into the hands of American Methodists a book that would be a blessing and not a burden.

Second, and more crucial to the thesis of this essay, Wesley was deeply troubled about the spiritual condition of the Church of England. This church had taught him the faith of Christianity. It had nurtured him emotionally and spiritually. Wesley was not about to leave this church that had formed and informed him through the years. However, it was not Wesley's way to let inconsistencies go unchecked. Wesley's desire for reform and renewal is matched only by his commitment and discipline. It is certainly not too much of a stretch to claim that Wesley was crafting the *Sunday Service* to be a test case for reformation in the Church of England—a reformation Wesley prayed, worked, and hoped for throughout his life.

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**Endnotes**

1. Thanks to Professor J. Neil Alexander for comments and suggestions on an earlier draft of this essay.
Methodist Board of Higher Education and Ministry, 1984), 20. See also Charles R. Hohenstein, "The Revisions of The Rites of Baptism in The Methodist Episcopal Church, 1784–1939" (Ph.D. diss., University of Notre Dame, 1990), who claims that we should not overlook "... the evidence that Wesley, at least in places, intended not only to shorten the Prayer Book, but to alter its character"(43).


30. Ibid., 468.


Several years ago at annual conference, I attended a dinner sponsored by a group seeking renewal for The United Methodist Church. Maxie Dunnam was the keynote speaker. As I recall, the title of his address was “What’s in the Box?” Dunnam’s basic point was that The United Methodist Church needs to be clear about who it is; and, he claimed, such identity is possible only if the church knows what it believes. Without a “doctrinal box,” the denomination is like an amorphous amoeba, ever changing its shape according to its environment.

Instead of the box metaphor to portray the function of doctrine in shaping theological identity, I prefer the metaphor of a house. This “doctrinal house” has been in the family for generations. It has been inherited. It is a gift.

The house of doctrine is a gift that we (every generation of United Methodists) have neither created nor preserved. But now that it

The above question can be taken in two ways. To see the distinction between the two, consider Umar, who is overweight and has problems with his heart. First, let us ask how important is it for him to modify his diet and to eat healthy food. A health professional would say it is absolutely crucial and would offer reasons for those who might be inclined to doubt. But second, it might be asked how important it is to Umar himself, as one observes him eating an extra-large sausage pizza and a supersized chocolate milkshake. That is another question altogether. And the answer to this latter query is, “not very important.” I suggest that this is a good picture of the ambiguous status of the importance of doctrine for United Methodists.

Objectively speaking, it is clear that doctrine is crucial for shaping the identity and ministry of all Christians, including United Methodists. Identity is disclosed in what is

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belongs to us we are responsible for it. The years have taken their toll, making renovation necessary. But care must be taken not to alter the house’s “character.” For the house invites the quality of family life that the soul recognizes as eternal. We experienced it as a child visiting our grandparents during the summer. We experienced it as a college student returning for Thanksgiving Day dinner. We experienced it as young parents bringing our children to the Labor Day family reunion. The house has been a constant, while we have changed.

We shape our buildings that then shape us. The church builds its doctrinal house and then is shaped by what it has built. The house doesn’t determine entirely the life that is lived in it. However, it definitely encourages or inhibits a particular lifestyle. And that particular lifestyle contributes to a specific sort of Christian formation and missional expression.

The way the doctrinal house is arranged is not the only factor determining how the lives within it are shaped. The nature of the “bricks” that are used to construct the house is equally determinative.

All denominations claim that the bricks of their doctrinal house are made of Scripture. Those who believe that the Bible yields inerrant, infallible, and indisputable truths build their doctrinal house with bricks that are opaque. Such doctrinal houses allow in no light from the outside. Life inside the house never needs to be seen “in a new light,” because its “form of life” is of God and is, therefore, eternally fixed. The bricks have been composed from God’s words; therefore, they say what they say—nothing more, nothing less. Those who accept these doctrines and the house they construct are admitted inside. Those who want to nuance their meaning or wrestle with them further until they can be affirmed with integrity are excluded. The result is a presumed uniformity of belief and understanding. It is clear who “we” are and who “they” are. The door of the house is closely guarded, so that only those who can identify themselves with the right doctrinal membership card are admitted.

While this use of doctrine provides a degree of blessed assurance, it operates from an unacknowledged hermeneutical assumption that can be held only by denying the truth. The truth is that the Bible does not offer indisputable, singular truths. The Bible speaks the word of God by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit as it helps us to interpret the words of those who wrote it and the judgments of those who translated and canonized it.
Take, for instance, the doctrine of the atonement. The light of Christ shines through that glass brick and yields for some occupants an understanding of substitutionary expiation and propitiation. The ancient ritual of the sin offering is the hermeneutic. Yet, other hermeneutical models are available—and permissible—that will yield different understandings of the atonement that are equally faithful. Christ may be understood as the Paschal Lamb, whose blood leads to deliverance from death. Or Christ may be seen as the Suffering Servant, whose identification with us brings saving grace. Or Christ is the One whose obedient self-denial and self-sacrifice captivates and transforms human hearts. Since our doctrine is one of faith's ways of seeking understanding, must the church insist on one understanding—one configuration of doctrinal bricks—to the exclusion of the rest?

The Bible can become the object of our worship rather than be a witness to God—and so can our doctrine. Scripture and doctrine are gifts we inherit. Though precious, they are means to an end, not ends in themselves. Neither dropped out of heaven directly from God. They were passed on to us by the faithful who preceded us and cared that we be faithful, too.

The church's doctrinal house provides a place where the United Methodist family hears, learns, interprets, and incarnates God's Word through conversation together. When the conversation takes place within The United Methodist Church, we call it "conferencing." (A good example is the United Methodist resource, *Christian Believer*, in which age-old doctrines come alive through conversation with Christians past and present.)

When the conversation is with God, it is called "prayer." Doctrine serves the Christian family by helping it keep its story as accurate and true as possible. It is by retelling its story, the story of "God's deeds of power" (Acts 2:11), that the church gives thanks at Holy Communion. Doctrine, then, is the language spoken around the Table, where we learn who we are because of Whose we are. Like all language, the value of doctrinal language lies in the world (the house) it creates and the life it makes possible in it. We misuse doctrine whenever we assume that it can be learned without asking the question, "What does it mean?" Otherwise, faith is nothing more than assent to propositions. "Catechism answers" are dry bones. Because our faith is a relationship with God through Jesus Christ, it is reflected best by narrative, not doctrine. Narrative consists of flesh and blood. "For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life" (2 Cor. 3:6b). Narrative honors the Spirit that gives life.

Continuing to mix metaphors of ear and eye, the bricks of the United
Methodist doctrinal house are translucent. (Were they transparent we would no longer see as through a glass dimly.) The light of God through Christ enables us to see ourselves as God sees us. It enables us to see that it is possible to be faithful to our doctrinal inheritance and yet be unfaithful to God. This is because our best efforts at biblical understanding and doctrinal house building are forever limited and corrupted by sin.

Doctrine is a means of grace to the end that we submit to the reign of God. That Reign, for whose realization God may use doctrine (howbeit partially), leads us to look at doctrine critically.

I believe it was from the perspective of the reign of God that George Miller of the Evangelical Association recommended a revision of his church’s doctrine, leading eventually to a reduction of the original twenty-six Articles of Religion to twenty-one. The articles excised were aimed at Roman Catholics, Anabaptists, and sixteenth-century sectaries. Had Miller treated doctrine as a hermetically sealed box, he would not have cared how his doctrinal inheritance affected those on the outside. That he did care, I maintain, is due to his conviction that his doctrinal house provides him with a place within which to “learn Christ.” Like St. Paul, he came to enjoy the mind of Christ. He knew that even though he may possess all doctrinal knowledge, without love it would be worth nothing in God’s reign.

I was raised in a denomination that takes its identity primarily from its doctrine. The way to salvation is through adherence to right doctrine. When this doctrinal house became a suffocating box, I joined The United Methodist Church. When this denomination took me in, I heard it say, “You’re welcome here. We will care for you as you work out what you believe. We don’t demand that you say you believe doctrines that you can’t sincerely say you believe right now. We are all seeking increased faith and clearer understanding. We’re glad you’re here, because we believe you’re a child of God, even if you aren’t sure of all this belief means. We’ll figure it out together.”

What’s most important to us United Methodists is not the house of our doctrine, but whether the Holy Spirit inspires those who know the life within the house as their eternal home.

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distinctive. One’s fingerprints, for instance, distinguish one from other persons and identify one as a unique person. In a similar way, Christian doctrine constitutes the distinctive fingerprint of Christians. It is the unique configuration of Christian belief summarized in the historic creeds that distinguishes Christianity from Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, and Islam, not to mention Mormonism, secularism, and neo-Nazism. When central Christian doctrine is distorted, compromised, or muted, Christian identity is obscured to a corresponding degree.

Moreover, this unique configuration of belief provides the rationale for all aspects of Christian ministry. Two examples are worship and evangelism. Worship is perhaps the fundamental ministry the church provides for believers. Evangelism is its central ministry directed to unbelievers.

It is a common observation that the heartbeat of United Methodist worship can be heard in its hymnody, particularly the great hymns of Charles Wesley. Wesley’s hymns are pervaded with doctrinal substance that is both profound and precise. Consider, for instance, the first verse of his hymn “O Love Divine, What Hast Thou Done.”

O Love divine, what hast thou done!
Th’incarnate God hath died for me!
The Father’s co-eternal Son
Bore all my sins upon the tree!
The Son of God for me hath died:
My Lord, my Love, is crucified.

It is the belief that God loves us in this fashion that has fired Christian piety and devotion for centuries. It is wonder and gratitude for this amazing love that motivates distinctively Christian worship.

Notice that the love Wesley celebrates in this hymn is the love of the triune God, who has existed from eternity. This love is shown compellingly in the death of the Son of God for us. The One who died on the tree was no less than the incarnation of the Father’s co-eternal Son. In this precisely drawn verse, Methodist worshipers have for generations expressed wonder at the marvels of Trinitarian love as shown in the Incarnation and Atonement.

The second verse of this hymn expresses the evangelistic heartbeat of traditional Methodism.
Is crucified for me and you,  
To bring us rebels near to God;  
Believe, believe the record true,  
Ye all are bought with Jesus' blood.  
Pardon for all flows from his side:  
My Lord, my Love, is crucified!

Evangelistic passion is fueled by the belief that the willing death of the incarnate Son of God is the necessary means of salvation for the whole human race. It was this conviction that motivated John Wesley to crisscross Great Britain urging his countrymen to believe the gospel. It is this belief that still gives the work of evangelism and mission its sense of urgency and makes perfect sense of the sacrifice and commitment such work demands.

When historic, orthodox Christian doctrine is neither believed nor proclaimed with the sort of seriousness reflected in Wesley's hymn, worship loses its point and often its vitality as well; and evangelism loses both its direction and its passion. This is not to say that orthodox conviction is all that is necessary for vital worship and effective evangelism. But it is to insist that worship is not Christian in any significant or historic sense if it is not premised upon the great doctrines made explicit in the classic creeds. And it is likewise to insist that any evangelism worthy of the name must have as its goal the conversion of people to faith in the eternal Son of God who died for their sins and was raised in his body. The conviction that Jesus is alive and living among us is what gives worship its personal immediacy and vitality, and it is what makes sense of the call to follow him in a living relationship of trust and obedience.

So doctrine is extremely important to United Methodists in the first sense of the question I distinguished above. Unfortunately, in the second sense of the question, it is much more doubtful that doctrine is very important to United Methodists. This is apparent from the fact that United Methodists—like other old-line Protestant denominations—have been notorious for tolerating wildly divergent doctrinal opinion within their ranks. For a couple of decades or so, this diversity was even blessed by General Conference under the free-floating banner of "theological pluralism." Although General Conference has more recently withdrawn the blessing previously explicitly extended to pluralism, it remains the case that radical doctrinal diversity is still the reality in The United Methodist Church.
Particularly within the ranks of the clergy, from parish ministers to seminary professors to bishops, divergence from the most basic doctrines of orthodoxy is often tolerated and overlooked. Sometimes it is even celebrated.

This is not to deny that various renewal groups have made issue of this, sometimes with considerable effect. But the fact remains that doctrinal indifference and infidelity are deeply entrenched in our church, and renewal movements appear to have had little power to change that thus far. Indeed, some of those most responsible for doctrinal oversight in our church—our bishops, whose consecration vows include the promise to “guard the . . . doctrine . . . of the Church against all that is contrary to God’s Word”2—have in some notable cases identified with the cause of doctrinal deviance. Either they do not know our doctrine well enough to recognize when it is being opposed by teaching contrary to God’s Word, or they do not care to exert discipline against those who promote such teaching.

When doctrinal infidelity is widely tolerated, it cannot fail to have a profoundly negative effect on our church. It saps the vitality of worship in many of our churches and drains the passion from our evangelistic efforts. And without vital worship and committed evangelistic efforts, our church has no hope of reversing its membership decline and waning influence in society.

Returning to the opening vignette of this article, I suspect our denomination is very much like Umar, indifferently eating his meal of pizza and a milkshake. Better nourishment is absolutely critical for our long-term health and survival as a Christian body. But it is another question altogether whether we have the heart to change.

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Endnotes

1. The Methodist Hymnal (Nashville: The Methodist Publishing House, 1966), 420. It is worth noting that the words of Wesley’s hymn have been modified in the current Hymnal in a way that mutes the precise doctrinal claims of Wesley’s original language. Cf. The United Methodist Hymnal (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), 287.

The Gospel of Luke is volume one of a two-volume work (Luke–Acts) written in the second half of the first century C.E. by an anonymous author who was, most likely, a male Gentile. He lived close enough to the spread of Christianity as to be able to tackle the task of attempting to explain its birth and development to a hypothetical (or, perhaps, real) patron, Theophilus (see Luke 1:1-4 and Acts 1:1-2). That Luke himself was a second-generation Christian rather than Paul’s coworker, the beloved physician of tradition, who had first-hand knowledge of the apostle’s journey (see Col. 4:14), is a widely accepted hypothesis. For one thing, the Paul we meet in Paul’s letters is very different from the Paul described in Luke–Acts (compare, for example, the account of the conference in Jerusalem in Acts 15 with Paul’s own account of it in Gal. 2:1-10). At the same time, Luke acknowledges as sources for his Gospel the existence of written and oral traditions (Luke 1:1-4). Obviously, he is not an eyewitness.

It is common parlance among scholars today to say that the Gospel of Luke is a sort of ancient biography. Together with its companion volume, Acts, which was probably intended as a kind of general history similar in genre to Flavius Josephus’s The Antiquities of the Jews, it constitutes what has been called “narrative theology”—that is, a presentation of the Christian faith in narrative form.

Luke writes his Gospel utilizing a number of sources, written and oral. Among his written sources he definitely used the Gospel of Mark and the so-called “sayings” source, technically known as “Q.” He also used his own materials. Luke has given us some of the better-known and most-loved stories in the New Testament: Mary and Elizabeth, the curious shepherds
at the manger, Jesus as a boy in the Temple, the parable of the Good Samaritan, the parable of the Prodigal Son, the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, Jesus and Zacchaeus, the walk to Emmaus, and more.

Luke was an author and a theologian in his own right. Most of all, he was a pastor. The way he presents the story of Jesus has been colored by the concerns of his own community. The following were some of his concerns: an interest in outcasts, sinners, and all minorities (especially women); a marked criticism of wealth; an explicit interest in the poor (in the socioeconomic sense); a strong sense of social justice; a tendency toward including all persons, Jews and non-Jews, in God’s people on earth; and an understanding of Jesus Christ as the Savior of the whole human race. Luke’s narrative leads the reader in a logical fashion from Jerusalem, the center of Jewish life, to Rome, the center of the Roman Empire. One has the feeling that Luke wants the reader to understand that God’s message of salvation is not ethnically conditioned. Everyone, even those living in the most powerful city of the known world, stands in need of deliverance from sin and oppression.

In Luke’s view, the church is to carry out the ministry left unfinished, as it were, by Jesus of Nazareth. The Holy Spirit—the presence of the Risen Christ in the community—is now the power behind the preaching of the disciples as they scatter the seeds of the gospel throughout the world (Acts 1:8).

June 17, 2001—Second Sunday after Pentecost

Luke 7:36–8:3; 1 Kings 21:1–21a; Ps. 5:1–8; Gal 2:15–21

The setting in Luke 7:36-50 is a dinner in the house of a Pharisee named Simon. The style of dining in the Hellenistic world was one in which guests ate reclining on cushions placed on the floor. Guests had places assigned to them according to their social status. We know from studies on this subject that meals were events in which social roles and statuses were confirmed and legitimized.1 The microcosm of the meal reflected the macrocosm of the society of the time. Pharisees would avoid at all cost being in contact with those people who, according to their understanding of the Torah, were unclean and would therefore defile them.

Jesus, following the rules of etiquette of the times, takes his assigned place at the table. Everything seems to suggest that he was the guest of honor at the dinner. Enter the woman. She is described as being a “woman in the city, who was a sinner” (v. 37). The text does not say anything about
her being a prostitute, but many male scholars have drawn this conclusion. She could have been somebody who, because of her occupation, was in contact with Gentiles. Or she could have been sick or disabled. All of these possible scenarios would have made her a "sinner" according to the Pharisaic purity code. These were people who for reason of their position in society could not lead a life according to the Law. They lived in a constant state of pollution, not being able to tithe or to provide pure, undefiled food. They were the "people of the land," a term of contempt religious leaders used for the lower classes (see John 7:49).

Now, this woman finds a way into the banquet, and no one, not even Jesus, appears to be surprised at her presence there. She positions herself behind Jesus, at his feet, and starts to weep. Something is making her very sad, and no one seems to understand that but Jesus. I can imagine her reciting in silence the words of Ps. 5:1-2:

Give ear to my words, O Lord;
give heed to my sighing.
Listen to the sound of my cry,
my King and my God,
for to you I pray.

Then she performs the three prescribed acts of hospitality that were common in a Palestinian home: welcome kiss, foot washing, and anointing. To her credit, she does this in an extravagant way—something that is readily noticed by the host. This action leads the Pharisee to question in his mind Jesus' status as a prophet. (By the way, the question about Jesus' identity is prominent in the context immediately preceding this section; see 7:16, 19, 26-28, 34.) He had initially considered Jesus as an equal in social ranking; otherwise, he wouldn't have invited him. When the woman touched Jesus, he automatically became unclean. He was touched in public by a woman, a member of a despised social class—a "sinner." Simon began to regret having invited Jesus to dinner.

Then we get to what seems to be the central part of the pericope, the parable. This can be deduced by analyzing the general structure of the passage. It follows a pattern of the type ABCDXD'C'B'A'. The X represents the center of the pattern and points at that which is being stressed by the evangelist. It is important for us as readers to follow this rhetorical clue in
order to find out what is being taught here. The structure unfolds as follows:

A. Jesus at table in the Pharisee's house (v. 36)
   B. A woman in the city, a sinner (v. 37)
      C. The woman shows Jesus due hospitality (v. 38)
      D. Simon misjudges the situation (v. 39)
         X. Jesus tells the parable of the two debtors (vv. 40-42)
         D'. Simon judges rightly (v. 43)
      C'. The woman's hospitality contrasted with the Pharisee's lack of it (vv. 44-46)
   B'. The woman's sins are forgiven; she leaves in peace (vv. 47-48, 50)
   A'. Those at the table comment on Jesus' pronouncement (v. 49)

The parable of the two debtors describes the painful situation of indebtedness that many peasants in first-century Palestine experienced. Here, the Lukan Jesus uses this parable to teach the Pharisee a lesson concerning people's standing in God's sight, thus spiritualizing the concept of debt. Jesus clearly affirms that everyone—no matter how hard he or she tries—is a debtor to God, the heavenly Patron. This must have been difficult for the Pharisee to accept, since he thought he had done everything the Torah required for being righteous in God's sight (see Gal. 2:15-21). Jesus acknowledges that some people have accumulated a greater amount of debts/sins. But in the last analysis, that is not the determining factor with God who will forgive all on an equal basis. What really counts with God is recognizing that no one can repay God for his or her transgressions. One should simply accept God's mercy and forgiveness and respond to it with a grateful heart.

In a world of privilege and status and of sharp social differences, a woman belonging to the lower classes—a "sinner" according to the Pharisaic worldview—finds her way to where Jesus is and out of love performs some striking acts of hospitality. She is the only one who treats him as the most important guest. It is difficult not to speculate whether this was the first time that this woman had met Jesus. Maybe she had heard of Jesus' deeds and words and believed he was a prophet from God. Maybe Jesus had healed her, and this was her way of saying thank you. Maybe she was one of the women who in 8:1-3 followed Jesus on the way, perhaps even Mary Magdalene. We do not really know, but what we do know is that she finds her way to Jesus' heart and receives forgiveness and acceptance. She is dismissed in peace—shalom, the gift of the new age. She leaves that house a different, changed person because of her encounter with the prophet from Nazareth.
In the course of the meal the woman moves from shame to honor, while the Pharisee, on the other hand, moves from honor to being shamed by his own words. But it is important to notice that Jesus does not reject the Pharisee completely. The parable suggests that Simon loved Jesus, but not in the same measure as the woman did. His self-righteousness did not allow him to take Jesus' visit as God's offer of forgiveness. In his mind, if Jesus were really a prophet, or "the prophet" (the expected eschatological forerunner of the Messiah), then Jesus was certainly going to approve of his Pharisaic piety. But, judging by the way in which he treated Jesus—he did not perform the traditional Mediterranean hospitality—it is clear that the Pharisee was not sure what to make of the prophet from Nazareth. In the end, he failed to see God acting through Jesus. And, he missed the blessing that Jesus bestowed on the woman: Go in peace.

These two passages, 7:36-50 and 8:1-3, are joined by the common theme of women who ministered to Jesus. It probably served the purpose of showing how the Jesus movement was inclusive of women and thus countercultural in its days.

June 24, 2001—Third Sunday after Pentecost
Luke 8:26-39; 1 Kings 19:1-15a; Ps. 42; Gal. 3:23-29

While the dinner at the Pharisee's house took place in the city (the woman was a woman in the city), according to Luke the encounter with the demon-possessed man takes place in the countryside, on the other side of the lake (see 8:22), in the country of the Gerasenes. This was probably the region of Gadara, approximately six miles southeast of the Sea of Galilee (see Matt. 8:28). Nevertheless, the man is of the city and he had demons. If one considers the possibility that the woman who anointed Jesus' feet was Mary Magdalene, whom the text describes as having been possessed by seven demons (see 8:2), then we have here a recurrent example of someone from the city who has a demon. Does this mean that for Luke the cities were evil centers of domination and oppression? When one considers that the Hellenistic cities of Galilee had destroyed the temple-based economies of the region and were consuming most of the surplus of the countryside while, at the same time, exploiting the farmers by demanding high production and paying low wages/prices, then it is not impossible that here Luke is making a theological as well as a sociopolitical statement.

Both the demons and the people of the city were afraid of Jesus. The
demons were afraid of him because he had the power to send them back to the abyss (v. 31). According to the book of Revelation, the abyss is the place of torment reserved for the Devil and his angels and for God's enemies (see Rev. 9:1-11; 11:7; 17:8; 20:1-3). They did not want to go there. They were doing fine as "tormenters" (v. 28). They begged Jesus to let them enter a herd of swine in hope of finding an alternative habitat for their unclean existence (an appropriate choice, by the way, since swine were unclean animals for the Jewish people). But the herd rushed down into the lake and was drowned. Since people held the belief that drowning destroys demons (see 11:24), the threat posed by these demons ceased completely. They were destroyed.

The people were also afraid—"seized with great fear," says the text (vv. 35, 37). When the swineherds told them what had happened, they realized that Jesus could present a serious threat to their way of life and to their economy. They owned swine (therefore, they were Gentiles, not Jews), and Jesus had a thing with sending demons into swine! Now, who were the swineherds? In Luke 15:15 we are told that it was not uncommon for a person who had lost his land or his inheritance to be hired as a day laborer. So these swineherds could have been people who, because of indebtedness, were forced to do whatever job a landowner would require them to do. If these men were Jewish, as was perhaps the son in the parable of Luke 15, then having to work with pigs was the ultimate humiliation. They lived in a state of constant ritual impurity. Therefore, when the swine died, it meant the end of their oppression, not only economic but also religious.

The demons and the people of the region represented the forces of oppression that were intent on perpetuating this situation for their own benefit. In the case of the demons, that was obvious. It was believed that demons were evil spirits that inhabited human beings as a way of postponing their ultimate destruction. The demons would take control of a person's body and use it as a medium to inflict pain on the world of creation. They were enemies of God. As for the villagers, they did not mind having to put up with the demon-possessed man; for, as we all know, it is always convenient to have people around who are "different" for us to blame when something goes wrong. Modern psychology has developed a term for that: scapegoat. The man possessed by demons lived among the tombs, a living dead himself (see Ps. 42:9-10), existing in a state of perpetual impurity and perhaps even the target of people's frustrations and failures.
When the people saw him in his right mind, sitting at Jesus’ feet, they real-
ized that from then on they were going to have to face their own demons.
And so they asked Jesus to leave immediately. It is always better to see the
demon in someone else’s life than in our own.

Luke 4:18-19 presents Jesus as the one who has come to proclaim the
year of the Lord’s favor: release to the captives and freedom for the
oppressed. Here, in Luke 8:26-39, we have an enactment of that proclama-
tion in Jesus’ ministry. This is supported by the following ring composition,
which clearly shows the theme of liberation:

A. The liberator and the oppressed meet (vv. 26-27)
B. Opposition to the liberator by the forces of spiritual oppression
   (vv. 28-31)
C. The man is liberated (vv. 32-33a)
C'. The swineherds are liberated (v. 33b)
B'. Opposition to the liberator by the forces of economic oppression
   (vv. 34-37)
A'. The liberated man proclaims Jesus’ liberation (vv. 38-39)

There is another aspect to the demon-possessed man. The text says
that the demon’s name was Legion. The political implications of this name
would not have been lost on a first-century reader: the name was a refer-
ence to the Roman occupation of Palestine. The story identifies the impe-
rial military encroachment in the area as a demonic force. A legion was
made up of five-to-six-thousand men. Such a military presence created a
subculture of occupation for the local population not very different from
what people experience today in places like the Philippines and Puerto
Rico. If this was the case, then, the drowning of the demon-possessed
swine herd takes on a new meaning: It refers to the overcoming not only of
spiritual and economic oppression but also of political oppression.

Now, it is possible that Luke is softening the impact of Mark’s account.
While Mark has the demons ask Jesus to allow them to go “out of the
country” (the political connotations here are obvious), Luke has the
demons beg Jesus not to order them “to go back into the abyss”—a refer-
ence to a spiritual reality that lay beyond the historical circumstances of
the story. This construal agrees with one of Luke’s possible purposes in
writing his Gospel, namely, to present an apology for the church as a move-
ment that did not threaten the social order of the Roman Empire. Jesus,
says Luke, never suggested that the Roman army should leave the country.
Here, the demons stand simply for spiritual forces whose fate has already been determined by God. Jesus, as God's messenger, exerts all authority over the demonic powers and destroys them.

Luke's possible spiritualizing of Mark's more explicitly political account speaks to us of the dangers of domesticating Jesus' revolutionary message. Many of us have been taught that Christianity has little or nothing to do with political and/or economic realities. Instead, our task is to cater to the spiritual needs of people. But even if Luke appears, in this instance, to support that view, the Markan passage certainly defies that interpretation. In the same vein, many interpretative trends that have emerged in oppressed and developing parts of the world, the so-called "liberation theologies" or "liberating hermeneutics," have shown us the importance of reading the text in a way that takes seriously the social location of the reader. These reading methodologies can certainly enrich us and make us even more committed to God's liberating purposes in the world.

July 1, 2001—Fourth Sunday after Pentecost
With 9:51 Luke starts a section that scholars call the "large insertion" (9:51–18:14). The section is composed mostly of Luke's own materials, put together in the form of a long travel narrative. Jesus is on the road going to Jerusalem (see 9:51; 10:1, 38; 13:22, 33). He is aware of the dangers of such a trip, yet he cannot do otherwise. The evangelist's inspired narrative puts it this way: "When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem" (9:51). What a sense of holy surrender to God's will! What stern determination! What a bold and courageous move! It is a noticeable move, too. The people of the Samaritan village notice it and do not allow him to lodge there. Years of ethnic and religious confrontation deprived these villagers of the opportunity to share time with the soon-to-be-crucified-and-exalted Son of Man. They miss a golden opportunity, the same opportunity the woman at the well (John 4:39-42), and her fellow villagers chose not to waste. But, unlike the Samaritans in John 4, the villagers in Luke's account do not ask Jesus to stay; indeed, they refuse to offer him hospitality. All they see is a foreigner passing through on his way to the Jerusalem Temple to offer what the Law requires from a pious Jew. (They are unaware—as are the disciples—that Jesus is going to Jerusalem to offer the supreme sacrifice of his own life for the sins of the world.)
is already an attitude of contempt, the villagers think, in Jesus' action of "passing through." Jesus sends messengers ahead of him "to make ready for him" (v. 52), which probably means they were to prepare proper lodging and food for a Jew—that is, ritually clean food and quarters. The Samaritans would not have any of this. They refuse this time to cater to the ritual expectations of their Jewish cousins. "If he is going to travel through our land," they seem to say, "let him drink our water in our jars and eat our food with our utensils. Enough of this unrealistic notion of separateness!"

It is amazing what peaceful, good-hearted people can do when they get tired of being oppressed and marginalized. They can become bold, courageous, and even violent. People living in affluence and privilege usually evaluate such actions as subversive, deviant, and criminal. But, because they have never experienced poverty themselves, affluent people fail to understand what poverty and oppression do to the human spirit. When you have been told by the representatives of the official religion that you are unclean, that your ways of worshipping God are not valid, that you do not belong to God's people on earth, then the mere presence of a pious man going through your territory to fulfill his responsibilities as a member of the chosen people is a provocation and an insult.

When James and John (whom Mark appropriately calls the Sons of Thunder [3:17]!) see the treatment that Jesus receives from the Samaritan villagers, they react with self-righteous indignation. Recalling the incident when the prophet Elijah caused fire to come down from heaven and consume the messengers of Ahaziah, king of Samaria (2 Kings 1:10-12), they want to repeat the cleansing miracle: make divine fire come down upon those pagan Samaritans! How easy it is to claim God's authority when one believes to be in the right! And how dangerous it is to believe precisely that—that one possesses and embodies the absolute truth!

The text says that Jesus rebukes them (v. 55). An interesting variant adds this content to Jesus' words: "You do not know what manner of spirit you are of; for the Son of Man has not come to destroy the lives of human beings but to save them." Jesus is the savior, not the destroyer, and in that sense he is far superior to Elijah. His ministry is one of reconciliation, not condemnation.

In the verses that follow (vv. 57-62), Jesus engages three different men in a discussion about discipleship and the kingdom of God. (This section resembles thematically the account of 2 Kings 2: 1-2, 6-14, where Elisha assures Elijah that he will not leave him.) Jesus' answer to these would-be
disciples can be summarized like this: Nothing, not even the most basic institution of the patriarchal system—the household—is more important than the kingdom of God. The disciple should be able to part with his/her family and its protective and identity-giving environment and join the Jesus movement, which offers itself as an alternative family—what anthropologists call a "fictive kin group." A life of uncertainties lies ahead, but this is the price even Jesus had to pay for being in the service of the Kingdom. The women in Luke 8:1-3 understood this and followed Jesus, together with the Twelve. Will these men here do the same? Will they be ready to risk all and follow Jesus? The text creates a tension that is left unresolved, reflecting perhaps a similar tension in the community to which Luke is writing his Gospel.

"Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head. . . . Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God. . . . No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God" (vv. 58, 60, 62). These are tough words for the believers to whom Luke is writing; and they are still hard words for disciples today. These sayings show the immense contrast between our societal constructs and the reign of God. Compared to the kingdom of God as proclaimed by Jesus anything we cherish and celebrate as life giving falls short of God’s ultimate liberating purpose for humankind. We should be careful not to become too comfortable with the structures we have devised to live in, lest we fail to see the need for the necessary changes and reforms that would allow these structures to be mediations of God's reign. We U.S. Americans, in particular, have to be mindful of these words of Jesus; for it is so easy to equate our culture, our progress and prosperity, with God’s “seal of approval”—or even to interpret our culture and the lifestyles that it makes possible as a God-given right. The ultimate test for any culture is whether, and to what an extent, it makes it possible for all people to experience the whole scope of God’s liberating purpose for humankind.

July 8, 2001—Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

Luke 10:1-11, 16-20; 2 Kings 5:1-14; Ps. 30; Gal. 6:(1-6), 7-16

In this section Luke expands on the Markan tradition of the sending of the Twelve (see Luke 9:1-6; Matt. 10:1-15; Mark 6:7-13) with the mention of seventy others (seventy-two in some MSS), who are also appointed and
sent out with a mission similar to that given to the Twelve in Luke 9:1-6. There is a difference, though: The seventy are sent ahead of Jesus in a kind of preparatory ministry, going into the places where Jesus was about to come as he headed toward Jerusalem.

For a number of reasons, this passage reveals several aspects of the life of the fledgling Christian church. First, the passage affirms the need for more workers (v. 2), implying, apparently, that the Christian “faction” is beginning to grow into a movement; indeed, it is in the process of becoming a community, an ekklesia. Second, there is mention of “wages” (v. 7). This points to the emergence of the professional missioner, one who is paid for his or her work. This suggestion is supported by the recommendation in v. 7 not to move from house to house, which probably suggests abuses of hospitality on the part of itinerant preachers. Third, the number seventy seems to be a reference to the Gentile nations of Gen. 10:2-20, thus making this passage a foundation for the Gentile mission (although the variant reading seventy-two makes this assumption difficult). Fourth, the command to enter any house and eat whatever is offered (v. 8) suggests openness to all kinds of foods, even those considered unclean by the Jewish people. All of this points to a setting in the early church that is marked by a missionary expansion beyond the Jewish people. This, I believe, represents the context of the Lukan church very well.

This narrative, coming on the heels of the incident in Samaria (9:51-56), provides extra guidelines for the mission, especially for dealing with the possibility of rejection. Such rejection was already anticipated in 9:5 and actually experienced in 9:53. How was the community of disciples in the infant church to respond to the open rejection of the gospel message? Calling down fire from heaven was out of the question. In fact, for Luke, fire from heaven is a symbol for the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit (see Acts 2). But does Luke rule out condemnation and punishment completely? Not entirely. In Acts 5:1-11 Ananias and his wife Sapphira learn the hard way that one had better not lie to the Holy Spirit. And, in Luke 10 the symbolic action of shaking off the dust from one’s sandals signals the eschatological judgment (10:12-15), which is brought about by people’s lack of repentance. Rejecting Jesus’ messengers is the same as rejecting Jesus himself, which in turn amounts to rejecting God’s offer of forgiveness implicit in the proclamation of the nearness of the Kingdom (10:16).

The alert reader will notice right away that Jesus’ teaching here does
not agree with his own practice in 9:51-56, where, in the face of rejection, he left and went on to another village. How do we explain this? I believe that Luke 9:51-56 portrays Jesus' annoyance at James's and John's short memories and their outburst of self-righteousness. They had forgotten that their task was to announce the consequences of rejecting the gospel message (see 9:5), not to become God's instruments of judgment! The forgetfulness of the disciples, therefore, makes it necessary for Jesus to give further instructions concerning the nature of the mission, clarifying what the disciples' response should be when they are rejected by people. In the same vein, in vv. 17-20 Jesus qualifies the misguided joy of the seventy (two). They rejoice over their ability to control the forces of the spiritual world. They are taking all the credit for themselves! Jesus reminds them: It is I who have given you this authority; it is not yours. Rejoice, rather, in the fact that God has chosen you as coworkers and allies in God's warfare against the powers. This is probably the meaning of the expression "your names are written in heaven" (v. 20), an expression that appears in many prophetic and apocalyptic contexts and that refers to those who will be spared the final judgment (see, for example, Exod. 32:32-33; Ps. 69:28; Dan. 12:1; Mal. 3:16-17; Phil. 4:3; Rev. 3:5; 13:8).

We have an important lesson to learn here. The role of the church in the world is not to execute judgment or to exercise control over evil or to exclude those whom she deems lost. These are all divine prerogatives. The role of the church is a prophetic one: to announce the good news of the reign of God and to denounce evil as it takes up residence in the structures of our society. It is an urgent call to individual as well as communal repentance and to joining God in the task of recreating humanity into God's image. When we do this we inflict a mortal wound on evil and its promoters.

Jesus tells the disciples that because of this their lives will be in danger. They are sent as lambs in the midst of wolves (10:3). These words might sound too extreme for people living in the Western world at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Many of us have succeeded in domesticating Jesus' radical message by making it into a private, feel-good religion that fails to challenge the powers that control and oppress people's lives. We live happy and untouched, unmoved by what's going on around us, practicing a religion that feeds the soul but not the stomach, heals the mind but not the aching bodies of the destitute, pacifies the spirit but not our neigh-
borhoods. There is no risk at all in the way we live our faith today. This text challenges us and makes us take a second look at the way we live our faith. In view of all this, Paul's words to the Galatians sound ever more pertinent: "Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow" (Gal. 6:7).

**Conclusion**

Finally, it is worth pointing out a common theme that runs through these four passages: the relationship between discipleship and money/wealth. In Luke 7:36-50 a woman uses a very costly perfume, and Jesus does not seem to mind it. Then, in 8:1-3, we are told of women who followed Jesus on the road providing financial support for the group. Notice that in both cases it is the women who do the spending in the service of the Kingdom. The lesson seems to be that money used in the service of God's reign is money well spent.

In Luke 8:26-29 the liberation of the possessed man has economic repercussions in the region. His liberation, and that of the herdsmen, was costly for the wealthy landowners: who will do the job now? Real liberation always affects the socioeconomic and political strata of reality and could put the disciple at odds with people who have a vested interest in maintaining those realities as they are. Perhaps the best comment on a church that aspires to follow in the steps of Jesus of Nazareth is when its ministry upsets the taken-for-granted relations of society, making the oppressors uncomfortable and the oppressed joyfully proclaim God's liberation.

In Luke 9:51-62 Jesus demands that his followers abandon their support systems, their place in the patriarchal society of the time. He challenges them to a life of possible insecurities and economic hardships, as they become members of the new surrogate family—the family of God. What would it mean—indeed, what would it take—for us who live in the richest nation in the world to leave our many securities and comforts and risk a life of discipleship?

Finally, in Luke 10:1-11, 16-20 the seventy (two) are sent into mission, depending completely on the charity and hospitality of others. Like Jesus, they have nowhere to lay their heads; therefore, they lodge wherever they receive hospitality. This gives the disciple of Jesus a certain freedom, because, when one voluntarily rejects the material comforts of society, one is no longer enslaved by anything or anyone. Again, the meaning of this
kind of radical freedom is worth pondering by Jesus’ twenty-first-century disciples.

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Endnotes


3. Ched Myers, Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark’s Story of Jesus (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1988), 190-92.

4. Malina and Rohrbaugh, Social-Science Commentary, 335.
Putting Criticisms in Their Place

PAUL SCOTT WILSON

I want to start with an old truth: Most preachers have not had much help in integrating their studies; and, yet, if a sermon is to be effective, it must be integrated. Aside from actions other theological disciplines may undertake to correct this problem, homiletics can help by conceiving of itself as a combination of three types of criticism: biblical (or historical), theological, and homiletical. Preachers in turn can achieve greater integration by employing each of these three types in their sermon preparation. In my other writing I am developing these types of criticism more fully, but here I only introduce them through discussing some of the latest books in homiletics.

Many of us were taught that historical criticism on its own is adequate to take us into the pulpit and that this is the only kind of scholarly biblical study. In fact, historical, theological, and homiletical criticism each has its own way of critically engaging biblical texts; and each contributes to a vital hearing of the Word of God for today.

The sermon process begins with biblical criticism. Two recent books in particular offer guidance of different sorts. David L. Barton’s Between the Bible and the Church: New Methods for Biblical Preaching (Abingdon, 1999) is theoretical and broad. He argues for continued reliance upon historical criticism as the essential foundation for biblical study and the means for determining what the text says, what it meant, and what it means. Historical criticism provides a means for conversing with various contemporary critical approaches to the Bible: the world in front of the text (literary and canonical criticism), behind the text (sociological criticism), and our world and the text (liberation theology). Barton provides a brief but excel-
lent overview of new criticism, narrative criticism, reader-response criticism, deconstruction, and new historicism. Although preachers may have difficulty knowing how to employ Bartlett's "methods," he is passionate that preaching should make a difference in people's lives: "We are so scared of allegorizing and psychologizing that we may be afraid of mattering. . . . We preach as if we were going to be graded by our seminary Bible professors, not as if we wanted to change the lives of our people" (29).

Stephen Farris's interest lies in the same direction in Preaching That Matters: The Bible and Our Lives (Westminster/John Knox, 1998). His book might be the choice for those who want practical help with biblical exegesis that draws on both historical and literary criticism. Preaching for him happens in front of the biblical text; and his principle of analogy assists preachers in determining the nature of the listeners' encounter with the Word. Analogy establishes a point of similarity between two things and moves from the better known to the lesser known—or, in this case, from what God is saying in the Bible to what God is saying on "this side" of the analogy. A fascinating chapter on "Finding the Analogies" moves through several steps that preachers can follow and demonstrates that establishing the right analogy can move a sermon well on its way toward completion.

A new kind of critical resource for preachers has emerged that may yet establish itself as a separate genre. This resource does not consist of biblical commentaries, as we know them. Neither are these books based on the original languages, nor are they rigorous in their demonstration of the historical-critical method. They are small, scholarly volumes (most are around 150 pages), dealing with specialized biblical subjects and their relationship to preaching. They also include sample sermons. These books will have a number of applications, including designs for a variety of sermon series. Ronald J. Allen's Preaching Luke–Acts (Chalice, 2000) is a recent example, and its publication is appropriately timed for use with the Revised Common Lectionary, Cycle C. Allen provides exegetical helps organized according to five themes in Luke–Acts: the realm of God, the Holy Spirit, community, the restoration of women, and poverty and wealth.

A unique, refreshing approach to Mark is found in Robert Stephen Reid's Preaching Mark (Chalice, 1999). Reid uses his knowledge of classical rhetoric—particularly how chiasm (and other forms of parallelism) were used to structure narrative argument in ancient times—as a means of reading Mark in nineteen "narrative complexes." The clever parallelism in
compositional structure that Reid identifies, the arrangement of accumulated episodes on the same theme, and the completeness of the narrative units are persuasive and provide preachers with a new way of preaching this Gospel. Instead of being confined to individual stories or pericopes, Reid frees preachers to preach larger thematic units that serve the argument of the whole. This in itself should help produce fresh sermons.

David Schnasa Jacobsen has written a timely volume for the new millennium, titled *Preaching in the New Creation: The Promise of New Testament Apocalyptic Texts* (Westminster/John Knox, 1999). The book is intriguing, because New Testament apocalyptic texts often resist close historical-critical scrutiny and for that reason are hard to preach. Jacobsen suggests three exegetical steps. First, do a rhetorical analysis of the text to assess what it is trying to accomplish. Second, determine if the text moves from divine action to cosmic convulsion and eschatological judgment—or, as in Mark 13, to eschatological salvation. Third, determine whether the text's symbols function to construct, maintain, or delegitimize the world. Jacobsen's helpful sermon examples do what he advocates: he uses the textual symbols as a lens to view our world rather than to view the ancient world; however, because of this some preachers may wonder if his demanding exegetical proposals are really essential.

Yet another example comes from Elizabeth Achtemeier in her book *Preaching from the Minor Prophets: Texts and Sermon Suggestions* (Eerdmans, 1998). She continues to demonstrate that even lesser Old Testament texts can be preached effectively.

These are only some of the volumes that prompt the question, "Why is this 'genre' appearing at this time?" Cynics may say that publishers are scrambling to fill a void. Two decades of revisions to the lectionary are over, and since the need for updated lectionary resources is reduced, a new product must be found. Perhaps time pressures have caught up with preachers, and they are less willing to wait to hear a fresh word from God; they need resources that move them quickly to homiletical reflection.

I prefer to think that publishers, scholars, and preachers are addressing what has been missing from much biblical criticism. As historical criticism improved, providing the church with more reliable texts and essential understandings about their backgrounds and meanings, biblical scholars have become more hesitant to speak of the Bible as the Word of God, more reluctant to speak about God, and more willing to defer questions of truth.
The new "genre" advocated by Allen, Reid, Jacobsen, and Achtemeier, written by scholars who teach preaching and are as loyal to its needs as they are to historical and literary demands, employ theological criticism to supplement—not replace—historical criticism in sermon preparation. Achtemeier’s interest in speaking frankly about God is particularly clear in the structure she follows with each of the twelve Minor Prophets: she moves from recommended commentaries to historical context to theological context to sermon possibilities. Strict historical critics may be less attentive to theology.

Theological criticism is, therefore, the second type of biblical criticism that preachers need to employ. Theological criticism may be conceived for preaching as a means of questioning biblical texts to discover what these texts reveal about the God whose word they express. Historical criticism conceives of the literal meaning of a text as the product of its own method of inquiry. The Reformers upheld the literal sense as the only sense of Scripture. However, for Luther and company, the literal sense was not the historical sense (i.e., what happened) but the theological one (i.e., what the text means in light of God). Theological criticism is a means of recovering for preaching the "God-sense" of Scripture as its literal meaning. Historical criticism brings essential historical materials and methods to biblical texts as a way of reading them. In a parallel move that requires the insights of history, theological criticism brings understandings of the triune God whom the church already knows to those same texts for new insight.

Scholars who address theology and preaching assist in this type of criticism by identifying what preachers are to do with the theological information texts yield. Of particular note is Sidney Greidanus’s *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament: A Contemporary Hermeneutical Approach* (Eerdmans, 1999), a book that affords rich dividends to patient readers. After developing the history and necessity of preaching Christ from the Old and New Testaments, Greidanus turns in the later chapters of his book to seven ways of preaching Christ from the Old Testament (including the progression of salvation history, promise-fulfillment, typology, and analogy). He discusses at what point in the exegetical process questions concerning the witness to Christ should be raised, and demonstrates proper christological method with numerous texts that in the past have been treated as allegories of Christ.

A delightful volume that keeps lifting profound truths in clear and
accessible ways is Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki’s *The Whispered Word: A Theology of Preaching* (Chalice, 1999). At least as far back as Philip Melancthon’s *Loci Communes*, preachers have been identifying great themes around which to preach the faith. Suchocki identifies seven such themes: “the universe as the creation of God; the problem of sin; the provision of sin’s answer in Jesus Christ who reveals God to us; the possibility of new life that triumphs over sin; the creation of community; the work of God through that community in the world; and the hope of everlasting redemption” (39). She calls these “symbols” rather than “doctrines,” because “symbols are deeper than doctrine or theology.” For Suchocki, preaching theologically involves finding one of these symbols in the biblical text at hand and letting it interact with one’s denominational tradition.

Of course not every book dealing with theology and preaching needs to contribute directly to theological criticism when this is conceived as dealing with biblical texts. *Preacher and Cross: Person and Message in Theology and Rhetoric* (Eerdmans, 1999) is Andre Resner’s revised doctoral thesis. In it, he argues that rhetoric offers to preaching “persuasive effect” that listeners perceive in relationship to the preacher’s character as it is shaped by the cross. Theology offers the “efficacy” of the proclaimed gospel for salvation. Both are essential, and choosing one over the other can diminish preaching. David M. Greenhaw and Ronald J. Allen have edited a fine volume on a much-neglected subject, *Preaching in the Context of Worship* (Chalice 2000). This collection of ten essays covers everything from art and drama to Word and Sacrament.

The third type of biblical criticism preachers require to integrate their sermons is homiletical criticism. Homiletical criticism asks, “How does this biblical text connect with our world? How does the text connect with other relevant scriptural stories or images? What is the best way of communicating this material so that it will be effectively heard by the congregation?” Too many writers discuss what can be done with the text itself, rather than critically assess what is best done and what is most likely to equip the saints for ministry and to build up the body of Christ.

My own *The Four Pages of the Sermon: A Guide to Biblical Preaching* (Abingdon, 1999), like some of the works already mentioned, tries to link biblical and theological criticism with homiletical criticism. No sermon can be integrated if it lacks unity. This unity can be achieved by ensuring that the sermon deals with one text, one theme sentence, one doctrine, one
person’s need, one dominant image, and one mission or action. I conceive of sermon design around the question, “What is God doing in or behind this text?” This question can be addressed alongside historical-critical exegesis to ensure that the sermon arrives at its appropriate destination. Too many sermons are anthropocentric and leave God out. Sermons have four possible theological emphases: trouble in the biblical text, trouble in our world, God’s action of grace in the text, and grace in our world. In order for the fullness of the gospel to be proclaimed, I argue that each of these emphases needs to be present in a sermon, although their arrangement and proportions may vary.


I am convinced that most excellent preachers demonstrate an integration of biblical, theological, and homiletical criticism in roughly equal measure. They are able to portray their biblical texts in lifelike ways; they “get to God” in their sermons; and they are able to connect with sin and brokenness as well as with God’s grace in contemporary life. Anyone who does not know what this might look like in a sermon can treat themselves to a journey with Barbara Brown Taylor’s Home by Another Way (Cowley, 1999) or to a collection that is as pleasing as its title, Low-Back, Ladder-Back, Cane-Bottom Chair: Biblical Meditations, by Presbyterian James S. Lowry (Saint Mary’s, 1999).

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The eight essays in Trinity, Community, and Power were plenary presentations at the Tenth Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies, held in summer 1997 at Somerville College, Oxford, England. The contributors share the conviction that without a cogent doctrine of the Trinity, Methodists are poorly equipped to address the deleterious uses of power and the erosion of community in our world. Armed with this conviction, the Institute responded to these questions: "Is there distinctively Wesleyan perspective on the Trinity; and if so, how would it affect the questions of power and community that are so perplexing both within the church and in all aspects of present life in the world?" (10) To a greater or lesser degree, all the essays in the book wrestle with these daunting questions.

In the opening essay, M. Douglas Meeks advances a view of the Trinity that seeks to honor Wesley's concern with salvation. The Methodist people, says Meeks, must "live in the Trinity," and thus model their practice of community and power after the trinitarian logic of the divine being, expressed in the act of "gifting"—a perichoretic practice of giving and receiving. By "dwelling in the life of the triune God," Methodists learn how to give as God has given and to love as God has loved. Indeed, sanctification is simply "our return of God's gift" (28), which is our lives. Only by living in the Trinity will Methodists be able to oppose the "market society," in which community is constantly undermined by the logic of commodity exchange.

In his essay, J. Philip Wogaman explores the relationship between the doctrine of God and ethics. The doctrine of God, while not prescribing specific ethical responses, does "set the context of what is ultimately at stake" (34). For the Wesleyan tradition, it is God's love that frames this context, prompting the question: "What are the implications of God's love and of our loving response to God for our responsibility in the world?" (36), particularly with relation to the uses of power? Wogaman's nuanced response to these
questions reveals the ambiguities surrounding the exercise of power in the political arena and the space of free-market economy. But the "guiding principle" of God's love helps little here, it seems, except to "tell us what is at stake" (45). Could the relationship between God's love and responsible human action have been made more precise had Wogaman construed the divine love along trinitarian lines, as Meeks had done?

Roberta Bondi engages in a practical exercise in trinitarian theology centering in the frequent objection that the use of "father language" for God and . . . language of kingdom and kingship" (51) in the Lord's Prayer legitimates patriarchal forms of dominance and authority. Bondi concedes that father language for God has historically been abused, but rejects calls to excise it from the Christian lexicon. Praying to "our Father" can be rehabilitated, she argues, by retrieving the subversive meaning of God's fatherhood as revealed in the teaching and ministry of Jesus and by allowing the radical view of God the Father to transform and heal our relationships through worship and personal and communal prayer.

José Miguez Bonino asks about the utility of Methodism's twin concerns with piety and social justice in a Latin American context. In critical conversation with Liberation Theology (particularly Gustavo Gutiérrez), Miguez Bonino explores a "holistic understanding of salvation" for the continent. He helpfully recasts Liberation Theology's central affirmations—the unity of God's action in the world, historical liberation as central to salvation, the option for the poor, and the eschatological significance of human action for love and justice—in a trinitarian framework to protect these convictions from misunderstanding and to ground them in God's self-revelation.

Ted A. Campbell explores understandings of God in the historic Wesleyan traditions to determine a common doctrinal core ("doctrine" meaning "corporate consensus about what to teach"). Examining the sources of Methodist doctrine—the writings of John and Charles Wesley; Methodist doctrinal statements; Methodist hymnody, liturgies, and catechisms; and Methodist theologies—Campbell concludes that there is "a fair ground of consensus in historic Wesleyan teaching" (107) about the nature of God, the Trinity, the divine attributes, and God's providence. Campbell counsels United Methodists to use this doctrinal consensus as a foundation to "imagine and re-imagine and worship faithfully and confidently the passionate and personal God to whom our heritage testifies. . . ." (109).
Using the term *perichoresis*, Jürgen Moltmann holds that a perichoretic understanding of God suggests an "open Trinity," which invites the church (and, eschatologically, the whole creation) "to become a community in the divine community of the triune God . . ." (121). For its part, perichoretic community is fundamentally liberative and prophetic, opposing the forces of patriarchy, market-driven individualism, and hierarchical and bureaucratic forms of church.

Frances Young explores Macarius's influence on John Wesley, particularly with reference to the Trinity and perfection. Both Wesley and Macarius see the drive toward perfection as the goal of the Christian life; and both ground this drive in a trinitarian view of God. Their orientation to practice prompted both men to draw a sharp distinction between the Trinity *in se* and the "divine energies." God's inner being is not knowable; yet, we know and experience the transforming "energies" of God through Christ and the Holy Spirit, as they effect in us their work of perfection.

One could certainly raise critical questions about several aspects of the book, not the least of which are Brian Beck's concluding comments to the volume. For example, while the Trinity was an integrating insight for the Institute, Beck asks whether the choice of "Trinity, community, and power" is not an attempt to be theologically fashionable, given the recent popularity of these themes. Moreover, the subtitle holds these essays to be mapping "trajectories in Wesleyan theology"; however, as Beck points out, there isn't complete agreement about the meaning of Wesleyan or about the normativity of Wesley in Methodist theology. Beyond these comments, one could point out that the themes of "trinity," "community," and "power" are not always consistently and intentionally linked in every essay, thus creating somewhat of an imbalance in the overall texture of the book.

These comments notwithstanding, *Trinity, Community, and Power* is a substantive contribution to Wesleyan theology and is evidence of the level of maturity that Wesleyan scholarship has reached. The style of theologizing is practical—that is, oriented toward "the everyday struggle of Christians" (14)—and this fact alone makes the book required reading for clergy and other church professionals.

Reviewed by Hendrik R. Pieterse. Pieterse is editor of Quarterly Review.
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