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NEXT ISSUE:
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Postmodernity, Spirituality, and the Spirit

HENRIK R. PIETERSE

When Nietzsche's madman announced dramatically in *The Gay Science* that God had died, many culture watchers took it as the prophetic death knell of the Christian faith. Many of them opined that, in time, the residual interest in "spiritual" or "supernatural" things will likely fade, allowing modern men and women to finally wriggle free from the hegemony of religious authority. Well-known American philosopher Richard Rorty echoes this attitude when he expresses the hope that the "liberal utopia" he envisions will be "enlightened, secular through and through," and one in which "no trace of divinity remained."

But contra Rorty's dream of a secular culture, the last few decades of the twentieth century have witnessed a veritable explosion of interest in the topic of "spirituality"; and there is no sign of it abating in the twenty-first century. One only has to note the immense popularity of TV shows such as *Touched by an Angel* or the huge amount of space large-scale bookstores devote to "spiritual/inspirational" literature (running the gamut from angels and Sufism to New Age and journey spirituality) to realize that the spiritual marketplace is a very busy space indeed.

What is the significance of this new spiritual sensibility for Christian theology and practice? Believers in prevenient grace are careful to recognize that God's Spirit "blows where it chooses" (John 3:8). They also know that finding the sustenance that nourishes faithful discipleship amid this bewildering religious smorgasbord calls for careful thought and clear-eyed discernment. For as Wade Clark Roof has observed, "Much of what passes as spirituality is as thin as chicken soup and as transparent as celestine profits."

Methodists know that responsible theological reflection involves neither wholesale rejection of the prevailing spiritual winds blowing through culture nor unthinking accommodation to them. Contributors
Lyle Dabney, Margaret Jones, Henry Knight, Bryan Stone, and Mary Elizabeth Mullino Moore know this. Yet they all share the assumption that faithful renewal of Christian spirituality, precisely amid the plethora of contemporary options, requires a creative retrieval of the rich biblical and theological resources of the Christian tradition.

Interestingly, a "(re)turn* to Spirit (Dabney) in a world that is both post-modern and post-Christendom involves emphases (the world as the realm of the presence and activity of God; the Spirit's renewal of creation through Christ; and selves as social and embodied) that resonate to concerns with the environment and a search for holism in many current spiritualities. However, as Henry Knight and Bryan Stone argue, a Christian spirituality fit for our time—both communal and individual—will, in fact, assume a countercultural form, sailing against many of the prevailing spiritual winds. For while the spiritual vibrancy in culture is surely to be welcomed, a distinctive Christian voice may serve as a much-needed critical corrective—indeed, a means of grace—to some of the questionable assumptions and expressions of popular spirituality, both inside and outside the churches. For example, the Wesleyan class meeting as the locus for spiritual discernment and formation, as retrieved by Margaret Jones (and also Henry Knight), offers a welcome alternative to the therapeutic style of so many contemporary small groups mushrooming around the country. And Mary Elizabeth Mullino Moore shows how the call to care for God's creation elicits in Methodists a unique stance of "committed, ambiguous hope"—a disposition from which environmentalists of all stripes, religious and secular, can learn.

Nietzsche's madman does have a lesson: Christians dare not rely uncritically on past religious concepts—including concepts of God. Every generation needs to experience afresh the renewing winds of the Spirit and forge a spirituality that is both faithful and inviting—even in a world post-Christendom.

Hendrik R. Pieterse is editor of Quarterly Review.

Endnotes

In recent decades we have witnessed a remarkable turn to the Spirit and to spirituality in Christian theology and popular culture in North America. Gone are the days when the theologian Hendrikus Berkhof could complain that what he could find on these topics even in the Anglo-American literature was largely "of a devotional or semi-theological nature." Since the 1960s we have been inundated with a mounting flood of scholarly articles and monographs on the Holy Spirit and the spiritual life. Indeed, this theme has become prominent across the theological spectrum, with significant evangelical, feminist, ecological, ecumenical, liberation, and liberal theologians, among others, all joining in the debates. This led one Catholic theologian to comment not long ago, "From being the 'forgotten' member of the Trinity, the Spirit is fast becoming its most popular member."

In this article, I address a twofold question: What prompted this recent turn to the Holy Spirit? And what does it mean for the life and witness of those of us in the Wesleyan tradition? I begin by describing the context in which that turn must be understood, namely, the profound cultural and theological shift that has been taking place in our social world for some time—the passing of Christendom, and with it, the passing of modernity. Then I point out how this shift has spurred Christian theology to turn in a new way to pneumatology in its witness to Jesus Christ. Finally, I suggest that for the Wesleyan tradition this rediscovery of the Holy Spirit represents not a turn but a re-turn to its own theological language of origin—a return that holds great promise for the future of Wesleyanism.
A World Post-Christendom

In the past few years much has been made of the fact that we live in a time of change, a moment in which one millennium is passing and another beginning. But the real change we are experiencing in the United States today is much more about culture than chronology. From the earliest settlements of permanent European immigrants in the seventeenth century to the century just passed, the dominant cultural traditions in North America identified themselves in terms of Western Christendom. In the twentieth century, however, that dominance came to an end. Not incidentally, the Enlightenment, the chief intellectual tradition that challenged the hegemony of the traditions of Christendom in the modern period, has itself come to grief at the very moment of its apparent triumph. As a consequence, we live today in a social world that is at once both "postmodern" and "post-Christendom"; and it is in the midst of such a world that we have witnessed a turn to the Spirit.

Christendom was the synthesis between Christianity and culture that was the central project of Western civilization from the late classical to the modern periods. It represented, in the words of Orlando Costas, "a vision of a society organized around Christian principles and values with the church as its manager or mentor." From the fourth century, in which Christianity moved with breathtaking speed from illicit to licit religion and then to official cult of the Roman Empire, to the twentieth century, in which its social role in the Western nation-state changed almost as dramatically, Christianity and Western civilization were inextricably bound up with one another. The classic European example of this, of course, was medieval Catholicism, whose Scholastic theology held together accounts of classical reason and Christian revelation and whose ecclesiastical hierarchy served as the central institution around which its social world was organized. A classic Protestant variant on this was found in North America, first in the form of the Puritan and Presbyterian traditions that came to dominate the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century English colonies and then in the nineteenth-century Evangelical establishment of the young republic. Once again, a theology holding together reason and revelation corresponded to the central role played by the ecclesiastical institutions—now Protestant—in structuring and interpreting its social world.

The Enlightenment and the modern world it engendered, on the other
hand, represent an effort to identify an alternative foundation for Western society. In response to the breaking of the unity of European Christendom in the Reformation and Counter-Reformation of the sixteenth century and to the role played by the conflicting claims of the territorial and national churches in the religious wars of the seventeenth century, the Enlightenment turned from institutionalized religious authority to the authority of reason alone. Thus was born the modern world, in which three fundamental claims were at work. First, the past was depicted as a time of virtually unrelieved ignorance and superstition—an age of darkness in thralldom to oppressive religious authority. Second, in the present, at last the true nature and capacities of universal human reason were being discovered. In possession of a rational soul that afforded human beings an objective vantage point from which to obtain true knowledge, declared René Descartes, the individual as res cogitans (the "thinking thing") is the subject in the act of coming to know the object under investigation, the res extensa (the "thing extended in space and time"). As such, the individual human subject gains mastery over the object of knowledge, and with that mastery comes the ability to turn the object to the service of the human good. Thus follows logically the third claim: If the past was a dark night and the present the dawn of morning's light, then the future is the era in which humanity would warm itself in the bright sun of the Enlightenment's day. The future represents progress, evidenced by humanity's progressive control over the processes of nature through the systematic application of universal reason, resulting in the alleviation of human need and the fulfilling of human desire. "Do we now live in an enlightened age?" asked Immanuel Kant in 1784. "No," he opined, "but we do live in an age of enlightenment," the age in which the process whereby humanity would attain its proper end in history begins. The task, therefore, was "to dare to know"—Sapere audel And such daring promised to produce forms of science and technology that would usher all humanity into modernity's bright light at the end of the dark medieval tunnel.

But at the end of one millennium and the beginning of another, much has changed for both Christendom and enlightened modernity in North America. Today it is clear that Christianity no longer enjoys a privileged status in Western society. While the roots of this development extend deep into the Western tradition, Christianity's disestablishment has come to flower only in the modern era. In the space of a relatively short period of
history, one of the constitutive principles of Western civilization has been abandoned. Thus, what began for us in the United States in the eighteenth century as the formal separation of church and state in the context of a social world defining itself materially as Christian and predominantly Protestant has developed in the twentieth century into a pluralistic social world in which Christianity is legally denied hegemony. The causes are complex but the consequence is simple: Our culture no longer defines itself in terms of the project of Western Christendom.

As Christendom has faltered, so too has the Enlightenment. If the light of modernity burned brightly when it played the role of the "rational" secular critic of a "dogmatic" religious tradition from the eighteenth to the early twentieth centuries, then by the twenty-first century its flame is all but extinguished. Modernity was always a counter tradition within the larger tradition of Western civilization and, as such, always lived off the dynamic of its critical reaction to Christendom. In the twentieth century, as modernity witnessed the rapid disintegration of the social and cultural world of Christendom, the Enlightenment intellectual traditions assumed the social role vacated by Christendom. This shift in social role yielded ambiguous results indeed. As these ambiguities have become more and more evident, modernity's assertion of intellectual and moral superiority to Christendom has become increasingly questionable and its fundamental claims subject to suspicion.

Take modernity's central claim concerning the present, namely, that the modern world represents the discovery of the true nature and capacities of universal human reason. Universal in this context has a twofold meaning: (1) All human beings share in the same universal rationality; thus, to be human is to be rational. (2) Human rationality is properly applicable to all the phenomena of the universe. Both senses of the term have now become problematic. On the one hand, we have discovered in the last century that rationality is a much more complex thing than how we are individually constituted in our souls or "hard wired" in our heads. Reason, as we now understand, is an activity of particular communities of discourse rather than a universal faculty of each individual human being. Language, culture, history, gender, social location, among a host of factors, shape our various forms of rationality. In many ways, humanity is polyrational—perhaps irreducibly so. Thus we live in what many term a postmodern age, where universal claims to knowledge are rejected in favor of particular epis-
D. LYLE DABNEY

temic claims and all forms of totalizing metaphysics and metanarratives are
dismissed as oppressive. On the other hand, the Enlightenment notion that
reason is sufficient for all the fields of human inquiry and endeavor has
become untenable as well. Modern instrumental rationality has enabled us
to split the atom but has proven itself quite powerless to unite humanity. It
has illuminated our homes and streets but has failed to enlighten our lives.
For while modern instrumental rationality has served to elucidate much of
the “how” of the processes of the natural world about us, it has demon­
strated a singular inability to speak of the “what” or the “why” of human
existence in any way that is not ultimately reductionistic and vain. Thus
there have arisen countless calls for alternative modes of knowing and
understanding ourselves and the world in which we live.

This leads to the questioning of the modern claim about the past and
the role of religion in Western society. If the Enlightenment claim to the
discovery of universal reason is taken to be the false universalization of a
quite particular and limited form of human rationality, then its attendant
assertion that all previous eras and cultures are to be dismissed as ignorant
and superstitious must be rejected. Thus, turning from the chauvinistic
ethnocentrism of Western modernity in its relations with other cultures
today, we are forced to draw the consequences concerning the cultures of
yesterday as well. The West’s cultural past is no more unrelieved darkness
than the present is unalloyed light—and the religious authority acknowl­
edged then did not necessarily keep humanity in the dark any more than
the authority of reason championed now necessarily enlightens us. As this
realization has dawned on our cultural consciousness, explicitly post­
modern figures such as Gianni Vattimo and Jacques Derrida have begun to
comment on the current “religious revival” taking place about us—arising
largely outside the bounds of the traditional Western ecclesiastical institu­
tions, they note—and to speak of a “return of the religious” today.

Finally, the Enlightenment claim for the future has also proven itself
hollow. Modernity now has a history, and it is by no means simply one of
“progress.” It is, rather, highly ambiguous, at once both the boon and the
bane of humanity. For the same science that has given us amazing abilities
to understand and manipulate the processes of nature for human good has
produced an industrial civilization that is systematically poisoning the air
we breathe and the water we drink, consuming the resources of nature
faster than they can be replaced, and even raising the possibility that the
world could ultimately be rendered uninhabitable. The technology we have
developed has produced prosperity for many, but has contributed mightily
to the impoverishment of many more in the Third World. In the twentieth
century, science and technology, justified in the name of "enlightened"
ideologies, led to the oppression, murder, rape, and plunder of humanity in
hot and cold wars both regional and worldwide. And while we still live in
the shadow of the weapons of mass destruction, in the twenty-first century
we are witnessing the emergence of a set of new technologies—robotics,
nano and genetic engineering, artificial intelligence—that promise to raise
our powers exponentially both for good and for ill. Thus, while it is
undoubtedly true that rapidly increasing change is one of the hallmarks of
modernity, that such change can simply be identified with progress is not.
And with that comes the realization that faith in history as the story of
humanity's progressive mastery over nature is problematic indeed; our
future could end just as well in tragedy as in triumph.

At the end of one millennium and the beginning of another, therefore,
U.S. Americans live amid the cultural ruins of both the traditions of
Christendom and the counter traditions of the Enlightenment. This has left
both Christianity and society profoundly divided, confused, and anxious. In
the absence of the putative unity of either a general allegiance to the tradi­tions
of Christendom or the Enlightenment's claims of universal reason, we
live in a profoundly "uncommon" world, made up of a host of competing
communities of discourse with no substantive means of adjudicating our
conflicting beliefs and practices. As a result, the ability to appeal success­fully
either to religious authority or to universal reason has diminished, and
the corresponding programs that have called for a return to a better past or
for the achievement of an ideal future have lost their compelling power.
Sophistry has now taken center stage in our public discourse and the vehe­mence
of our rhetoric has steadily increased, with today's furious beating of
the air recalling yesterday's pounding of the pulpit. And as the optimism of
modernity has faded, our social world has become suffused with a kind of
creeping despair that can be measured by the rise of endless consumption
and the expansion of an entertainment industry that is called upon to
provide perpetual diversion so that we may avoid considering how the full­ness
of our bellies cannot answer the emptiness of our lives. In this context,
much of Christianity is floundering as well.
Turning to the Spirit

But a new wind is now blowing through the ruins in the "cool of the evening" of Christendom. While we cannot yet say with certainty "where it comes from or where it is going," we can "hear the sound of it" and recognize the effect it is working among us. For we have observed a remarkable turn to the Spirit during the past several decades of theological discussion. This new interest in pneumatology began almost a hundred years ago among the poor and the marginalized in North American society with the rise of Pentecostalism, a branch on Wesleyanism's family tree. In less than a century that movement has grown from virtually nothing to numbers approaching 500 million worldwide and now ranks second in number only to Roman Catholicism (which claims approximately 950 million adherents).

Yet, while many see in Pentecostalism the precursor of a new form of Christianity for the twenty-first century, the fact is that the movement's unprecedented rate of growth has not resulted in any significant theological development, for they have never brought their implicit theological concerns to explicit expression in a clear and compelling manner. Theological advance occurred only after 1950 as that pneumatological concern penetrated the theologizing of the older churches who were only then beginning to awaken to the passing of the social and cultural world they had long presupposed and learned to flourish within.

Thus the turn to the Spirit in Christian theology today. For a growing number of theologians are discovering in pneumatology the promise of a language about God and world that would enable Christianity to give witness to its faith in Jesus Christ in a manner faithful to both God's Word and God's world in an age that is postmodern and post-Christian. The end of Christendom means neither the end of Christianity nor the end of Christian theology. There was a Christianity before, during, and outside of Christendom; and now there is a Christianity after that social synthesis as well. Thus, to speak of Christendom and its passing is neither to idealize the past nor to demonize the present; it is, rather, to take the first step toward properly identifying the context in which we must now live and witness as Christians. The turn to the Spirit is a turn to the question that now confronts us: What does it mean to be Christian in a world post-Christendom?

There are at least three recurrent themes that characterize this turn to the Spirit. The first is a new turn to the world as the realm of the presence...
and activity of God—and the concern of all those who worship God in Jesus Christ. The tendency of the theologies that dominated Christian discourse in the era of Western Christendom was to stress divine transcendence—the distance between God and the world—and to limit the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit to the life of the Trinity in eternity; the institutional church in its mediation of grace, and the depths of the individual human soul. But as the role played by the institutional church in Western society slowly began to diminish, many Christian theologians became aware of just how narrowing the traditional conceptions of God and world were. As these theologians began to attend anew to Scripture's witness to the Holy Spirit regarding God's presence and activity in the world, they began speaking in a much broader manner of God's relationship to all creation.

Among the first to make this turn to the Spirit were feminist and ecological theologians. Elizabeth Johnson, for instance, reminds us,

> Of all the activities that theology attributes to the Spirit, the most significant is this: the Spirit is the creative origin of all life. In the words of the Nicene Creed, the Spirit is *vivificantem*, vivifier or life-giver. This designation refers to creation not just at the beginning of time but continuously: the Spirit is the unceasing, dynamic flow of divine power that sustains the universe, bringing forth life.⁷

As life-giving Spirit, the Spirit of God is present and active in all creation, not just in and through the offices of the institutional church. God is not the world, and the world is not God. But as the Creator who is constantly the source of life, God is never without the world; and as a creation constantly dependent upon a new gift of life, the world can never be without God.

In turning to the world, created and sustained in God's life-giving Spirit, these theologians are turning to the whole of God's creation as the realm of God's activity and concern—and ours as well. This signals the first step toward a new, more biblical and more appropriate, understanding of the role of Christianity in the postmodern social world. Two models of redemption have dominated the theological tradition of Western Christendom and defined the role played by the church. The Medieval and Reformation model envisioned salvation as the ascent of the soul to God. The modern model linked salvation with the Enlightenment claim for the future as the era of progress and identified history's fulfillment with Jesus' proclamation of the coming of the kingdom of God. Salvation, in this case, is the goal of
history, the ultimate triumph of humanity over nature; and the role of the church is the ethical instruction of a culture toward that end. But in a world post-Christendom, both of these models have become problematic—and so has the way they narrow the sphere of God's presence and activity. Neither is Christianity any longer the institution to which our social world turns to facilitate the ascent of the soul nor is it looked to as the privileged source of ethical guidance leading to historical progress. Thus, the turn to the Spirit is a turn away from the claim that the gospel of Jesus Christ is about either escaping from or triumphing over the world. For we have come to realize that Christianity neither points away from the world nor provides ethical formation for those wanting to conquer the world. Rather, Christianity is a community that serves God in the world in the Spirit of life—a community of spiritual discipleship to God's Christ in God's world for God's redemption of all creation.

The second theme that has characterized the turn to the Spirit is a new turn to the confession of Jesus as Christ, as the one who is the Son of God anointed by God's life-giving Spirit for the renewal of creation. The New Testament witness to Jesus of Nazareth is unambiguous: he is the Messiah (Matt. 1:1-17). Indeed, all four Gospels begin their depictions of the public ministry of Jesus with an account of his baptism in the Jordan, accompanied by the descent of the Holy Spirit upon him (Mark 1:9-11). All four portray his subsequent ministry as marked by the work of the Spirit in and through all his words and deeds. But from early in its history, much of Christian theology has found it difficult to speak adequately of the relationship between Jesus and the Spirit, largely because it has had difficulty in speaking of Jesus' humanity. In the Patristic debates about Jesus' divinity, theologians arguing for a Spirit Christology that could speak of the Son's ministry under the Spirit's guidance came to be seen as a threat to the arguments emphasizing and explicating Christ's divine nature. As heir of that tradition, most of Western theology has displayed a tendency to avoid or explain away the biblical witness to Jesus as the Christ, anointed by the Holy Spirit for his work in word and deed.

But the past fifty years has witnessed a dramatic change in this regard. While affirming the full divinity of the Son and the doctrine of the Trinity, a host of Protestant and Catholic theologians have turned to the development of a full-blooded pneumatological Christology, taking up once again the cry of earliest Christianity that Jesus is the Christ. They have done so in an
effort to give a more adequate account of the full humanity of the Son in his person and work. This turn was evident as early as 1948 in the theology of Karl Barth when, in the development of his anthropology, he depicts Jesus Christ as the "whole human being" and makes the Spirit fundamental for understanding the Son's (and, therefore, our) humanity. In contrast to the tendency in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Protestant Liberalism to closely connect the Holy Spirit with the human spirit as the place of human self-transcendence, Barth and those who came after him saw pneumatology as the key to articulating the mode, means, and end of divine immanence in the full humanity of the incarnate Son of God. And there is no articulating of Jesus' humanity or of the salvation that he works apart from the New Testament witness to the Holy Spirit. As Ralph Del Colle observes:

What is new and distinctive in Spirit-Christology is that... it proposes that the relationship between Jesus and God and the role of Christ in redemption cannot be fully understood unless there is an explicitly pneumatological dimension. In other words, the relationship between Jesus and the Spirit is as important to conveying the truth of the christological mystery with its soteriological consequences as that of Jesus and the Word.

The third theme that has characterized the turn to the Spirit is a turn to the whole of embodied life. Many theologians are now turning to the Spirit to speak of the redemption of the whole of our humanity, for they recognize that our whole, embodied, social selves, not just some part of us, are the "object" of God's redemptive intent; and that, furthermore, God's redemption of our lives occurs in and through the Holy Spirit. Here I must be very brief. In the biblical witness, human beings are depicted as "animated dust," that is, as an integral part of the material creation that has been granted not simply existence but vivification (see Gen. 2:7). Humanity is related essentially to both the world and God. The material body is thus the locus but not the sum of human identity. Rather, the identity of an individual is determined by the totality of the social experiences, encounters, and relationships that make up the story of a given bodily existence. There is no "essential" self apart from concrete existence—a core "thing" that "has" experiences, relationships, and activities. Rather, human being, in the very act of breathing, is a contingent event of the gift of life given and maintained by God in the midst of the fabric of creation.
Many people are thus turning to the Spirit to find a language of salvation that addresses the whole of human life. They discover that God has acted in Jesus Christ and through the Spirit not to save our disembodied souls or the memory of our contribution to human progress but rather to save our "lives"—all that constitutes our socially embodied identity. The turn to the Spirit, therefore, emphasizes different metaphors of redemption than those that have dominated the Western tradition. In contrast to the forensic metaphors of medieval and Reformation theologies and the image of Jesus as ethical educator in modern theologies, those who turn to the Spirit are taking up metaphors that speak of God's redemption of the whole of human life: the language of resurrection and new creation.

This language is rooted in the Gospel narratives of Jesus and the Spirit. It is in the midst of human stories that the story of Jesus, God’s Son and Christ, unfolds as an account of faithful obedience and life in the Spirit through death on the cross and new creation in the resurrection. The Gospels depict the resurrected Jesus as God’s act of saving creation precisely as the mediator of the Spirit, the agent of God’s new creation. Just as life was given at the beginning through God’s condescending to breathe life into the dust, so in Jesus Christ God condescends to breathe new life into creation’s death: “Receive the Holy Spirit” (John 21:20-23). The promise of the gospel, therefore, is new creation in the Spirit—the pledge that in receiving God’s Spirit through the Son we receive now a foretaste of redemption (“Peace be with you” [John 20:19]). Moreover, through Christ and in the Spirit, we will be raised from the dead as Christ was raised. In raising our mortal bodies, God will redeem not just our bodies (the locus of our existence) but also the entirety of our embodied life: all our relationships, experiences, and encounters—everything that makes up our identities. That is the promise and the hope of the resurrection: the new creation of creation.

It is here also that we find a language to speak of discipleship to Christ today as we live in hope and anticipation of the new creation in the midst of the questions and suffering of the old. Like Abraham, we walk the length and breadth of this land, building altars to the God who is its Creator and Redeemer, seeking to make known in word and deed the God who is the source of life in creation and the resource of life in new creation through Jesus Christ and in the Spirit. Ours is the modest and humble task of seeking to follow the One who has unexpectedly included us in the Spirit’s
reconciling mission. For Christ our Savior has come for the "re-creation" of all creation through the mediation of the Spirit. All that we have torn apart as the "spiritual" versus the "material" is part and parcel of God's salvation—God's new creation of creation through Jesus Christ and in the Holy Spirit.

Returning to Ourselves

The turn to the Spirit in recent theology represents for those of us in the Wesleyan tradition a return to our theological language of origin; as such, it holds great promise for us. As I have argued elsewhere, the Wesleyan tradition began with John and Charles Wesley's own turn to the Spirit in the social world of eighteenth-century English Christendom. Yet this turn, while always latent in the tradition and erupting in unexpected ways, has not been maintained by our tradition. When Methodists immigrated to the New World, they entered a society long dominated by Puritan and Reformed traditions that attempted to establish and maintain a form of Protestant Christendom. At the same time, this society was undergoing rapid change under the impact of the Enlightenment. The nineteenth century witnessed the Wesleyans lose track of their own theological trajectory as they became defined by the categories of the Protestant Scholastic theology that informed the struggles of the heirs of Puritanism and Reform to reestablish their social hegemony. In this struggle, Methodism was an ecclesiastical juggernaut. By the end of the nineteenth century, it was "America's church," with a congregation in virtually every county. But theologically, Methodism was shipwrecked, for it traded its own theological birthright for the thin gruel of nineteenth-century Protestant Scholasticism and then twentieth-century Protestant Liberalism. Thus were the heirs of Wesley enmeshed in the modern theological travails of the Reformation traditions, whose own internal contradictions were even then publicly playing out in a process that would ultimately result in the social and ideological polarization of "liberal" and "conservative" camps in the twentieth century.

Yet the previous generation of Wesley scholars has begun to produce new resources—above all, a critical edition of Wesley's Works—that are bringing to light the pneumatological orientation of Wesley and the early Wesleyan movement. The recovery of Wesley's theological trajectory that began in the last half of the twentieth century promises to address divisions, confusion, and fear by a communal act of remembrance and recovery and a social act of repentance and reembodiment. We cannot today simply repeat
Wesley, for the world in which we witness to Christ is very different from Wesley’s. But we can and must do what Wesley did: turn anew to God’s world and God’s Christ by turning to the Spirit. The promise of a new turn to a theology of Spirit for the Wesleyan tradition is not only that we could at last come to ourselves but also that we could come to an other: that world of others both within and without the church. For in a world post-Christendom, a turn to the Spirit is a new turn to the proclamation in word and deed of God’s redemption in Christ of all God’s world.

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Endnotes

The Closet and the Class:
Some Historical Perspectives on Methodist
Spiritual Discernment

MARGARET JONES

Anyone involved in mission today is aware of the privatized spirituality that presents a major obstacle to the communication of the gospel. "It's true for me" stands squarely in the pathway of any attempt to speak of truth. "It's right for me" impedes any attempt to discover ethical principles. Does Methodism have any distinctive resources for discerning the work of the Spirit and making truth claims today? This article is written from a British Methodist perspective by one who is involved in historical-theological reflection, active ministry, and ministerial formation. In this article, I seek illumination from the history of Methodism, not so much from John Wesley himself but from the method of spiritual and moral discernment reflected and reported in the lives of believers in his lifetime and immediately after—a method that balances inner experience and group discernment. I then examine some of the changes to which the method was subject in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and conclude by asking whether history can indeed indicate a characteristically Methodist pathway into the twenty-first century. The fact that the article is set firmly within my British Methodist perspective, leaving readers to make their own contrasts and comparisons, may be seen as part of its methodology. The sharing of narrative and testimony and the attempt to discern a common structure within differing circumstances may prove to be the essence of what we are looking for as we seek to find ways of discerning the Spirit's working in today's church. First, however, let me outline my "British Methodist perspective." The average British Methodist in the pew (and even in the pulpit) does not automatically turn to history in search of inspiration or identity; and when history is invoked it may have little to do with John Wesley. Henry Rack has made a major historical contribution but reappropriation of John Wesley as a theologian and spiritual practitioner for our own day is heavily dependent on Wesleyan scholarship in the United States over the
past thirty years. British Methodism is strongly marked by nineteenth-century developments: the schisms within Methodism, the publication of standard works of Methodist theology, the distinctive Nonconformist "chapel" culture and ethos in which Methodism shared, and the response to urban growth by way of the City Missions. Twentieth-century British Methodist theology has on the whole responded to contemporary European developments (in biblical studies, for example) rather than to the writings of the Wesleys. Any sense of continuity with John Wesley tends to be expressed in the "heritage" mode (or mood) of nostalgia, which characterizes so much of contemporary Britain's relationship with its past. When Wesley's theology and spirituality are explored, there can be a sense of recognition, but even this can be elusive. Peter Jarvis, Methodist minister, sociologist, and professor of education, was lecturing recently at Wesley's Chapel in London on "Methodism in an Age of Learning." He concluded that the basic emphases of Methodism have left us the best equipped of all churches to fit into the "learning society" that is the world of today, because "John Wesley created a learning organisation—but we've lost it."

This sense of something lost—a past that might have valuable lessons to teach were it not just out of reach—applies not only to John Wesley but also to much that the eighteenth century created, including the small group method of spiritual discernment on which we focus. The loss and rediscovery of the class meeting wears a different face on different sides of the Atlantic. British Methodism has always retained a commitment to small group membership. There was concern about the role of the class meeting as early as the 1820s, and in 1889 the Wesleyan Conference broke the link between attendance at class and membership of the society (church). Some class meetings remained as effective faith sharing groups. Many more became "pastoral groups," maintaining a general oversight of members' welfare. Thus the group ethos remained strong, but not particularly theological. Writing on "Methodism and Fellowship," Clive Marsh (secretary of the British Faith and Order Committee) defends "the assumption that 'fellowship' is... worth holding on to" while highlighting its decline into superficial friendliness and the lack of the dimension of confession, repentance, and forgiveness in most church fellowship. Brian Beck (former principal of Wesley House, Cambridge; former secretary of Conference; and former president of Conference) includes among his list of distinctive Methodist emphases or characteristics, "We expect the local church to be a
THE CLOSET AND THE CLASS

close-knit and supportive fellowship in which faith is shared. Present-day Methodism may know about fellowship, but it does not necessarily link it to the sharing of faith. Consequently, when faith sharing groups sprang up in other churches under the impact of the Charismatic revival of the 1970s, Methodists were ready to welcome such developments but, paradoxically, may now maintain that small groups are characteristic no more of Methodism than of other branches of the church.

Such an awareness of the ecumenical context is an important part of contemporary British Methodist self-understanding: nearly 700 out of 6,381 churches are in some form of ecumenical partnership; all students training for ministry are in some kind of ecumenical situation; talks toward unity are ongoing with the Church of England. These factors create a new sense of urgency in reflections on Methodist identity. In this ecumenical setting, at a time of rapid change and against a background of falling membership, British Methodism treads a fine line between convergence and failure of nerve. It can be difficult to speak of Methodist emphases without sounding anti-ecumenical. If Methodist distinctiveness needs to be disinterred from history, perhaps the time has come to abandon it. If, on the other hand, there are still distinctively Methodist features of the collective psyche, a time of ecumenical convergence is above all the time to be aware of them in order to preserve what is valuable. Reflecting on Methodist distinctiveness at such a time is a challenge indeed.

From this perspective it can seem that any traces of a small group method of spiritual discernment in Methodism are only a residuary trickle (or, to change the metaphor, a kind of background radiation from the Big Bang) fed now from other streams. Examination of Methodist history and theology suggests otherwise: it may be that current trends of thought make the original method more accessible now than at any time during the past two hundred years. I hope that the analysis of the problem below will lead readers to interrogate their own situation in light of the broadly outlined developments with which this essay concludes.

We are justified in speaking of a “method” of spiritual discernment in eighteenth-century Methodism—a method not formally prescribed but clearly defined in practice, which offered group “checks and balances” to the individual encounter with God, the experience of justification by faith, which is at the heart of evangelical religion. Significant work has been done on both sides of the Atlantic on the relationship between individual and
group experience in early Methodist spirituality. The correspondence of the Wesley brothers and other Methodist leaders, autobiographies, and above all "Lives" provide abundant source material. My own work has focused on a more limited range: the "Lives" (running into many hundreds) published in the denominational magazine from its foundation in 1778 until about 1850. The basic building block of this spirituality was the individual's testimony to the work of God in his or her life—the "witness of the Spirit." This one-to-one relationship with God may be described as "the closet" (a word that remains current as an archaism in British English in the sense of a small dressing room, not the American sense of what the British would call a cupboard). Thus Thomas Coke writes of his wife Penelope in 1812, "By waiting on God in her closet she renewed her strength." The private place could, of course, be physically anywhere. Mrs. Skirmer "was going to milk the cows one night, when it pleased the Lord to work this great change in her heart." It was most typically when alone that individuals received assurance of the forgiveness of their sins. Methodist spiritual discernment is a child of the Enlightenment thought world, in which the subject's self-awareness provides the ultimate guarantee of reported experience.

However, inner experience was set within a structure of shared testimony. Persons "groaning after salvation" would have heard others describe the experience that they themselves were seeking and in their turn offered their own testimony. Henry Rack notes that not all early converts immediately recognized, or were able to name, what was happening to them, until they encountered the normative narrative proffered by others. As the class system became established, patterns of experience were laid down and claimed, being shared not only in class but also in the widely read denominational magazines. William Saunderson's story is typical: he "received mercy" in private prayer but "with joy... embraced the first opportunity that offered of telling the members of the Class... what great things the Lord had done for his soul." The class's response would be one of joy but also of a constant watchfulness over reported experience and conduct. "I know, I feel, my Saviour mine" (Charles Wesley) testified to an awareness not simply of an emotional experience but of a presence capable of changing the springs of volition and action. Subsequent testimony would be expected to provide evidence that the convert was "pressing on to perfection" or "maintaining a consistent course"—evidence of a unified spirituality in which inner conviction led to changed character and lifestyle.
enabling the Spirit's work to be judged by its fruits.

Such a method of spiritual discernment works well while there is a good fit between the normative narrative and individual instances of it. But by the early nineteenth century, accounts of discourse within the class meeting are pointing to a situation where the “fit” is becoming less satisfactory. People find difficulty in telling their story; they pass the time in “social conversation” and “meet (in class) once or twice in a quarter for the sake of being continued in the Society.” This process has been well investigated and described in terms of the transition from society to church. As church members became more likely to be children of existing members rather than new converts, the nature of the experience reported in class changed. Class leaders continuing to work with the old norms were unable to shape a new narrative for the nurture of “once-born” believers. Was this simply a case of an institution clinging to its glorious past, trying to live by foundational narratives that were no longer relevant? Why was the class unable to meet the needs of a new generation of believers?

These changes can also be analyzed in terms of a changed discourse of spiritual discernment. This would affect not only British Methodism in its specific social and historical setting but also other locations sharing the same basic worldview. Study of more formal Methodist theological writing suggests that fundamental changes did indeed take place in people's thought world, in the relationship between inner experience and its reporting and validation, destroying the unified life story of early Methodism and the place of the class meeting in it. We consider some of these changes in the linked areas of the verification of spiritual experience, the anthropology of spiritual motivation, and the theology of the Holy Spirit.

**Verification of Spiritual Experience**

The late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries saw a revival of the Platonic anthropology in which “feelings” (note the plural) took on a life of their own and became sometimes ungovernable forces which, in pursuit of ethical discernment, needed to be restrained by the superior force of reason. Romanticism understood that key word feeling to mean “emotion” rather than its earlier meaning of “heart knowledge.” Emphasis on discerning the Spirit's work by its fruits was submerged in a reliance on individual testimony to an emotional state. Those who pioneered and charted theology's assimilation of these changes, such as Schleiermacher and Coleridge, might
insist on setting individual experience in its communal and historical context; but evangelical religion, with its fundamental commitment to the closet, was especially vulnerable to this kind of privatization.

One response to this development was to privilege feeling and individual testimony, acknowledging its inaccessibility to verification except by direct revelation. This process can be seen in the classic nineteenth-century work on the Holy Spirit, The Tongue of Fire, by William Arthur. This work, representing the impact of midcentury holiness movements on an established denomination, gives an account of the Spirit's activity that is moderate in many respects, not least in its treatment of the relationship between the individual and the corporate. Arthur is a good Methodist when he writes, "Religion is a life to be lived in fellowship; a conflict to be sustained, not singly, but in bands." Closer reading, however, makes it apparent that the function of the fellowship has changed; it is to be prized as a means of encouragement rather than discernment. Religion is "a redemption, of which we are to impart the joy; a hope, an anticipation, of which the comforts are to be gladly told to those who 'fear the Lord.'" It is feelings ("the joy," "the comforts") rather than the narrative of "what God has done" that are to be shared in the "social fellowship of the saints." The mystery of God's communication with human beings is shrouded in incommunicable privacy: "To the old question, 'How can these things be?' the one sufficient answer is, They are spiritually discerned." Such an account of spiritual discernment throws all the weight of verification onto the believer's own testimony and makes it difficult to talk of sanctification. The fruit of the Spirit is "the scriptural marks of the regenerated," but "practical sanctification of life" is seen as the product purely of the mysterious inner transaction, not as a process involving other "practical believers."

Arthur believes that the Spirit will provide his own verification to those who seek humbly and prayerfully: the ensuing revival will guarantee the genuineness of the revelation. Those in nineteenth-century Methodism in search of a less individualistic pathway (especially in its Wesleyan branch) were not without resource. Pressures on Wesleyan Methodism in the second half of the nineteenth century led some to emphasize the corporate nature of the means of grace. In the standard work of late nineteenth-century Methodist theology, the Compendium of Christian Theology, W. B. Pope wrote at a time when the Wesleyan Methodist Church in Great Britain felt itself to be particularly under attack from the Anglo-Catholic wing of the
Church of England. Controversialists led by E. B. Pusey attacked Methodism for claiming to be a church in the absence of apostolic orders and famously dismissed the Methodist doctrine of assurance as "justification by feeling." Pope is thus summarizing thirty years of controversy as he emphasizes the church's role in spiritual discernment ("the class" in our terminology), seeking to demonstrate Methodism's claim to be a true church rather than an association of enthusiasts. The "secret instruction" that provides assurance is given through the Spirit "not only by secret and personal illumination, but through the channels of teaching provided in his Church, which is the pillar and ground of truth." But Pope's basic Methodist commitment to evangelical religion undermines this attempt at reliance on the church and its teaching. Although "the Word of God and prayer" (as ministered by the church) "are generally the vehicle, instrument and channel for his impartation of assurance," what prayer brings about is "the application to the soul of the promises of the Word of God ... the seal set by the soul itself, in its experience, to the verity and value of the external pledges." Pope thus remains caught in the net of Romantic inferiority, thrown back on unverifiable inner experience. He goes as far as he can, claiming that Methodism has cleared the doctrine of assurance of misapprehensions in presenting it as "the direct witness of the Spirit, not independent of the objective ... grounds of assurance, but given through them ..." And yet Methodist integrity forces him to add "... or indeed without them, directly to the soul." Methodism was thus unable to give an independent authority to the church as the guarantor of spiritual discernment. The conversion experience remained essential to Methodist spirituality, making it impossible for even the most clerical of Wesleyans to lay all the emphasis on the church's efficacy as the transmitter of grace; yet the reciprocal relationship between individual experience and its corporate validation, played out in the class meeting, had been lost. Reception remained crucial and yet unverifiable.

**Anthropology of Spiritual Motivation**

In this climate of thought the narrative of the conversion experience took on a new kind of authority. Converts in all branches of evangelical religion were expected to give testimony to experience described in the form approved by the community. But that narrative lost its power as a tool of spiritual formation because of changes in theological anthropology, which remained dominant throughout the nineteenth century and much of the twentieth. Despite
his emphasis on the inner nature of the witness of the Spirit, Arthur remained a classical Wesleyan by retaining the essential connection between feeling and action. Dividing human nature into intellect, emotions, and moral powers, he identified the "heart" with the moral nature—"the self and substance of a man"—and saw "the crowning power of the messenger of God" as "power over the moral man; power which, whether it approaches the soul through the avenues of the intellect or of the affection, does reach into the soul." In the course of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth, this understanding changed. The "heart," being seen as the seat of the "emotions," lost its connection with the will and the powers of discernment. Arthur's difficulty in providing verification of sanctification has already been noted, but those branches of Methodism that regarded their identity as linked with the experiential fervor of the early days had an even greater difficulty. Thus it was a Primitive Methodist theological tutor, A. L. Humphries, writing on "The Work of the Holy Spirit" in 1929, who could assert that "though Methodism discourages extravagances of emotion, and has rightly attached supreme importance to the ethical, it has always held religion to be emotional in both its appeal and expression." On the question of sanctification, Humphries attempted to refute the charge by R. W. Dale, the great Congregationalist leader and preacher of the late nineteenth century, that the Evangelical Revival did not lay enough emphasis on ethical living and moral training. He referred to John Wesley's teaching and the discipline of the early Methodist societies, but with regard to his own day could say only that the Holy Spirit makes us holy by renewing our hearts. Dale's charge stands proved by Humphries's inability to connect the renewed heart with any verifiable narrative of renewed conduct.

Theology of the Holy Spirit

These changes in the verification of experience and the understanding of theological anthropology radically altered Methodist spirituality. Linked changes in pneumatology compounded the problem. These changes can be seen at work in both the "Lives" and in theological writing from the 1820s onward. Considering the importance of "the witness of the Spirit" in early Methodist spirituality, it is surprising to find how infrequently the Holy Spirit is named in the "Lives" in the Magazine before about 1820. Faith and affection were centered on Jesus. The question asked of the dying believer was "Is Jesus precious?" More developed theological statements named the
inner witness of the Spirit as enabling the believer to answer this question in the affirmative, but the language of the “Lives” is generally Christocentric. Typically “One night as [he] was returning from a dance, the Lord struck him with powerful convictions.”27 “With joy he embraced the first opportunity . . . of telling the members of the Class in which he met, what great things the Lord had done for his soul.”28 The “Lord” who does these things is thus the one who has performed the work of salvation; he is the object of the believer’s love and obedience and the one who creates these convictions and affections in the soul.

We can see a different kind of discourse from the 1820s onward. The presence of Christ in the class meeting itself is more often affirmed. Eventually the class becomes the place where the Spirit may be experienced. She received “a rich baptism of the Spirit” on the occasion of her last meeting in class.29 This development has important implications for the power relationships of spirituality. If the outpouring of the Spirit is expected to be received in class rather than in the closet, the experience depends to some extent on the dynamics of the group and the position of the leader. Class members who reacted unfavorably in any way, who felt themselves excluded or were unable to identify with the normative narrative, were thus deprived of the space in which to have their own encounter with the Spirit.

At the same time, a new kind of theological language was developing. A pamphlet by the Rev. James H. Stewart, an evangelical clergyman and Chaplain to the Most Noble the Marquis of Bute, introduced with approval by the Magazine’s editor in 1821, asserts that “the Holy Spirit has not received a due share of our consideration.”30 Wrestling with the fact that the many missionary, Bible, and evangelical societies have not succeeded in evangelizing the whole world, Stewart concludes that “to all this human machinery must be added the mighty working of that Spirit without whom nothing . . . is wise, or strong, or holy.”31 The word machinery alerts us to the presence of the Romantic relationship between matter and spirit: a more radical dualism, separating grace from the means; divine agency conceived of as a special force, not integrated with the “normal” structures of the church. The “normal” course of a believer’s experience now seemed to present insufficient evidence of the Spirit’s presence and power. Something more supernatural must be sought, verified by signs and wonders such as the speaking in tongues, which characterized Edward Irving’s Catholic Apostolic Church of the 1830s—the first modern instance of institutional-
ized glossolalia. While the time was undoubtedly ripe for a reassertion of the Spirit's place in the economy of salvation, this overmechanical conception of the Spirit led, paradoxically, to a breakdown of the classical Wesleyan conversion narrative. Instead of the institutions of Christianity being seen as the necessary locus of the means of grace, it became possible for William Arthur, for example, to speak of Christianity without the Holy Spirit: "a natural agency for social improvement." We are in a world far removed from the Lord's work with Mrs. Skirmer as she went to milk the cows.

The changes delineated here may be summed up as the loss of Methodism's ability to tell and receive individual narratives of spiritual change in a collective setting. This loss is seen as resulting from a radically changed discourse about spiritual experience. In this new discourse, the experience itself can be verified only by the subject's own testimony; the experience is seen to consist of "feelings," rather than dispositions or states of will; and the church's structures are seen as external to the experience, rather than helping to shape and constitute it. This situation is presented as part of the history of ideas—but where are we now? Does this state of loss characterize the present day, or has something changed?

If TV dramas and recently published biographies are any guide, our age finds the eighteenth century more congenial than the nineteenth. Methodism's desire to explore the roots of its identity is set in the context of a postindustrial society joining hands with a preindustrial one. In the age of the factory not only work but also religion, entertainment, and education were all focused on a centralized institution embodied in a building. The individual's identity, closely bound up with that of the institution, oscillated between the poles of institutional control and a fiercely defended privacy. Both before and after this period, work, entertainment, education, and religion—experienced in smaller units focused on the home—impinged, and impinge, differently on the individual. Domestic industrial production, giving way to the factory as the driving force of Western economies, was superseded in its turn by e-commerce. Similarly, the dame school was replaced by the Mechanics' Institute and in its turn by Web-based distance learning; and the traveling freak show by the cinema and in its turn by multichannel television. And in the sphere of religious institutions the class meeting and the home-based preaching meeting gave way to the grand Gothic chapel (with organ) and in its turn to...?

If such an interpretation should seem unfashionably Marxist, contem-
porary theories of identity provide a less materialist view of the eighteenth century's renewed appeal. Perhaps this is the point at which the term postmodernism can no longer be avoided. In the first place, the turn to narrative theories of identity formation has led to a reinstatement of the reciprocal relationship between the individual and the group. Feminist psychology, virtue ethics, and language theory have all contributed to an understanding of human persons as "secure in their particularity and constituted by their relations." In all these models the individual's identity is discerned in the context of relationships, by a process of testing the inwardly perceived narrative of life events against the normative narratives of the group.

Second, moves away from crudely behaviorist theories of learning have reestablished the link between emotion and will. Despite the emphases on testing and the acquisition of skills that sometimes seem to dominate current educational practice, the equally current vogue for "lifelong learning" tends to a more holistic view of personal growth and change—a view that sits well with classical Wesleyan praxis. To return to Peter Jarvis: it is possible to model learning as the construction and transformation of experience through the encounter with and the acquisition of knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, emotions, beliefs, and sensory input. By a process of memorization, evaluation, reflection, and practice these acquisitions become the stuff of changed experience, and so the cycle continues. Such a model of the transformation of experience through learning has the potential to move spiritual discernment away from the stalemate in which only the unmediated Spirit can change the heart but only the inaccessible heart can testify to the work of the Spirit.

Third, moves to reestablish trinitarian theology as the basis for understanding human personhood have combined with the relational view of human identity to bring the Holy Spirit back into dialogue with the structures of the church. The British Council of Churches' study document, The Forgotten Trinity, draws on many sources in proposing that "the being of God is a relational unity." Such a notion of God can be used to "throw light on created personhood," yielding a particularity based in reciprocity and relationship. It is noteworthy that this understanding of the Trinity owes much to the Cappadocian Fathers, who deeply influenced John Wesley.

It is, then, possible that the eighteenth and twenty-first centuries may address each other. The inner narrative of a human life given voice only by the learned language of the constitutive community; lived experience as
both content and process of human transformation; human personhood constituted in relationship in the image of the trinitarian God—all these resources of present-day theology and philosophy combine to give new life to the old Wesleyan method of spiritual discernment. May the church, by the grace of God, on whichever side of the Atlantic, be enabled to hear what the Spirit is saying.

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Endnotes

6. Ibid.
8. The Magazine, founded by John Wesley as the Arminian Magazine, was known as the Methodist Magazine from 1798 and the Wesleyan Methodist Magazine from 1822.
10. Ibid., 26 (1803): 17.
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18. Ibid., 194.
19. Ibid., 188, 196.
22. Ibid., 3: 121 (italics mine).
23. Ibid., 128 (italics mine).
25. Ibid., 103.
28. Ibid., 25 (1812): 323.
31. Ibid., 445.
The Spirit and the Mission of God

HENRY H. KNIGHT III

The Holy Spirit is the presence and power of God in the world. To speak of the Spirit as presence is to say that God is not far away but near, and to speak of power is to claim that the Spirit is actively bringing about the purposes of God. The work of the Spirit involves change, transformation, and new creation.

But it is important to describe not only the work but also the person of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the third person of the triune God whose character and mission is most fully revealed in Jesus Christ. Thus, when the Holy Spirit is present, there is found the same love that was in Jesus Christ, the love that is essentially who God is. For this love to characterize creation as it does the trinitarian life of God is central to the mission of God in the world. Today, between Pentecost and Parousia, the Holy Spirit is the agent of that mission.

The Mission of God

The recovery of the mission of God as a central biblical theme revolutionized missiology in the last half of the twentieth century. Prior to its recovery, mission was understood from an ecclesiocentric perspective as the mission of the church. Mission was seen as one of many tasks that the church undertook, having as its purpose the saving of souls and the planting of new churches. In practice, this meant the churches in the Christianized West would send missionaries to bring the gospel to the rest of the world.

The missionary effort of the nineteenth century is a complex phenomenon, involving faithfulness, insensitivity, cultural imperialism, genuine evangelism, complicity in violence, and defense of people against violence. While we admire the sacrifice and commitment of many of these missionaries, we have become painfully aware of the cultural blindness of the missionary enterprise as a whole. All too often it was simply assumed that a proper Christian church would look like a Western church, and non-Western cultures would eventually "progress" to become like Western culture. This flawed perspective owed more to the ideal of progress associ-
ated with post-Enlightenment modernity than to biblical Christianity; but it nonetheless seriously compromised Christian mission.

Lamin Sanneh has argued that by translating the Scriptures into the language of the people the missionaries in the end enabled truly indigenous churches to emerge. We can be grateful for that and for the cross-cultural sensitivity that pervades contemporary missiology. But the problem was much deeper than a failure to take seriously different cultural contexts. The fundamental problem was an understanding of mission rooted more in Western Christendom than in biblical revelation and apostolic Christianity.

Mission today is seen as the salvific activity of the triune God in the world. As David Bosch has said,

Mission has its origin in the heart of God. God is a fountain of sending love. This is the deepest source of mission. It is impossible to penetrate deeper still; there is mission because God loves people.

There is a remarkable ecumenical consensus on this point. Whether or not the term mission of God (or missio Dei) is used, it has been affirmed in every major missional document in recent decades, including those of the World Council of Churches (representing mainline Protestantism and Eastern Orthodoxy), the Roman Catholic Church since Vatican II, and the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization (representing evangelical Protestantism). Of course, there is disagreement between and within all of these groups over the exact understanding of the missio Dei, including such issues as the relative priority of evangelism to social liberation and the exact role of the church. Nonetheless, all agree that the goal is to faithfully understand the mission of God and to faithfully participate in that mission.

A missional God is a sending God. We see this initially in the story of Israel, where God calls and sends Abraham, Moses, and the prophets, among others. The creating of a people who would reflect God's own character and be a blessing to the nations was an integral part of God's mission.

Then came the sending of the Son, through whose incarnation, life, death, and resurrection comes salvation for all. In Christ God is triumphant over sin, suffering, injustice, and death; through Christ God offers forgiveness and a new life that not even death can end.

Christ reveals in fullness the two core elements that have characterized God's mission from the beginning, namely, God's reign and God's love.
Jesus' own proclamation was that the kingdom or reign of God was at hand; hearers should therefore repent and believe this good news. With his resurrection Jesus was shown to have embodied the reign of God in his life and crucifixion. As the risen and living Lord, he would come again to establish God's reign in fullness over all creation.

Inextricably woven with God's reign is the love of God revealed in Christ. The Son was sent because God loved the world (John 3:16), and his life and death is the concrete embodiment of divine love in the world. For God's reign to be extended over all creation means for God's love to triumph over all that is contrary to love. Hence the coming Kingdom will be marked by the absence of sin and death, as well as of injustice, oppression, hunger, and other forms of suffering.

The reign of God and the Lordship of Christ are misconstrued apart from the love revealed in Jesus' life and death. Jesus was born in a stable, touched lepers, honored children, conversed with women, healed Gentiles, washed his disciples' feet, forgave his murderers, and died on a cross to save a sinful humanity. To say this Jesus is Lord and embodies the reign of God is to overturn oppression, bring justice and healing, open the way for all to receive forgiveness and new life, and deny the finality of death itself.

The sending of the Son was in the form of an incarnation, in which God became a particular human being. This enabled Christ to embody the reign of God and through the cross bring salvation to humanity. The sending of the Spirit was by way of Pentecost, which makes the new life Christ brings universally available and extends the reign of God throughout the world.

Through the Holy Spirit the kingdom of God, which is yet to come in fullness, is already breaking into our history. In terms of God's mission, pneumatology is the necessary integrative link between christology and eschatology. The Spirit witnesses to Christ, who died, rose, and will come again, and makes the love of God a reality in human hearts and lives. The Spirit also brings the reign of God to bear on the full range of human affliction, as well as the affliction of the earth itself.

The church is sent into mission as it is empowered and led by the Spirit. The church exists to participate in the mission of God—it does not determine the mission but is shaped by the mission. As Jürgen Moltmann has said, "It is not the church that has a mission of salvation to fulfill to the world; it is the mission of the Son and Spirit through the Father that includes the church. Creating a church as it goes on its way."
This is a radical revisioning of ecclesiology, though one quite congruent with the New Testament. Darrell Guder puts this well when he says,

Mission is not just a program of the church. It defines the church as God’s sent people. Either we are defined by mission, or we reduce the scope of the gospel and the mandate of the church. Thus our challenge today is to move from church with mission to missional church.6

One consequence of seeing the church as missional is that we can no longer think of certain cultures as “Christian” and others as not. Of course, as John Wesley noted again and again, there has never really been a Christian culture (if by that one means a culture and people governed by the love of God), only Christendom. But today, with secularism and an abundance of new spiritualities, the illusion is less and less credible. Now each continent both sends and receives missionaries, and each local church in North America and Europe finds itself in a mission field.

We shall look at the role of the Spirit and the Spirit-led church in reaching out to this new missional context. But first I examine how the Holy Spirit shapes the church itself for mission in light of the temptation to accommodate to this post-Christendom culture.

The Church in the Context of Mission

Central to the mission of God is the creation of churches by the Spirit in which God’s love is experienced as a living reality and in which this love decisively shapes their ministry. Such churches are communities and persons who are formed by encountering the reality (or presence) of God together with the identity of God as revealed in Jesus Christ. This occurs as persons enter into a relationship with God through participation in practices called “means of grace,” through which the Holy Spirit enables them to grow in love for God and neighbor.7

While this can be seen as an essentially Wesleyan construal of the Christian life, the point is ecumenical: because of their role as means of the Holy Spirit’s transforming work, these practices have become absolutely essential to the creation of missional churches. They enable lives and communities to continue to be shaped by God’s presence and identity in a culture that calls both into question.

It is modernity, which has dominated the Western world for the past
three centuries, that has made the presence of God problematic. Sometimes this has been explicit, as in Marxism, positivism, and other materialist philosophies. But more subtle, yet equally effective, has been the *de facto* cultural deism which acknowledges God’s existence but not God’s involvement in our lives and world. Even our beliefs themselves seem to make no real difference in how we live. Sociologist Robert Wuthnow, in a survey of the American middle class, reported this finding:

Asked if their religious beliefs had influenced their choice of a career, most... —Christians and non-Christians alike—said no. Asked if they thought of their work as a calling, most said no. Asked if they understood the concept of stewardship, most said no. Asked how religion did influence their work lives or thoughts about money, most said the two were completely separate.  

That is, for the most part, religious beliefs seem to have little or no effect on our dispositions, values, and lives.

John Wesley faced a similar problem, which he termed *formalism*. He observed that the average churchgoer reduced being a Christian to church attendance, a set of beliefs, and contributing money to the church. There was neither the experience nor the expectation of a transformation of the heart and life through the Holy Spirit. Instead of being the gift of a wonderful new life, Christianity for most people had become a set of obligations designed to get one to heaven or to conform to cultural expectations.

In Wesley’s analysis, the primary reason church members were so closed to the work of the Spirit was not the incursions of secular ideas but the living of a lifestyle that placed God at the margins. This he called “dissipation,” “the art of forgetting God.” “We are,” he said, “encompassed on all sides with persons and things that tend to draw us from our centre.” We become “habitually inattentive to the presence and will” of God through being caught up in the activities of life, whether vocational, recreational, or even ecclesial. This could just as easily be a description of those things that dominate the lives of so many of us today. When we live this way we become practical atheists: we believe there is a God, but it makes no difference in how we actually live our lives.

Wesley’s cure for this dissipation was a vibrant faith, in which we come not only to know about God but to know God, to trust in Jesus Christ for our salvation, and to be shaped by Christ’s love. Such faith is a work of the
Holy Spirit. If we find it absent among members of the Christian community, then there is a need to evangelize within the church so that, in Walter Brueggemann's words, "forgetters can become rememberers."12

But in addition to this, Wesley saw a need to enable persons to retain and grow in their faith. His system of small groups and spiritual discipline, or means of grace, was designed for that purpose. It enabled the early Methodists to intentionally come into God's presence through prayer, Scripture, Eucharist, and the like; to regularly serve their neighbor; and to practice the presence of God in all their everyday activities. This did not mean that they constantly had "feelings"—their hearts were not "strangely warmed" on a daily basis. But they did remain open to the work of the Spirit through participation in these means of grace. A church in which hearts and lives are being changed by God is a precondition for effective witness and the church's participation in the mission of God.

It would be inaccurate to conclude from what we have said so far that nominal religion is the chief characteristic of American culture, although it may be a major reality in many churches. The secularism and materialism of our day have left many empty. Ours is an age not of rampant atheism but of growing spiritual hunger.

Interest in things spiritual and in finding God is on the rise. What has changed is that more and more people do not expect to find God in our churches. There is an aversion to organized religion, and along with it an aversion to the nominal Christianity that makes outward demands to support the institutional church but otherwise leaves lives unchanged. There is at the same time a strong rejection of the kind of passionate religious commitment that insists that one's faith is the only true faith. The emerging spirituality seems to be more privatistic, though not isolationist. It is more experiential: people long to feel closer to God or to have a sense of God's presence in their lives. There is also a real need for God.

This emerging postmodern culture affirms God's experiential presence but is intentionally vague as to who this God really is. We can see this in the dynamic and growing contemporary small group movement. In his study of these groups, most of which are religious, Robert Wuthnow found a number of notable strengths but also identified two serious concerns. First, most groups had an unspoken rule that whatever a participant says is to be accepted without question. The result is to uncritically affirm any and every spiritual experience. Second, they tend to see God as intimate and
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caring, available to meet our felt needs or to assist us in our struggles with
careers, families, and times of trouble. However, God is not expected to
judge or challenge us—the prophetic element is absent from group experi­
ence. This is, in Wuthnow's words, "a domesticated view of the sacred."[23]

The old-fashioned name for a god we construct is idolatry. Wesley
encountered it in the form of "enthusiasm," a kind of illusory religious
experience which led to false conclusions about the nature and purposes
of God. What is needed to counteract this illusory God is the remem­
brance of who God is and what God has done in the story of Israel and in
Jesus Christ. Again, it is through participation in means of grace such as
Scripture, prayer, and Eucharist that persons encounter the identity of this
God and are consequently transformed by the Holy Spirit.

If a missional church is to resist the lure of accommodation to modern
or postmodern culture—and that resistance depends on an openness to the
work of the Spirit through participation in the means of grace—then
Christian initiation must be dramatically different from current practice.
This is true not only for the increasing numbers of adult converts who will
come with little or no prior church experience but also for children
baptized and nurtured in the church. Quite simply, our expectations for
membership in a missional church must be elevated in comparison to what
is found in most churches today.

This concern has led William Abraham to construe evangelism "as
primary initiation into the Kingdom of God,"[24] and to propose a set of six
practices into which Christians need to be initiated. These include conver­
sion, baptism, the practice of love for God and neighbor, a basic knowledge
of Christian teaching, practicing the means of grace, and discovering spiri­
tual gifts. It has led Daniel Benedict and other liturgical scholars to call for
a recovery of the historic catechumenate and the process of initiation
found in the early centuries of the church. It has prompted David Lowes
Watson to call for a recovery of Wesley's pattern of covenant discipleship
and accountability via small groups.[25] Finally, it has led so-called "high
expectation" churches like Ginghamsburg United Methodist Church and
Saddleback Valley Church to make membership contingent on a specific
set of commitments and to devise a program of successive courses that
enable members to grow in their understanding and discipleship.[26]

The role of the Holy Spirit in these practices is not always made explicit;
but I contend that it is in and through participation in these forms of
Christian initiation that the Holy Spirit begins to shape a missional church. Without something like them, we will not be open to the power and direction of the Spirit, which both our context and the mission of God requires.

**Sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ**

Central to the mission of God is the renewal of the entire creation in love. The focus of that mission is on humanity, whose fall into sin has turned their stewardship of creation toward destructive ends and whose broken relationships with God and one another have led to massive injustice and suffering. What God seeks is nothing less than to restore human beings to their original condition, so that they once again reflect in their hearts and lives the love of their Creator.

I will develop this point from a Wesleyan perspective. Because God is love, humans, who were created in God’s image, are intended to have love govern their character and lives in the same way it does the character and life of God. This is, of course, not the condition we find ourselves in today. Like Luther and Calvin, Wesley believes sin to have such a hold on our lives that we cannot set ourselves free. We are totally corrupted by sin—it is like a terminal disease that has affected every aspect of our lives. Only God can set us free, and this God graciously accomplishes through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit.

While Wesley has a stark view of our condition, he has strong confidence in the power of the Spirit. Like Eastern Orthodoxy, Wesley understands salvation fundamentally to be the curing of our sin and the restoring us to the divine image. This is what Wesley means by terms like *Christian perfection, entire sanctification,* and *perfect love.* He believed that the Holy Spirit would so restore us in God’s image in this life that love would fully govern our hearts and lives.

Wesley insisted that the mission of God was to spread this scriptural holiness across the earth. Consequently, he opposed any form of evangelism that did not have sanctification or holiness as its goal. Salvation was not a forgiveness that enabled one to go to heaven while leaving one’s life unchanged. Salvation was the gift of a new life through the power of the Spirit that made persons loving in this life, as well as fitted them for the life to come.

God offers this new life to everyone and through the Spirit enables all humanity to hear and respond to the good news of Jesus Christ. This preve-
nient grace restores in every person a small measure of freedom, allowing
him or her to respond to the divine initiative. Apart from the gospel such
response may simply be to obey one's conscience; yet even this begins an
embryonic relationship with God through grace.

This pro-evangelistic work of the Spirit has two consequences for our
thinking about persons who never truly hear the gospel of Jesus Christ.
First, those who respond to the grace they have are, however unknowingly,
responding to Christ. Wesley is clear that anyone who continues to
respond to God's grace will in the end receive salvation. What they do not
have is knowledge that their sins are forgiven and that they can have a new
life in Christ; but tragic as that may be, it does not mean they totally lack a
relationship with God.

Second, if God is universally at work, then this would include working
among adherents of other religions. While prevenient grace does not imply
that there are alternative ways of salvation apart from Jesus Christ, it opens
the possibility that some participants in other religions may be seeking to
respond to God's grace through their own religious practices. While this in
no way diminishes the calling of Christians to share the good news of Jesus
Christ with everyone, it should make us humbly aware that we do not and
cannot know all that the Holy Spirit is doing among people of other faiths
and that we have something to learn from them.17

That said, prevenient grace marks the beginning of the work of the
Spirit in humanity and not its conclusion. The fullness of the Spirit's work
results in a new life in Christ and ultimately in the restoring of the image of
God. Because this cannot take place without encountering the good news
of Christ, the practice of evangelism by the church is essential to the
mission of God.

Why does the Holy Spirit not simply evangelize every person directly?
The answer, I believe, is in the nature of love itself. Love is necessarily rela­
tional. If it were God's mission only to enable us to restore our relationship
with God, then a direct act of the Spirit to each individual would be logical.
But the divine mission is to restore our broken relationship not only with
God but also with one another. That can happen only as we are brought
into community with one another, sharing the love of Christ. It is intrinsic
to the fulfillment of the mission of God that we reach out to others to
share the love we have received through Christ.

This means that our primary motive for sharing our faith with another
person is love and that such sharing normally would occur within a pre-existing relationship or, if with a stranger, would be one part of a process of building a relationship. It rules out as contrary to God’s mission any motive rooted in maintaining the institutional church or demonstrating one’s spirituality. It also recognizes that any attempt to manipulate a conversion, even if well intentioned, undercuts the integrity of the response and shows lack of respect for our neighbor. As Eddie Fox and George Morris have said, evangelism “is not something we do to people but something we do with the gospel.” After sharing our faith we wait and watch “in respectful humility” while “working with expectant hope.”

The evident presence of love for God and for one another within our churches gives credence to our faith sharing, just as its absence calls it into question. Given the state of the church in his day, Wesley argued on many occasions that the renewal of the church in love was a precondition for effective witness. He believed that with the “grand stumbling block thus happily removed out of the way, namely, the lives of Christians” that non-Christians would be strongly attracted to the promise of the gospel.

Lesslie Newbigin agrees. He contends that where persons see in Christian communities “the presence of a new reality, the presence of the Spirit of God in power,” there they begin to seek explanations for the resulting way of life. When “the Church is faithful to its Lord, there the powers of the kingdom are present and people begin to ask the question to which the gospel is the answer.” What does a church look like whose life and outreach both reflect the mission of God in the power of the Spirit?

**Signs of the Kingdom**

If the mission of God is to establish the divine reign so that the love of God will renew the entirety of creation, then the concrete effects of that mission should be found in all aspects of life—personal, relational, communal, societal, and environmental. Wherever God’s will is done on earth as it is in heaven, suffering is alleviated, sickness is healed, persons are reconciled, and justice prevails.

To participate in this mission a church must both embody the reign and love of God in its own life and reach out in love to others. As we have seen, the Holy Spirit enables the church to embody God’s love through the gift of new life. As persons and the community grow in this life, they also grow in their ability to see how their own life together, as well as that of the society,
is not obedient to God's reign and does not reflect God's love. This christological and eschatological vision is nurtured through participation in the means of grace, attuning the church to the call and direction of the Spirit.

The Spirit not only leads the church into mission but also empowers the church for mission. It does this through giving every member gifts for ministry, enabling the whole people of God to engage together in the mission of God. As everyone receives at least one gift, no one is superfluous to the mission; each person is necessary if the community is to fulfill its missional calling.

While the mission belongs to God, the church is the central instrument used by God in furthering that mission. It would be presumptuous to attempt an exhaustive account of the mission of God, but we can certainly sketch some elements of this mission which, in addition to and integrated with evangelism, the church might embody in its life and outreach.

First, there is the entire range of human suffering and need. A church that is involved in God's mission is concerned to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the imprisoned, comfort the grieving, and befriend the lonely. Such a church will be known as a place of compassion and assistance for both member and nonmember alike.

Second, a missional church will be a place of healing. Persons suffer from physical and emotional illness, broken relationships, and alienation from God. To meet these needs a church can draw upon diverse resources such as prayer, pastoral counseling, and visitation. Increasingly, churches are incorporating services of healing into their life together to call upon the healing power of the Spirit. This theologically balanced recovery of biblical signs and wonders is itself a powerful witness to God's reign and love.

Third, a church that participates in the mission of God will be a prophetic voice against injustice and oppression and a friend of the most vulnerable members of society. This too is a recovery of a pervasive biblical theme: God's special care for the widow, the orphan, and the poor. Today we are aware that not only persons but also social structures can oppress; and we are called to faithfully proclaim the implications of God's reign for society as a whole.

Fourth, the mission of God involves the church in ministries of peace and reconciliation. The conflicts that continue between racial and ethnic groups, social classes, and nations reflect neither God's reign nor God's love. The issues are often difficult, and the solutions may involve both
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matters of justice and forgiveness. But the goal is more than an absence of conflict—it is a unity in love that respects and honors one another. A missional church can begin by seeking reconciliation and unity within and between local churches themselves as well as in the church universal. How can a church proclaim a unity in Christ that it does not itself even seek, much less manifest?

Finally, a missional church will show care for the earth. God's creation has suffered much from human sin and ignorance; but the church can begin to model and advocate a love for this world that God created. With the recovery of the image of God through salvation comes a recovery as well of faithful stewardship of the earth.

The church can participate in all these aspects of God's mission, but only the Holy Spirit can establish the reign of God and bring new life. Empowered and led by the Spirit, the church can share its faith, pray for the sick, speak out against injustice, and seek racial reconciliation. But only the Holy Spirit can convert and sanctify persons, heal in response to prayer, and provide the vision and hope necessary to truly overcome injustice and effect reconciliation.

Without the Holy Spirit God's mission would cease and the church would not exist. Through the Spirit the church can embody in its own life the love of God revealed in Christ and share in God's mission of renewing the earth in that love.

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Endnotes

3. For an in-depth account, see James A. Scherer, Gospel, Church and Kingdom: Comparative Studies in World Mission Theology (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1987); see also Bosch, Transforming Mission, 368-93.
4. I develop this in more depth in A Future for Truth: Evangelical Theology in a Postmodern World (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), 124-25, 139-56.
11. Ibid. (12), 120.
17. For an affirmation of this from an evangelical perspective see Gerald R. McDermott, Can Evangelicals Learn from World Religions? (Downers Grove, Il: InterVarsity, 2000).
19. Ibid., 55.
I teach a course in the theology of John Wesley, populated largely by United Methodist graduate students preparing for pastoral ministry. Wesley's doctrine of "Christian perfection" figures centrally in that class, as it did for Wesley himself. Wesley was optimistic about the possibilities of grace in transforming human life, both personally and socially. He taught that Christians should not reconcile themselves to the sin in their lives but should press on toward a holy, or sanctified, life. That life is governed by singleness of intention, where sin is increasingly expelled as love increasingly fills the heart. It is a life where, through the power of the Holy Spirit, our souls are renewed after the image of God. Christian perfection, as the aim of the holy life, is "the humble, gentle, patient love of God, and our neighbor, ruling our tempers, words, and actions." As we discuss Wesley's doctrine together in class, however, I regularly discover that the great majority of these students have heard very little about this subject, especially if they have grown up in the United States. If what my students tell me is correct, Christian perfection is rarely preached from Methodist pulpits, and it is the focus of any sustained religious education in Methodist circles only infrequently. Not only does the doctrine no longer figure prominently in United Methodism but also the very notion of living a holy life with victory over sin is rarely held out as a serious possibility for the Christian. Rather, the Christian walk has been reduced to something more like, in the words of John Howard Yoder, "the general label for anyone's good intentions." I take it that this loss is an enormously important development for Methodism given, for example, Wesley's statement made late in his life that the doctrine of Christian perfection is "the grand depositum which God has lodged with the people called Methodists; and for the sake of propagating this chiefly He appeared to have raised us up."

Those of us who were raised in churches that descended from Methodism but were the product of the nineteenth-century Holiness Movement have had a very different experience from that of my United Methodist students. In the Church of the Nazarene, for example, we were consistently
exposed to the doctrine of holiness and urged to take seriously the ideal of the "holy life." Unfortunately, the holy life was construed rather legalistically. Then, too, Christian perfection was typically reduced to a single experience subsequent to conversion—a "second work of grace" called "entire sanctification." In fact, I can still remember the standard pattern for those of us who attended Nazarene summer youth camp. We would get saved on Monday or Tuesday night, and by Thursday night we had sufficiently matured in Christ so as to be ready to heed the evangelist's invitation to receive a "second blessing" and be entirely sanctified! This is clearly a distortion of Wesley's teaching on the subject, where movement from new birth toward Christian perfection is hardly brief or effortless, but it is a lifelong and daily process of availing ourselves of means whereby the Spirit tempers our thoughts, actions, and inclinations toward love. Simply because the doctrine of Christian perfection is more prominent in some branches of Wesleyanism than in others is no guarantee that we are better off in those places where it is more prominent. It could even be that the United Methodist neglect of the doctrine of Christian perfection is a reaction to and rejection of the legalistic and emotional excesses of Holiness and Pentecostal branches of Wesleyanism.

I suspect, however, that the relative neglect of Wesley's doctrine of Christian perfection in United Methodism cannot be adequately explained as a mere reaction to the excesses or distortions of other religious groups. There are, in fact, significant dynamics in contemporary Western culture that militate against the plausibility of the doctrine and that make it difficult to believe in, hope for, or move toward the holy life. There are at least four of these dynamics: (1) A pervasive individualism and focus on self-fulfillment; (2) a drive toward cultural conformity; (3) a rejection of discipline and the careful cultivation of intentional life habits with, instead, a distinct preference for the quick and painless; and (4) a general pessimism about the possibility of human transformation. Clearly, some of these dynamics may always be part of the human condition. But on all four points the Wesleyan understanding of Christian holiness runs counter to prevailing sentiments. In order to move toward a contemporary rediscovery of what it means to live the holy life—a life lived in the Spirit and oriented toward our perfection in love—we will need to find plausible ways to respond to each of these dynamics.
THE SPIRIT AND THE HOLY LIFE

Community

If, as Wesley says, Christian perfection is a total renewal of ourselves after the image of God, then that image must be understood as essentially social. The image of God in which we are created is not a "thing" or "substance" but fundamentally a capacity for relationship. Our original condition, however, is that we come into the world with that image already tarnished and distorted. We are instead turned in on ourselves and seek our own will and pleasure. Our inclinations are toward self rather than toward God and others. The holy life is nonetheless possible, taught Wesley; and this possibility is premised upon the conviction that our capacity for relationship may be healed in this life. Rather than being forever focused on ourselves, we can become increasingly turned outward toward God and neighbor so that love rather than selfishness is our most natural response. In fact, it is only to the extent that this relational healing begins to occur that we can even begin to love ourselves properly.

Holiness, therefore, is by its very definition a relational matter. When we are talking about the holy life, we do not mean a private or merely inward transformation of individual, self-contained egos that may at best have social consequences. We are instead talking about a transformation of the self to community and in community. Community is both the context out of which holiness arises and that toward which holiness aims. As Wesley put it, "Holiness is a phrase no more consistent with the gospel than holy adulterers. The gospel of Christ knows of no religion, but social holiness but social holiness."

One of the problems associated with the Wesleyan tradition, born as it was into a Western post-Enlightenment culture and even more so as it passed into the highly individualistic culture of the United States, is that the very nature of Christian holiness (as well as the person and work of the Spirit in making us holy) tended to be interpreted in ways that were overly individualistic and anthropocentric. Even Wesley himself, despite his strong advocacy of social holiness and his frequent envisioning of sanctification as ultimately even cosmic in scope, often presupposes an anthropology that is rather atomistic. The net result is that holiness is construed in terms that are excessively private, individualistic, and inward-focused. The Holiness Movement of the nineteenth century often exacerbated this tendency and, insofar as it also emphasized the role of the Holy Spirit in
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sancification, frequently pressed the doctrine of the Spirit into molds that were highly privatistic and, to a large degree, oriented around personal emotions.

So, for example, the Book of Acts (a book that is about the work of the Holy Spirit if any book in the New Testament is) was often studied by Holiness Christians who looked for models of how individuals are sanctified and filled with the Spirit. Frequently overlooked, however, were the radically social dimensions of the Spirit’s activity in creating holy communities. Indeed, whenever the Holy Spirit shows up in the Book of Acts, social categories are being obliterated as new communities of faith are being formed from across ethnic, cultural, and gender lines. It is not that these new communities simply provided a space where holy persons could congregate. These communities were, by their very existence, a testament to the meaning of holiness. The very fact that reconciliation was happening in community was a live embodiment of Christian holiness in both its personal and corporate dimensions. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, we have no greater task than to imagine with renewed creativity and courage new communities of the Spirit that model what is meant by the holy life.

Deviance

Despite growing signs that human beings in our society continue to have a deep hunger for authentic community, it is undoubtedly true that this communal path to the holy life flies in the face of the rank individualism, consumerism, and fixation on self-fulfillment that is so characteristic of late modern Western culture. Contemporary models of social holiness will very likely, therefore, be countercultural and deviant. It will always be easier, of course, simply to “play church.” Those institutions that capitulate to a consumeristic mentality, marketing the gospel in terms that are palatable to the contemporary quest for self-fulfillment, will most likely continue to grow and thrive. Methodists should be careful, however, not to go chasing after these models out of an anxiety over recent numerical decline. It may well be true that it is the very nature of the church to grow, but so it is with the nature of cancer. We are not, therefore, to pursue church growth, but rather “peace with everyone, and the holiness without which no one will see the Lord” (Heb. 12:14). The size of a congregation is no indication whatsoever of its capacity both for engendering and for embodying authentic Christian community and holiness.
So, for example, while the fact that 3,000 persons were added to the church on the day of Pentecost is remarkable, that fact in and of itself bears no relationship to the holiness of the church. What is remarkable in the Pentecost story is the holy deviance of these early Christian communities—the way, for example, lines of gender and ethnicity were crossed so that "every nation under heaven" was able to hear the gospel in its own language (Acts 2:5-11) and so that the Spirit was poured out on both men and women alike (2:18). What is noteworthy is that those who believed "had all things in common" and began to "sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need" (2:44-45). What is unprecedented is that not one of them considered his or her belongings to be private property, but rather all things were common property and "there was not a needy person among them" (4:32-34). Whether we are talking about twelve people or twelve hundred people, it is this kind of embodied witness to the subversive and deviant values of God's reign that makes the church holy.

Douglas Strong, in his analysis of nineteenth-century holiness preachers, notes that one of their most common character traits was "eccentricity." In fact, one such preacher, Cary Allen, was referred to by his nineteenth-century biographer as having had a "sanctified eccentricity." The word eccentric literally means "outside the center," or "off-center." Someone is eccentric if he or she deviates from the norms of accepted conduct. Eccentric was an appropriate designation for these preachers, says Strong, for they "gloried in their peculiarity and scoffed at pretension and ascribed status." In fact, accusations of "eccentricity" were even worn like a badge of honor by these preachers who understood themselves to be challenging religious and social structures. By accepting this label, they were "deliberately contrasting themselves with the polished mores and religious sophistication of genteel culture—values that represented the privileges only available to a few. They challenged the hierarchical power structures of their day, and especially the institutionalism of the mainline churches."

Strong notes that these countercultural holiness preachers would often appear disheveled at their meetings, not because they were sloppy dressers or poor groomers but because, in the words of nineteenth-century minister David Marks, they wanted to be "independent from the changeable fashions of this age of superfluities." Their eccentricity was a refusal to be
Christians who were tied to the center of society; it was a refusal to accommodate the gospel to the demands of a consumer culture.

Sloppy dressing and poor grooming are probably inadequate as marks of the holy life, and yet something like a contemporary version of "sanctified eccentricity," with its rejection of cultural conformity, may be precisely what is needed if social holiness is to be a serious option for Christians today. Thus, even though the culture teaches us that it is good to seek wealth and possessions, the Spirit invites us to downward mobility, solidarity with the poor, and simplicity. Though our culture suggests to us that we are individual, unrelated, and self-contained egos, the Spirit invites us to undergo a conversion to community. Though the world claims that our value is determined by our exchange value in terms of our contribution to the service of Mammon, the Spirit reminds us that our value rests simply in the fact that we have all been created in the image of God and that we may accept one another as equals because all barriers to such acceptance have been demolished in the cross.

In every respect, the path of the holy life stands as an alternate and deviant witness to the presence of the Spirit. It is the Spirit that opens our eyes to new possibilities and, indeed, to a new creation. Thus, when the world suggests that power is measured in terms of our ability to wield influence over others, the Spirit points us to the kind of power found in the manger and in the cross. When our culture preaches an unrestricted freedom that is little more than the freedom to consume and accumulate, the Spirit offers a brand of liberty that is a freedom for the other. When our society teaches us that we should get what we deserve and that justice is defined by giving to others exactly what they deserve, the Spirit offers us the possibility of a creative, redemptive, and restorative justice—one that treats others precisely the way we have been treated by God: in ways that we don't deserve.

If there is to be a recovery of the holy life among Methodists, not only will holiness need to be embodied in eccentric ways that refuse to play according to the rules of our culture, but there must also be a conscious inclusion of those whose very existence is eccentric—people who live at the margins, those who are poor and dispossessed. Our acceptance by God in Christ compels us to move beyond ourselves toward others, to welcome the stranger, to open our hearts to the one who is different. To be eccentric is not to exist for oneself but to find one's center outside of oneself. And
that is why the holy life is fundamentally eccentric. Our center is in Christ, but Christ is in the world—in the poor, the hungry, the naked, the prisoner, the sick, and the stranger (Matt. 25:31-46). It is there that we encounter Christ. The church that allows not only its sense of mission and experience of worship but also its institutional life and internal organization to be shaped by the needs of those outside itself will be revolutionized from outside itself. And here is the great irony of the matter. The life of Christian holiness is life in a community of deviants who have determined no longer to play by the world’s rules. But it is precisely in no longer playing by the world’s rules that we discover a new openness to the world.

The most radical thing that the church can do today, therefore, is simply to be the church, to live together according to an alternate reality. The church that embodies a holy deviance does not need to look for evangelistic programs or strategies. The church is the evangelistic strategy. The community of faith itself constitutes an invitation to the holy life by its very existence "as an unprecedented social phenomenon" in which reconciliation occurs, the poor are valued, violence is rejected, and patterns of domination and subordination are refused.10 As Yoder says, "The challenge to the church today is not to dilute or filter or translate its witness in such a way that the world can handle it easier or without believing, but so to purify and clarify and exemplify it that the world can recognize it as good news." 11

I believe that the twenty-first century will witness a new holiness movement. It will not be merely a reaction to previous distortions or a recovery of the eccentricity of nineteenth-century holiness preachers. The twenty-first century will witness a new social holiness movement that is more comfortable on the edges of culture than at the center. It is possible for Methodists to write that history.

Discipline

The holy life, especially because it is communal, is not easy. It does not descend from above ready-made—and this despite the fact that holiness is ultimately the result of the Spirit working in our lives. "If a man preach like an angel," wrote Wesley, "he will do little good without exact discipline." The problem is this: we want to be Christlike; we want hearts filled with love; but we are attached to "things," and without freedom from this bondage, we cannot really begin to serve God or neighbor as we should. The fact that it is this attachment to the world that is so critical a problem
should not, of course, lead us to devalue the world or the realm of the physical and material. On the contrary, a life of holiness liberates us for the world and all of its beauty and goodness. In fact, the path of discipline through which Wesley believed God’s grace operates is “worldly” through and through. Take, for example, the discipline of “constant communion.”

It is precisely in and through the grace mediated through the simple, physical elements of bread and wine that we are strengthened to resist the temptation to hoard and accumulate physical possessions. It is in sharing the physical elements of the Eucharist with the wider community of believers that we become increasingly sensitized to the needs around us and so become careful not to consume or stockpile the goods of the world while others lack.

Any recovery of Wesley’s doctrine of Christian perfection in the twenty-first century will have to include some recovery of the disciplines apart from which no such perfection is possible. For Wesley, of course, those disciplines include centrally an attendance upon all the means of grace. While Wesley believed that Christ is the only meritorious cause of grace in our lives, the Spirit applies Christ’s work in our lives through a variety of means. There is no single path here, but, rather, as Wesley says, “there is an irreconcilable variability in the operation of the Holy Spirit upon the souls of people.” Wesley tended to focus much of his energy on those means of grace that were specifically instituted by Christ, such as prayer, searching the Scriptures, the Lord’s Supper, fasting, and Christian fellowship. The priority that he assigned to these means was based upon his belief that their consistent practice nurtured in us an openness and responsiveness to the work of the Spirit. For the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit is one that is cooperant through and through. In and through the means of grace—through remembering, studying, seeing, singing, confessing, listening, giving—we avail ourselves of the Spirit’s sanctifying power. So, for example, in assessing why it is that in so many places where converts to Christianity have been made, there is such little evidence of the fact, Wesley writes:

It was a common saying among the Christians in the primitive church, “The soul and the body make a man; the spirit and discipline make a Christian”—implying that none could be real Christians without the help of Christian discipline. But if this be so, is it any wonder that we find so few Christians, for
where is Christian discipline! In what part of England (to go no farther) is Christian discipline added to Christian doctrine? Now whatever doctrine is preached where there is not discipline, it cannot have its full effect upon the hearers.14

What happens through the disciplined life is that our thoughts and inclinations are really being tempered, purified, or "patterned" after the mind of Christ. At one level, this patterning is clearly conscious as we learn more about Christ and his "way." At another level, however, this patterning is somewhat unconscious as we are habituated to Christlike ways of responding to one another. For this reason, Wesley placed a high priority on the very structures by which we intentionally enter into community (for example, his system of societies, classes, and bands) and felt that here, more than anywhere else, he had found a way of restoring something of the original genius of the Anglican Church.

Who watched over them in love? Who marked their growth in grace? Who advised and exhorted them from time to time? Who prayed with them and for them, as they had need? This, and this alone is Christian fellowship: But, alas! Where is it be found? Look east or west, north or south; name what parish you please: Is this Christian fellowship there? Rather, are not the bulk of parishioners a mere rope of sand? What Christian connexion is there between them? What intercourse in spiritual things? What watching over each other's souls? What bearing of one another's burdens?... We introduce fellowship where it was utterly destroyed. And the fruits of it have been peace, joy, love, and zeal for every good word and work.15

One could easily talk about other disciplines by which the holy life is formed, for example, what Wesley spoke of as "works of mercy." These practices of personally visiting the poor, the sick, and the imprisoned and of tending to their needs through ministries of food, clothing, shelter, health, and education were to be carried out, first, because the Lord commanded it16 and, second, because they are necessary for our own salvation. But such practices were also to be carried out for the "continuance of that faith whereby we 'are' already 'saved by grace.'"17 Wesley defends works of mercy as "real means of grace" whereby "God is pleased, frequently, yea, ordinarily to convey his grace to them that either love or fear him."18 In fact, in
his sermon “On Zeal,” Wesley even places works of mercy in a closer proximity to the soul of love than he does the more traditional “works of piety,” such as reading Scripture, prayer, fasting, and the Lord’s Supper.

One of the real problems in bringing forward the importance of discipline and the means of grace into our time is that the weight of tradition is toward reducing these disciplines to religious observances such as the aforementioned “works of piety.” Notwithstanding the importance of such religious observance in patterning our lives after Christ, it is nonetheless in the ordinary world of buying and selling, working and playing, living and loving that one finds the substance of the discipline required for living the holy life. Perhaps that is why Wesley writes so much on the economic life and the disciplines of love that were required for a sanctified approach to wealth and possessions. As Theodore Jennings puts it, “Holiness cannot consist in religious observances. These can only be means of grace, not the aim or goal of grace. They are helps to holiness, not the marks of it or the content of it. Holiness must consist in a reversal of the worldliness of economics.”

If we are to move toward a contemporary recovery of Wesley’s doctrine of holiness, it will be only insular as we are able to demonstrate the viability of a serious holiness discipline in the arena of our economic lives. The first step in this discipline, for Wesley, was a flat rejection of the misguided notion that we may do whatever we like with our possessions—a notion that, for Wesley, amounted to little more than atheism. Wealth invariably tends to insulate and isolate us from human need and accordingly, extraordinarily dangerous. Its effects upon us are often gradual and barely perceptible, but the only way to break the deadly hold that riches have on us is to develop the discipline of giving all we can. The discipline of a holiness economics does not, of course, denounce hard work or the making of a profit; neither does it discourage making adequate provision for the necessities of one’s life and family. But the purpose of making any money above these basic necessities is for the sole purpose of giving it away; thus, Wesley’s famous threefold economic discipline: “Gain all you can, save all you can, give all you can.” The disciplines of “saving” (which meant not accumulating but rather being frugal) and “gaining” were wholly oriented toward the discipline of giving. Apart from this third discipline, they could even be downright sinful.

The implications of a holiness economic discipline are radical; they form
a break with almost every tenet of conventional wisdom about finances, both in our day and in Wesley's. As Albert Outler once wrote, "On no other single point, save only faith alone and holy living, is Wesley more insistent, consistent—and out of step with the bourgeois spirit of his age." But thanks be to God, we do not have to go at these disciplines alone. Again, it is the very purpose of the Christian community to serve as a visible and deviant model to the world of an alternate reality—and to serve as instruments of strengthening and nurturing one another in that task.

Expectation

On more than one occasion, I have seen a bumper sticker that reads, "Christians aren't perfect, just forgiven." A Methodist should be uncomfortable with the options. That we are forgiven is, of course, good news. But the very core of the Wesleyan message is that "just forgiven" so truncates the full message of the gospel as to distort it. And yet it would not be too much of a stretch, perhaps, to suggest that the theology expressed by this bumper sticker is a fundamental plank in the predominant consensus of most Christians in the West, regardless of denominational attachment. We have made peace with sin. While confident in the sovereignty of grace to forgive us, we are generally pessimistic about the power of grace to transform us. This mentality has so pervaded our theology, in fact, that we come to expect little more than mere forgiveness in our lives. What is more, we want the world to know that it should not really expect much more from us either—the public display of this bumper sticker serves this very purpose. Given the way many of us drive, perhaps that is why we would even place such a sticker on our automobiles!

Wesley, however, believed that Christians should expect much more than mere forgiveness. And he believed that this expectation itself was critically related to the growth and transformation that we might experience. According to Wesley, even though Christian believers know that sin is still at work, they also know the promise of "entire renewal in the image of God," and so expect the fulfillment of that promise. It is this very expectation, in fact, that motivates the disciplined life already mentioned. Of course, the fact that Wesley encouraged his people to "go on to perfection" and urged them to expect to be made "perfect in love" in this life was bound to create fears that this would encourage self-righteousness or cause people to be deluded about reality. Some of the most impassioned attacks
against Wesley were in response to his advocacy of Christian perfection.

And yet Wesley knew that the postures of hope and expectation have an enormous impact on our spiritual growth. He knew that it is impossible to move forward in the holy life without expectation. Indeed, one of the reasons why Christians remain in the "wilderness state" is that they expect little more than darkness and are taught to expect little more. Perhaps the wars, holocausts, and scandals of the twentieth century have wearied us of hoping for too much out of ourselves. Maybe consumerism as a way of life has numbed us to the possibilities of genuinely loving God and neighbor more than cars, houses, and electronic equipment. But holiness is not our own doing. Our expectation for the holy life should be as great as we know God’s love and power to be—in short, unbounded. One thing is certain. Our limitations today are not because of expecting too much but because of hoping for too little. Not by ourselves, but together as a community lived in the Spirit, perhaps even in the twenty-first century, we will be able to believe what Wesley himself believed:

We expect to be "made perfect in love," in that love which "casts out" all painful "fear," and all desire but that of glorifying him we love, and of loving and serving him more and more. We look for such an increase in the experimental knowledge and love of God our Saviour as will enable us always to "walk in the light, as he is in the light." We believe the whole "mind" will be in us "which was also in Christ Jesus"; that we shall love every man so as to be ready "to lay down our life for his sake," so as by this love to be freed from anger and pride, and from every unkind affection. We expect to be "cleansed" from all our idols, "from all filthiness," whether "of flesh or spirit"; to be "saved from all our uncleanliness," inward or outward; to be "purified as he is pure."  

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Endnotes

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7. Ibid., 19.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid., 20.

10. Yoder, For the Nations, 41.

11. Ibid., 24.


15. Works (Jackson), 8: 251-52.

16. "Yet I find time to visit the sick and the poor; and I must do it, if I believe the Bible," "Letter to a Member of the Society, Dec. 10, 1777," in Works (Jackson), 12: 304.


18. Ibid., 385.


God's Spirit and the Renewal of Creation:
Living in Committed, Ambiguous Hope

MARY ELIZABETH MULLINO MOORE

Breathe on us, Holy Spirit!
Breathe the winds of your Spirit
Until we know You with our hearts
And follow your paths beyond the charts,
Until our hope is strong and sure
And our lives, love-filled and pure!

Breathe on us, Holy Spirit!
Breathe the winds of your Spirit
On every animal, plant and tree,
And every river, stream and sea,
Through the mountains, valleys and plains,
And the air and soil and rains.

Breathe on us, Holy Spirit!
Renew your creation!

With this poem, we enter into the mysteries of God's Spirit—the Breath of God that moves through creation, doing mighty deeds and stirring every being in God's creation to do the work to which it is called. The Spirit of God is present, powerful, active, and beyond our grasp. We know the Spirit, as we know breath or wind. It is present when we know it not, and it changes the world when we expect it least. In God's Spirit, we can place our hope; through God's Spirit, we can breathe new life and share life with others; from the Spirit will come the renewal of all God's creation. That is our promise, our hope, and our prayer.

But how does God's Spirit move? How do we discern its movements? How do we respond faithfully to such demanding mystery? How can we,
feeble creatures that we are, respond at all? These questions do not have answers; or, more appropriately, they have many answers. In this article, I explore these questions from a Wesleyan perspective, drawing particularly from the sermons of John Wesley, which have shaped the movement in which the Wesleyan and Methodist churches still stand. I begin with a story that represents a recent incident in The United Methodist Church. I then proceed through an analysis of the committed, ambiguous hope that characterizes Wesleyan traditions, and I conclude with proposals for the future.

This essay takes the form of a drama of hope, but it is the peculiar kind of hope—deeply committed and disturbingly ambiguous—that rises up whenever Christians in the Wesleyan tradition join together to discern and follow the work of God. Indeed, one could tell thousands of other stories that occur in local churches, denominational meetings and other venues; we will begin with just one.

Act 1: Living in Committed, Ambiguous Hope

Scene 1: Year 2000

The drama opens in the heat of church debate. The setting is the 2000 General Conference of The United Methodist Church, held in Cleveland, Ohio. My particular legislative committee assignment was Faith and Order, which had responsibility for acting on petitions regarding the Social Principles of The United Methodist Church. The people assigned to Faith and Order were a passionate group; indeed, the air was electric when we first met to elect officers. That electricity carried over into the first days of discussion, collaboration, debate, and decision making.

As the scene opens on the first working session of the Faith and Order Committee, the committee is hard at work in subcommittees, each with a set of petitions on a particular subject, including economics, ecology, health care, peacemaking, and education. Each petition has originated from an individual or church body; each proposes to change, reinforce, delete, or add something to the Social Principles. The people gathered in these circles care deeply about the renewal of God's creation, and they are somehow convinced that God wants something from them and The United Methodist Church in this work of renewal. They are also convinced that God's Spirit will guide them to what they hope will be the best possible decisions.

As this scene comes into focus, one's eyes are drawn from circle to circle, and one can hear lively debates about which petitions represent the
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most adequate responses for Christian people on various ethical issues. Most groups find one or two petitions that are, in their view, particularly strong and then they work at perfecting these petitions to bring before the legislative committee for action. Let your eyes be drawn to one particular circle where the group is discussing a petition about sustainable agriculture. They have chosen a complex petition to perfect, and they have removed and added some clauses. In their view, they have strengthened the petition with great hope that the new wording will be added to the Social Principles. When their work is complete, the legislative committee will act on the petition, perhaps amending it further, and then send it to the full plenary of General Conference for final action.

As the scene unfolds, people move back into plenary, and the legislative committee is ready to act on one petition at a time. When the petition on rural life is presented, I listen intently. In my view, the subcommittee has indeed strengthened some aspects of the original petition and has weakened other aspects. Knowing that another petition is coming that will, I think, be more adequate, I vote against the subcommittee’s recommendation to approve their revised petition. I am in a very small minority, which means that the other petitions will be voted negatively in a block; the legislative committee has acted on the one that came with high recommendations from the hardworking subcommittee, and the matter is closed.

As I reflected on that quick moment of decision making, I realized that I had made a mistake. In a large body of concerned people, one cannot always have complete agreement on all matters, and certainly not on every phrase of every petition. We were called upon to think quickly and to find ways to agree on the major issues, not holding to the perfection of every word according to our own views but choosing which issues are most important, which pull us to stand with the majority, which pull us to stand with the minority, when wording changes are critical, and when they are less so. From that moment on, I made more realistic judgments in my voting.

Here, in this first scene of Act 1, we have already been introduced to the committed, ambiguous hope of Wesleyan Christians. First, these people in the opening scene would not have been gathered in this electrifying room if they were not committed, first to following God, then to building up the church, and then to the particular views of God’s will that they brought with them into the room. Second, the people were not just committed individually; they were also working in committed community. The subcommittees
were very serious as they carried on their work; they were committed to do what they thought was God's will for the church and, then, to bring the fruits of their work to the legislative committee. Finally, each person who voted in the legislative committee, including me, took that role seriously. Each voted his or her conscience; and some, like me, had to struggle with matters of conscience in deciding between yes and no.

This leads naturally to the issue of ambiguity. In the moment when I voted against a basically good petition, I realized immediately that the world of the Faith and Order Committee was an ambiguous reality. If I were to function effectively, I would have to live with ambiguity. I would have to vote my conscience, indeed, but not expect that every word would be perfected in the exact way that I discerned the will of God. To learn this lesson on an early vote was a blessing that prepared me for the deeper ambiguities yet to come. I was, thus, somewhat prepared for some of the later decisions on more controversial issues—issues that divided our community deeply, issues on which I stood with the minority.

The purpose of this essay is not to discuss the particular issues of General Conference but to discern, within that gathering of committed and ambiguous Christians, the spirit of hope that bound people together and returned them to the table again and again for prayer, debate, and decision making. With that scene in mind, we move into another scene of long ago, a scene of the Wesley brothers and the people called Methodists.

Scene 2: More than Two Hundred Years Ago

The next scene of this drama takes place in eighteenth-century Britain, where John and Charles Wesley are setting the table of fellowship in Oxford. Here, too, people are praying, debating, and making difficult decisions. As we look at this scene, we see only flashing pictures of the early Oxford group who prayed in the early mornings (4:00 and 5:00 A.M.), read the Bible together, fasted on Wednesdays and Fridays, visited the prison, gave to the poor, lived frugally, and held one another accountable for holy living.

In a flash, our eyes turn to another part of the stage where similar practices are taking place on board a ship to Georgia (then one of the British colonies), where the idealistic John and Charles Wesley intend to spread the gospel in a new land. In this land, John Wesley's excesses and self-doubts are well known, but some aspects of his commitment are often overlooked. On the stage, for example, we watch him studying German.
Spanish, and French in order to communicate more fully with the settlers who spoke these languages. Further, we see Wesley visiting the native peoples of Georgia, spending countless hours with them.

In another flash, our eyes turn to John Wesley, many years later, preaching in fields, in marketplaces, and under trees—wherever he found people to listen. He preaches a gospel of love, repentance, and hope for new life in God’s kingdom. In quieter moments, we see him at his desk or writing on horseback, preparing tracts and sermons for people to study, writing copiously in his diary, corresponding with numerous people, and tending the many classes and societies that are sprouting up across Britain among these people called “Methodists.”

One need not deliberate hard on these scenes to discern the idealism of John Wesley. His idealism led him into deep commitments, rigorous living, and intense hope in God’s power to transform the world and everything in it. In Oxford, the idealism led to such stringent living that the “Holy Club” was mocked by other Oxford students. In Georgia, Wesley’s idealism toward the native people and his intended mission to them appear shamefully paternalistic and arrogant from the vantage point of today’s intercultural understandings. On the other hand, they were motivated, at least in part, by deep compassion—committed and ambiguous compassion. In Wesley’s later years of ministry, his commitments became even deeper, and ambiguity continued to follow him. He even doubted and wrestled with himself in his Journal. Self-doubts did not deter Wesley from brazen action, however. He willingly broke with social and church conventions to carry out the ministry to which he knew himself to be called.

Wesley’s commitment was such that he often attracted criticism, especially from more conventional quarters. For example, he responded from time to time to the frequent charges of “enthusiasm.” He even preached on this topic, basing the sermon on Acts 26:24, in which Paul is accused of being beside himself. Wesley responds, “But if you aim at the religion of the heart, if you talk of ‘righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost;’ then it will not be long before your sentence is passed, ‘Thou art beside thyself.’” Wesley did not assume that all enthusiasm represents “true religion.” In fact, he specifically identified certain kinds of enthusiasm about which we should be wary—imagining that you have grace when you do not; imagining that you have gifts from God that you do not have; and thinking that you can attain certain goals without the power of God. This wariness
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is simply another reminder of ambiguity. Such ambiguity is not the final word, however. Wesley urges again and again that people give their whole selves to God, embracing true religion wholeheartedly, even while they try to avoid false forms of enthusiasm.

Given such commitment mixed with ambiguity, one would think that this scene of Wesleyan snapshots ends with confusion rather than hope. On the contrary, Wesley himself moves to center stage and pronounces words of hope. He encourages the viewers of this drama to take courage and accept the risks of being judged, expecting "daily growth in that pure and holy religion which the world always did, and always will, call enthusiasm." With these words, Act 1 closes; and the viewers are invited to enter Act 2, a discourse on God's Spirit and the renewal of creation—a discourse that reveals the enduring themes of commitment, ambiguity, and hope.

Act 2: Proclaiming God in the World

Scene 1: God Moves

In Act 2, the scenery is simple—fields and stumps, church pulpits, and other venues where John Wesley is preaching. This act is less narrative, but the words sketch a picture of Wesley that is rarely accented: a picture of an eighteenth-century man whose view of creation and God's renewal of it are filled with poetic image and hope. This is not the aspect of Wesley's theology that is most visible and most often discussed; but it is well worth the search. Note that the words and ideas in this act are from John Wesley's sermons. The scenery and sets are fictionalized, but the attempt to portray Wesley as preaching to real people struggling with real questions is true to his reality.

The scene opens on a vineyard, with Wesley in the middle proclaiming to his listeners that we are living in the "vineyard of the Lord." He associates the vineyard of Isa. 5:4 with the whole world, then with all people, with the Christian world, with the Reformed Christian world, and, finally, with the "people commonly called Methodists." His word to the Methodists who are listening is that God could not have done more than God has done for the Methodists; and yet, the harvest has brought forth wild grapes. Wesley urges them not to make excuses but to respond to God. He closes his sermon with challenges to live well; then, he reminds the people again that "you can never praise God enough for all these blessings, so plentifully showered down upon you ...." The vineyard fades, and we see Wesley, grown old, standing in a non-
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descript place, surrounded by clouds and mist. He reads from Jer. 23:24 and proceeds to testify to the beautiful words that "express the omnipresence of God!" He wonders out loud why "so little has been wrote on so sublime and useful a subject." Calling on God's Spirit, he seeks to explain God's omnipresence, speaking in clear tones that faithfulness to God always rises first from what God has already done for us. He ends with an admonition to be cheerful in expecting God's guidance, support, perfecting, strengthening, and preservation "unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ!"

The misty scene fades, and we see Wesley standing now on a hilltop, looking over a vast landscape and reading from Gen. 1:31, "And God saw every thing that he had made, and, behold it was very good." Again Wesley asks for the assistance of the Spirit in understanding, recognizing that human beings can understand only a small part of this great work of God. Wesley imagines the world as God first created it with complete happiness. For example, he describes the waters of the second day of creation, imagining them divided "into innumerable drops, which, descending, watered the earth, and made it very plenteous, without incommoding any of its inhabitants." Likewise, he describes the atmosphere as having "no impetuous currents of air; no tempestuous winds; no furious hail; no torrents of rain; no rolling thunders, or forked lightnings. One perennial spring was perpetually smiling over the whole surface of the earth." In short, the world was made without blemish or defect: God "made it better, unspeakably better, than it is at present." As Wesley continues his poetic description of creation, he concludes with a sad testimony that people's rebellion against God changed the world for all creatures. As humans sought to create happiness independent of God, they ruined the beauty of creation. They threw themselves, and "likewise the whole creation, which was intimately connected with [humanity], into disorder, misery, death . . . ." The consequence, then and now, is a groaning creation. Even in the travail, however, God is at work, and the evils in creation may still "work together for our good"; thus, we can still give thanks for the goodness of God.

Act 2, Scene 1 ends on this hopeful note. One can see in this scene that Wesley has kept his gaze always fixed on God. God is the source of all that is good; the Owner of the vineyard; the One who is ever present with creation; the One who helps us to understand; the One who celebrates that creation is good; the One who continues, even with human fallenness, to bring good from evil. Such a God expects faithfulness from human beings;
and when we are unfaithful, we bring harm to all of God's creatures. Commitment is expected; ambiguity is real. Yet, God continues to be faithful, working with creation to the end that all things will be well. We, thus, live in the mixed realities of commitment and ambiguity, but God's work keeps the flame of hope burning.

Scene 2: People Live Ambiguously
We have already been introduced to the depressing reality of Scene 2, the fall of humanity. The scene opens with Wesley speaking in deliberate, sad tones. He explains to the people sitting before his pulpit that the human heart "is desperately wicked."\(^{19}\) Such wickedness is the consequence of people exerting their own wills, pride, and independence from God.\(^{20}\)

Looking up at the people, Wesley adds that grace still abounds. He acknowledges that, "in the heart of every child," a deep store of ungodliness and unrighteousness is strongly rooted, such that "nothing less than almighty grace can cure it."\(^ {21} \)

From this somber scene, we move to another, with Wesley standing near a well, holding a clay pot. He speaks of the goodness and evil of humanity as a riddle; people are made of strange inconsistencies, which even wise people cannot reconcile—"the wonderful mixture of good and evil, of greatness and littleness, of nobleness and baseness!"\(^ {22} \) God created people in God's own image, but people created themselves in another image—evil, carnal, inimical with God. Wesley pauses and lifts the clay pot; he adds a further note: even when we regain the image that God created, it will always be a "treasure in earthen vessels."\(^ {23} \)

Feeling somewhat fragile and very ambiguous about being human, the people in the audience turn their heads to see one last scene at the back of the stage. The audience looks on as the ground shakes, and people on stage huddle together, trembling. Apparently, an earthquake has just occurred, and people are nervously turning to Wesley. He explains that God causes earthquakes, but that the moral cause is really human sin.\(^ {24} \) The modern audience to this drama turn to one another with questioning glances, but they remember the earlier sermon in Scene 1 when Wesley attributed the fall of all creation to the fall of humanity. Perhaps this is what Wesley is saying again; however, he does not linger to give an elaborate explanation of how humans cause earthquakes. He turns his attention, instead, to giving advice about what people can do: fear God, thank God
for deliverance, and repent and believe the gospel.25

Act 2, Scene 2 has been a drama of rebellion, failure, sin, evil, and destruction. Human beings are looking dismal at this point of the drama, with Wesley’s blaming human sin for all of creation’s ills. On the other hand, even in this scene of the drama, Wesley expresses some urgency about human response. Humans can still act, with the help of God’s grace. They can still know that God’s grace is available to them although human actions are often destructive to all creation. With the help of God, people can still repent and believe. This will make a difference. God’s image can even be restored in human lives, though it will be carried in earthen vessels. The call to commitment is vivid in these sermons, as is the reality of ambiguity; yet the last words are still sounds of hope.

Scene 3: Much Is Expected
Scene 3 of Act 2 begins with many questions about what people can do. Whereas John Wesley preached abundantly on this subject, the scene will be a brief one, simply representing some of the dominant threads of Wesley’s preaching and writing. The light first falls on John Wesley with his hand raised for emphasis. He announces that the Holy Spirit reproves people for conforming to the world, being friends with the world.26 The light quickly shifts to the other side of the stage where Wesley stands with the other hand raised. This time, the people standing around Wesley in the open field look at him curiously. One asks, “What do you mean when you say that we are to leave the world?” Wesley responds by reading 2 Cor. 6:17-18, and then he explains that we are to keep a distance from ungodly people.27 He explains that this does not mean complete separation, as in the affairs of business, but simply keeping a distance so as not to be influenced by their ungodliness.

The light shifts again, and Wesley is preaching in a parish pulpit. He urges the people to bring their wandering thoughts into captivity to Christ.28 He explains that there are different kinds of wandering thoughts; and only some of these originate from, or contribute to, evil temper. Even so, he urges the people to pray that God will deliver them from sin and that the fruit of God’s Spirit will be manifest in their lives.29

The light shifts yet again, and Wesley is very serious in his manner as he preaches on the dangers of riches. He speaks strongly in saying that the words of the text (1 Tim. 6:9) be understood “in their plain and obvious
sense," namely, that people should not desire to be rich, endeavor to be rich, store up treasures, possess more goods than God wills for God's stewards (more than is needed for food and covering), or love money. He then returns to a frequent Wesleyan theme: Gain all you can, save all you can, and give all you can. He explains that gaining should be done without hurting your soul or body; saving without wasting paper, water, or anything else; and giving in such a way that prevents one's longing for or storing up riches.

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Wesley walks across the stage and continues the theme, addressing another group with an extensive explanation of the problem of riches. The problem is that having riches inevitably leads to trusting riches. Riches, thus, hinder love of God and neighbor and hinder holiness of living.

People sit quietly, listening, while Wesley walks to another group at another place on the stage. To this group, he adds an additional warning, namely, that those who "have the conveniences of life, and something over,... walk upon slippery ground. . . . Ye are every moment on the verge of hell." With people moving silently to stand near Wesley at center stage, Wesley shifts to the subject of stewardship. He reads from Luke 16:2 and then extends both arms. He explains to the people around him that God has entrusted human beings with their souls (in the image of God), their bodies, worldly goods, talents, and the grace of God and power of God's Holy Spirit. "Which alone worketh in us all that is acceptable" in God's sight.

The people are silent, waiting. Wesley adds that God's critical questions to us in judgment will be how we used our souls, bodies, worldly goods, talents, and grace. In short, have you been a good steward of these gifts? As the curtain closes, Wesley adds a critical question from God, "Above all, wast thou a good steward of my grace, preventing, accompanying, and following thee?"

Act 3: Renewal of Creation

The final act in this drama opens with people murmuring among themselves. One person asks, "How can we possibly live up to what this man is preaching?" Another says, "The cost is too high." Yet another replies, "This is overwhelming!" The crowd quiets as Wesley steps onto the stage again, speaking of the possibility of new birth—"the great work which God does in us, in renewing our fallen nature." He explains about justification and being born of God's Spirit; he speaks of being renewed in the image of God. He promises that new birth will bring many fruits to people's lives; it
Wesley continues to talk about the way of love and the possibility of Christian perfection, all of which are gifts of God and all of which bear much fruit. He puts forth the grand promise that God’s Spirit bears witness with our spirits that we are children of God; and living as children of God is marked by love, joy, peace, and the other fruits of the Spirit. Wesley concludes by encouraging the people to follow the very clear commands of God—to love God with all their hearts and souls and minds and strength and to love their neighbors as themselves. This love is itself the work of God’s Spirit! The kingdom of God is at hand!

At that moment, Wesley steps out of the crowd on stage and begins to address the audience directly. He says that these words are directed not just to the people on this stage. God makes all things new—in the past, in the present, and in the future! This includes the transformation of all elements—not just people. For example, fire will be transformed so that it will be “harmless in the new heavens and earth”; it will “probably retain its vivifying power, though divested of its power to destroy.” The new world will be renewed, and people will enjoy “a deep, an intimate, an uninterrupted union with God.” We pray now for “thy Kingdom to come,” and we know that the Kingdom includes all of God’s creation.

Reflections in Conclusion

Returning to the poem with which this essay began, the strong sense that God’s Spirit will renew creation was the first and last word for John Wesley, as evident in his sermons and discussed recently by Theodore Runyan. Between the first and last words of God’s abundant grace and transforming Spirit, we find the pangs of human sin, which have wrought havoc on human life and on all God’s creation. Whereas Wesley’s view of creation is highly anthropocentric and his view of original sin naïve at many points, his awareness of human sin and its devastating influence on God’s creation represents a complex view of human life as interconnected with God’s other creatures. God created the world and declared it very good, but human selfishness and arrogance have despoiled the earth. God calls people to repent and follow the ways of God; further, God gives the grace to make this possible.

Wesley does not leave people with general theological principles; he gives specific directions about following the ways of godliness, spurning ungodliness, and living for God in all the details of daily life. This includes a radical approach to stewardship, giving everything to God and rejecting
riches and the control they wield in human life. People are called to reject consumerism and to use all of their possessions in service of God. This environmental ethic is radical in its demand; but God's Spirit makes it possible. It promises to bear much fruit—the fruits of the Spirit for human life and, indeed, for all creation! With Wesley we close, not with exasperation about the radical commitment expected of us or with the ambiguity of life. We close simply with prayer: Breathe on us, Holy Spirit! Renew your creation!

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Endnotes
1. Mary Elizabeth Moore, "Breathe on Us, Holy Spirit!," December 2000.
3. Ibid., ¶ 162N, 109.
5. Ibid., 470-75.
6. Ibid., 478.
8. Ibid., 213.
10. Ibid.
13. Ibid., 206.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid., 213.
17. Ibid., 214.
18. Ibid., 215.
23. Ibid., 345; cf. 344-48.
29. Ibid., 32.
35. Ibid., 147.
37. Ibid., 65, 71; see also Wesley, "The End of Christ’s Coming," in Works, 267-77.
42. Ibid., 291.
43. Ibid., 296.
In this article, I carry you off to Europe. By Europe I do not mean the European Union, which is a partner—or competitor—of the United States. I mean Eastern Europe—the part of Europe that still does not have membership in the European Union. They are still wishing and praying, Fiat Europa!

Ten years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Europe is still a divided continent. The borderlines, though different, remain a painful reality. Through the Schengen Treaty, the European Union has erected a new fence against the poor nations in Europe: Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Ukraine, Slovakia, and many others. For The United Methodist Church in Central and Southern Europe this creates many problems. Some delegates are unable to attend denominational meetings, because they are denied visas or immigration as visitors.

“Let Europe arise!” With this exclamation Winston Churchill ended his speech in Zürich on Sept. 19, 1946. These words were surprising in the midst of the ruins of World War II, but the Western European states pursued this goal vigorously. However, Europe has yet to achieve this goal. At a meeting recently with representatives of the European churches, president of the European Commission, Jacques Delors, said, “We have to give Europe a soul.” Should this not succeed, the whole process of integration could fail. Economic interests alone cannot represent Europe’s soul.

Europe is still divided between those who belong to the European Union and those who are waiting outside the door.

Most representatives from the former Socialist countries today would
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confess that the political changes did not improve the standard of living for
the majority of the people. Today, more people live in poverty than during
the Communist era. The calculation goes this way: forty years of Com­
munism plus ten years in the diaspora of capitalism equals disaster. It is very
possible that European integration will remain elusive. The gap between
poverty and wealth could grow, leaving a remnant of nations that will never
meet the criteria for becoming full members of the European Union.

It cannot be the church's role to find the economic solutions for a new
Europe. But the churches are expected to have a vision for all the people—
rich and poor. The church has to continue in the effort to give Europe a soul.

Europe extends from small islands in the Atlantic Ocean to the Ural
Mountains in the East. In square miles, it is a small continent. But it has a
high number of inhabitants—600 million. Europe is a cluster of more than
fifty nations in which 189 different languages are spoken and six different
alphabets are used. Europe represents a greater diversity than we will ever
be able to understand.

At present, the European Union comprises only fifteen states. Another
thirteen are participating in the enlargement process. Europe is a cluster of
very different ethnicities and mentalities. It is still in the process of
becoming a community where equality and reconciliation can prevail.

We do not usually think of Europe when we think of the Bible. Yet,
Christianity has been in Europe since New Testament times. After all, it
was the Roman Empire and its soldiers that crucified Jesus and stood
guard at his tomb. And the centurion who confessed under the cross,
"Truly this man was God's Son!" (Mark 15:39), was a European.

Most Europeans belong to one of the three families of state churches:
Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Protestant. If you are Polish, you are
supposed to be Roman Catholic. If you are Bulgarian, you are Orthodox; and
if you are from the eastern part of Hungary, then you are Reformed. But this
does not automatically determine church membership. This church affilia­
tion is connected to national identity and has a cultural significance. So, it is
no surprise when a recent survey revealed the large number of people who
registered as 'nondenominational' (in percentages of the whole population):
East Germany, 72 percent; Poland, 7 percent; Slovakia, 27 percent; Czech
Republic, 73 percent; Hungary, 40 percent; Ukraine, 68 percent.

There is not yet enough experience to understand and even classify the
various new religious expressions and communities in Eastern Europe.
Transitional Experiences
Ten years ago, the Communist system collapsed almost simultaneously in all of the Eastern European countries. The effect for the churches was to create greater scope and more liberty for mission and ministry. But this must be seen in the historical context of the attempt by the Communist regimes to limit the activities and influence of the churches. This limitation had two aspects:

1. The totalitarian Communist ideology demanded that it be the exclusive force forming both society and people. In this context, the churches were a foreign body within the Socialist community. No wonder the registration of the churches during the Communist era resided in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs!

2. The above totalitarian claim was accompanied by administrative control, close supervision, and also oppression and persecution.

These factors made for hard conditions; but the Czech theologian Josef L. Hromádka used to say, "We are as free as we dare to be. Christians are not only victims of a system. Whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's (Rom. 14:8)."

Ten years ago, the changes led from a state of distress into new freedom. Our feet were set in a broad place. The new freedom gave a strong impetus for the life of the church, and we started off with great enthusiasm for evangelism and church planting. But very soon we realized that we were not prepared for this development. It was clear that the new conditions also brought new challenges: The churches have moved from the diaspora of a pseudomodern Communist world into the diaspora of a postmodern society. Let me explore this statement in three points.

1. The Attraction of Relativistic Pluralism
After the monopoly of the Communist ideology follows a pluralism of political philosophy and views of life. In a longstanding democracy there is consensus (albeit often unarticulated) about the society's basic values. But in post-Communist societies this consensus does not exist. So pluralism reigns, and with it relativism and particularism. This creates in both the political life and the churches an atmosphere of disloyalty and a feeling that nothing is binding—that "anything goes." Thus, United Methodist annual conferences in Eastern Europe began to experience new difficulties in the decision-making process, finding it hard to get the majorities needed for
important decisions. Many members, without saying so, were abandoning
the church community and following their personal and private views,
without pondering the effect their actions might have on the community.
Even clergy of long standing fell victims to the philosophy of relativistic
pluralism, to the point of risking ethical misconduct. The churches were
leaving the connection and behaving like congregationalist movements.

2. The Magic of the Market
The new market system was criticized by Vaclav Klaus, a state leader in the
Czech Republic, as being brutal and without any values to regulate it. He
spoke about a market without any attributes. This state of affairs has a
dehumanizing influence on personal relationships. It influences relation­
ships even within the church, expressing itself in attitudes like this: "If you
do not buy my strategy, my understanding of mission, I'll quit!" The church
is living in a brutal market of homemade religious menus.

How do we in the church deal with this "anything goes" mentality, on
the one hand, and an egotistic particularism, on the other? How do we find
and set common goals for the future? How do leaders and local churches
again become reliable partners? How do we develop—alongside the new
sense of freedom—a concern for responsibility, truth, and values, so that
the church might be salt and light for a new generation? Wesley's approach,
based on Gal. 5:6, is very much needed: "The only thing that counts is faith
working through love."

3. A Renaissance of Religion
A large number of new religious movements began to fill the spiritual
vacuum left by the atheistic states of Eastern Europe: Unification Church,
Hare Krishna, Scientology, the Mormons, and fundamentalist and charis­
matic hardliners. The monopoly of the national churches was dissolved and
an atmosphere of discordance created. The philosopher Jurgen Habermas
has referred to this new atmosphere as "der neue Unübersichtlichkeit"—
"the new confusion." The religious scene is no longer comprehensible at a
glance.

The parable of the unclean spirit that was cast out of the house and
then returned with a phalanx of evil spirits (Matt. 12:43-45) is an apt way to
explain the feelings of the people in the post-Communist society. How do
we fill the empty house of the post-Communist society? The only response
for United Methodists is this: with faith working through love.
Three Options in Setting New Goals

The churches in post-Communist European countries have three options:

1. They can look and go backwards by restoring the conditions and expressions of church life that existed in pre-Communist times. One of the main issues facing those who select this option is having to request the government to restore church buildings expropriated under Communism and also to rehabilitate the status of the church to pre-Communist times. Many of the state churches have chosen this option. They are trying to restore the church buildings not so much as instruments of their mission but more as symbols of inherited power and glory. These churches, very clergy oriented, think that they can reinstitute the former glory of the priesthood and the hierarchy. They have not yet discovered the new call to evangelism and especially the role of the laity in this new field of mission.

2. The churches can opt to rely on the experiences of the churches in the West to provide the answers for a liberal and pluralistic society. But the position of the churches in Western Europe is weak. (Church attendance amounts to 3 to 5 percent of the official membership.) Sociologist of religion Peter Berger likes to speak of the church in Western Europe as the zone of disaster and debacle. While the churches in Eastern Europe can learn from the churches in Western Europe, perhaps the churches in the West stand to benefit more by listening to and learning from those in the East, particularly about how these churches survived in a highly secular, hostile context.

3. The churches in Eastern Europe can learn from their experiences under Communism and extrapolate the results into the new conditions of the post-Communist era. The approach could be a mix of the three options. However, regardless of the option a church selects for entering the post-Communist era, it should do so based on a solid evaluation of its past and a clear sense of where it wants to go in the future.

Wanting to assist, many Western churches simply introduced Western programs and methods into the Eastern churches. However, they were unwilling to travel with their Eastern brothers and sisters down the path of change and transition from the Communist to the post-Communist era.

The process of transition requires attention to the following components:

- The church's role in the transition from a monolithic to a pluralistic society
- The role of laity, particularly women and youth, during the Communist era and in the time of transition
- The models of leadership under Communism and now
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- The lack of middle-aged and younger pastors and the question of how to recruit and educate new leaders
- The presence of the church in the secular media
- The church's relation to money and self-sufficiency
- The church's role in the emerging situation of religious pluralism
- Religion and national identity
- Ecumenical cooperation in an open society
- Christian education in an open society
- Learning afresh about the church's diaconal dimension as it enters a post-Communist area

If the churches in the West and the East would be open to share experiences and to listen, they could truly learn a lot from one another. And what the churches have to learn, the societies in Europe also have to learn.

The famous Spanish emissary and philosopher Salvador de Madariaga said in 1952:

Above all, we have to love Europe . . . because Europe is still in the process of becoming Europe. Only if a Spaniard would start to speak about "our Copenhagen" and a Norwegian about "our Belgrade." Only then, Europe will no longer be a battlefield of self-interests, but a community trustworthy for our partners in the other continents of the world. Fiat Europae

II

Let us now take a closer look at the United Methodist presence in the post-Communist countries of Eastern Europe.

Methodists have a history in Eastern Europe.
The United Methodist churches in Eastern Europe fall into three episcopal areas: The Nordic and Baltic Area, the Eurasia Area, and the Central and Southern Europe Area.

The list of Eastern European countries with a United Methodist presence is impressive. Indeed, it is easier to name a country in which the church is not present than to name where it is. The only countries lacking a United Methodist presence are Rumania, Belarus, Georgia, Armenia, and Slovenia.

By contrast, The United Methodist Church is established in the following post-Communist countries: Albania, Bulgaria, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia,
Czech Republic, Estonia, Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Moldavia, Poland, Russia, Slovakia, Ukraine.

For historical reasons, we could divide the countries into four categories. (1) About 150 years ago, the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, started a missionary conference for the region of Bulgaria and Macedonia. (2) Methodist work in the Czech and Slovak republics and in Poland began when the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, undertook relief work in these countries following World War I. (3) The third category in the development of Methodism in Eastern Europe is the result of Germans who settled in Hungary and Yugoslavia about one hundred years ago. (4) Methodist work in Russia and the Baltics began about one hundred years ago, too, at the initiative of the Methodist Episcopal Church. Extension into the Ukraine was spearheaded by United Methodists in Poland, Slovakia, and Hungary.

With the exception of the work in Albania, Bosnia, and Moldavia, the Methodist presence in all these countries listed above is the result of Methodist missionary outreach. But even in Albania, Bosnia, and Moldavia, a Methodist agency was present to provide humanitarian aid following the two world wars.

The long history of Methodism in Eastern Europe is an important factor when entering into ecumenical discussions, for the attitude is still prevalent that Methodists are “invading” Orthodox territory in search of proselytes. But Methodists are hardly invaders; they have been in Eastern Europe for more than one hundred years!

This situation simply adds to the urgency for United Methodists in the post-Communist countries to write and publish their history. Evidence is emerging that United Methodists in these countries want to remember their history. Take the Bulgarian United Methodists as an example. The younger churches in the annual conference showed little interest in the history of the denomination in the region. Their primary interest was to live and witness in the present and the future. But things changed at the 2000 annual conference. The annual conference featured an evening of storytelling during which people told stories about the history of Methodism in Bulgaria. The response to the stories was very positive. One story, in particular, bears repeating here.

In the Bulgarian city of Varna, one of the most beautiful cities on the Black Sea, the Methodist mission started in 1885. In 1889 a beautiful church building was erected in the downtown area—a work of art in stonemasonry,
with a bell tower. In 1965 the city took over the church building, and the Communists converted the building into a puppet theater for the children of Varna. The bell tower had to go. With the help of three other men, Bedros Altunian, now superintendent of Bulgaria, stole the bell under cover of darkness and buried it in a field outside the city. Persecution reduced the congregation to a small group of faithful Methodists. After Communism gave way, the congregation was revitalized in 1990. The church was growing rapidly and soon in need of more space. In spite of difficult circumstances, a new, six-story church center is nearing completion, virtually face to face with the tower building of the Communist party.

There was extensive debate about whether the modern, six-story construction in the downtown area should have a tower; but, finally, everyone supported the idea. When the tower was finished in 2000, the secret behind the tower was revealed. It turns out that the bell in the tower was the same one buried by Altunian and friends in the 1960s! The three men who collaborated with Altunian were the only ones who remembered the whereabouts of the bell, and they excavated it for the new tower. What is more, after the bell was polished, it revealed two inscriptions: "Varna" and "Baltimore." Thus, after thirty-five years, this bell, donated by Methodists in Baltimore, was restored to its place of honor. The bell will call together the congregation for worship, weddings, and funerals. It will also stand as a witness to the power of the Methodist connection, which endured the difficult times of the Communist era. The congregation, like the bell, was forced to go underground for a time, but the connection between Varna and Baltimore remained intact.

Methodists in Eastern Europe are minorities and are open to minorities.

In most countries in Eastern Europe, The United Methodist Church is small. Belonging to the worldwide Methodist connection is an encouragement to these churches. It provides them with an identity and saves them from parochialism. However, these churches face the dilemma of being a minority church in the context of predominantly national churches. This renders them very vulnerable, especially when the minority church is sponsored from abroad. Consequently, The United Methodist Church is often lumped together with "foreign sects." Not surprisingly, United Methodists in Eastern Europe are eager to stress that their church has a history of
more than one hundred years in the region.

Let us explore the history of the Bulgarian Methodist Church. The first American missionaries entered Bulgaria in 1857 through Istanbul. The Sultan Abdul Mejid of Istanbul had issued an edict in favor of the Protestant mission, hoping thereby to weaken the influence of the Orthodox Church. But the Protestant mission did not support the oppressors; on the contrary, the Methodists worked to strengthen the national identity of the oppressed by giving them back the Bulgarian language (which was virtually lost). The official language of Bulgaria was Turkish, and the Orthodox churches used Greek or the ancient Church-Slavonic language. The Methodists, on the other hand, translated the Bible into the national Bulgarian language in 1864, thus saving the language from extinction. That is why one finds a "Dr. Long Street" in every major Bulgarian town, named after the first Methodist missionary in Bulgaria.

The minority church was siding in a very practical way with those in need. But a minority church, claiming to belong to a global church, is vulnerable. In 1949, fifteen Protestant churchmen were arrested by the new Communist state on the charge of spying for the United States and the British Intelligence Services. The Communists made this false accusation to decimate the church's leadership. These church leaders were sentenced to from five to fifteen years of prison and work camp.

Methodists in Eastern Europe are minorities and are open to minorities. In Bulgaria today, for example, one-fifth of Methodist Church activity takes place among Armenian refugees and Turkish-speaking gypsies. Methodists are a connecting people, and not nationally bound. In the war zone of the Balkans, the national churches and other communities were giving preference to their own ethnic groups when lending aid. However, the Methodists were free to distribute humanitarian aid to everyone. The response of the national churches has its roots in long-standing enmities and atrocities, provoking a strong sense of nationalism. And nationalism was abetted by a kind of romanticism that stressed the validity of subjective experience at the level of the nation. This led to unhealthy national pride and also bias against strangers.

With its roots in the Church of England, the Methodist movement developed in the New World as a church for everybody. Our Constitution reads, "In The United Methodist Church no conference or other organiza-
tional unit of the Church shall be structured so as to exclude any member or any constituent body of the Church because of race, color, national origin, status, or economic condition." I hope that United Methodists in Eastern Europe never develop an ecclesiology with a national binding.

By the way, the Methodists came to Europe as immigrants or reimmigrants. They know what it means to be strangers.

Methodism in post-Communist countries is largely a lay mission. Like early Methodism, Eastern European Methodists are working with lay missionaries and local pastors. The church in Bulgaria, for example, has six ordained clergy, but seventeen local pastors and eight lay missionaries. The superintendent of Bulgaria commented recently that it is "the lay people who are developing new churches, not the clergy. Every lay person who is employed full time is expected to develop at least three new churches during his or her tenure of service."

The resurgence of The United Methodist Church in Bulgaria is the work of lay people. In 1990, there were three congregations; in 2000, the church boasted thirty local churches and eleven preaching points.

Methodism is struggling with pluralism versus identity. The church always reflects society more than we would like. As I said earlier, Eastern European societies are marked by an "anything goes" mentality, on the one hand, and an egotistic particularism, on the other—and this has influenced the churches. Thus, Methodists struggle with the question: How does the church develop, parallel to the new sense of freedom, a sense of responsibility, truth, and values, so that we might be salt and light for the new generation?

An example from the Czech Republic may elucidate the problem. Most of the newly developed Czech churches were so charismatic in style that the gap between the new and the traditional churches was becoming a threat to the unity of the annual conference. The "anything goes" mentality started to paralyze the annual conference, because the new Christians were willing to accept neither the church's discipline nor ecumenical agreements, such as the prohibition against rebaptism.

Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the annual conference covenanted to undergo a three-year process in search of new unity. The process, called "UMC 2000," culminated in the "Faith Festival 2000," held in Praha. We celebrated not only the beginning of The Methodist Church in
Czechoslovakia some eighty years ago but also the fact that in the three-year process we lost only one congregation. We celebrated our unity and diversity, acknowledging that Christianity is "faith working through love," which is the basic expression of the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Methodists care about the poor. The Methodists in Eastern Europe are very close to the poor, because they themselves are poor. The clergy and lay workers receive small salaries and they and their families live at poverty level. As of yet, the churches are unable to survive without considerable support from Western Europe and the United States. We have too many unemployed members (especially the young people) and too many elderly people, who have yet to see a penny of their pensions, the state being unable to pay.

Many of the local churches are running programs to support the poor: food distribution, soup kitchens, medical aid, heating in the winter, and so forth. It is very interesting that, in the countries where all diaconal and social work was taken away from the churches, the churches are engaging in many new diaconal initiatives: homes for the elderly and orphans, shelters for the homeless, and therapy for drug addicts and alcoholics. Prison ministry is done mostly by volunteers.

Methodists build ecumenical bridges. As is clear by now, the Methodists as a minority church are not always welcomed by the national churches. Nevertheless, Methodists are fostering ecumenical relationships wherever possible: for example, the Conference of European Churches (Protestant and Orthodox); the Concordat of the Leuenberg Churches (Reformed, Lutheran, and Methodist); and the World Council of Churches. On the national level, Methodists negotiate with the leadership of the national churches, while, at the local level, they extend a hand of friendship to their sister churches.

Following the complaints of the Orthodox churches about proselytism in Eastern Europe, the Conference of European Churches, together with the Council of the Roman Catholic Bishops in Europe, are discussing a Charta Ecumenica, a codex on ecumenical behavior for the mission of the churches in Europe.

In my travels in Eastern Europe, I always try to visit with the bishops of other churches. We very often have good friendships. A recurring question from the Orthodox bishops is this: Could United Methodists not help
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with scholarships for their students of theology, making it possible for
them to study in a Western university so that they can become acquainted
with other cultures and other confessional families?

III

Societies in rapid transition, such as those in Eastern Europe, experience
many challenges. This demands of the church extraordinary levels of
performance in ministry. Sometimes we are tempted to pray for stability;
but we know that only as long as we dare to face the challenges of transi­
tion will we continue to grow.

The challenges are many. Some church personnel are close to being
burned out. New congregations, after four or more years, need people who
are educated in pastoral theology. For everything there is a time: a time for
learning by doing and a time for leadership based on solid education. The
United Methodist Church in Eastern Europe needs both right now.

Endnotes

1. Miklos Tomka and Paul Zulehner, Religion in der Reformländern Ost (Mittel)
   Europas (Vienna, 1999), 46.
2. Quoted in Jan Milik Lochmann, "Herausforderungen und Hoffnungen der
   Christen in einer postkommunistischen Gesellschaft." Lecture delivered at a
   meeting of United Methodist superintendents of Central and Southern Europe
   in October 1998.
3. Jürgen Habermas, Die Postnationale Konstellation: Politische Essays (Frankfurt
   am Main: Suhrkamp, 1998), 121.
4. Quoted by Erhard Busek in "Die kulturelle Zukunft Europas." Lecture deliv­
   ered at the meeting of the Consultative Conference of the European
   Methodist Council in September 1999.
5. The Discipline of The United Methodist Church–2000 (Nashville: The United
What does the authority of the Bible mean for United Methodists?

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When John Wesley preached a celebratory sermon on the occasion of the opening of the New Chapel in City Road, London, in 1777, he reminded the congregation that "Methodism, so called, is the old religion, the religion of the Bible." Indeed, as the octogenarian reminisced a decade later upon the rise of Methodism, he observed that the young band at Oxford had been continually reproached for being “Bible bigots” and “Bible moths,” feeding upon the Bible as moths do upon cloth.

Knowing church history quite well, Wesley affirmed in his own day the canonical status of the sixty-six books that Protestants call the Bible. Earlier, in a lengthy process, the universal church had recognized the canon of the New Testament in the Festal Letter of Athanasius in 367 and in the work of the Council of Carthage in 397. This body of literature, together with the Old Testament (canonized by the Jews at the Council of

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SARAH H. LANCASTER

In recent years, questions about the authority of Scripture have occupied the attention of The United Methodist Church in several official forums. Because of tensions in the denomination about certain issues, most notably homosexuality, the General Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns (GCCUIC) sponsored a dialogue on theological diversity, at which it soon became apparent that underlying our different opinions about particular issues were equally different understandings about the authority of Scripture and divine revelation. Soon after, an issue of the Circuit Rider was devoted to the topic of the authority of Scripture. Then in December 1999, the GCCUIC cosponsored with the General Board of Discipleship a “Consultation on Scriptural Authority and the Nature of God’s Revelation.” With all the attention that has been paid to this issue, have we made any progress toward a common understanding?

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Jamnia at the end of the first century), were deemed Sacred Scripture by the church. In other words, although these writings came to the church through very human means—that is, through a diversity of times, authors and locations—they were nevertheless unlike all other literature in that their canonical status meant that they were holy.

Confronted with the realities of both persecution and heresy, and taking into account the inspiration of the Holy Spirit in the creation of the Bible, the early church looked to the biblical canon as a “rule, measure or standard” in order to guide its course as it proclaimed God’s faithful activity with respect to two key stories: (1) the history of Israel, and (2) the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Indeed, Athanasius and others in the fourth century realized that the clarity and integrity of this twofold witness could be lost through the “party spirit” or “faddism” of heresy. Self-willed in many respects, and therefore unwilling to submit to any authority higher than their own judgments, heretics often revered in idiosyncratic teachings that were rightly put aside by the ecumenical church.

**Scripture in the Community of the Church**

Though the Bible is read profitably in private devotion and study, where the believing community, though absent, is presupposed, it is read best, perhaps, in the context of the liturgical community, bathed in both prayer and worship. To be sure, the stories of Scripture have the uncanny ability to evoke; they call us forth as a people, beyond egoism and all sorts of tribalism, to participate in something far greater than ourselves—the very life of God. In particular, United Methodists participate in three important interpretive communities that help to define the substance—the ethos—of our witness and tradition. On the most general level, our reading of Scripture is guided by the ecumenical consensus of all orthodox Christians (Roman Catholics, Protestants, and Eastern Orthodox) of whom we are a part. Here our interpretation of Scripture is informed by the careful judgment of the early church at the councils of Nicaea, Constantinople, Ephesus, and Chalcedon and by the *regula fidei* of the Apostles’ Creed, as our Book of Discipline carefully reminds us.

Second, The United Methodist Church acknowledges two great creedal epochs, not just one. The first period naturally includes the christological and trinitarian work of the fourth and fifth centuries, and it constitutes our
ecumenical witness. The second period embraces the reforming labors of the sixteenth century, when the great Protestant creeds and confessions were articulated; as, for example, in The Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion of the Church of England. These articles, carefully crafted and expressed, found their way in a reduced form, through the editorial judgment of John Wesley, into the life of Methodism. Indeed, so important are the Methodist Articles as a guide for the proper interpretation of Scripture, as a regula fidei, that they are protected from alteration and amendment by the first restrictive rule of the Constitution of The United Methodist Church.

Third, the substance of our distinctive Methodist witness to the broader church, as well as to society at large, is held in place by the guiding and illuminative value of John Wesley's Sermons and Notes, which are included "in our present existing and established standards of doctrine." This literature, which constitutes a salient part of Methodist tradition, not only underscores the witness of the Holy Spirit—that is, the doctrine of assurance for which Wesley was so strongly criticized by eighteenth-century rationalists—but also highlights the goal, or telos, of the Christian faith itself by displaying the doctrine of entire sanctification, not as a theological oddity or a distinctive doctrine but as the actualization, the instantiation, of the great twofold commandment of Jesus Christ to love God with all our heart and our neighbor as ourselves.

So then, on the one hand, the canonical status of Scripture points to its authority as the norma normans (the norm that norms) in that the Bible constitutes the highest standard of appeal in terms of both faith and practice. On the other hand, the diversity of social locations in which the Word of God is actually read, the distinct interpretive communities, comprise nothing less than living traditions that are carefully passed on from generation to generation. In a real sense, tradition is the signet which holds the jewel in place. Again, we properly read Scripture within the believing community, not apart from it. The Holy Spirit inspired the biblical authors and continues to illuminate and guide the contemporary community of faith as it reads, studies, and meditates upon the Word of God.

Even with canon and tradition in place in an authoritative way, there may, however, still be room for interpretive error—for idiosyncratic, self-invested readings or, on a group level, for the emergence of an ethnocentric, tribal spirit which sets aside, or deflects, the universal love of God and neighbor. To prevent such a possibility in his own age, Augustine postu-
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Endnotes

Certainly, consensus in a denomination of several million would be an unlikely outcome for any dialogue on any issue. Still, the report by the 1999 Consultation, while not claiming to speak for everyone, does indicate two areas in which there seems to be general agreement: (1) the question for United Methodists is not whether Scripture has authority but rather how the Bible may function authoritatively; (2) our doctrinal standards affirm that Scripture reveals what is necessary for our salvation. These two points, as spare as they may at first seem, do provide an important foundation for further discussion. I would like to suggest some ways in which they may provide direction for future reflection.

The first point of agreement indicates that the concept of authority itself needs to be given careful consideration, probably more than it has received up to this point. Authority is a term that can be understood in many different ways, and it can also be misunderstood. Authority, for instance, is not the same as authoritarianism, which is really a misuse of authority; but in many cases, reactions against authority are colored by past experiences of authoritarianism. Furthermore, authority may be held or exercised in many different ways. A judge, for instance, has very different authority than a teacher, a parent than a senator. Authority may involve imposing discipline, giving orders, sharing expertise, modeling behavior, and more, depending on its context and purpose. Authority does not come in “one size fits all,” and our dialogues regarding Scripture’s authority should give careful attention to the kind that is appropriate to the Bible.

In light of this point, it is also important to see that different kinds of authority do share a common structure. At its heart, authority is relational; it cannot be exercised in isolation. Someone or something “bears” authority, and someone else is “subject to” authority? The language of being subject to authority carries a great deal of negative weight; but the work of several philosophers indicates that authority actually exists for the benefit of the person who is subject to it. It may feel at times confining to be subject to laws, but they exist to protect citizens. Any school age child has wished to be free from the assignments that teachers make, but doing those assignments is how students learn. It is always possible for authority to be misused, and certainly those bearing authority can make mistakes; but when it works as it should, authority serves an important function for those who are under it.
One common misuse of authority is the failure to recognize that it is properly exercised only in a particular domain. For instance, a police officer has authority to arrest criminals but not to arrest just anyone. Taking into custody someone who has not broken the law would constitute misuse of that officer’s authority. A college professor with a specialization in English literature is not authorized to give exams to students in a political science course. At ordination, we charge clergy to “take authority,” but we recognize limits to and the need for appropriate use of that authority when we talk about clergy ethics. To recognize that authority functions in a particular domain does not diminish the authority of the person or thing under discussion. It simply specifies where and how this authority pertains in order to avoid confusions that give rise to problems for its proper exercise within its domain.

So how could this understanding of the concept of authority help in thinking about the Bible’s authority? At this point, the second insight of the Consultation becomes important. According to our doctrinal standards, Scripture reveals what is necessary for salvation. One could say, then, that the domain of its authority is salvation. This seemingly simple (and perhaps obvious) statement provides important information about the proper exercise of scriptural authority. The Bible has authority in a particular domain, namely, in those things necessary for our salvation. God has given the Bible this authority for our benefit, because God wishes to save us. Its purpose, then, is not to impose constricting regulations or provide information in other fields of knowledge (such as science) but to bring us into a saving relationship with God. The Bible exercises its authority properly when it does so, and its purpose ought to shape the kind of authority we recognize it to have. The Bible’s authority is misused when it is extended beyond its proper domain into areas that are not essential to our salvation. This is not to say, though, that its scope is narrow. If salvation involves the whole person, and if John Wesley is right that it is available to us now, then the Bible may exercise its authority for our lives in many ways; for instance, by providing principles by which we should live, examples of consequences for certain behaviors, models of faithful people, and so forth. Far from limiting the Bible, recognizing the appropriate domain in which Scripture exercises its authority calls us to pay close attention to the ways in which it does speak God’s word to us.

Although there is promise for developing a better understanding of the
Bible's authority when these clarifications are kept in mind, they will not eliminate all disagreement. For one thing, we are likely to have different views about what is "necessary for salvation." Whether the "essentials" include specific doctrinal beliefs or particular moral codes, or even certain religious practices, have been and undoubtedly will continue to be questions that divide us. The long history of denominational schism within Christianity and the more recent attempts at ecumenical dialogue are instructive regarding the difficulty of reaching consensus on any of these points. In many cases, these disputes arose because of different kinds of appeals to Scripture, and we are learning that God manages to work through us despite our disagreements with one another. Although conversation about Scripture's authority is important because it keeps us focused on what it means to live by the Word of God, we should not expect that any statement about the Bible's authority will settle all our disputes. Even if we cannot hope for much more consensus than we have now, we need not despair. Ultimately, the Bible's authority rests on the way God uses it to touch and change our lives, and any further dialogue about scriptural authority should keep that focus clearly in mind.

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Endnotes
2. It is possible for the "thing" to bear authority when it represents the thoughts or intentions of a person or persons. For instance, one may consult a dictionary regarding the proper use of a word rather than having to contact the person who wrote the definition.
The Book of Jeremiah is the complex product of turbulent times. Pain, loss, dislocation, and death are the subjects of most of the book. The prophet Jeremiah ministered during the last decades of the kingdom of Judah and the beginning of the exilic period. He suffered persecution for prophesying judgment to people who wanted to hear about peace, for calling for surrender to God's plan for a new Israel when his audience wanted to believe in the past, and for inviting repentance and faith among survivors who rejected God. During his long ministry, prophecies originally spoken to one audience were addressed again to another. Small collections were formed and expanded. The Book of Jeremiah gathered materials from and about his long ministry and addressed them to later generations for whom the death of the kingdom of Judah and exile were bitter present realities.

Poetry and prose in chapters 2-24 account for the removal of the institutions and beliefs that had rooted Judah's sense of security and identity. The covenant theology of Deuteronomy provides the explanation for these losses. Scattered through the first half of the book, but concentrated in chapters 29-33, are the passages that reveal God's plan to restore and rebuild the people according to a transformed pattern. The lectionary readings are from this part of the book. The land had been lost, because the people had broken the covenant (Jer. 2:17). Yet God promises blessing and answered prayer even in exile (29:1, 4-7), eventual restoration to the land (32:1-3a, 6-15), and a new covenant (31:27-34). The Davidic dynasty had been removed (21-22), but God will raise up another shepherd from the line of David (23:1-6; cf. 30:8-9; 33:14-26). God's promise to bring back the
ones who will repent is rooted in the revelation of God's everlasting love (31:3) that breaks the bounds of covenant curses and retribution.

September 30, 2001—Twenty-sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15; Ps. 91:1-6, 14-16; 1 Tim. 6:6-19; Luke 16:19-31

Jeremiah, "the weeping prophet," should have laughed. Perhaps he did laugh at the brazen hope of his cousin who asked him to buy a piece of land occupied by the enemy. Perhaps he laughed with delight over Hanamel's relief and gratitude when he agreed to do it. Perhaps he laughed with skepticism when God's word made this transaction a sign of his people's eventual return to their lost homes, as Sarah had laughed over her promised pregnancy (Gen. 18:12). But is anything impossible with God (Gen. 18:14; Jer. 32:17, 27)?

If Jeremiah laughed, he laughed alone. Judah was conquered and Jerusalem besieged by the Babylonians. Starvation and death already stalked the city's inhabitants. Their ultimate destruction was imminent. (This episode fits chronologically following chapter 37.) Jeremiah was also under siege, confined in the court of the guard within the palace complex. Yet he complied with his cousin's request to redeem his field, to give silver in exchange for a piece of land Jeremiah could not use and might never even see.

Even in ordinary circumstances acting as redeemer exhibited an extra measure of compassion, family loyalty, and generosity. One way that an Israelite could repay a large debt was by selling his inherited property. In Old Testament understanding the land belonged to God, who apportioned it to the Israelite tribes, clans, and family households (Lev. 25:23; Josh. 14:1-5). Law and custom preserved family inheritances for use within the clan and tribe. The law of redemption gave the closest male relative the legal right and moral encouragement to purchase his impoverished kin's land (Lev. 25:25). The law could not require him to do it, however, since he might be poor himself. The nearest relative had the freedom to choose whether to act as redeemer or not. He might risk his own security by paying his bankrupt relative's debt, but he was also free to refuse (cf. Ruth 4:6). Perhaps some redeemers were so generous that they gave back the land to their impoverished kin instead of keeping it for their own use.

Land was valuable because of the life-sustaining food and raw materials it produced. Unusable land was worthless. Hanamel's field in Anathoth was
behind enemy lines. Perhaps it was occupied by Babylonian troops, or its crops had been requisitioned to feed them. The field had become useless to Hanamel or anyone else in Jerusalem; yet he was bold and desperate enough to ask Jeremiah to redeem this worthless field with money. As a refugee from the countryside Hanamel needed cash to survive. Jerusalem was already on siege rations. Jeremiah himself received one loaf of bread per day (Jer 37:21) as the king’s prisoner until the bread in the city ran out. Hanamel may have been planning to escape southward, or even to go out to the Babylonians. Through Jeremiah God had promised survival to anyone who would surrender to Nebuchadnezzar’s forces (Jer. 21:9). One may imagine several stories for Hanamel, but the account focuses on Jeremiah and the significance of his actions. Jeremiah put his trust and hope in God, not in silver (1 Tim. 6:10). He spent seventeen shekels of silver (slightly less than 200 grams) to redeem Hanamel’s field. Hanamel left with ready cash, but Jeremiah chose to take refuge in God by faith and obedience.

Earlier in Jeremiah’s ministry his relatives from Anathoth had plotted to kill him in order to silence his message of judgment from God (Jer. 11:19, 21; 12:6). Did Hanamel or his father participate in that conspiracy? Chapter 11 implies that they did. A man who had wanted Jeremiah dead now asks Jeremiah to help him live! There is no hint in chapter 32 of the bitterness of Jeremiah’s appeal for retribution against his would-be assassins in 11:20 and 12:3. He had committed his cause to God’s justice and relinquished his desire for revenge. Now, as an act of compassion, personal sacrifice, and prophetic ministry he redeems his kinsman-enemy’s field. We do not know if Hanamel had come to believe God’s word through Jeremiah or if he simply considered the imprisoned prophet to be an easy mark. Nevertheless, the redemption transaction is a token of reconciliation between Jeremiah and his extended family.

This account of Jeremiah’s redeeming a field contributes to the book’s portrait of his individual faith, but it is primarily an act of his public ministry. By considering this act within the circumstances of its setting and in the context of the book, one may discern Jeremiah the individual relinquishing material security and the status of resentful victim in order to help his enemy. This act also goes on the public record to serve as a sign of God’s promise of restoration for the people. The redemption was carried out according to standard procedure in full view of the people in the court.
of the guard. There were many witnesses to Jeremiah's foolish transaction, and the perplexity expressed in 32:25 was no doubt theirs as well as his: "Yet you, O Lord God, have said to me, 'Buy the field for money and get witnesses'—though the city has been given into the hands of the Chaldeans." God's word of promise makes sense of Jeremiah's inexplicable transaction. "Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land" (32:15). By buying Hanamel's field Jeremiah is living in the future promised by God. Observers see a prophet literally putting his money where his mouth is! Furthermore, the procedural details about signature, seals, witnesses, and duplicate copies of the deed present this as an actual transaction, not as a pantomime or merely symbolic act. Sobering reality intrudes when Jeremiah instructs Baruch to store the copies of the deed in a clay jar so that "they may last for a long time" (32:14). Babylonian rule would last for seventy years (25:12; 29:10.) God's promises of restoration in chapters 30-33 now provide an extended interpretation of the deed stored in a jar. God had promised restoration even before the final Babylonian conquest.

Compassion, sacrificial generosity, and reconciliation are fruits of faith. By living in the future promised by God and not in the fearful present, one is free to give up trying to save oneself.

October 14, 2001—Twenty-eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7; Ps. 66:1-12; 2 Tim. 2:8-15; Luke 17:11-19

In 597 B.C.E. Nebuchadnezzar's army conquered Jerusalem for the first time. They captured the king and the royal household and deported priests, prophets, and people with them to Babylon. What was the meaning of their exile? Some of the people left behind thought that the exiles had been removed from the scene to purge the nation (Ezek. 11:14-15; Jer. 24). Other prophets predicted that their exile would be brief, because Babylonian power was already in decline (Jer. 28:2-4, 11; 29:24-32). This interpretation was patriotic and theologically conservative. Yahweh, the God of Israel, would protect and preserve the king and the Temple (cf. 2 Kings 19:34). Jeremiah's message, however, warned that the worst was yet to come. The Babylonians would complete their conquest of Judah and Jerusalem and rule the whole region for three generations of kings (27:7) or seventy years (25:12; 29:10). God had granted them this realm and called upon Judah and the neighboring countries to submit to their authority (27:5-7, 12-15). The
exiles of 597 had experienced what was in store for many others in Judah. In the decade between the two conquests Jeremiah used the exiles as an example of how to live under the divinely authorized Babylonian regime. The short book of prophecies that comprise chapter 29 offered them explanation, instruction, and promises for a hopeful future (29:11). This divine word to the first exiles found a larger audience after 586 B.C.E., when thousands more were taken away by the victorious Babylonians; and it continued to address generations of Jews scattered throughout the world's kingdoms.

The people described in v. 1 as the ones whom Nebuchadnezzar had carried off are addressed by God in v. 4 as “the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon.” Nebuchadnezzar has been God’s servant (27:6) in this matter, not a victorious opponent. In the Book of Jeremiah, most of the prophet’s ministry is devoted to exposing the justice of the death sentence against the kingdom of Judah (e.g., 29:17-19; 5:20-29; 11:1-17: 17:4). Accepting by faith that their exile is part of God’s plan provides a foundation for obedience and hope. Nebuchadnezzar’s victory does not disprove God’s power.

The simple commands to build, plant, and marry are another way of saying, “Do not plan an armed rebellion.” According to Deut. 20:5-9, a man who had built a house, planted a vineyard, or become engaged to marry was exempt from military service. Establishing a home took precedence over making war.

The pairs of imperatives in vv. 4-6 are commands with the implied promise of success. The same grammatical form is found in Gen. 1:28, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it,” and in Jer. 27:17, “[S]erve the king of Babylon and live.” These promises that exiles will live in the houses they build, eat the fruit of the gardens they plant, and see their children and grandchildren are much more than logical consequences. Each promise cancels one of the futility curses in effect against the covenant violators in Judah (Deut. 28:30-32; Jer. 5:15-17; 6:12). In exile life is possible under divine blessing (cf. Isa. 65:21-23). Build and plant are also key words from Jeremiah’s call (1:10), and “multiply” echoes the creation command and blessing (Gen. 1:28). This domestic scene among the exiles is a modest beginning of God’s plan to give new life to the people Israel (“I will make them many, and they shall not be few,” 30:19) and to build and plant nations and kingdoms (1:10). By settling down, the exiles were not giving up; they were...
acting in faith that their descendants would be the recipients of God's promises. (Compare the three generations in 29:6 and 27:7.)

Worshippers prayed for the peace of Jerusalem (Ps. 122:6-9), but God had denied the petition. The prophets who announced peace did not bring a true word from God (6:14; 8:11). Just as royal authority had been transferred from the kings of Judah and neighboring states to the king of Babylon for a set period (27:6-7), so the locus of peace and security had moved from Jerusalem to Babylon (29:7). The commands to "seek" and "pray for" Babylon's shalom (well-being) call for intercession on its behalf and requests for divine promises of salvation. Seek also implies action. By building up their own faithful communities, God's people in exile contributed to the well-being of the kingdom in which they made their homes. Babylonian rule was not the ultimate good or God's eternal kingdom, any more than the kingdom of Judah had been; but seeking the welfare of Babylon during its allotted time was compatible with faith in God's promises of restoration.

Suffering the loss of home, position, and freedom, exiles are vulnerable to false hope conjured out of denial and to apostasy arising from despair. They do not automatically become "good figs," ready to receive God's promises, just because they are exiles (24:4-7). They must believe God's word and live by it.

October 21, 2001—Twenty-ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Jeremiah 31:27-34; Ps. 119:97-104 or Ps. 19; 2 Tim. 3:14-4:5; Luke 18:1-8

The generation of Israelites in Judah and Jerusalem who suffered the most severe blows of conquest and exile used a proverb that expressed their despair over an unnatural and inexplicable experience, "The fathers have eaten sour grapes and the children's teeth go numb." The consequences of their ancestors' accumulated sins had fallen unfairly on them (cf. Lam. 5:7). The Book of Jeremiah is punctuated by the motif of the people's persistent refusal to respond to God's word through the prophets (7:13-14; 25:26; 11:7-8; 32:31-34; 44:9-10). Was their generation really more guilty than any other had been? If this disaster could happen again, what hope existed for the lasting future promised to Israel and Judah? Sins could build up over the course of many generations until catastrophic judgment fell once more. God promises to silence the proverb by restoring the just and consistent application of the law in Deut. 24:16, "only for their own crimes may
persons be put to death." The people who will be planted and built in the
land will be free from their ancestors' guilt but responsible for their own.

The promise of a new covenant in 31:31-34 provides a more radical
solution to the sin that would threaten the community. The Book of
Jeremiah explains the death of the kingdom of Israel and the kingdom of
Judah as the result of their unremitting failure to keep the terms of the
Sinai/Horeb covenant. God, who had offered the covenant relationship to
Israel in the first place, had the right to declare the covenant broken.

Through Jeremiah God had done so (11:1-17), refusing the overtures by the
people (14:7-9, 12) and forbidding intercession by the prophet (11:14; 14:11)
to renew the broken covenant once more. Even if Moses were present to
pray for forgiveness and renewal, God would not agree (15:1). The recipi­
ents of the hopeful prophecies in Jeremiah had already experienced the
effects of the covenant curses (Deut. 28:15-68). Within the terms of the
covention, Israel had no further claim on God and no right to be called the
Lord's people anymore. Yet God promised Israel that they would be God
and people to each other again (24:7; 30:22; 31:1). This restoration of rela­
tionship would be made possible by a new covenant. Since Yahweh's offer
of covenant to the Exodus generation had been an act of grace, how much
more gracious is this promise of a new covenant to a people with a long
history of unfaithfulness and rebellion!

Could anything prevent God's people from breaking the new covenant
as they had the old? The comparison between the old and new covenants
set forth in this passage focuses on this question. Some things will not
change. God will first forgive their sin so that they will begin with a clean
slate (31:34; cf. Exod. 34:9; Num. 14:19-20). The parties to the covenant are
the same—Yahweh and the house of Israel—and the relationship created by
the covenant is defined by the same formula, "I will be their God, and they
shall be my people" (31:33; 7:23; 11:4). Israel's obligation in the covenant is
still Yahweh's torah, the law or instruction that articulates the divine will.
The innovative feature of this new covenant is the place where the torah
will be written. Law written on stone or scrolls is vulnerable. Stone tablets
may be broken (Exod. 32:19), scrolls may be lost (2 Kings 22:8-20) or
burned (Jer. 36:23), teachers may fail (Jer. 8:8-9), and the people regularly
refuse to know and follow the Lord's way (Jer. 5:1-5). God will overcome the
vulnerability of the old covenant by inscribing the new covenant document
on the hearts of the people.
The metaphor of the heart is not sentimental or emotional but rational. In the Old Testament, the human mind is in the heart, not the head. With the heart one considers and makes commitments (e.g., "circumcise . . . your hearts," 4:4). Life choices leave their marks there. Jeremiah 17:1 describes Judah’s sin inscribed deeply on the tablets of their hearts. Sin and Yahweh’s torah cannot be written on the same heart. God will have to chip and polish off the sin inscription in order to replace it with the covenant obligations. Hearts transformed by God will enable and ensure the faithfulness of the restored people of God (24:7; 32:39-40).

People with God’s law in their hearts know the Lord. In Jeremiah, knowing God incorporates familiarity with God’s character and the nature of divine actions (9:24), the memory of how God had saved Israel (2:6-8), and the acceptance of God’s authority by obeying divine commands (9:3; 22:15-16; 24:7). In Psalm 119 (e.g., vv. 11, 34, 97-104) the psalmist seeks what is promised in Jer. 31:31-34. The poet meditates on God’s word, memorizes it, and is taught by God. In the promised new covenant, by God’s grace, people’s desires and decisions will embrace God’s self-revelation without reservation.

The date of this new covenant is vague ("the days are coming"). It will follow the return and restoration of God’s people promised in Jeremiah 30:1-31:28 ("after those days," 31:33; cf. 32:37-41). Jeremiah 31:27-28 summarizes the message of the book, using key terms from the first chapter. When God’s plan to pluck up, break down, overthrow, destroy, and bring calamity (1:10, 14) has been brought to completion, then God will build and plant Israel and Judah again (1:10) and establish the new covenant. The experience of prophesied judgment serves as evidence that God will also watch over the promises until they are fulfilled. In several places, the New Testament reflects on the fulfillment and reinterpretation of the new covenant promise in Jesus’ ministry (Luke 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:25; 2 Cor. 3:1-18; Heb. 8:8-13; 10:11-18). Yet Christian believers still apply themselves to know and do God’s will by studying the Word (2 Tim. 3:14-17), praying always (Luke 18:1), and seeking the illumination and guidance of the Holy Spirit.

November 25, 2001—Reign of Christ Sunday
Kings and prophets were often in conflict over different views of the rights and responsibilities of monarchs toward God and toward their subjects.
Kings were attracted to the idea that a monarch should secure his kingdom by impressing other kings. Displays of wealth and armies, treaties, conspiracies, and revolts maneuvered a king and his realm to avoid the many threats to their survival among the nations of the world. Support from a powerful deity provided the foundation of a king’s political support at home. The descendants of David who ruled from Jerusalem were able to claim legitimacy and security on the basis of Yahweh’s eternal covenant with David (2 Samuel 7; 23:1-7). Prophets like Jeremiah and the authors of the prophetic books in the Old Testament ministered with the knowledge that the kingdoms of Israel and Judah would die. The kings could not save them. According to God’s word through these prophets and books the kings were primarily responsible for leading their subjects in life-giving paths by doing justice and righteousness and by supporting true and exclusive worship of Yahweh (e.g., Jer. 22:15-17; 1 Kings 15:11-14; 16:25-26; cf. Pss. 72, 101). The latter position seems idealistic and naïve. No nation could survive in the real world of the Ancient Near East by attending only to the internal matters of social justice and the spiritual needs of its people. David himself had been used by God to defeat the Philistines, gain control of the full extent of the promised land, and grant Israel rest from their enemies (2 Samuel 8). The Deuteronomistic History and the Book of Jeremiah argue that loyal service to Yahweh alone was directly related to Israel’s success against external enemies (Joshua 23; Judges 2:16; Jer. 5:20-29).

The kings of Judah had been the cause of much of the nation’s suffering. Jehoiakim had oppressed, enslaved, and even killed the subjects entrusted to him in order to increase his wealth and embellish the image of his power (22:13-17). He killed a prophet and burned a scroll in the attempt to silence God’s accusation and warning (26:20-23; 36:23). Zedekiah could never find the courage or faith to obey God and submit peacefully to Nebuchadnezzar. His city, people, and family suffered violent overthrow as a result of his arrogance (38:17-28). The woe saying against the shepherds in 23:1-2 summarizes the collection of sayings against Judah’s last four kings in chapters 21–22.

The Babylonian conquest in 586 B.C.E. ended the reign of the last Davidic king in Jerusalem. God had promised David an eternal dynasty (2 Sam. 7:16). Psalm 89 eloquently articulates the distress caused by this contradiction. What was the meaning of that promise when there was no more king on the throne? The metaphor of king and subjects as shepherd and sheep hints at an answer. Between the shepherds who destroyed and
scattered the flock (23:1-2) and the new shepherds whom God will raise up (23:4). God promises to gather “my flock” back to the land (23:3). The gap in the rule of kings in the line of David will be filled by God.

The second promise identifies the shepherd whom the Lord will “raise up” (vv. 4-5) as a righteous branch, the legitimate descendant of the house of David. The reign of the king to come will provide safety for Israel and Judah (23:6). His rule will integrate protection from enemies without and oppressors within. The promise that he will “deal wisely, and ... execute justice and righteousness” epitomizes the type of royal leadership that had always been desired but had seldom been enjoyed (21:12; 22:3, 15). His defense of the alien, orphan, widow, and other oppressed people will create a kingdom within which no one will be afraid, dismayed, or lost. This king’s name, “Yahweh is our righteousness,” testifies to his leadership in worship. The prophet’s depiction of the righteous reigns of both the king and the Lord points Christians toward the coming reign of Christ.

Conclusion

In the New Testament, Zechariah and John the Baptist join the line of prophets who repeat God’s merciful promises and proclaim the coming of the Savior from David’s house (Luke 1:68-79). God has fulfilled these promises of forgiveness, salvation, and light by means of Jesus’ death under the mocking title “King of the Jews” (Luke 23:35-38) and his resurrection as the first-born from the dead (Col. 1:18). In the kingdom of the beloved Son we enjoy redemption and the forgiveness of sin (Col. 1:13-14), the capacity to serve the Lord in holiness and righteousness (Luke 1:79), and light to walk the path of peace (Luke 1:79; Col. 1:12). May we, therefore, endure all things with patience and give thanks to God with joyful hearts (Col. 1:11-12).

Pamela J. Scalise is Associate Professor of Old Testament at Fuller Theological Seminary in Seattle, Washington.
The "quest for the historical Jesus" has returned and is currently generating more publications than at any time in the history of scholarship. The central issue is the question of what can be reliably asserted about the person of Jesus on the basis of historical evidence alone—apart from the imposition of a faith perspective. I sometimes explain this to laity by asking the question, "What would it be appropriate for a teacher to say about Jesus in the public schools?" Most Christians in the United States recognize that it would not be appropriate for such a teacher to tell students that Jesus was born of a virgin; though we might believe this as Christians, it is a conclusion of faith rather than of historical research. That Jesus was crucified, however, or that he befriended outcasts and taught a radical ethic of love—these are matters that virtually all scholars (Christian or not) accept as indisputable facts of history.

Most pastors will know that the historical study of Jesus was in vogue in the nineteenth century but was derailed by the work of Albert Schweitzer, who seemed to demonstrate the futility and irrelevance of such research. The movement was taken up again in the 1960s in a chastened and more critical movement called "the new quest." For those who wish to review some of the essential documents of these periods, an anthology has recently been published, *The Historical Jesus Quest: Landmarks in the Search for the Jesus of History*, ed. by Gregory W. Dawes (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2000).

The current explosion of scholarship on the historical Jesus is sometimes called "the third quest," because it takes off in directions that were not pursued previously. One noteworthy facet of this third quest is its interdisciplinary character: scholars draw on resources of archaeology, literary criticism, cultural anthropology, sociological analysis, and even psycho-historical study in ways that were not possible in previous generations. This essay only begins to describe what is afoot, but it does so with attention to the questions that I hear most often from pastors and parishioners.
JESUS RESEARCH AND SCHOLARSHIP

How Can I Get Up to Date?

So much is being written so quickly that it may be impossible to stay current on this issue; but I can recommend three surveys of recent scholarship that provide a general orientation:

- Ben Witherington III, The Jesus Quest: The Third Search for the Jew of Nazareth (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997)
- Marcus J. Borg, Jesus in Contemporary Scholarship (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity, 1994)
- Mark Allan Powell, Jesus as a Figure in History: How Modern Historians View the Man from Galilee (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1998)

Witherington writes from a conservative theological perspective, seeking to correct notions that are most challenging to traditional Christian understandings of Jesus. Borg also critiques research from an explicitly Christian perspective, but he is more open to ideas that challenge traditional or even orthodox understandings of Jesus. Powell’s book is intended as a classroom text and so strives for neutrality, describing positions without indicating whether they are right or wrong.

Who Are the Major Players?

Many of the world’s most important biblical scholars and theologians are now involved in historical Jesus studies; but if pressed to name “the top three,” I would list the following (with their major works):

  N. T. Wright, Jesus and the Victory of God (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996)

These works are for the truly committed. They are dense tomes, devoted to explicating Jesus’ life and teaching with exhaustive attention to detail. Was Jesus really baptized by John? Did he have twelve disciples? Was he born in Bethlehem? Did he tell the story of the Good Samaritan?
Whatever the question, these scholars compile the data, weigh the arguments, and render their verdicts. Crossan's work generally favors a secularized view of Jesus as an innovative social reformer not particularly interested in matters of theological doctrine. Meier sticks pretty close to the biblical portrait of Jesus as an eschatological Jewish prophet who announced that God's kingdom was imminent, while challenging some Jewish traditions in startling ways. Wright radicalizes this view by presenting Jesus as a politically charged prophet to Israel who became convinced that he was the Messiah appointed to die as an atoning sacrifice for his people's sins.

There are shorter works also, ones that would be more appropriate for use in an adult study group. The following three books are merely examples of the dozens of fine "biographies of Jesus" that are being produced:

- E. P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (London: Penguin, 1993)
- Paula Fredriksen, *Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews: A Jewish Life and the Emergence of Christianity* (New York: Knopf, 1999)

All three of these works are written in a lively and engaging style. They do not assume an advanced level of theological awareness. All three are written by Christians with sensitivity to the impact that historical study can have on faith and piety; but all three also allow scholarship to challenge traditional notions in what they consider to be responsible ways. Borg does not (in this book) dispute facts about Jesus so much as encourage Christians to envision certain aspects of Jesus that are often ignored. What does it mean for us to realize that Jesus was a social revolutionary who defied the conventional wisdom of the political and religious authorities of his day? Do we really appreciate the charismatic quality of Jesus' personality—the fact that he was a mystic who saw visions, heard voices, and often devoted himself to long periods of prayer and fasting? Both Sanders and Fredriksen are more concerned with the historical reliability of biblical reports. They think that much of what the Synoptic Gospels tell us can be sustained, but there are specific instances where they conclude that the Bible is wrong. For both of them, a recurring problem is that the Gospels are written for a church engaged in Gentile mission, to the extent that the specifically Jewish aspects of Jesus' life and ministry are often transformed.
What about the Controversial Jesus Seminar?

Many laity have heard about historical Jesus studies primarily through reports about the Jesus Seminar. This group was a consortium of scholars who met during the 1990s and voted (with colored marbles) as to whether Jesus really did say or do the things attributed to him in the Bible. Their conclusions were often widely reported in national news outlets, especially when the verdict was negative. Headlines would scream, “Scholars Decide Jesus Did Not Teach the Lord’s Prayer.” Borg and Crossan were members of the Jesus Seminar, though they did not necessarily agree with all of that group’s findings.

The Jesus Seminar seems to be off the radar screen at present; but for those who remain exercised over the group or simply want to understand better the role that it played, I cautiously recommend two books that should be read in tandem:


Johnson’s book is a blistering attack on the Seminar by a theologian who believes its work is not only misguided but antagonistic to Christianity. Miller writes as a member of the Seminar and responds to Johnson’s charges, while also offering a sober analysis of what the group did and did not seek to accomplish.

What about Those Other Gospels?

Historical Jesus studies have brought new attention to the oft-ignored apocryphal gospels, such that many parishioners are now hearing of these works for the first time. A certain sensationalism attaches to the phenomenon when the volumes are touted as “secret gospels” that the church has tried to keep hidden from the public. In fact, they are readily available in theological libraries but are of less interest to the general public than conspiracy theorists would have us believe. For one thing, the only apocryphal gospel that any scholar regards as conveying authentic information about Jesus is the Gospel of Thomas. All of the other apocryphal gospels are studied for what they reveal about later Christianity, not what they say
about the historical person of Jesus. This is a rare point on which virtually all scholars of all persuasions agree. The Gospel of Thomas, furthermore, is not thought to reveal anything authentic about Jesus that would counter traditional concepts—at most, it enhances those concepts with similar, parallel material. The Jesus Seminar probably has a higher estimate of the worth of the Gospel of Thomas than any other group of scholars; and in the entire book they find only two unique sayings (that is, sayings not also found in our canonical Gospels) to be authentic. Neither of these unique sayings would alter the biblical portrait of Jesus. Finally, many laity may confuse the Gospel of Thomas with the Infancy Gospel of Thomas, which is a completely different work. The book that may contain some historically authentic material is simply a collection of sayings attributed to Jesus. The Infancy Gospel of Thomas is a second-century account of fanciful stories about Jesus when he was a child; no scholar considers these stories to be historically authentic.

What Was the Message of Jesus?

When we inquire historically as to the content of Jesus' teaching, we discover that scholars are divided. In general, the teaching contained in material attributed to the Q source is regarded as most reliable; material derived from Mark's Gospel belongs in a second tier; and that which is found only in John is least regarded. But we may also construe this topically.

The greatest level of agreement concerns what the Bible presents as Jesus' ethical teaching. Almost all historical scholars accept the authenticity of this material (e.g., the bulk of what is in the Sermon on the Mount). Most stress that Jesus proclaimed a social ethic in addition to personal morality, and many insist that this was geared specifically to the context of Israel's crisis as a puppet state of Rome. Crossan emphasizes Jesus' critique of the patron-client relations and brokerage systems that had evolved under Hellenistic rule. Wright argues for the hope of liberation and articulates Jesus' message as a prophetic call to dependence on God.

There is less agreement with regard to the authenticity of eschatological sayings attributed to Jesus: did he really think that the kingdom of God was at hand, and what did that mean? Many scholars (Meier, Sanders, Witherington, Wright) insist that Jesus expected the end of the world [or, at least, the end of a world] and proclaimed the imminent activity of God in this light. Recently, however, several scholars departed from this former
consensus. Borg, Crossan, and others associated with the Jesus Seminar argue that Jesus was not a future-oriented prophet but a down-to-earth sage, extolling lessons for a life focused on the present. These scholars attribute the eschatological material in the Gospels to later Christians who were responding to such apocalyptic crises as the disastrous Jewish war with Rome.

The material attributed to Jesus that is least likely to be regarded as authentic by historians is that in which he describes his own person or mission. When the Bible presents Jesus as saying that he must "give his life a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45) or as proclaiming "I am the way, and the truth, and the life" (John 14:6), most historians dismiss these remarks as projections of later Christians who are putting their own ideas about Jesus' significance on the lips of the teacher himself. There is a growing movement among many scholars, however, to ground apostolic christology in the historical teaching of Jesus. Wright asks, for instance, whether it is reasonable to presume that the radically monotheistic followers of Jesus would have attributed divinity to him if he had not told them that he was, in some sense, a manifestation of God.

The following volume offers a summary on the teaching of Jesus from a perspective that grants a high degree of authenticity to what is found in the Bible:


As the title implies, McKnight tries to relate all of Jesus' teaching (his ethics, prophetic announcements regarding the future, and articulation of his purpose and mission) to the context of Palestinian Judaism rather than to the later context of Gentile-oriented Christianity.

**Did Jesus Work Miracles?**

Most Christians are curious as to what historians do with all the reports of Jesus' miracles. It should come as no surprise that most scholars dismiss these stories as legendary or else bracket them out as unsuitable for historical discussion. To believe in a miracle requires faith. Therefore, by definition, no one can ever say on the basis of historical science alone that a miracle happened. This is not the end of the matter, however. Meier has recently broken with this longstanding tradition of avoiding discussion of the miraculous. He devotes several hundred pages in the second volume of
his study to a detailed examination of every miracle story in the Gospels. His conclusion is that, although historians cannot say whether or not the miracles occurred, they can (indeed, must) say that Jesus did inexplicable things that the people of his day regarded as miracles. This much, he avers, is historical fact. Wright goes even further, questioning whether historical reporting must restrict itself to limits set by post-Enlightenment scientific theory. If historical evidence points to something that scientists cannot explain (as he believes it does in this case), the tension should be allowed to stand. The following volume offers an in-depth study of the miracles from a perspective that is basically compatible with that of Meier and Wright:

- Graham H. Twelftree, *Jesus the Miracle Worker: A Historical and Theological Study* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999)

**Conclusion**

It is no doubt obvious that church leaders must approach this topic with the utmost sensitivity. Parishioners rightly perceive that what is being said about the historical Jesus has implications for the legitimacy of Christian doctrine and popular piety. Academic distinctions between "the Jesus of history" and "the Christ of faith" are artificial and unconvincing to the average churchgoer who hears whatever the academicians say about Jesus as applicable to the One they worship as Lord and Savior. A degree of humility is warranted—and perhaps attainable—by emphasizing the operative word: quest. The Bible presents the kingdom of God as something that must be sought (Matt. 6:33). Above all else, historical Jesus scholars are seekers.

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Mark Allan Powell is Professor of New Testament at Trinity Lutheran Seminary. He is the author of *Jesus as a Figure in History* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1998). He has been elected to serve as chair of the Historical Jesus Section of the Society of Biblical Literature, beginning in 2002.
As mainline denominations see their membership shrink, it is all too tempting to look beyond our borders to the secular world or non-denominational churches for ways to lure folks back. What many Christians seek, however, is a strong tradition with which to identify and one that is relevant to our changing world. *Doctrines and Discipline*, the third volume in a series dealing with United Methodism and U.S. American culture, suggests that our Wesleyan theological heritage is just such a tradition.

In *Doctrines and Discipline*, articles by a dozen different scholars examine aspects of our theological history and how recovery of the Wesleyan spirit can revitalize the contemporary church. Several themes emerge from the volume that make Methodism especially suited to a world marked by change: the dynamic character of Wesleyan theology; the diverse traditions that United Methodism holds in tension; rooting in a practical, lived-out faith; and a focus on Christian community, an important corrective to the U.S. American focus on individualism.

The dynamic character of Methodist theology is discussed in Dennis Campbell’s introduction to the book, Randy Maddox’s chapter on John Wesley’s practical theology, Gregory Jones’s look at distinctive features of Methodist theology, and Gregory Schneider’s chapter on the Holiness Movement. Jones points to the place of theological creativity alongside doctrines, while Campbell and Schneider emphasize the work of the Holy Spirit in theological reflection. The dynamic character of Methodism is, in fact, what makes this volume possible. With no set creeds or liturgy, the Methodist church can bring a variety of theological perspectives and methods into conversation with one another. For Methodists, theology is more a process than a set of doctrines; yet that process is increasingly absent from the lives of Methodist clergy and laity outside the academy.

The diverse traditions that comprise Methodism are explored in several
articles. Steven O'Malley describes the distinctive and often overlooked doctrines of the Evangelical United Brethren, a tradition that in itself embraces numerous influences. Schneider urges a balance of the Holiness tradition with the institutional aspects of connectionalism. Michael Cartwright points out the place doctrinal standards have held in African-American Methodist denominations, suggesting lessons these churches hold for The United Methodist Church and its possible reunification with Black Methodist denominations. Douglas Strong writes of the Methodist church's history of making room for both mainstream ideas and those on the margin.

Randy Maddox defines practical theology as the ongoing task of connecting life stories with the larger narrative of God's work in the world, and he traces the erosion of the role of the Methodist pastor-theologian. Other chapters in the volume discuss specific practical aspects of our faith: the importance of family and midweek worship (Karen Westerfield-Tucker); advocacy of public education (Elliott Wright); the process of moral discourse (Jack Keller); and the importance of small group experiences (David Lowes Watson). An article by the late Frederick Herzog cuts to the heart of the relationship between culture and religion, namely, the extent to which money has influenced the church and, specifically, its missional task. While Herzog addresses the priorities of the larger United Methodist Church, his critique can challenge the practical day-to-day choices of many individuals and local congregations.

Watson, Maddox, and Campbell deal with the communal aspects of Methodism, as does Bruce Robbins, who compares Methodist connectionalism to the ecumenical concept of koinonia. Both connectionalism and koinonia emphasize fellowship based on matters of the heart and offer much-needed organic models to an age defined by distinctiveness and individuality.

All of the articles provide historical background that is unfamiliar to many United Methodists, both clergy and laity. Some chapters bring this context into dialogue with the contemporary church better than others, with Maddox, Jones, and Watson offering specific suggestions for recovering Wesleyan ideals and practices. Several articles assess the current situation in The United Methodist Church but offer no constructive suggestions for applying the background they have outlined. This is especially unfortunate in Westerfield-Tucker's article on family and midweek worship,
DOCTRINES AND DISCIPLINE: METHODIST THEOLOGY AND PRACTICE

Wright's article on public education, and Strong's chapter on reconciling those on the margins with those in the middle. By addressing these topics, the writers clearly believe they are relevant to the contemporary church, but, by and large, they fail to define that relevance or any concrete actions the church might take in these directions.

Parish ministers will benefit from the entire book, but especially Maddox's chapter, in which he suggests that mainline churches are failing in the task of practical theology. By suggesting that the proper arena for theology is not the academy but the broader Christian community, Maddox encourages pastors and congregations to take up the task of theology, and he suggests ways for greater interaction between the parish and the academy. Since few ministers find time to "practice" theology, or even read a book such as this, they could plan to study chapters from the book at pastors' schools or with district or parish groups involving clergy and laity. Each chapter is accompanied by a summary of its argument and a number of reflection questions that can enrich individual or group study of the book. Such study can help move theological activity into the lives of those outside the academy and, given the dynamic character of Wesleyan theology, enliven and equip The United Methodist Church to accept its own inherent diversity and to meet the challenges of a changing world.

Reviewed by Jane Ellen Nickell. Nickell is Associate Pastor at First United Methodist Church in Huntington, West Virginia.
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When Nietzsche's madman announced dramatically in The Gay Science that God had died, many culture watchers took it as the prophetic death knell of the Christian faith. Many of them opined that, in time, the residual interest in "spiritual" or "supernatural" things will likely fade, allowing modern men and women to finally wriggle free from the hegemony of religious authority. Well-known American philosopher Richard Rorty echoes this attitude when he expresses the hope that the "liberal utopia" he envisions will be "enlightened, secular through and through," and one in which "no trace of divinity remained."\(^1\)

But contra Rorty's dreams of a secular culture, the last few decades of the twentieth century have witnessed a veritable explosion of interest in the topic of "spirituality"; and there is no sign of it abating in the twenty-first century. One only has to note the immense popularity of TV shows such as Touched by an Angel or the huge amount of space large-scale bookstores devote to "spiritual/inspirational" literature (running the gamut from angels and Sufism to New Age and journey spirituality) to realize that the spiritual marketplace is a very busy space indeed.

What is the significance of this new spiritual sensibility for Christian theology and practice? Believers in prevenient grace are careful to recognize that God's Spirit "blows where it chooses" (John 3:8). They also know that finding the sustenance that nourishes faithful discipleship amid this bewildering religious smorgasbord calls for careful thought and clear-eyed discernment. For as Wade Clark Roof has observed, "Much of what passes as spirituality is as thin as chicken soup and as transparent as celestine profits."\(^2\)

Methodists know that responsible theological reflection involves neither wholesale rejection of the prevailing spiritual winds blowing through culture nor unthinking accommodation to them. Contributors
Lyle Dabney, Margaret Jones, Henry Knight, Bryan Stone, and Mary Elizabeth Mullino Moore know this. Yet they all share the assumption that faithful renewal of Christian spirituality, precisely amid the plethora of contemporary options, requires a creative retrieval of the rich biblical and theological resources of the Christian tradition.

Interestingly, a "(re)turn to Spirit (Dabney) in a world that is both postmodern and post-Christendom involves emphases (the world as the realm of the presence and activity of God; the Spirit's renewal of creation through Christ; and selves as social and embodied) that resonate to concerns with the environment and a search for holism in many current spiritualities. However, as Henry Knight and Bryan Stone argue, a Christian spirituality fit for our time—both communal and individual—will, in fact, assume a countercultural form, sailing against many of the prevailing spiritual winds. For while the spiritual vibrancy in culture is surely to be welcomed, a distinctive Christian voice may serve as a much-needed critical corrective—indeed, a means of grace—to some of the questionable assumptions and expressions of popular spirituality, both inside and outside the churches. For example, the Wesleyan class meeting as the locus for spiritual discernment and formation, as retrieved by Margaret Jones (and also Henry Knight), offers a welcome alternative to the therapeutic style of so many contemporary small groups mushrooming around the country. And Mary Elizabeth Mullino Moore shows how the call to care for God's creation elicits in Methodists a unique stance of "committed, ambiguous hope"—a disposition from which environmentalists of all stripes, religious and secular, can learn.

Nietzsche's madman does have a lesson: Christians dare not rely uncritically on past religious concepts—including concepts of God. Every generation needs to experience afresh the renewing winds of the Spirit and forge a spirituality that is both faithful and inviting—even in a world post-Christendom.

Endnotes

Issue Theme

Renewing Spirit: Searching for Spirituality in a Postmodern World

(Re)Turning to the Spirit: Theology in a World Post-Christendom

D. LYLE DABNEY

In recent decades we have witnessed a remarkable turn to the Spirit and to spirituality in Christian theology and popular culture in North America. Gone are the days when the theologian Hendrikus Berkhof could complain that what he could find on these topics even in the Anglo-American literature was largely "of a devotional or semi-theological nature." Since the 1960s we have been inundated with a mounting flood of scholarly articles and monographs on the Holy Spirit and the spiritual life. Indeed, this theme has become prominent across the theological spectrum, with significant evangelical, feminist, ecological, ecumenical, liberation, and liberal theologians, among others, all joining in the debates. This led one Catholic theologian to comment not long ago, "From being the 'forgotten' member of the Trinity, the Spirit is fast becoming its most popular member."

In this article, I address a twofold question: What prompted this recent turn to the Holy Spirit? And what does it mean for the life and witness of those of us in the Wesleyan tradition? I begin by describing the context in which that turn must be understood, namely, the profound cultural and theological shift that has been taking place in our social world for some time—the passing of Christendom, and with it, the passing of modernity. Then I point out how this shift has spurred Christian theology to turn in a new way to pneumatology in its witness to Jesus Christ. Finally, I suggest that for the Wesleyan tradition this rediscovery of the Holy Spirit represents not a turn but a re-turn to its own theological language of origin—a return that holds great promise for the future of Wesleyanism.
A World Post-Christendom

In the past few years much has been made of the fact that we live in a time of change, a moment in which one millennium is passing and another beginning. But the real change we are experiencing in the United States today is much more about culture than chronology. From the earliest settlements of permanent European immigrants in the seventeenth century to the century just passed, the dominant cultural traditions in North America identified themselves in terms of Western Christendom. In the twentieth century, however, that dominance came to an end. Not incidentally, the Enlightenment, the chief intellectual tradition that challenged the hegemony of the traditions of Christendom in the modern period, has itself come to grief at the very moment of its apparent triumph. As a consequence, we live today in a social world that is at once both "postmodern" and "post-Christendom"; and it is in the midst of such a world that we have witnessed a turn to the Spirit.

Christendom was the synthesis between Christianity and culture that was the central project of Western civilization from the late classical to the modern periods. It represented, in the words of Orlando Costas, "a vision of a society organized around Christian principles and values with the church as its manager or mentor." From the fourth century, in which Christianity moved with breathtaking speed from illicit to licit religion and then to official cult of the Roman Empire, to the twentieth century, in which its social role in the Western nation-state changed almost as dramatically, Christianity and Western civilization were inextricably bound up with one another. The classic European example of this, of course, was medieval Catholicism, whose Scholastic theology held together accounts of classical reason and Christian revelation and whose ecclesiastical hierarchy served as the central institution around which its social world was organized. A classic Protestant variant on this was found in North America, first in the form of the Puritan and Presbyterian traditions that came to dominate the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century English colonies and then in the nineteenth-century Evangelical establishment of the young republic. Once again, a theology holding together reason and revelation corresponded to the central role played by the ecclesiastical institutions—now Protestant—in structuring and interpreting its social world.

The Enlightenment and the modern world it engendered, on the other
hand, represent an effort to identify an alternative foundation for Western society. In response to the breaking of the unity of European Christendom in the Reformation and Counter-Reformation of the sixteenth century and to the role played by the conflicting claims of the territorial and national churches in the religious wars of the seventeenth century, the Enlightenment turned from institutionalized religious authority to the authority of reason alone. Thus was born the modern world, in which three fundamental claims were at work. First, the past was depicted as a time of virtually unrelieved ignorance and superstition—an age of darkness in thralldom to oppressive religious authority. Second, in the present, at last the true nature and capacities of universal human reason were being discovered. In possession of a rational soul that afforded human beings an objective vantage point from which to obtain true knowledge, declared René Descartes, the individual as res cogitans (the "thinking thing") is the subject in the act of coming to know the object under investigation, the res extensa (the "thing extended in space and time"). As such, the individual human subject gains mastery over the object of knowledge, and with that mastery comes the ability to turn the object to the service of the human good. Thus follows logically the third claim: If the past was a dark night and the present the dawn of morning's light, then the future is the era in which humanity would warm itself in the bright sun of the Enlightenment's day. The future represents progress, evidenced by humanity's progressive control over the processes of nature through the systematic application of universal reason, resulting in the alleviation of human need and the fulfilling of human desire. "Do we now live in an enlightened age?" asked Immanuel Kant in 1784. "No," he opined, "but we do live in an age of enlightenment," the age in which the process whereby humanity would attain its proper end in history begins. The task, therefore, was "to dare to know"—Sapere aude! And such daring promised to produce forms of science and technology that would usher all humanity into modernity's bright light at the end of the dark medieval tunnel.

But at the end of one millennium and the beginning of another, much has changed for both Christendom and enlightened modernity in North America. Today it is clear that Christianity no longer enjoys a privileged status in Western society. While the roots of this development extend deep into the Western tradition, Christianity's disestablishment has come to flower only in the modern era. In the space of a relatively short period of
history, one of the constitutive principles of Western civilization has been abandoned. Thus, what began for us in the United States in the eighteenth century as the formal separation of church and state in the context of a social world defining itself materially as Christian and predominantly Protestant has developed in the twentieth century into a pluralistic social world in which Christianity is legally denied hegemony. The causes are complex but the consequence is simple: Our culture no longer defines itself in terms of the project of Western Christendom.

As Christendom has faltered, so too has the Enlightenment. If the light of modernity burned brightly when it played the role of the "rational" secular critic of a "dogmatic" religious tradition from the eighteenth to the early twentieth centuries, then by the twenty-first century its flame is all but extinguished. Modernity was always a counter tradition within the larger tradition of Western civilization and, as such, always lived off the dynamic of its critical reaction to Christendom. In the twentieth century, as modernity witnessed the rapid disintegration of the social and cultural world of Christendom, the Enlightenment intellectual traditions assumed the social role vacated by Christendom. This shift in social role yielded ambiguous results indeed. As these ambiguities have become more and more evident, modernity's assertion of intellectual and moral superiority to Christendom has become increasingly questionable and its fundamental claims subject to suspicion.

Take modernity's central claim concerning the present, namely, that the modern world represents the discovery of the true nature and capacities of universal human reason. Universal in this context has a twofold meaning: (1) All human beings share in the same universal rationality; thus, to be human is to be rational. (2) Human rationality is properly applicable to all the phenomena of the universe. Both senses of the term have now become problematic. On the one hand, we have discovered in the last century that rationality is a much more complex thing than how we are individually constituted in our souls or "hard wired" in our heads. Reason, as we now understand, is an activity of particular communities of discourse rather than a universal faculty of each individual human being. Language, culture, history, gender, social location, among a host of factors, shape our various forms of rationality. In many ways, humanity is polyrational—perhaps irreducibly so. Thus we live in what many term a postmodern age, where universal claims to knowledge are rejected in favor of particular epis-
temic claims and all forms of totalizing metaphysics and metanarratives are dismissed as oppressive. On the other hand, the Enlightenment notion that reason is sufficient for all the fields of human inquiry and endeavor has become untenable as well. Modern instrumental rationality has enabled us to split the atom but has proven itself quite powerless to unite humanity. It has illuminated our homes and streets but has failed to enlighten our lives. For while modern instrumental rationality has served to elucidate much of the "how" of the processes of the natural world about us, it has demonstrated a singular inability to speak of the "what" or the "why" of human existence in any way that is not ultimately reductionistic and vain. Thus there have arisen countless calls for alternative modes of knowing and understanding ourselves and the world in which we live.

This leads to the questioning of the modern claim about the past and the role of religion in Western society. If the Enlightenment claim to the discovery of universal reason is taken to be the false universalization of a quite particular and limited form of human rationality, then its attendant assertion that all previous eras and cultures are to be dismissed as ignorant and superstitious must be rejected. Thus, turning from the chauvinistic ethnocentrism of Western modernity in its relations with other cultures today, we are forced to draw the consequences concerning the cultures of yesterday as well. The West's cultural past is no more unrelieved darkness than the present is unalloyed light—and the religious authority acknowledged then did not necessarily keep humanity in the dark any more than the authority of reason championed now necessarily enlightens us. As this realization has dawned on our cultural consciousness, explicitly postmodern figures such as Gianni Vattimo and Jacques Derrida have begun to comment on the current "religious revival" taking place about us—arising largely outside the bounds of the traditional Western ecclesiastical institutions, they note—and to speak of a "return of the religious" today.

Finally, the Enlightenment claim for the future has also proven itself hollow. Modernity now has a history, and it is by no means simply one of "progress." It is, rather, highly ambiguous, at once both the boon and the bane of humanity. For the same science that has given us amazing abilities to understand and manipulate the processes of nature for human good has produced an industrial civilization that is systematically poisoning the air we breathe and the water we drink, consuming the resources of nature faster than they can be replaced, and even raising the possibility that the
world could ultimately be rendered uninhabitable. The technology we have
developed has produced prosperity for many, but has contributed mightily
to the impoverishment of many more in the Third World. In the twentieth
century, science and technology, justified in the name of “enlightened”
ideologies, led to the oppression, murder, rape, and plunder of humanity in
hot and cold wars both regional and worldwide. And while we still live in
the shadow of the weapons of mass destruction, in the twenty-first century
we are witnessing the emergence of a set of new technologies—robotics,
nano and genetic engineering, artificial intelligence—that promise to raise
our powers exponentially both for good and for ill. Thus, while it is
undoubtedly true that rapidly increasing change is one of the hallmarks of
modernity, that such change can simply be identified with progress is not.
And with that comes the realization that faith in history as the story of
humanity’s progressive mastery over nature is problematic indeed; our
future could end just as well in tragedy as in triumph.

At the end of one millennium and the beginning of another, therefore,
U.S. Americans live amid the cultural ruins of both the traditions of
Christendom and the counter traditions of the Enlightenment. This has left
both Christianity and society profoundly divided, confused, and anxious. In
the absence of the putative unity of either a general allegiance to the tradit­
ions of Christendom or the Enlightenment’s claims of universal reason, we
live in a profoundly “uncommon” world, made up of a host of competing
communities of discourse with no substantive means of adjudicating our
conflicting beliefs and practices. As a result, the ability to appeal success­
fully either to religious authority or to universal reason has diminished, and
the corresponding programs that have called for a return to a better past or
for the achievement of an ideal future have lost their compelling power.
Sophistry has now taken center stage in our public discourse and the vehe­
mence of our rhetoric has steadily increased, with today’s furious beating of
the air recalling yesterday’s pounding of the pulpit. And as the optimism of
modernity has faded, our social world has become suffused with a kind of
creeping despair that can be measured by the rise of endless consumption
and the expansion of an entertainment industry that is called upon to
provide perpetual diversion so that we may avoid considering how the full­
ness of our bellies cannot answer the emptiness of our lives. In this context,
much of Christianity is floundering as well.
Turning to the Spirit

But a new wind is now blowing through the ruins in the "cool of the evening" of Christendom. While we cannot yet say with certainty "where it comes from or where it is going," we can "hear the sound of it" and recognize the effect it is working among us. For we have observed a remarkable turn to the Spirit during the past several decades of theological discussion. This new interest in pneumatology began almost a hundred years ago among the poor and the marginalized in North American society with the rise of Pentecostalism, a branch on Wesleyanism's family tree. In less than a century that movement has grown from virtually nothing to numbers approaching 500 million worldwide and now ranks second in number only to Roman Catholicism (which claims approximately 950 million adherents). Yet, while many see in Pentecostalism the precursor of a new form of Christianity for the twenty-first century, the fact is that the movement's unprecedented rate of growth has not resulted in any significant theological development, for they have never brought their implicit theological concerns to explicit expression in a clear and compelling manner. Theological advance occurred only after 1950 as that pneumatological concern penetrated the theologizing of the older churches who were only then beginning to awaken to the passing of the social and cultural world they had long presupposed and learned to flourish within.

Thus the turn to the Spirit in Christian theology today. For a growing number of theologians are discovering in pneumatology the promise of a language about God and world that would enable Christianity to give witness to its faith in Jesus Christ in a manner faithful to both God's Word and God's world in an age that is postmodern and post-Christian. The end of Christendom means neither the end of Christianity nor the end of Christian theology. There was a Christianity before, during, and outside of Christendom; and now there is a Christianity after that social synthesis as well. Thus, to speak of Christendom and its passing is neither to idealize the past nor to demonize the present; it is, rather, to take the first step toward properly identifying the context in which we must now live and witness as Christians. The turn to the Spirit is a turn to the question that now confronts us: What does it mean to be Christian in a world post-Christendom?

There are at least three recurrent themes that characterize this turn to the Spirit. The first is a new turn to the world as the realm of the presence.
and activity of God—and the concern of all those who worship God in Jesus Christ. The tendency of the theologies that dominated Christian discourse in the era of Western Christendom was to stress divine transcendence—the distance between God and the world—and to limit the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit to the life of the Trinity in eternity, the institutional church in its mediation of grace, and the depths of the individual human soul. But as the role played by the institutional church in Western society slowly began to diminish, many Christian theologians became aware of just how narrowing the traditional conceptions of God and world were. As these theologians began to attend anew to Scripture's witness to the Holy Spirit regarding God's presence and activity in the world, they began speaking in a much broader manner of God's relationship to all creation.

Among the first to make this turn to the Spirit were feminist and ecological theologians. Elizabeth Johnson, for instance, reminds us,

> Of all the activities that theology attributes to the Spirit, the most significant is this: the Spirit is the creative origin of all life. In the words of the Nicene Creed, the Spirit is *vivificantem*, vivifier or life-giver. This designation refers to creation not just at the beginning of time but continuously: the Spirit is the unceasing, dynamic flow of divine power that sustains the universe, bringing forth life.7

As life-giving Spirit, the Spirit of God is present and active in all creation, not just in and through the offices of the institutional church. God is not the world, and the world is not God. But as the Creator who is constantly the source of life, God is never without the world; and as a creation constantly dependent upon a new gift of life, the world can never be without God.

In turning to the world, created and sustained in God's life-giving Spirit, these theologians are turning to the whole of God's creation as the realm of God's activity and concern—and ours as well. This signals the first step toward a new, more biblical and more appropriate, understanding of the role of Christianity in the postmodern social world. Two models of redemption have dominated the theological tradition of Western Christendom and defined the role played by the church. The Medieval and Reformation model envisioned salvation as the ascent of the soul to God. The modern model linked salvation with the Enlightenment claim for the future as the era of progress and identified history's fulfillment with Jesus' proclamation of the coming of the kingdom of God. Salvation, in this case, is the goal of
history, the ultimate triumph of humanity over nature; and the role of the church is the ethical instruction of a culture toward that end. But in a world post-Christendom, both of these models have become problematic—and so has the way they narrow the sphere of God's presence and activity. Neither is Christianity any longer the institution to which our social world turns to facilitate the ascent of the soul nor is it looked to as the privileged source of ethical guidance leading to historical progress. Thus, the turn to the Spirit is a turn away from the claim that the gospel of Jesus Christ is about either escaping from or triumphing over the world. For we have come to realize that Christianity neither points away from the world nor provides ethical formation for those wanting to conquer the world. Rather, Christianity is a community that serves God in the world in the Spirit of life—a community of spiritual discipleship to God's Christ in God's world for God's redemption of all creation.

The second theme that has characterized the turn to the Spirit is a new turn to the confession of Jesus as Christ, as the one who is the Son of God anointed by God's life-giving Spirit for the renewal of creation. The New Testament witness to Jesus of Nazareth is unambiguous: he is the Messiah (Matt. 1:1-17). Indeed, all four Gospels begin their depictions of the public ministry of Jesus with an account of his baptism in the Jordan, accompanied by the descent of the Holy Spirit upon him (Mark 1:9-11). All four portray his subsequent ministry as marked by the work of the Spirit in and through all his words and deeds. But from early in its history, much of Christian theology has found it difficult to speak adequately of the relationship between Jesus and the Spirit, largely because it has had difficulty in speaking of Jesus' humanity. In the Patristic debates about Jesus' divinity, theologians arguing for a Spirit Christology that could speak of the Son's ministry under the Spirit's guidance came to be seen as a threat to the arguments emphasizing and explicating Christ's divine nature. As heir of that tradition, most of Western theology has displayed a tendency to avoid or explain away the biblical witness to Jesus as the Christ, anointed by the Holy Spirit for his work in word and deed.

But the past fifty years has witnessed a dramatic change in this regard. While affirming the full divinity of the Son and the doctrine of the Trinity, a host of Protestant and Catholic theologians have turned to the development of a full-blooded pneumatological Christology, taking up once again the cry of earliest Christianity that Jesus is the Christ. They have done so in an
effort to give a more adequate account of the full humanity of the Son in his person and work. This turn was evident as early as 1948 in the theology of Karl Barth when, in the development of his anthropology, he depicts Jesus Christ as the “whole human being” and makes the Spirit fundamental for understanding the Son’s (and, therefore, our) humanity. In contrast to the tendency in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Protestant Liberalism to closely connect the Holy Spirit with the human spirit as the place of human self-transcendence, Barth and those who came after him saw pneumatology as the key to articulating the mode, means, and end of divine immanence in the full humanity of the incarnate Son of God. And there is no articulating of Jesus’ humanity or of the salvation that he works apart from the New Testament witness to the Holy Spirit. As Ralph Del Colle observes:

What is new and distinctive in Spirit-Christology is that... it proposes that the relationship between Jesus and God and the role of Christ in redemption cannot be fully understood unless there is an explicitly pneumatological dimension. In other words, the relationship between Jesus and the Spirit is as important to conveying the truth of the christological mystery with its soteriological consequences as that of Jesus and the Word.

The third theme that has characterized the turn to the Spirit is a turn to the whole of embodied life. Many theologians are now turning to the Spirit to speak of the redemption of the whole of our humanity, for they recognize that our whole, embodied, social selves, not just some part of us, are the “object” of God’s redemptive intent; and that, furthermore, God’s redemption of our lives occurs in and through the Holy Spirit. Here I must be very brief. In the biblical witness, human beings are depicted as “animated dust,” that is, as an integral part of the material creation that has been granted not simply existence but vivification (see Gen. 2:7). Humanity is related essentially to both the world and God. The material body is thus the locus but not the sum of human identity. Rather, the identity of an individual is determined by the totality of the social experiences, encounters, and relationships that make up the story of a given bodily existence. There is no “essential” self apart from concrete existence—a core “thing” that “has” experiences, relationships, and activities. Rather, human being, in the very act of breathing, is a contingent event of the gift of life given and maintained by God in the midst of the fabric of creation.
D. LYLE DABNEY

Many people are thus turning to the Spirit to find a language of salvation that addresses the whole of human life. They discover that God has acted in Jesus Christ and through the Spirit not to save our disembodied souls or the memory of our contribution to human progress but rather to save our "lives"—all that constitutes our socially embodied identity. The turn to the Spirit, therefore, emphasizes different metaphors of redemption than those that have dominated the Western tradition. In contrast to the forensic metaphors of medieval and Reformation theologies and the image of Jesus as ethical educator in modern theologies, those who turn to the Spirit are taking up metaphors that speak of God's redemption of the whole of human life: the language of resurrection and new creation.

This language is rooted in the Gospel narratives of Jesus and the Spirit. It is in the midst of human stories that the story of Jesus, God's Son and Christ, unfolds as an account of faithful obedience and life in the Spirit through death on the cross and new creation in the resurrection. The Gospels depict the resurrected Jesus as God's act of saving creation precisely as the mediator of the Spirit, the agent of God's new creation. Just as life was given at the beginning through God's condescending to breathe life into the dust, so in Jesus Christ God condescends to breathe new life into creation's death: "Receive the Holy Spirit" (John 21:20-23). The promise of the gospel, therefore, is new creation in the Spirit—the pledge that in receiving God's Spirit through the Son we receive now a foretaste of redemption ("Peace be with you" [John 20:19]). Moreover, through Christ and in the Spirit, we will be raised from the dead as Christ was raised. In raising our mortal bodies, God will redeem not just our bodies (the locus of our existence) but also the entirety of our embodied life: all our relationships, experiences, and encounters—everything that makes up our identities. That is the promise and the hope of the resurrection: the new creation of creation.

It is here also that we find a language to speak of discipleship to Christ today as we live in hope and anticipation of the new creation in the midst of the questions and suffering of the old. Like Abraham, we walk the length and breadth of this land, building altars to the God who is its Creator and Redeemer, seeking to make known in word and deed the God who is the source of life in creation and the resource of life in new creation through Jesus Christ and in the Spirit. Ours is the modest and humble task of seeking to follow the One who has unexpectedly included us in the Spirit's
reconciling mission. For Christ our Savior has come for the "re-creation" of all creation through the mediation of the Spirit. All that we have torn apart as the "spiritual" versus the "material" is part and parcel of God's salvation—God's new creation of creation through Jesus Christ and in the Holy Spirit.

Returning to Ourselves

The turn to the Spirit in recent theology represents for those of us in the Wesleyan tradition a return to our theological language of origin; as such, it holds great promise for us. As I have argued elsewhere, the Wesleyan tradition began with John and Charles Wesley's own turn to the Spirit in the social world of eighteenth-century English Christendom. Yet this turn, while always latent in the tradition and erupting in unexpected ways, has not been maintained by our tradition. When Methodists immigrated to the New World, they entered a society long dominated by Puritan and Reformed traditions that attempted to establish and maintain a form of Protestant Christendom. At the same time, this society was undergoing rapid change under the impact of the Enlightenment. The nineteenth century witnessed the Wesleyans lose track of their own theological trajectory as they became defined by the categories of the Protestant Scholastic theology that informed the struggles of the heirs of Puritanism and Reform to reestablish their social hegemony. In this struggle, Methodism was an ecclesiastical juggernaut. By the end of the nineteenth century, it was "America's church," with a congregation in virtually every county. But theologically, Methodism was shipwrecked, for it traded its own theological birthright for the thin gruel of nineteenth-century Protestant Scholasticism and then twentieth-century Protestant Liberalism. Thus were the heirs of Wesley enmeshed in the modern theological travails of the Reformation traditions, whose own internal contradictions were even then publicly playing out in a process that would ultimately result in the social and ideological polarization of "liberal" and "conservative" camps in the twentieth century.

Yet the previous generation of Wesley scholars has begun to produce new resources—above all, a critical edition of Wesley's Works—that are bringing to light the pneumatological orientation of Wesley and the early Wesleyan movement. The recovery of Wesley's theological trajectory that began in the last half of the twentieth century promises to address divisions, confusion, and fear by a communal act of remembrance and recovery and a social act of repentance and reembodiment. We cannot today simply repeat
Wesley, for the world in which we witness to Christ is very different from Wesley's. But we can and must do what Wesley did: turn anew to God's world and God's Christ by turning to the Spirit. The promise of a new turn to a theology of Spirit for the Wesleyan tradition is not only that we could at last come to ourselves but also that we could come to an other: that world of others both within and without the church. For in a world post-Christendom, a turn to the Spirit is a new turn to the proclamation in word and deed of God's redemption in Christ of all God's world.

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Endnotes

The Closet and the Class:
Some Historical Perspectives on Methodist Spiritual Discernment

MARGARET JONES

Anyone involved in mission today is aware of the privatized spirituality that presents a major obstacle to the communication of the gospel. "It's true for me" stands squarely in the pathway of any attempt to speak of truth, "it's right for me" impedes any attempt to discover ethical principles. Does Methodism have any distinctive resources for discerning the work of the Spirit and making truth claims today? This article is written from a British Methodist perspective by one who is involved in historical-theological reflection, active ministry, and ministerial formation. In this article, I seek illumination from the history of Methodism, not so much from John Wesley himself but from the method of spiritual and moral discernment reflected and reported in the lives of believers in his lifetime and immediately after—a method that balances inner experience and group discernment. I then examine some of the changes to which the method was subject in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and conclude by asking whether history can indeed indicate a characteristically Methodist pathway into the twenty-first century. The fact that the article is set firmly within my British Methodist perspective, leaving readers to make their own contrasts and comparisons, may be seen as part of its methodology. The sharing of narrative and testimony and the attempt to discern a common structure within differing circumstances may prove to be the essence of what we are looking for as we seek to find ways of discerning the Spirit's working in today's church. First, however, let me outline my "British Methodist perspective."

The average British Methodist in the pew (and even in the pulpit) does not automatically turn to history in search of inspiration or identity; and when history is invoked it may have little to do with John Wesley. Henry Rack has made a major historical contribution, but reappropriation of John Wesley as a theologian and spiritual practitioner for our own day is heavily dependent on Wesleyan scholarship in the United States over the
past thirty years. British Methodism is strongly marked by nineteenth-century developments: the schisms within Methodism, the publication of standard works of Methodist theology, the distinctive Nonconformist "chapel" culture and ethos in which Methodism shared, and the response to urban growth by way of the City Missions. Twentieth-century British Methodist theology has on the whole responded to contemporary European developments (in biblical studies, for example) rather than to the writings of the Wesleys. Any sense of continuity with John Wesley tends to be expressed in the "heritage" mode (or mood) of nostalgia, which characterizes so much of contemporary Britain's relationship with its past. When Wesley's theology and spirituality are explored, there can be a sense of recognition, but even this can be elusive. Peter Jarvis, Methodist minister, sociologist, and professor of education, was lecturing recently at Wesley's Chapel in London on "Methodism in an Age of Learning." He concluded that the basic emphases of Methodism have left us the best equipped of all churches to fit into the "learning society" that is the world of today, because "John Wesley created a learning organisation—but we've lost it."3

This sense of something lost—a past that might have valuable lessons to teach were it not just out of reach—applies not only to John Wesley but also to much that the eighteenth century created, including the small group method of spiritual discernment on which we focus. The loss and rediscovery of the class meeting wears a different face on different sides of the Atlantic. British Methodism has always retained a commitment to small group membership. There was concern about the role of the class meeting as early as the 1820s, and in 1889 the Wesleyan Conference broke the link between attendance at class and membership of the society (church). Some class meetings remained as effective faith sharing groups. Many more became "pastoral groups," maintaining a general oversight of members' welfare. Thus the group ethos remained strong, but not particularly theological. Writing on "Methodism and Fellowship," Clive Marsh (secretary of the British Faith and Order Committee) defends "the assumption that 'fellowship' is . . . worth holding on to" while highlighting its decline into superficial friendliness and the lack of the dimension of confession, repentance, and forgiveness in most church fellowship. Brian Beck (former principal of Wesley House, Cambridge; former secretary of Conference; and former president of Conference) includes among his list of distinctive Methodist emphases or characteristics, "We expect the local church to be a
close-knit and supportive fellowship in which faith is shared. Present-day Methodism may know about fellowship, but it does not necessarily link it to the sharing of faith. Consequently, when faith sharing groups sprang up in other churches under the impact of the Charismatic revival of the 1970s, Methodists were ready to welcome such developments but, paradoxically, may now maintain that small groups are characteristic no more of Methodism than of other branches of the church.

Such an awareness of the ecumenical context is an important part of contemporary British Methodist self-understanding: nearly 700 out of 6,381 churches are in some form of ecumenical partnership; all students training for ministry are in some kind of ecumenical situation; talks toward unity are ongoing with the Church of England. These factors create a new sense of urgency in reflections on Methodist identity. In this ecumenical setting, at a time of rapid change and against a background of falling membership, British Methodism treads a fine line between convergence and failure of nerve. It can be difficult to speak of Methodist emphases without sounding anti-ecumenical. If Methodist distinctiveness needs to be disinterred from history, perhaps the time has come to abandon it. If, on the other hand, there are still distinctively Methodist features of the collective psyche, a time of ecumenical convergence is above all the time to be aware of them in order to preserve what is valuable. Reflecting on Methodist distinctiveness at such a time is a challenge indeed.

From this perspective it can seem that any traces of a small group method of spiritual discernment in Methodism are only a residuary trickle (or, to change the metaphor, a kind of background radiation from the Big Bang) fed now from other streams. Examination of Methodist history and theology suggests otherwise: it may be that current trends of thought make the original method more accessible now than at any time during the past two hundred years. I hope that the analysis of the problem below will lead readers to interrogate their own situation in light of the broadly outlined developments with which this essay concludes.

We are justified in speaking of a "method" of spiritual discernment in eighteenth-century Methodism—a method not formally prescribed but clearly defined in practice, which offered group "checks and balances" to the individual encounter with God, the experience of justification by faith, which is at the heart of evangelical religion. Significant work has been done on both sides of the Atlantic on the relationship between individual and
group experience in early Methodist spirituality. The correspondence of the Wesley brothers and other Methodist leaders, autobiographies, and above all "Lives" provide abundant source material. My own work has focused on a more limited range: the "Lives" (running into many hundreds) published in the denominational magazine from its foundation in 1778 until about 1850. The basic building block of this spirituality was the individual's testimony to the work of God in his or her life—the "witness of the Spirit." This one-to-one relationship with God may be described as "the closet" (a word that remains current as an archaism in British English in the sense of a small dressing room, not the American sense of what the British would call a cupboard!). Thus Thomas Coke writes of his wife Penelope in 1812, "By waiting on God in her closet she renewed her strength." The private place could, of course, be physically anywhere. Mrs. Skirmer "was going to milk the cows one night, when it pleased the Lord to work this great change in her heart." It was most typically when alone that individuals received assurance of the forgiveness of their sins. Methodist spiritual discernment is a child of the Enlightenment thought world, in which the subject's self-awareness provides the ultimate guarantee of reported experience.

However, inner experience was set within a structure of shared testimony. Persons "groaning after salvation" would have heard others describe the experience that they themselves were seeking and in their turn offered their own testimony. Henry Rack notes that not all early converts immediately recognized, or were able to name, what was happening to them, until they encountered the normative narrative proffered by others. As the class system became established, patterns of experience were laid down and claimed, being shared not only in class but also in the widely read denominational magazines. William Saunderson's story is typical: he "received mercy" in private prayer but "with joy ... embraced the first opportunity that offered of telling the members of the Class ... what great things the Lord had done for his soul." The class's response would be one of joy but also of a constant watchfulness over reported experience and conduct. "I know, I feel, my Saviour mine" (Charles Wesley) testified to an awareness not simply of an emotional experience but of a presence capable of changing the springs of volition and action. Subsequent testimony would be expected to provide evidence that the convert was "pressing on to perfection" or "maintaining a consistent course"—evidence of a unified spirituality in which inner conviction led to changed character and lifestyle.
enabling the Spirit's work to be judged by its fruits.

Such a method of spiritual discernment works well while there is a good fit between the normative narrative and individual instances of it. But by the early nineteenth century, accounts of discourse within the class meeting are pointing to a situation where the "fit" is becoming less satisfactory. People find difficulty in telling their story; they pass the time in "social conversation" and "meet (in class) once or twice in a quarter for the sake of being continued in the Society." This process has been well investigated and described in terms of the transition from society to church. As church members became more likely to be children of existing members rather than new converts, the nature of the experience reported in class changed. Class leaders continuing to work with the old norms were unable to shape a new narrative for the nurture of "once-born" believers. Was this simply a case of an institution clinging to its glorious past, trying to live by foundational narratives that were no longer relevant? Why was the class unable to meet the needs of a new generation of believers?

These changes can also be analyzed in terms of a changed discourse of spiritual discernment. This would affect not only British Methodism in its specific social and historical setting but also other locations sharing the same basic worldview. Study of more formal Methodist theological writing suggests that fundamental changes did indeed take place in people's thought world, in the relationship between inner experience and its reporting and validation, destroying the unified life story of early Methodism and the place of the class meeting in it. We consider some of these changes in the linked areas of the verification of spiritual experience, the anthropology of spiritual motivation, and the theology of the Holy Spirit.

Verification of Spiritual Experience

The late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries saw a revival of the Platonic anthropology in which "feelings" (note the plural) took on a life of their own and became sometimes ungovernable forces which, in pursuit of ethical discernment, needed to be restrained by the superior force of reason. Romanticism understood that key word feeling to mean "emotion" rather than its earlier meaning of "heart knowledge." Emphasis on discerning the Spirit's work by its fruits was submerged in a reliance on individual testimony to an emotional state. Those who pioneered and charted theology's assimilation of these changes, such as Schleiermacher and Coleridge, might
insist on setting individual experience in its communal and historical context; but evangelical religion, with its fundamental commitment to the closet, was especially vulnerable to this kind of privatization.

One response to this development was to privilege feeling and individual testimony, acknowledging its inaccessibility to verification except by direct revelation. This process can be seen in the classic nineteenth-century work on the Holy Spirit, *The Tongue of Fire*, by William Arthur. This work, representing the impact of midcentury holiness movements on an established denomination, gives an account of the Spirit's activity that is moderate in many respects, not least in its treatment of the relationship between the individual and the corporate. Arthur is a good Methodist when he writes, "Religion is a life to be lived in fellowship; a conflict to be sustained, not singly, but in bands." Closer reading, however, makes it apparent that the function of the fellowship has changed; it is to be prized as a means of encouragement rather than discernment. Religion is "a redemption, of which we are to impart the joy; a hope, an anticipation, of which the comforts are to be gladly told to those who 'fear the Lord.'" It is feelings ("the joy," "the comforts") rather than the narrative of "what God has done" that are to be shared in the "social fellowship of the saints." The mystery of God's communication with human beings is shrouded in incommunicable privacy: "To the old question, 'How can these things be?' the one sufficient answer is, They are spiritually discerned." Such an account of spiritual discernment throws all the weight of verification onto the believer's own testimony and makes it difficult to talk of sanctification. The fruit of the Spirit is "the scriptural marks of the regenerated," but "practical sanctification of life" is seen as the product purely of the mysterious inner transaction, not as a process involving other "practical believers."

Arthur believes that the Spirit will provide his own verification to those who seek humbly and prayerfully; the ensuing revival will guarantee the genuineness of the revelation. Those in nineteenth-century Methodism in search of a less individualistic pathway (especially in its Wesleyan branch) were not without resource. Pressures on Wesleyan Methodism in the second half of the nineteenth century led some to emphasize the corporate nature of the means of grace. In the standard work of late nineteenth-century Methodist theology, the *Compendium of Christian Theology*, W. B. Pope wrote at a time when the Wesleyan Methodist Church in Great Britain felt itself to be particularly under attack from the Anglo-Catholic wing of the
Church of England. Controversialists led by E. B. Pusey attacked Methodism for claiming to be a church in the absence of apostolic orders and famously dismissed the Methodist doctrine of assurance as "justification by feeling." Pope is thus summarizing thirty years of controversy as he emphasizes the church's role in spiritual discernment ("the class" in our terminology), seeking to demonstrate Methodism's claim to be a true church rather than an association of enthusiasts. The "secret instruction" that provides assurance is given through the Spirit "not only by secret and personal illumination, but through the channels of teaching provided in his Church, which is the pillar and ground of truth." But Pope's basic Methodist commitment to evangelical religion undermines this attempt at reliance on the church and its teaching. Although "the Word of God and prayer" (as ministered by the church) "are generally the vehicle, instrument and channel for his impartation of assurance," what prayer brings about is "the application to the soul of the promises of the Word of God... the seal set by the soul itself, in its experience, to the verity and value of the external pledges." Pope thus remains caught in the net of Romantic inferiority, thrown back on unverifiable inner experience. He goes as far as he can, claiming that Methodism has cleared the doctrine of assurance of misapprehensions in presenting it as "the direct witness of the Spirit, not independent of the objective... grounds of assurance, but given through them..." And yet Methodist integrity forces him to add "... or indeed without them, directly to the soul." Methodism was thus unable to give an independent authority to the church as the guarantor of spiritual discernment. The conversion experience remained essential to Methodist spirituality, making it impossible for even the most clerical of Wesleyans to lay all the emphasis on the church's efficacy as the transmitter of grace; yet the reciprocal relationship between individual experience and its corporate validation, played out in the class meeting, had been lost. Reception remained crucial and yet unverifiable.

**Anthropology of Spiritual Motivation**

In this climate of thought the narrative of the conversion experience took on a new kind of authority. Converts in all branches of evangelical religion were expected to give testimony to experience described in the form approved by the community. But that narrative lost its power as a tool of spiritual formation because of changes in theological anthropology, which remained dominant throughout the nineteenth century and much of the twentieth. Despite
his emphasis on the inner nature of the witness of the Spirit, Arthur remained a classical Wesleyan by retaining the essential connection between feeling and action. Dividing human nature into intellect, emotions, and moral powers, he identified the "heart" with the moral nature—"the self and substance of a man"—and saw "the crowning power of the messenger of God" as "power over the moral man; power which, whether it approaches the soul through the avenues of the intellect or of the affection, does reach into the soul." In the course of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth, this understanding changed. The "heart," being seen as the seat of the "emotions," lost its connection with the will and the powers of discernment. Arthur's difficulty in providing verification of sanctification has already been noted, but those branches of Methodism that regarded their identity as linked with the experiential fervor of the early days had an even greater difficulty. Thus it was a Primitive Methodist theological tutor, A. L. Humphries, writing on "The Work of the Holy Spirit" in 1929, who could assert that "though Methodism discourages extravagances of emotion, and has rightly attached supreme importance to the ethical, it has always held religion to be emotional in both its appeal and expression." On the question of sanctification, Humphries attempted to refute the charge by R. W. Dale, the great Congregationalist leader and preacher of the late nineteenth century, that the Evangelical Revival did not lay enough emphasis on ethical living and moral training. He referred to John Wesley's teaching and the discipline of the early Methodist societies, but with regard to his own day could say only that the Holy Spirit makes us holy by renewing our hearts. Dale's charge stands proved by Humphries's inability to connect the renewed heart with any verifiable narrative of renewed conduct.

Theology of the Holy Spirit

These changes in the verification of experience and the understanding of theological anthropology radically altered Methodist spirituality. Linked changes in pneumatology compounded the problem. These changes can be seen at work in both the "Lives" and in theological writing from the 1820s onward. Considering the importance of "the witness of the Spirit" in early Methodist spirituality, it is surprising to find how infrequently the Holy Spirit is named in the "Lives" in the Magazine before about 1820. Faith and affection were centered on Jesus: The question asked of the dying believer was "Is Jesus precious?" More developed theological statements named the
inner witness of the Spirit as enabling the believer to answer this question in the affirmative, but the language of the "Lives" is generally Christocentric. Typically "One night as he was returning from a dance, the Lord struck him with powerful convictions." With joy he embraced the first opportunity . . . of telling the members of the Class in which he met, what great things the Lord had done for his soul." The "Lord" who does these things is thus the one who has performed the work of salvation; he is the object of the believer's love and obedience and the one who creates these convictions and affections in the soul.

We can see a different kind of discourse from the 1820s onward. The presence of Christ in the class meeting itself is more often affirmed. Eventually the class becomes the place where the Spirit may be experienced: She received "a rich baptism of the Spirit" on the occasion of her last meeting in class. This development has important implications for the power relationships of spirituality. If the outpouring of the Spirit is expected to be received in class rather than in the closet, the experience depends to some extent on the dynamics of the group and the position of the leader. Class members who reacted unfavorably in any way, who felt themselves excluded or were unable to identify with the normative narrative, were thus deprived of the space in which to have their own encounter with the Spirit.

At the same time, a new kind of theological language was developing. A pamphlet by the Rev. James H. Stewart, an evangelical clergyman and Chaplain to the Most Noble the Marquis of Bute, introduced with approval by the Magazine's editor in 1821, asserts that "the Holy Spirit has not received a due share of our consideration." Wrestling with the fact that the many missionary, Bible, and evangelical societies have not succeeded in evangelizing the whole world, Stewart concludes that "to all this human machinery must be added the mighty working of that Spirit without whom nothing . . . is wise, or strong, or holy." The word machinery alerts us to the presence of the Romantic relationship between matter and spirit: a more radical dualism, separating grace from the means; divine agency conceived of as a special force, not integrated with the "normal" structures of the church. The "normal" course of a believer's experience now seemed to present insufficient evidence of the Spirit's presence and power. Something more supernatural must be sought, verified by signs and wonders such as the speaking in tongues, which characterized Edward Irving's Catholic Apostolic Church of the 1830s—the first modern instance of institutional-
ized glossolalia. While the time was undoubtedly ripe for a reassertion of the Spirit's place in the economy of salvation, this overmechanical conception of the Spirit led, paradoxically, to a breakdown of the classical Wesleyan conversion narrative. Instead of the institutions of Christianity being seen as the necessary locus of the means of grace, it became possible for William Arthur, for example, to speak of Christianity without the Holy Spirit: "a natural agency for social improvement." We are in a world far removed from the Lord's work with Mrs. Skirmer as she went to milk the cows.

The changes delineated here may be summed up as the loss of Methodism's ability to tell and receive individual narratives of spiritual change in a collective setting. This loss is seen as resulting from a radically changed discourse about spiritual experience. In this new discourse, the experience itself can be verified only by the subject's own testimony; the experience is seen to consist of "feelings," rather than dispositions or states of will; and the church's structures are seen as external to the experience, rather than helping to shape and constitute it. This situation is presented as part of the history of ideas—but where are we now? Does this state of loss characterize the present day, or has something changed?

If TV dramas and recently published biographies are any guide, our age finds the eighteenth century more congenial than the nineteenth. Methodism's desire to explore the roots of its identity is set in the context of a postindustrial society joining hands with a preindustrial one. In the age of the factory not only work but also religion, entertainment, and education were all focused on a centralized institution embodied in a building. The individual's identity, closely bound up with that of the institution, oscillated between the poles of institutional control and a fiercely defended privacy. Both before and after this period, work, entertainment, education, and religion—experienced in smaller units focused on the home—impinged, and impinge, differently on the individual. Domestic industrial production, giving way to the factory as the driving force of Western economies, was superseded in its turn by e-commerce. Similarly, the dame school was replaced by the Mechanics' Institute and in its turn by Web-based distance learning; and the traveling freak show by the cinema and in its turn by multichannel television. And in the sphere of religious institutions the class meeting and the home-based preaching meeting gave way to the grand Gothic chapel (with organ) and in its turn to . . . ?

If such an interpretation should seem unfashionably Marxist, contem-
Porary theories of identity provide a less materialist view of the eighteenth century's renewed appeal. Perhaps this is the point at which the term postmodernism can no longer be avoided. In the first place, the turn to narrative theories of identity formation has led to a reinstatement of the reciprocal relationship between the individual and the group. Feminist psychology, virtue ethics, and language theory have all contributed to an understanding of human persons as "secure in their particularity and constituted by their relations." In all these models the individual's identity is discerned in the context of relationships, by a process of testing the inwardly perceived narrative of life events against the normative narratives of the group.

Second, moves away from crudely behaviorist theories of learning have reestablished the link between emotion and will. Despite the emphases on testing and the acquisition of skills that sometimes seem to dominate current educational practice, the equally current vogue for "lifelong learning" tends to a more holistic view of personal growth and change—a view that sits well with classical Wesleyan praxis. To return to Peter Jarvis: it is possible to model learning as the construction and transformation of experience through the encounter with and the acquisition of knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, emotions, beliefs, and sensory input. By a process of memorization, evaluation, reflection, and practice these acquisitions become the stuff of changed experience, and so the cycle continues. Such a model of the transformation of experience through learning has the potential to move spiritual discernment away from the stalemate in which only the unmediated Spirit can change the heart but only the inaccessible heart can testify to the work of the Spirit.

Third, moves to reestablish trinitarian theology as the basis for understanding human personhood have combined with the relational view of human identity to bring the Holy Spirit back into dialogue with the structures of the church. The British Council of Churches' study document, The Forgotten Trinity, draws on many sources in proposing that "the being of God is a relational unity." Such a notion of God can be used to "throw light on created personhood," yielding a particularity based in reciprocity and relationship. It is noteworthy that this understanding of the Trinity owes much to the Cappadocian Fathers, who deeply influenced John Wesley.

It is, then, possible that the eighteenth and twenty-first centuries may address each other. The inner narrative of a human life given voice only by the learned language of the constitutive community; lived experience as
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Endnotes

6. Ibid.
8. *The Magazine*, founded by John Wesley as the *Arminian Magazine*, was known as the *Methodist Magazine* from 1798 and the *Wesleyan Methodist Magazine* from 1822.
10. Ibid., 26 (1803): 17.

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18. Ibid., 194.
19. Ibid., 188, 196.
22. Ibid., 3: 121 (italics mine).
23. Ibid., 128 (italics mine).
25. Ibid., 103.
28. Ibid., 25 (1812): 323.
31. Ibid., 445.
The Spirit and the Mission of God

HENRY H. KNIGHT III

The Holy Spirit is the presence and power of God in the world. To speak of the Spirit as presence is to say that God is not far away but near, and to speak of power is to claim that the Spirit is actively bringing about the purposes of God. The work of the Spirit involves change, transformation, and new creation.

But it is important to describe not only the work but also the person of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the third person of the triune God whose character and mission is most fully revealed in Jesus Christ. Thus, when the Holy Spirit is present, there is found the same love that was in Jesus Christ, the love that is essentially who God is. For this love to characterize creation as it does the trinitarian life of God is central to the mission of God in the world. Today, between Pentecost and Parousia, the Holy Spirit is the agent of that mission.

The Mission of God

The recovery of the mission of God as a central biblical theme revolutionized missiology in the last half of the twentieth century. Prior to its recovery, mission was understood from an ecclesiocentric perspective as the mission of the church. Mission was seen as one of many tasks that the church undertook, having as its purpose the saving of souls and the planting of new churches. In practice, this meant the churches in the Christianized West would send missionaries to bring the gospel to the rest of the world.

The missionary effort of the nineteenth century is a complex phenomenon, involving faithfulness, insensitivity, cultural imperialism, genuine evangelism, complicity in violence, and defense of people against violence. While we admire the sacrifice and commitment of many of these missionaries, we have become painfully aware of the cultural blindness of the missionary enterprise as a whole. All too often it was simply assumed that a proper Christian church would look like a Western church, and non-Western cultures would eventually "progress" to become like Western culture. This flawed perspective owed more to the ideal of progress associ-
ated with post-Enlightenment modernity than to biblical Christianity; but it nonetheless seriously compromised Christian mission.

Lamin Sanneh has argued that by translating the Scriptures into the language of the people the missionaries in the end enabled truly indigenous churches to emerge. We can be grateful for that and for the cross-cultural sensitivity that pervades contemporary missiology. But the problem was much deeper than a failure to take seriously different cultural contexts. The fundamental problem was an understanding of mission rooted more in Western Christendom than in biblical revelation and apostolic Christianity.

Mission today is seen as the salvific activity of the triune God in the world. As David Bosch has said,

Mission has its origin in the heart of God. God is a fountain of sending love. This is the deepest source of mission. It is impossible to penetrate deeper still; there is mission because God loves people.

There is a remarkable ecumenical consensus on this point. Whether or not the term *missio Dei* (or *mission of God*) is used, it has been affirmed in every major missional document in recent decades, including those of the World Council of Churches (representing mainline Protestantism and Eastern Orthodoxy), the Roman Catholic Church since Vatican II, and the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization (representing evangelical Protestantism). Of course, there is disagreement between and within all of these groups over the exact understanding of the *missio Dei*, including such issues as the relative priority of evangelism to social liberation and the exact role of the church. Nonetheless, all agree that the goal is to faithfully understand the mission of God and to faithfully participate in that mission.

A missional God is a sending God. We see this initially in the story of Israel, where God calls and sends Abraham, Moses, and the prophets, among others. The creating of a people who would reflect God’s own character and be a blessing to the nations was an integral part of God’s mission.

Then came the sending of the Son, through whose incarnation, life, death, and resurrection comes salvation for all. In Christ God is triumphant over sin, suffering, injustice, and death; through Christ God offers forgiveness and a new life that not even death can end.

Christ reveals in fullness the two core elements that have characterized God’s mission from the beginning, namely, God’s reign and God’s love.
Jesus' own proclamation was that the kingdom or reign of God was at hand; hearers should therefore repent and believe this good news. With his resurrection Jesus was shown to have embodied the reign of God in his life and crucifixion. As the risen and living Lord, he would come again to establish God's reign in fullness over all creation.

Inextricably woven with God's reign is the love of God revealed in Christ. The Son was sent because God loved the world (John 3:16), and his life and death is the concrete embodiment of divine love in the world. For God's reign to be extended over all creation means for God's love to triumph over all that is contrary to love. Hence the coming Kingdom will be marked by the absence of sin and death, as well as of injustice, oppression, hunger, and other forms of suffering.

The reign of God and the Lordship of Christ are misconstrued apart from the love revealed in Jesus' life and death. Jesus was born in a stable, touched lepers, honored children, conversed with women, healed Gentiles, washed his disciples' feet, forgave his murderers, and died on a cross to save a sinful humanity. To say this Jesus is Lord and embodies the reign of God is to overturn oppression, bring justice and healing, open the way for all to receive forgiveness and new life, and deny the finality of death itself.

The sending of the Son was in the form of an incarnation, in which God became a particular human being. This enabled Christ to embody the reign of God and through the cross bring salvation to humanity. The sending of the Spirit was by way of Pentecost, which makes the new life Christ brings universally available and extends the reign of God throughout the world.

Through the Holy Spirit the kingdom of God, which is yet to come in fullness, is already breaking into our history. In terms of God's mission, pneumatology is the necessary integrative link between christology and eschatology. The Spirit witnesses to Christ, who died, rose, and will come again, and makes the love of God a reality in human hearts and lives. The Spirit also brings the reign of God to bear on the full range of human affliction, as well as the affliction of the earth itself.

The church is sent into mission as it is empowered and led by the Spirit. The church exists to participate in the mission of God—it does not determine the mission but is shaped by the mission. As Jurgen Moltmann has said, "It is not the church that has a mission of salvation to fulfill to the world; it is the mission of the Son and Spirit through the Father that includes the church, creating a church as it goes on its way."
This is a radical revisioning of ecclesiology, though one quite congruent with the New Testament. Darrell Guder puts this well when he says,

Mission is not just a program of the church. It defines the church as God's sent people. Either we are defined by mission, or we reduce the scope of the gospel and the mandate of the church. Thus our challenge today is to move from church with mission to missional church.

One consequence of seeing the church as missional is that we can no longer think of certain cultures as "Christian" and others as not. Of course, as John Wesley noted again and again, there has never really been a Christian culture (if by that one means a culture and people governed by the love of God), only Christendom. But today, with secularism and an abundance of new spiritualities, the illusion is less and less credible. Now each continent both sends and receives missionaries, and each local church in North America and Europe finds itself in a mission field.

We shall look at the role of the Spirit and the Spirit-led church in reaching out to this new missional context. But first I examine how the Holy Spirit shapes the church itself for mission in light of the temptation to accommodate to this post-Christendom culture.

The Church in the Context of Mission

Central to the mission of God is the creation of churches by the Spirit in which God's love is experienced as a living reality and in which this love decisively shapes their ministry. Such churches are communities and persons who are formed by encountering the reality (or presence) of God together with the identity of God as revealed in Jesus Christ. This occurs as persons enter into a relationship with God through participation in practices called "means of grace," through which the Holy Spirit enables them to grow in love for God and neighbor.

While this can be seen as an essentially Wesleyan construal of the Christian life, the point is ecumenical: because of their role as means of the Holy Spirit's transforming work, these practices have become absolutely essential to the creation of missional churches. They enable lives and communities to continue to be shaped by God's presence and identity in a culture that calls both into question.

It is modernity, which has dominated the Western world for the past
three centuries, that has made the presence of God problematic. Sometimes this has been explicit, as in Marxism, positivism, and other materialist philosophies. But more subtle, yet equally effective, has been the de facto cultural deism which acknowledges God’s existence but not God’s involvement in our lives and world. Even our beliefs themselves seem to make no real difference in how we live. Sociologist Robert Wuthnow, in a survey of the American middle class, reported this finding:

Asked if their religious beliefs had influenced their choice of a career, most...—Christians and non-Christians alike—said no. Asked if they thought of their work as a calling, most said no. Asked if they understood the concept of stewardship, most said no. Asked how religion did influence their work lives or thoughts about money, most said the two were completely separate.

That is, for the most part, religious beliefs seem to have little or no effect on our dispositions, values, and lives.

John Wesley faced a similar problem, which he termed formalism. He observed that the average churchgoer reduced being a Christian to church attendance, a set of beliefs, and contributing money to the church. There was neither the experience nor the expectation of a transformation of the heart and life through the Holy Spirit. Instead of being the gift of a wonderful new life, Christianity for most people had become a set of obligations designed to get one to heaven or to conform to cultural expectations.

In Wesley’s analysis, the primary reason church members were so closed to the work of the Spirit was not the incursions of secular ideas but the living of a lifestyle that placed God at the margins. This he called “dissipation,” “the art of forgetting God.” “We are,” he said, “encompassed on all sides with persons and things that tend to draw us from our centre.” We become “habitually inattentive to the presence and will” of God through being caught up in the activities of life, whether vocational, recreational, or even ecclesial. This could just as easily be a description of those things that dominate the lives of so many of us today. When we live this way we become practical atheists: we believe there is a God, but it makes no difference in how we actually live our lives.

Wesley’s cure for this dissipation was a vibrant faith, in which we come not only to know about God but to know God, to trust in Jesus Christ for our salvation, and to be shaped by Christ’s love. Such faith is a work of the
Holy Spirit. If we find it absent among members of the Christian community, then there is a need to evangelize within the church so that, in Walter Brueggemann's words, "forgetters can become rememberers."

But in addition to this, Wesley saw a need to enable persons to retain and grow in their faith. His system of small groups and spiritual discipline, or means of grace, was designed for that purpose. It enabled the early Methodists to intentionally come into God's presence through prayer, Scripture, Eucharist, and the like; to regularly serve their neighbor; and to practice the presence of God in all their everyday activities. This did not mean that they constantly had "feelings"—their hearts were not "strangely warmed" on a daily basis. But they did remain open to the work of the Spirit through participation in these means of grace. A church in which hearts and lives are being changed by God is a precondition for effective witness and the church's participation in the mission of God.

It would be inaccurate to conclude from what we have said so far that nominal religion is the chief characteristic of American culture, although it may be a major reality in many churches. The secularism and materialism of our day have left many empty. Ours is an age not of rampant atheism but of growing spiritual hunger.

Interest in things spiritual and in finding God is on the rise. What has changed is that more and more people do not expect to find God in our churches. There is an aversion to organized religion, and along with it an aversion to the nominal Christianity that makes outward demands to support the institutional church but otherwise leaves lives unchanged. There is at the same time a strong rejection of the kind of passionate religious commitment that insists that one's faith is the only true faith. The emerging spirituality seems to be more privatistic, though not isolationist. It is more experiential: people long to feel closer to God or to have a sense of God's presence in their lives. There is also a real need for God.

This emerging postmodern culture affirms God's experiential presence but is intentionally vague as to who this God really is. We can see this in the dynamic and growing contemporary small group movement. In his study of these groups, most of which are religious, Robert Wuthnow found a number of notable strengths but also identified two serious concerns. First, most groups had an unspoken rule that whatever a participant says is to be accepted without question. The result is to uncritically affirm any and every spiritual experience. Second, they tend to see God as intimate and
caring, available to meet our felt needs or to assist us in our struggles with careers, families, and times of trouble. However, God is not expected to judge or challenge us—the prophetic element is absent from group experience. This is, in Wuthnow's words, "a domesticated view of the sacred."\(^{13}\)

The old-fashioned name for a god we construct is idolatry. Wesley encountered it in the form of "enthusiasm," a kind of illusory religious experience which led to false conclusions about the nature and purposes of God. What is needed to counteract this illusory God is the remembrance of who God is and what God has done in the story of Israel and in Jesus Christ. Again, it is through participation in means of grace such as Scripture, prayer, and Eucharist that persons encounter the identity of this God and are consequently transformed by the Holy Spirit.

If a missional church is to resist the lure of accommodation to modern or postmodern culture—and that resistance depends on an openness to the work of the Spirit through participation in the means of grace—then Christian initiation must be dramatically different from current practice. This is true not only for the increasing numbers of adult converts who will come with little or no prior church experience but also for children baptized and nurtured in the church. Quite simply, our expectations for membership in a missional church must be elevated in comparison to what is found in most churches today.

This concern has led William Abraham to construe evangelism "as primary initiation into the Kingdom of God,"\(^{14}\) and to propose a set of six practices into which Christians need to be initiated. These include conversion, baptism, the practice of love for God and neighbor, a basic knowledge of Christian teaching, practicing the means of grace, and discovering spiritual gifts. It has led Daniel Benedict and other liturgical scholars to call for a recovery of the historic catechumenate and the process of initiation found in the early centuries of the church. It has prompted David Lowes Watson to call for a recovery of Wesley's pattern of covenant discipleship and accountability via small groups.\(^{15}\) Finally, it has led so-called "high expectation" churches like Ginghamsburg United Methodist Church and Saddleback Valley Church to make membership contingent on a specific set of commitments and to devise a program of successive courses that enable members to grow in their understanding and discipleship.\(^{16}\)

The role of the Holy Spirit in these practices is not always made explicit; but I contend that it is in and through participation in these forms of
Christian initiation that the Holy Spirit begins to shape a missional church. Without something like them, we will not be open to the power and direction of the Spirit, which both our context and the mission of God requires.

**Sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ**

Central to the mission of God is the renewal of the entire creation in love. The focus of that mission is on humanity, whose fall into sin has turned their stewardship of creation toward destructive ends and whose broken relationships with God and one another have led to massive injustice and suffering. What God seeks is nothing less than to restore human beings to their original condition, so that they once again reflect in their hearts and lives the love of their Creator.

I will develop this point from a Wesleyan perspective. Because God is love, humans, who were created in God's image, are intended to have love govern their character and lives in the same way it does the character and life of God. This is, of course, not the condition we find ourselves in today. Like Luther and Calvin, Wesley believes sin to have such a hold on our lives that we cannot set ourselves free. We are totally corrupted by sin—it is like a terminal disease that has affected every aspect of our lives. Only God can set us free, and this God graciously accomplishes through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit.

While Wesley has a stark view of our condition, he has strong confidence in the power of the Spirit. Like Eastern Orthodoxy, Wesley understands salvation fundamentally to be the curing of our sin and the restoring us to the divine image. This is what Wesley means by terms like *Christian perfection*, *entire sanctification*, and *perfect love*. He believed that the Holy Spirit would so restore us in God's image in this life that love would fully govern our hearts and lives.

Wesley insisted that the mission of God was to spread this scriptural holiness across the earth. Consequently, he opposed any form of evangelism that did not have sanctification or holiness as its goal. Salvation was not a forgiveness that enabled one to go to heaven while leaving one's life unchanged. Salvation was the gift of a new life through the power of the Spirit that made persons loving in this life, as well as fitted them for the life to come.

God offers this new life to everyone and through the Spirit enables all humanity to hear and respond to the good news of Jesus Christ. This preve-
nient grace restores in every person a small measure of freedom, allowing
him or her to respond to the divine initiative. Apart from the gospel such
response may simply be to obey one’s conscience; yet even this begins an
embryonic relationship with God through grace.

This pre-evangelistic work of the Spirit has two consequences for our
thinking about persons who never truly hear the gospel of Jesus Christ.
First, those who respond to the grace they have are, however unknowingly,
responding to Christ. Wesley is clear that anyone who continues to
respond to God’s grace will in the end receive salvation. What they do not
have is knowledge that their sins are forgiven and that they can have a new
life in Christ; but tragic as that may be, it does not mean they totally lack a
relationship with God.

Second, if God is universally at work, then this would include working
among adherents of other religions. While prevenient grace does not imply
that there are alternative ways of salvation apart from Jesus Christ, it opens
the possibility that some participants in other religions may be seeking to
respond to God’s grace through their own religious practices. While this in
no way diminishes the calling of Christians to share the good news of Jesus
Christ with everyone, it should make us humbly aware that we do not and
cannot know all that the Holy Spirit is doing among people of other faiths
and that we have something to learn from them.\textsuperscript{17}

That said, prevenient grace marks the beginning of the work of the
Spirit in humanity and not its conclusion. The fullness of the Spirit’s work
results in a new life in Christ and ultimately in the restoring of the image of
God. Because this cannot take place without encountering the good news
of Christ, the practice of evangelism by the church is essential to the
mission of God.

Why does the Holy Spirit not simply evangelize every person directly?
The answer, I believe, is in the nature of love itself. Love is necessarily rela-
tional. If it were God’s mission only to enable us to restore our relationship
with God, then a direct act of the Spirit to each individual would be logical.
But the divine mission is to restore our broken relationship not only with
God but also with one another. That can happen only as we are brought
into community with one another, sharing the love of Christ. It is intrinsic
to the fulfillment of the mission of God that we reach out to others to
share the love we have received through Christ.

This means that our primary motive for sharing our faith with another
person is love and that such sharing normally would occur within a pre-existing relationship or, if with a stranger, would be one part of a process of building a relationship. It rules out as contrary to God's mission any motive rooted in maintaining the institutional church or demonstrating one's spirituality. It also recognizes that any attempt to manipulate a conversion, even if well intentioned, undercuts the integrity of the response and shows lack of respect for our neighbor. As Eddie Fox and George Morris have said, evangelism "is not something we do to people but something we do with the gospel." After sharing our faith we wait and watch "in respectful humility" while "working with expectant hope."

The evident presence of love for God and for one another within our churches gives credence to our faith sharing, just as its absence calls it into question. Given the state of the church in his day, Wesley argued on many occasions that the renewal of the church in love was a precondition for effective witness. He believed that with the "grand stumbling block thus happily removed out of the way, namely, the lives of Christians" that non-Christians would be strongly attracted to the promise of the gospel.

Lesslie Newbigin agrees. He contends that where persons see in Christian communities "the presence of a new reality, the presence of the Spirit of God in power," there they begin to seek explanations for the resulting way of life. When "the Church is faithful to its Lord, there the powers of the kingdom are present and people begin to ask the question to which the gospel is the answer." What does a church look like whose life and outreach both reflect the mission of God in the power of the Spirit?

**Signs of the Kingdom**

If the mission of God is to establish the divine reign so that the love of God will renew the entirety of creation, then the concrete effects of that mission should be found in all aspects of life—personal, relational, communal, societal, and environmental. Wherever God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven, suffering is alleviated, sickness is healed, persons are reconciled, and justice prevails.

To participate in this mission a church must both embody the reign and love of God in its own life and reach out in love to others. As we have seen, the Holy Spirit enables the church to embody God's love through the gift of new life. As persons and the community grow in this life, they also grow in their ability to see how their own life together, as well as that of the society,
is not obedient to God's reign and does not reflect God's love. This christological and eschatological vision is nurtured through participation in the means of grace, attuning the church to the call and direction of the Spirit.

The Spirit not only leads the church into mission but also empowers the church for mission. It does this through giving every member gifts for ministry, enabling the whole people of God to engage together in the mission of God. As everyone receives at least one gift, no one is superfluous to the mission; each person is necessary if the community is to fulfill its missional calling.

While the mission belongs to God, the church is the central instrument used by God in furthering that mission. It would be presumptuous to attempt an exhaustive account of the mission of God, but we can certainly sketch some elements of this mission which, in addition to and integrated with evangelism, the church might embody in its life and outreach.

First, there is the entire range of human suffering and need. A church that is involved in God's mission is concerned to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the imprisoned, comfort the grieving, and befriend the lonely. Such a church will be known as a place of compassion and assistance for both member and nonmember alike.

Second, a missional church will be a place of healing. Persons suffer from physical and emotional illness, broken relationships, and alienation from God. To meet these needs a church can draw upon diverse resources such as prayer, pastoral counseling, and visitation. Increasingly, churches are incorporating services of healing into their life together to call upon the healing power of the Spirit. This theologically balanced recovery of biblical signs and wonders is itself a powerful witness to God's reign and love.

Third, a church that participates in the mission of God will be a prophetic voice against injustice and oppression and a friend of the most vulnerable members of society. This too is a recovery of a pervasive biblical theme: God's special care for the widow, the orphan, and the poor. Today we are aware that not only persons but also social structures can oppress; and we are called to faithfully proclaim the implications of God's reign for society as a whole.

Fourth, the mission of God involves the church in ministries of peace and reconciliation. The conflicts that continue between racial and ethnic groups, social classes, and nations reflect neither God's reign nor God's love. The issues are often difficult, and the solutions may involve both
matters of justice and forgiveness. But the goal is more than an absence of conflict—it is a unity in love that respects and honors one another. A missional church can begin by seeking reconciliation and unity within and between local churches themselves as well as in the church universal. How can a church proclaim a unity in Christ that it does not itself even seek, much less manifest?

Finally, a missional church will show care for the earth. God’s creation has suffered much from human sin and ignorance; but the church can begin to model and advocate a love for this world that God created. With the recovery of the image of God through salvation comes a recovery as well of faithful stewardship of the earth.

The church can participate in all these aspects of God’s mission, but only the Holy Spirit can establish the reign of God and bring new life. Empowered and led by the Spirit, the church can share its faith, pray for the sick, speak out against injustice, and seek racial reconciliation. But only the Holy Spirit can convert and sanctify persons, heal in response to prayer, and provide the vision and hope necessary to truly overcome injustice and effect reconciliation.

Without the Holy Spirit God’s mission would cease and the church would not exist. Through the Spirit the church can embody in its own life the love of God revealed in Christ and share in God’s mission of renewing the earth in that love.

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Endnotes

3. For an in-depth account, see James A. Scherer, Gospel, Church and Kingdom: Comparative Studies in World Mission Theology (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1987); see also Bosch, Transforming Mission, 368-93.
4. I develop this in more depth in A Future for Truth: Evangelical Theology in a Postmodern World (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), 124-25, 139-56.
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11. Ibid. (12), 120.


17. For an affirmation of this from an evangelical perspective see Gerald R. McDermott, Can Evangelicals Learn from World Religions? (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000).


19. Ibid., 55.


I teach a course in the theology of John Wesley, populated largely by United Methodist graduate students preparing for pastoral ministry. Wesley’s doctrine of “Christian perfection” figures centrally in that class, as it did for Wesley himself. Wesley was optimistic about the possibilities of grace in transforming human life, both personally and socially. He taught that Christians should not reconcile themselves to the sin in their lives but should press on toward a holy, or sanctified, life. That life is governed by singleness of intention, where sin is increasingly expelled as love increasingly fills the heart. It is a life where, through the power of the Holy Spirit, our souls are renewed after the image of God. Christian perfection, as the aim of the holy life, is “the humble, gentle, patient love of God, and our neighbor, ruling our tempers, words, and actions.”

As we discuss Wesley’s doctrine together in class, however, I regularly discover that the great majority of these students have heard very little about this subject, especially if they have grown up in the United States. If what my students tell me is correct, Christian perfection is rarely preached from Methodist pulpits, and it is the focus of any sustained religious education in Methodist circles only infrequently. Not only does the doctrine no longer figure prominently in United Methodism but also the very notion of living a holy life with victory over sin is rarely held out as a serious possibility for the Christian. Rather, the Christian walk has been reduced to something more like, in the words of John Howard Yoder, “the general label for anyone’s good intentions.”

I take it that this loss is an enormously important development for Methodism given, for example, Wesley’s statement made late in his life that the doctrine of Christian perfection is “the grand depositum which God has lodged with the people called Methodists; and for the sake of propagating this chiefly He appeared to have raised us up.”

Those of us who were raised in churches that descended from Methodism but were the product of the nineteenth-century Holiness Movement have had a very different experience from that of my United Methodist students. In the Church of the Nazarene, for example, we were consistently
exposed to the doctrine of holiness and urged to take seriously the ideal of the "holy life." Unfortunately, the holy life was construed rather legalistically. Then, too, Christian perfection was typically reduced to a single experience subsequent to conversion—a "second work of grace" called "entire sanctification." In fact, I can still remember the standard pattern for those of us who attended Nazarene summer youth camp. We would get saved on Monday or Tuesday night, and by Thursday night we had sufficiently matured in Christ so as to be ready to heed the evangelist's invitation to receive a "second blessing" and be entirely sanctified! This is clearly a distortion of Wesley's teaching on the subject, where movement from new birth toward Christian perfection is hardly brief or effortless, but it is a lifelong and daily process of availing ourselves of means whereby the Spirit tempers our thoughts, actions, and inclinations toward love. Simply because the doctrine of Christian perfection is more prominent in some branches of Wesleyanism than in others is no guarantee that we are better off in those places where it is more prominent. It could even be that the United Methodist neglect of the doctrine of Christian perfection is a reaction to and rejection of the legalistic and emotional excesses of Holiness and Pentecostal branches of Wesleyanism.

I suspect, however, that the relative neglect of Wesley's doctrine of Christian perfection in United Methodism cannot be adequately explained as a mere reaction to the excesses or distortions of other religious groups. There are, in fact, significant dynamics in contemporary Western culture that militate against the plausibility of the doctrine and that make it difficult to believe in, hope for, or move toward the holy life. There are at least four of these dynamics: (1) A pervasive individualism and focus on self-fulfillment; (2) a drive toward cultural conformity; (3) a rejection of discipline and the careful cultivation of intentional life habits with, instead, a distinct preference for the quick and painless; and (4) a general pessimism about the possibility of human transformation. Clearly, some of these dynamics may always be part of the human condition. But on all four points the Wesleyan understanding of Christian holiness runs counter to prevailing sentiments. In order to move toward a contemporary rediscovery of what it means to live the holy life—a life lived in the Spirit and oriented toward our perfection in love—we will need to find plausible ways to respond to each of these dynamics.
Community

If, as Wesley says, Christian perfection is a total renewal of ourselves after the image of God, then that image must be understood as essentially social. The image of God in which we are created is not a "thing" or "substance" but fundamentally a capacity for relationship. Our original condition, however, is that we come into the world with that image already tarnished and distorted. We are instead turned in on ourselves and seek our own will and pleasure. Our inclinations are toward self rather than toward God and others. The holy life is nonetheless possible, taught Wesley; and this possibility is premised upon the conviction that our capacity for relationship may be healed in this life. Rather than being forever focused on ourselves, we can become increasingly turned outward toward God and neighbor so that love rather than selfishness is our most natural response. In fact, it is only to the extent that this relational healing begins to occur that we can even begin to love ourselves properly.

Holiness, therefore, is by its very definition a relational matter. When we are talking about the holy life, we do not mean a private or merely inward transformation of individual, self-contained egos that may at best have social consequences. We are instead talking about a transformation of the self to community and in community. Community is both the context out of which holiness arises and that toward which holiness aims. As Wesley put it, "Holy solitaries is a phrase no more consistent with the gospel than holy adulterers. The gospel of Christ knows of no religion, but social; no holiness but social holiness."

One of the problems associated with the Wesleyan tradition, born as it was into a Western post-Enlightenment culture and even more so as it passed into the highly individualistic culture of the United States, is that the very nature of Christian holiness (as well as the person and work of the Spirit in making us holy) tended to be interpreted in ways that were overly individualistic and anthropocentric. Even Wesley himself, despite his strong advocacy of social holiness and his frequent envisioning of sanctification as ultimately even cosmic in scope, often presupposes an anthropology that is rather atomistic. The net result is that holiness is construed in terms that are excessively private, individualistic, and inward-focused. The Holiness Movement of the nineteenth century often exacerbated this tendency and, insofar as it also emphasized the role of the Holy Spirit in
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sanctification, frequently pressed the doctrine of the Spirit into molds that were highly privatistic and, to a large degree, oriented around personal emotions.

So, for example, the Book of Acts (a book that is about the work of the Holy Spirit if any book in the New Testament is) was often studied by Holiness Christians who looked for models of how individuals are sanctified and filled with the Spirit. Frequently overlooked, however, were the radically social dimensions of the Spirit’s activity in creating holy communities. Indeed, whenever the Holy Spirit shows up in the Book of Acts, social categories are being obliterated as new communities of faith are being formed from across ethnic, cultural, and gender lines. It is not that these new communities simply provided a space where holy persons could congregate. These communities were, by their very existence, a testament to the meaning of holiness. The very fact that reconciliation was happening in community was a live embodiment of Christian holiness in both its personal and corporate dimensions. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, we have no greater task than to imagine with renewed creativity and courage new communities of the Spirit that model what is meant by the holy life.

Deviance

Despite growing signs that human beings in our society continue to have a deep hunger for authentic community, it is undoubtedly true that this communal path to the holy life flies in the face of the rank individualism, consumerism, and fixation on self-fulfillment that is so characteristic of late modern Western culture. Contemporary models of social holiness will very likely, therefore, be countercultural and deviant. It will always be easier, of course, simply to “play church.” Those institutions that capitulate to a consumeristic mentality, marketing the gospel in terms that are palatable to the contemporary quest for self-fulfillment, will most likely continue to grow and thrive. Methodists should be careful, however, not to go chasing after these models out of an anxiety over recent numerical decline. It may well be true that it is the very nature of the church to grow, but so it is with the nature of cancer. We are not, therefore, to pursue church growth, but rather “peace with everyone, and the holiness without which no one will see the Lord” (Heb. 12:14). The size of a congregation is no indication whatsoever of its capacity both for engendering and for embodying authentic Christian community and holiness.
So, for example, while the fact that 3,000 persons were added to the church on the day of Pentecost is remarkable, that fact in and of itself bears no relationship to the holiness of the church. What is remarkable in the Pentecost story is the holy deviance of these early Christian communities—the way, for example, lines of gender and ethnicity were crossed so that "every nation under heaven" was able to hear the gospel in its own language (Acts 2:5-11) and so that the Spirit was poured out on both men and women alike (2:18). What is noteworthy is that those who believed "had all things in common" and began to "sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need" (2:44-45). What is unprecedented is that not one of them considered his or her belongings to be private property, but rather all things were common property and "there was not a needy person among them" (4:32-34). Whether we are talking about twelve people or twelve hundred people, it is this kind of embodied witness to the subversive and deviant values of God's reign that makes the church holy.

Douglas Strong, in his analysis of nineteenth-century holiness preachers, notes that one of their most common character traits was "eccentricity." In fact, one such preacher, Cary Allen, was referred to by his nineteenth-century biographer as having had a "sanctified eccentricity." The word eccentric literally means "outside the center," or "off-center." Someone is eccentric if he or she deviates from the norms of accepted conduct. Eccentric was an appropriate designation for these preachers, says Strong, for they "gloried in their peculiarity and scoffed at pretension and ascribed status." In fact, accusations of "eccentricity" were even worn like a badge of honor by these preachers who understood themselves to be challenging religious and social structures. By accepting this label, they were "deliberately contrasting themselves with the polished mores and religious sophistication of genteel culture—values that represented the privileges only available to a few. They challenged the hierarchical power structures of their day, and especially the institutionalism of the mainline churches."

Strong notes that these countercultural holiness preachers would often appear disheveled at their meetings, not because they were sloppy dressers or poor groomers but because, in the words of nineteenth-century minister David Marks, they wanted to be "independent from the changeable fashions of this age of superfluities." Their eccentricity was a refusal to be
Christians who were tied to the center of society; it was a refusal to accommodate the gospel to the demands of a consumer culture.

Sloppy dressing and poor grooming are probably inadequate as marks of the holy life, and yet something like a contemporary version of "sanctified eccentricity," with its rejection of cultural conformity, may be precisely what is needed if social holiness is to be a serious option for Christians today. Thus, even though the culture teaches us that it is good to seek wealth and possessions, the Spirit invites us to downward mobility, solidarity with the poor, and simplicity. Though our culture suggests to us that we are individual, unrelated, and self-contained egos, the Spirit invites us to undergo a conversion to community. Though the world claims that our value is determined by our exchange value in terms of our contribution to the service of Mammon, the Spirit reminds us that our value rests simply in the fact that we have all been created in the image of God and that we may accept one another as equals because all barriers to such acceptance have been demolished in the cross.

In every respect, the path of the holy life stands as an alternate and deviant witness to the presence of the Spirit. It is the Spirit that opens our eyes to new possibilities and, indeed, to a new creation. Thus, when the world suggests that power is measured in terms of our ability to wield influence over others, the Spirit points us to the kind of power found in the manger and in the cross. When our culture preaches an unrestricted freedom that is little more than the freedom to consume and accumulate, the Spirit offers a brand of liberty that is a freedom for the other. When our society teaches us that we should get what we deserve and that justice is defined by giving to others exactly what they deserve, the Spirit offers us the possibility of a creative, redemptive, and restorative justice—one that treats others precisely the way we have been treated by God: in ways that we don't deserve.

If there is to be a recovery of the holy life among Methodists, not only will holiness need to be embodied in eccentric ways that refuse to play according to the rules of our culture, but there must also be a conscious inclusion of those whose very existence is eccentric—people who live at the margins, those who are poor and disinherited. Our acceptance by God in Christ compels us to move beyond ourselves toward others, to welcome the stranger, to open our hearts to the one who is different. To be eccentric is not to exist for oneself but to find one's center outside of oneself. And
that is why the holy life is fundamentally eccentric. Our center is in Christ, but Christ is in the world—in the poor, the hungry, the naked, the prisoner, the sick, and the stranger (Matt. 25:31-46). It is there that we encounter Christ. The church that allows not only its sense of mission and experience of worship but also its institutional life and internal organization to be shaped by the needs of those outside itself will be revolutionized from outside itself. And here is the great irony of the matter. The life of Christian holiness is life in a community of deviants who have determined no longer to play by the world's rules. But it is precisely in no longer playing by the world's rules that we discover a new openness to the world.

The most radical thing that the church can do today, therefore, is simply to be the church, to live together according to an alternate reality. The church that embodies a holy deviance does not need to look for evangelistic programs or strategies. The church is the evangelistic strategy. The community of faith itself constitutes an invitation to the holy life by its very existence "as an unprecedented social phenomenon" in which reconciliation occurs, the poor are valued, violence is rejected, and patterns of domination and subordination are refused. As Yoder says, "The challenge to the church today is not to dilute or filter or translate its witness in such a way that the world can handle it easier or without believing, but so to purify and clarify and exemplify it that the world can recognize it as good news."

I believe that the twenty-first century will witness a new holiness movement. It will not be merely a reaction to previous distortions or a recovery of the eccentricity of nineteenth-century holiness preachers. The twenty-first century will witness a new social holiness movement that is more comfortable on the edges of culture than at the center. It is possible for Methodists to write that history.

**Discipline**

The holy life, especially because it is communal, is not easy. It does not descend from above ready-made—and this despite the fact that holiness is ultimately the result of the Spirit working in our lives. "If a man preach like an angel," wrote Wesley, "he will do little good without exact discipline." The problem is this: we want to be Christlike; we want hearts filled with love; but we are attached to "things," and without freedom from this bondage, we cannot really begin to serve God or neighbor as we should. The fact that it is this attachment to the world that is so critical a problem
should not, of course, lead us to devalue the world or the realm of the physical and material. On the contrary, a life of holiness liberates us for the world and all of its beauty and goodness. In fact, the path of discipline through which Wesley believed God's grace operates is "worldly" through and through. Take, for example, the discipline of "constant communion." It is precisely in and through the grace mediated through the simple, physical elements of bread and wine that we are strengthened to resist the temptation to hoard and accumulate physical possessions. It is in sharing the physical elements of the Eucharist with the wider community of believers that we become increasingly sensitized to the needs around us and so become careful not to consume or stockpile the goods of the world while others lack.

Any recovery of Wesley's doctrine of Christian perfection in the twenty-first century will have to include some recovery of the disciplines apart from which no such perfection is possible. For Wesley, of course, those disciplines include centrally an attendance upon all the means of grace. While Wesley believed that Christ is the only meritorious cause of grace in our lives, the Spirit applies Christ's work in our lives through a variety of means. There is no single path here, but, rather, as Wesley says, "there is an irreconcilable variability in the operation of the Holy Spirit upon the souls of people." Wesley tended to focus much of his energy on those means of grace that were specifically instituted by Christ, such as prayer, searching the Scriptures, the Lord's Supper, fasting, and Christian fellowship. The priority that he assigned to these means was based upon his belief that their consistent practice nurtured in us an openness and responsiveness to the work of the Spirit. For the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit is one that is cooperant through and through. In and through the means of grace—through remembering, studying, seeing, singing, confessing, listening, giving—we avail ourselves of the Spirit's sanctifying power. So, for example, in assessing why it is that in so many places where converts to Christianity have been made, there is such little evidence of the fact, Wesley writes:

It was a common saying among the Christians in the primitive church, "The soul and the body make a man; the spirit and discipline make a Christian"—implying that none could be real Christians without the help of Christian discipline. But if this be so, is it any wonder that we find so few Christians, for
where is Christian discipline! In what part of England (to go no farther) is Christian discipline added to Christian doctrine? Now whatever doctrine is preached where there is not discipline, it cannot have its full effect upon the hearers.14

What happens through the disciplined life is that our thoughts and inclinations are really being tempered, purified, or “patterned” after the mind of Christ. At one level, this patterning is clearly conscious as we learn more about Christ and his “way.” At another level, however, this patterning is somewhat unconscious as we are habituated to Christlike ways of responding to one another. For this reason, Wesley placed a high priority on the very structures by which we intentionally enter into community (for example, his system of societies, classes, and bands) and felt that here, more than anywhere else, he had found a way of restoring something of the original genius of the Anglican Church.

Who watched over them in love? Who marked their growth in grace? Who advised and exhorted them from time to time? Who prayed with them and for them, as they had need? This, and this alone is Christian fellowship: But, alas! Where is it be found? Look east or west, north or south; name what parish you please: Is this Christian fellowship there? Rather, are not the bulk of parishioners a mere rope of sand? What Christian connexion is there between them? What intercourse in spiritual things? What watching over each other’s souls? What hearing of one another’s burdens? . . . We introduce fellowship where it was utterly destroyed. And the fruits of it have been peace, joy, love, and zeal for every good word and work.15

One could easily talk about other disciplines by which the holy life is formed, for example, what Wesley spoke of as “works of mercy.” These practices of personally visiting the poor, the sick, and the imprisoned and of tending to their needs through ministries of food, clothing, shelter, health, and education were to be carried out, first, because the Lord commanded it16 and, second, because they are necessary for our own salvation. But such practices were also to be carried out for the “continuance of that faith whereby we ‘are’ already ‘saved by grace.’”17 Wesley defends works of mercy as “real means of grace” whereby “God is pleased, frequently, yea, ordinarily to convey his grace to them that either love or fear him.”18 In fact, in
his sermon “On Zeal,” Wesley even places works of mercy in a closer proximity to the soul of love than he does the more traditional “works of piety,” such as reading Scripture, prayer, fasting, and the Lord’s Supper!  

One of the real problems in bringing forward the importance of discipline and the means of grace into our time is that the weight of tradition is toward reducing these disciplines to religious observances such as the aforementioned “works of piety.” Notwithstanding the importance of such religious observance in patterning our lives after Christ, it is nonetheless in the ordinary world of buying and selling, working and playing, living and loving that one finds the substance of the discipline required for living the holy life. Perhaps that is why Wesley writes so much on the economic life and the disciplines of love that were required for a sanctified approach to wealth and possessions. As Theodore Jennings puts it, “Holiness cannot consist in religious observances. These can only be means of grace, not the aim or goal of grace. They are helps to holiness, not the marks of it or the content of it. Holiness must consist in a reversal of the worldliness of economics.”

If we are to move toward a contemporary recovery of Wesley’s doctrine of holiness, it will be only insular as we are able to demonstrate the viability of a serious holiness discipline in the arena of our economic lives. The first step in this discipline, for Wesley, was a flat rejection of the misguided notion that we may do whatever we like with our possessions—a notion that, for Wesley, amounted to little more than atheism. Wealth invariably tends to insulate and isolate us from human need and is, accordingly, extraordinarily dangerous. Its effects upon us are often gradual and barely perceptible, but the only way to break the deadly hold that riches have on us is to develop the discipline of giving all we can. The discipline of a holiness economics does not, of course, denounce hard work or the making of a profit; neither does it discourage making adequate provision for the necessities of one’s life and family. But the purpose of making any money above these basic necessities is for the sole purpose of giving it away; thus, Wesley’s famous threefold economic discipline: “Gain all you can, save all you can, give all you can.” The disciplines of “saving” (which meant not accumulating but rather being frugal) and “gaining” were wholly oriented toward the discipline of giving. Apart from this third discipline, they could even be downright sinful.

The implications of a holiness economic discipline are radical; they form
a break with almost every tenet of conventional wisdom about finances, both in our day and in Wesley's. As Albert Outler once wrote, "On no other single point, save only faith alone and holy living, is Wesley more insistent, consistent—and out of step with the bourgeois spirit of his age." But thanks be to God, we do not have to go at these disciplines alone. Again, it is the very purpose of the Christian community to serve as a visible and deviant model to the world of an alternate reality—and to serve as instruments of strengthening and nurturing one another in that task.

**Expectation**

On more than one occasion, I have seen a bumper sticker that reads, "Christians aren't perfect, just forgiven." A Methodist should be uncomfortable with the options. That we are forgiven is, of course, good news. But the very core of the Wesleyan message is that "just forgiven" so truncates the full message of the gospel as to distort it. And yet it would not be too much of a stretch, perhaps, to suggest that the theology expressed by this bumper sticker is a fundamental plank in the predominant consensus of most Christians in the West, regardless of denominational attachment. We have made peace with sin. While confident in the sovereignty of grace to forgive us, we are generally pessimistic about the power of grace to transform us. This mentality has so pervaded our theology, in fact, that we come to expect little more than mere forgiveness in our lives. What is more, we want the world to know that it should not really expect much more from us either—the public display of this bumper sticker serves this very purpose. Given the way many of us drive, perhaps that is why we would even place such a sticker on our automobiles!

Wesley, however, believed that Christians should expect much more than mere forgiveness. And he believed that this expectation itself was critically related to the growth and transformation that we might experience. According to Wesley, even though Christian believers know that sin is still at work, they also know the promise of "entire renewal in the image of God," and so expect the fulfillment of that promise. It is this very expectation, in fact, that motivates the disciplined life already mentioned. Of course, the fact that Wesley encouraged his people to "go on to perfection" and urged them to expect to be made "perfect in love" in this life was bound to create fears that this would encourage self-righteousness or cause people to be deluded about reality. Some of the most impassioned attacks
against Wesley were in response to his advocacy of Christian perfection.

And yet Wesley knew that the postures of hope and expectation have an enormous impact on our spiritual growth. He knew that it is impossible to move forward in the holy life without expectation. Indeed, one of the reasons why Christians remain in the "wilderness state" is that they expect little more than darkness and are taught to expect little more.22 Perhaps the wars, holocausts, and scandals of the twentieth century have wearied us of hoping for too much out of ourselves. Maybe consumerism as a way of life has numbed us to the possibilities of genuinely loving God and neighbor more than cars, houses, and electronic equipment. But holiness is not our own doing. Our expectation for the holy life should be as great as we know God’s love and power to be—in short, unbounded. One thing is certain. Our limitations today are not because of expecting too much but because of hoping for too little. Not by ourselves, but together as a community lived in the Spirit, perhaps even in the twenty-first century, we will be able to believe what Wesley himself believed:

We expect to be "made perfect in love," in that love which "casts out" all painful "fear," and all desire but that of glorifying him we love, and of loving and serving him more and more. We look for such an increase in the experimental knowledge and love of God our Saviour as will enable us always to "walk in the light, as he is in the light." We believe the whole "mind" will be in us "which was also in Christ Jesus:" that we shall love every man so as to be ready "to lay down our life for his sake," so as by this love to be freed from anger and pride, and from every unkind affection. We expect to be "cleansed" from all our idols, "from all filthiness," whether "of flesh or spirit"; to be "saved from all our uncleannesses," inward or outward; to be "purified as he is pure."23

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Endnotes

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7. Ibid., 19.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid., 20.

10. Yoder, For the Nations, 41.

11. Ibid., 24.


15. Works (Jackson), 8: 251-52.

16. "Yet I find time to visit the sick and the poor; and I must do it, if I believe the Bible." "Letter to a Member of the Society, Dec. 10, 1777," in Works (Jackson), 12: 304.


18. Ibid., 385.


God's Spirit and the Renewal of Creation: Living in Committed, Ambiguous Hope

MARY ELIZABETH MULLINO MOORE

Breathe on us, Holy Spirit!
Breathe the winds of your Spirit
Until we know You with our hearts
And follow your paths beyond the charts,
Until our hope is strong and sure
And our lives, love-filled and pure!

Breathe on us, Holy Spirit!
Breathe the winds of your Spirit
On every animal, plant and tree,
And every river, stream and sea,
Through the mountains, valleys and plains,
And the air and soil and rains.

Breathe on us, Holy Spirit!
Renew your creation!

With this poem, we enter into the mysteries of God's Spirit—the Breath of God that moves through creation, doing mighty deeds and stirring every being in God's creation to do the work to which it is called. The Spirit of God is present, powerful, active, and beyond our grasp. We know the Spirit, as we know breath or wind. It is present when we know it not, and it changes the world when we expect it least. In God's Spirit, we can place our hope: through God's Spirit, we can breathe new life and share life with others; from the Spirit will come the renewal of all God's creation. That is our promise, our hope, and our prayer.

But how does God's Spirit move? How do we discern its movements? How do we respond faithfully to such demanding mystery? How can we,
feeble creatures that we are, respond at all? These questions do not have answers; or, more appropriately, they have many answers. In this article, I explore these questions from a Wesleyan perspective, drawing particularly from the sermons of John Wesley, which have shaped the movement in which the Wesleyan and Methodist churches still stand. I begin with a story that represents a recent incident in The United Methodist Church. I then proceed through an analysis of the committed, ambiguous hope that characterizes Wesleyan traditions, and I conclude with proposals for the future.

This essay takes the form of a drama of hope, but it is the peculiar kind of hope—deeply committed and disturbingly ambiguous—that rises up whenever Christians in the Wesleyan tradition join together to discern and follow the work of God. Indeed, one could tell thousands of other stories that occur in local churches, denominational meetings and other venues; we will begin with just one.

**Act 1: Living in Committed, Ambiguous Hope**

**Scene 1: Year 2000**

The drama opens in the heat of church debate. The setting is the 2000 General Conference of The United Methodist Church, held in Cleveland, Ohio. My particular legislative committee assignment was Faith and Order, which had responsibility for acting on petitions regarding the Social Principles of The United Methodist Church. The people assigned to Faith and Order were a passionate group; indeed, the air was electric when we first met to elect officers. That electricity carried over into the first days of discussion, collaboration, debate, and decision making.

As the scene opens on the first working session of the Faith and Order Committee, the committee is hard at work in subcommittees, each with a set of petitions on a particular subject, including economics, ecology, health care, peacemaking, and education. Each petition has originated from an individual or church body; each proposes to change, reinforce, delete, or add something to the Social Principles. The people gathered in these circles care deeply about the renewal of God's creation, and they are somehow convinced that God wants something from them and The United Methodist Church in this work of renewal. They are also convinced that God's Spirit will guide them to what they hope will be the best possible decisions.

As this scene comes into focus, one's eyes are drawn from circle to circle, and one can hear lively debates about which petitions represent the
most adequate responses for Christian people on various ethical issues. Most groups find one or two petitions that are, in their view, particularly strong and then they work at perfecting these petitions to bring before the legislative committee for action. Let your eyes be drawn to one particular circle where the group is discussing a petition about sustainable agriculture. They have chosen a complex petition to perfect, and they have removed and added some clauses. In their view, they have strengthened the petition with great hope that the new wording will be added to the Social Principles. When their work is complete, the legislative committee will act on the petition, perhaps amending it further, and then send it to the full plenary of General Conference for final action.

As the scene unfolds, people move back into plenary, and the legislative committee is ready to act on one petition at a time. When the petition on rural life is presented, I listen intently. In my view, the subcommittee has indeed strengthened some aspects of the original petition and has weakened other aspects. Knowing that another petition is coming that will, I think, be more adequate, I vote against the subcommittee’s recommendation to approve their revised petition. I am in a very small minority, which means that the other petitions will be voted negatively in a block; the legislative committee has acted on the one that came with high recommendations from the hardworking subcommittee, and the matter is closed.3

As I reflected on that quick moment of decision making, I realized that I had made a mistake. In a large body of concerned people, one cannot always have complete agreement on all matters, and certainly not on every phrase of every petition. We were called upon to think quickly and to find ways to agree on the major issues, not holding to the perfection of every word according to our own views but choosing which issues are most important, which pull us to stand with the majority, which pull us to stand with the minority when wording changes are critical, and when they are less so. From that moment on, I made more realistic judgments in my voting.

Here, in this first scene of Act 1, we have already been introduced to the committed, ambiguous hope of Wesleyan Christians. First, these people in the opening scene would not have been gathered in this electrifying room if they were not committed, first to following God, then to building up the church, and then to the particular views of God’s will that they brought with them into the room. Second, the people were not just committed individually; they were also working in committed community. The subcommittees
were very serious as they carried on their work; they were committed to do what they thought was God's will for the church and, then, to bring the fruits of their work to the legislative committee. Finally, each person who voted in the legislative committee, including me, took that role seriously. Each voted his or her conscience; and some, like me, had to struggle with matters of conscience in deciding between yes and no.

This leads naturally to the issue of ambiguity. In the moment when I voted against a basically good petition, I realized immediately that the world of the Faith and Order Committee was an ambiguous reality. If I were to function effectively, I would have to live with ambiguity. I would have to vote my conscience, indeed, but not expect that every word would be perfected in the exact way that I discerned the will of God. To learn this lesson on an early vote was a blessing that prepared me for the deeper ambiguities yet to come. I was, thus, somewhat prepared for some of the later decisions on more controversial issues—issues that divided our community deeply, issues on which I stood with the minority.

The purpose of this essay is not to discuss the particular issues of General Conference but to discern, within that gathering of committed and ambiguous Christians, the spirit of hope that bound people together and returned them to the table again and again for prayer, debate, and decision making. With that scene in mind, we move into another scene of long ago, a scene of the Wesley brothers and the people called Methodists.

Scene 2: More than Two Hundred Years Ago
The next scene of this drama takes place in eighteenth-century Britain, where John and Charles Wesley are setting the table of fellowship in Oxford. Here, too, people are praying, debating, and making difficult decisions. As we look at this scene, we see only flashing pictures of the early Oxford group who prayed in the early mornings (4:00 and 5:00 A.M.), read the Bible together, fasted on Wednesdays and Fridays, visited the prison, gave to the poor, lived frugally, and held one another accountable for holy living.

In a flash, our eyes turn to another part of the stage where similar practices are taking place on board a ship to Georgia (then one of the British colonies), where the idealistic John and Charles Wesley intend to spread the gospel in a new land. In this land, John Wesley's excesses and self-doubts are well known, but some aspects of his commitment are often overlooked. On the stage, for example, we watch him studying German.
Spanish, and French in order to communicate more fully with the settlers who spoke these languages. Further, we see Wesley visiting the native peoples of Georgia, spending countless hours with them.

In another flash, our eyes turn to John Wesley, many years later, preaching in fields, in marketplaces, and under trees—wherever he found people to listen. He preaches a gospel of love, repentance, and hope for new life in God's kingdom. In quieter moments, we see him at his desk or writing on horseback, preparing tracts and sermons for people to study, writing copiously in his diary, corresponding with numerous people, and tending the many classes and societies that are sprouting up across Britain among these people called "Methodists."

One need not deliberate hard on these scenes to discern the idealism of John Wesley. His idealism led him into deep commitments, rigorous living, and intense hope in God's power to transform the world and everything in it. In Oxford, the idealism led to such stringent living that the "Holy Club" was mocked by other Oxford students. In Georgia, Wesley's idealism toward the native people and his intended mission to them appear shamefully paternalistic and arrogant from the vantage point of today's intercultural understandings. On the other hand, they were motivated, at least in part, by deep compassion—committed and ambiguous compassion. In Wesley's later years of ministry, his commitments became even deeper, and ambiguity continued to follow him. He even doubted and wrestled with himself in his Journal. Self-doubts did not deter Wesley from brazen action, however. He willingly broke with social and church conventions to carry out the ministry to which he knew himself to be called.

Wesley's commitment was such that he often attracted criticism, especially from more conventional quarters. For example, he responded from time to time to the frequent charges of "enthusiasm." He even preached on this topic, basing the sermon on Acts 26:24, in which Paul is accused of being beside himself. Wesley responds, "But if you aim at the religion of the heart, if you talk of 'righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost,' then it will not be long before your sentence is passed, 'Thou art beside thyself.'" Wesley did not assume that all enthusiasm represents "true religion." In fact, he specifically identified certain kinds of enthusiasm about which we should be wary—imagining that you have grace when you do not; imagining that you have gifts from God that you do not have; and thinking that you can attain certain goals without the power of God. This wariness
is simply another reminder of ambiguity. Such ambiguity is not the final word, however. Wesley urges again and again that people give their whole selves to God, embracing true religion wholeheartedly, even while they try to avoid false forms of enthusiasm.

Given such commitment mixed with ambiguity, one would think that this scene of Wesleyan snapshots ends with confusion rather than hope. On the contrary, Wesley himself moves to center stage and pronounces words of hope. He encourages the viewers of this drama to take courage and accept the risks of being judged, expecting "daily growth in that pure and holy religion which the world always did, and always will, call enthusiasm." 5 With these words, Act 1 closes; and the viewers are invited to enter Act 2, a discourse on God's Spirit and the renewal of creation—a discourse that reveals the enduring themes of commitment, ambiguity, and hope.

Act 2: Proclaiming God in the World

Scene 1: God Moves

In Act 2, the scenery is simple—fields and stumps, church pulpits, and other venues where John Wesley is preaching. This act is less narrative, but the words sketch a picture of Wesley that is rarely accented: a picture of an eighteenth-century man whose view of creation and God's renewal of it are filled with poetic image and hope. This is not the aspect of Wesley's theology that is most visible and most often discussed; but it is well worth the search. Note that the words and ideas in this act are from John Wesley's sermons. The scenery and sets are fictionalized, but the attempt to portray Wesley as preaching to real people struggling with real questions is true to his reality.

The scene opens on a vineyard, with Wesley in the middle proclaiming to his listeners that we are living in the "vineyard of the Lord." He associates the vineyard of Isa. 5:4 with the whole world, then with all people, with the Christian world, with the Reformed Christian world, and, finally, with the "people commonly called Methodists." 7 His word to the Methodists who are listening is that God could not have done more than God has done for the Methodists; and yet, the harvest has brought forth wild grapes. Wesley urges them not to make excuses but to respond to God. He closes his sermon with challenges to live well; then, he reminds the people again that "you can never praise God enough for all these blessings, so plentifully showered down upon you . . . ." 8

The vineyard fades, and we see Wesley, grown old, standing in an non-
descript place, surrounded by clouds and mist. He reads from Jer. 23:24 and proceeds to testify to the beautiful words that "express the omnipresence of God!" He wonders out loud why "so little has been written on so sublime and useful a subject." Calling on God’s Spirit, he seeks to explain God’s omnipresence, speaking in clear tones that faithfulness to God always rises from what God has already done for us. He ends with an admonition to be cheerful in expecting God’s guidance, support, perfecting, strengthening, and preservation "unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ!"

The misty scene fades, and we see Wesley standing now on a hilltop, looking over a vast landscape and reading from Gen. 1:31, "And God saw every thing that he had made, and, behold it was very good." Again Wesley asks for the assistance of the Spirit in understanding, recognizing that human beings can understand only a small part of this great work of God. Wesley imagines the world as God first created it with complete happiness. For example, he describes the waters of the second day of creation, imagining them divided "into innumerable drops, which, descending, watered the earth, and made it very plenteous, without incommoding any of its inhabitants." Likewise, he describes the atmosphere as having "no impetuous currents of air; no tempestuous winds; no furious hail; no torrents of rain; no rolling thunders, or forked lightnings. One perennial spring was perpetually smiling over the whole surface of the earth." In short, the world was made without blemish or defect; God made it better, unspeakably better, than it is at present. As Wesley continues his poetic description of creation, he concludes with a sad testimony that people’s rebellion against God changed the world for all creatures. As humans sought to create happiness independent of God, they ruined the beauty of creation. They threw themselves, and "likewise the whole creation, which was intimately connected with [humanity], into disorder, misery, death ...." The consequence, then and now, is a groaning creation. Even in the travail, however, God is at work, and the evils in creation may still "work together for our good"; thus, we can still give thanks for the goodness of God.

Act 2, Scene 1 ends on this hopeful note. One can see in this scene that Wesley has kept his gaze always fixed on God. God is the source of all that is good; the Owner of the vineyard; the One who is ever present with creation; the One who helps us to understand; the One who celebrates that creation is good; the One who continues, even with human fallenness, to bring good from evil. Such a God expects faithfulness from human beings;
and when we are unfaithful, we bring harm to all of God's creatures. Commitment is expected; ambiguity is real. Yet, God continues to be faithful, working with creation to the end that all things will be well. We, thus, live in the mixed realities of commitment and ambiguity, but God's work keeps the flame of hope burning.

Scene 2: People Live Ambiguously
We have already been introduced to the depressing reality of Scene 2, the fall of humanity. The scene opens with Wesley speaking in deliberate, sad tones. He explains to the people sitting before his pulpit that the human heart "is desperately wicked." Such wickedness is the consequence of people exerting their own wills, pride, and independence from God.

Looking up at the people, Wesley adds that grace still abounds. He acknowledges that, "in the heart of every child," a deep store of ungodliness and unrighteousness is strongly rooted, such that "nothing less than almighty grace can cure it."

From this somber scene, we move to another, with Wesley standing near a well, holding a clay pot. He speaks of the goodness and evil of humanity as a riddle; people are made of strange inconsistencies, which even wise people cannot reconcile—"the wonderful mixture of good and evil, of greatness and littleness, of nobleness and baseness." God created people in God's own image, but people created themselves in another image—evil, carnal, inimical with God. Wesley pauses and lifts the clay pot; he adds a further note: even when we regain the image that God created, it will always be a "treasure in earthen vessels."

Feeling somewhat fragile and very ambiguous about being human, the people in the audience turn their heads to see one last scene at the back of the stage. The audience looks on as the ground shakes, and people on stage huddle together, trembling. Apparently, an earthquake has just occurred, and people are nervously turning to Wesley. He explains that God causes earthquakes, but that the moral cause is really human sin. The modern audience to this drama turn to one another with questioning glances, but they remember the earlier sermon in Scene 1 when Wesley attributed the fall of all creation to the fall of humanity. Perhaps this is what Wesley is saying again; however, he does not linger to give an elaborate explanation of how humans cause earthquakes. He turns his attention, instead, to giving advice about what people can do: fear God, thank God...
for deliverance, and repent and believe the gospel.  

Act 2. Scene 2 has been a drama of rebellion, failure, sin, evil, and destruction. Human beings are looking dismal at this point of the drama, with Wesley’s blaming human sin for all of creation’s ills. On the other hand, even in this scene of the drama, Wesley expresses some urgency about human response. Humans can still act, with the help of God’s grace. They can still know that God’s grace is available to them although human actions are often destructive to all creation. With the help of God, people can still repent and believe. This will make a difference. God’s image can even be restored in human lives, though it will be carried in earthen vessels. The call to commitment is vivid in these sermons, as is the reality of ambiguity; yet the last words are still sounds of hope.

Scene 3: Much Is Expected
Scene 3 of Act 2 begins with many questions about what people can do. Whereas John Wesley preached abundantly on this subject, the scene will be a brief one, simply representing some of the dominant threads of Wesley’s preaching and writing. The light first falls on John Wesley with his hand raised for emphasis. He announces that the Holy Spirit reproves people for conforming to the world, being friends with the world. The light quickly shifts to the other side of the stage where Wesley stands with the other hand raised. This time, the people standing around Wesley in the open field look at him curiously. One asks, “What do you mean when you say that we are to leave the world?” Wesley responds by reading 2 Cor. 6:17-18, and then he explains that we are to keep a distance from ungodly people. He explains that this does not mean complete separation, as in the affairs of business, but simply keeping a distance so as not to be influenced by their ungodliness.

The light shifts again, and Wesley is preaching in a parish pulpit. He urges the people to bring their wandering thoughts into captivity to Christ. He explains that there are different kinds of wandering thoughts, and only some of these originate from, or contribute to, evil tempers. Even so, he urges the people to pray that God will deliver them from sin and that the fruit of God’s Spirit will be manifest in their lives.

The light shifts yet again, and Wesley is very serious in his manner as he preaches on the dangers of riches. He speaks strongly in saying that the words of the text (1 Tim. 6:9) be understood “in their plain and obvious
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sense,” namely, that people should not desire to be rich, endeavor to be rich, store up treasures, possess more goods than God wills for God's stewards (more than is needed for food and covering), or love money.  

He then returns to a frequent Wesleyan theme: Gain all you can, save all you can, and give all you can. He explains that gaining should be done without hurting your soul or body; saving without wasting paper, water, or anything else; and giving in such a way that prevents one's longing for or storing up riches.  

Wesley walks across the stage and continues the theme, addressing another group with an extensive explanation of the problem of riches. The problem is that having riches inevitably leads to trusting riches. Riches, thus, hinder love of God and neighbor and hinder holiness of living.  

People sit quietly, listening, while Wesley walks to another group at another place on the stage. To this group, he adds an additional warning, namely, that those who “have the conveniences of life, and something over,... walk upon slippery ground. . . . Ye are every moment on the verge of hell.”  

With people moving silently to stand near Wesley at center stage, Wesley shifts to the subject of stewardship. He reads from Luke 16:2 and then extends both arms. He explains to the people around him that God has entrusted human beings with their souls (in the image of God), their bodies, worldly goods, talents, and the grace of God and power of God's Holy Spirit. “Which alone worketh in us all that is acceptable” in God's sight. The people are silent, waiting. Wesley adds that God's critical questions to us in judgment will be how we used our souls, bodies, worldly goods, talents, and grace. In short, have you been a good steward of these gifts? As the curtain closes, Wesley adds a critical question from God, “Above all, wast thou a good steward of my grace, preventing, accompanying, and following thee?”  

Act 3: Renewal of Creation

The final act in this drama opens with people murmuring among themselves. One person asks, “How can we possibly live up to what this man is preaching?” Another says, “The cost is too high.” Yet another replies, “This is overwhelming!” The crowd quiets as Wesley steps onto the stage again, speaking of the possibility of new birth—“the great work which God does in us, in renewing our fallen nature.” He explains about justification and being born of God’s Spirit; he speaks of being renewed in the image of God. He promises that new birth will bring many fruits to people’s lives; it
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will bring faith, hope, and love of God. Wesley continues to talk about the way of love and the possibility of Christian perfection, all of which are gifts of God and all of which bear much fruit. He puts forth the grand promise that God's Spirit bears witness with our spirits that we are children of God; and living as children of God is marked by love, joy, peace, and the other fruits of the Spirit. Wesley concludes by encouraging the people to follow the very clear commands of God—to love God with all their hearts and souls and minds and strength and to love their neighbors as themselves. This love is itself the work of God's Spirit! The kingdom of God is at hand!

At that moment, Wesley steps out of the crowd on stage and begins to address the audience directly. He says that these words are directed not just to the people on this stage. God makes all things new—in the past, in the present, and in the future! This includes the transformation of all elements—not just people. For example, fire will be transformed so that it will be "harmless in the new heavens and earth"; it will "probably retain its vivifying power, though divested of its power to destroy." The new world will be renewed, and people will enjoy "a deep, an intimate, an uninterrupted union with God." We pray now for "thy Kingdom to come," and we know that the Kingdom includes all of God's creation.

Reflections in Conclusion

Returning to the poem with which this essay began, the strong sense that God's Spirit will renew creation was the first and last word for John Wesley, as evident in his sermons and discussed recently by Theodore Runyon. Between the first and last words of God's abundant grace and transforming Spirit, we find the pangs of human sin, which have wrought havoc on human life and on all God's creation. Whereas Wesley's view of creation is highly anthropocentric and his view of original sin naïve at many points, his awareness of human sin and its devastating influence on God's creation represents a complex view of human life as interconnected with God's other creatures. God created the world and declared it very good, but human selfishness and arrogance have despoiled the earth. God calls people to repent and follow the ways of God; further, God gives the grace to make this possible.

Wesley does not leave people with general theological principles; he gives specific directions about following the ways of godliness, spurning ungodliness, and living for God in all the details of daily life. This includes a radical approach to stewardship, giving everything to God and rejecting
riches and the control they wield in human life. People are called to reject consumerism and to use all of their possessions in service of God. This environmental ethic is radical in its demand; but God’s Spirit makes it possible. It promises to bear much fruit—the fruits of the Spirit for human life and, indeed, for all creation! With Wesley we close, not with exasperation about the radical commitment expected of us or with the ambiguity of life. We close simply with prayer: Breathe on us, Holy Spirit! Renew your creation!

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Endnotes
3. Ibid., ¶ 162N, 109.
5. Ibid., 470-75.
6. Ibid., 478.
8. Ibid., 213.
10. Ibid.
13. Ibid., 206.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid., 213.
17. Ibid., 214.
18. Ibid., 215.
23. Ibid., 345; cf. 344-48.
25. Ibid., 395-99; See also, Wesley, "Original Sin," 63-65.
29. Ibid., 32.
35. Ibid., 147.
37. Ibid., 65, 71; see also Wesley, "The End of Christ's Coming," in Works, 267-77.
42. Ibid., 291.
43. Ibid., 296.
In this article, I carry you off to Europe. By Europe I do not mean the European Union, which is a partner—or competitor—of the United States. I mean Eastern Europe—the part of Europe that still does not have membership in the European Union. They are still wishing and praying, Fiat Europae!

Ten years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Europe is still a divided continent. The borderlines, though different, remain a painful reality. Through the Schengen Treaty, the European Union has erected a new fence against the poor nations in Europe: Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Ukraine, Slovakia, and many others. For The United Methodist Church in Central and Southern Europe this creates many problems. Some delegates are unable to attend denominational meetings, because they are denied visas or immigration as visitors.

"Let Europe arise!" With this exclamation Winston Churchill ended his speech in Zürich on Sept. 19, 1946. These words were surprising in the midst of the ruins of World War II, but the Western European states pursued this goal vigorously. However, Europe has yet to achieve this goal. At a meeting recently with representatives of the European churches, president of the European Commission, Jacques Delors, said, "We have to give Europe a soul." Should this not succeed, the whole process of integration could fail. Economic interests alone cannot represent Europe’s soul.

Europe is still divided between those who belong to the European Union and those who are waiting outside the door.

Most representatives from the former Socialist countries today would
confess that the political changes did not improve the standard of living for the majority of the people. Today, more people live in poverty than during the Communist era. The calculation goes this way: forty years of Communism plus ten years in the diaspora of capitalism equals disaster. It is very possible that European integration will remain elusive. The gap between poverty and wealth could grow, leaving a remnant of nations that will never meet the criteria for becoming full members of the European Union.

It cannot be the church’s role to find the economic solutions for a new Europe. But the churches are expected to have a vision for all the people—rich and poor. The church has to continue in the effort to give Europe a soul.

Europe extends from small islands in the Atlantic Ocean to the Ural Mountains in the East. In square miles, it is a small continent. But it has a high number of inhabitants—600 million. Europe is a cluster of more than fifty nations in which 189 different languages are spoken and six different alphabets are used. Europe represents a greater diversity than we will ever be able to understand.

At present, the European Union comprises only fifteen states. Another thirteen are participating in the enlargement process. Europe is a cluster of very different ethnicities and mentalities. It is still in the process of becoming a community where equality and reconciliation can prevail.

We do not usually think of Europe when we think of the Bible. Yet, Christianity has been in Europe since New Testament times. After all, it was the Roman Empire and its soldiers that crucified Jesus and stood guard at his tomb. And the centurion who confessed under the cross, “Truly this man was God’s Son!” (Mark 15:39), was a European.

Most Europeans belong to one of the three families of state churches: Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Protestant. If you are Polish, you are supposed to be Roman Catholic. If you are Bulgarian, you are Orthodox; and if you are from the eastern part of Hungary, then you are Reformed. But this does not automatically determine church membership. This church affiliation is connected to national identity and has a cultural significance. So, it is no surprise when a recent survey revealed the large number of people who registered as “nondenominational” (in percentages of the whole population): East Germany, 72 percent; Poland, 7 percent; Slovakia, 27 percent; Czech Republic, 73 percent; Hungary, 40 percent; Ukraine, 68 percent.

There is not yet enough experience to understand and even classify the various new religious expressions and communities in Eastern Europe.
Transitional Experiences

Ten years ago, the Communist system collapsed almost simultaneously in all of the Eastern European countries. The effect for the churches was to create greater scope and more liberty for mission and ministry. But this must be seen in the historical context of the attempt by the Communist regimes to limit the activities and influence of the churches. This limitation had two aspects:

1. The totalitarian Communist ideology demanded that it be the exclusive force forming both society and people. In this context, the churches were a foreign body within the Socialist community. No wonder the registration of the churches during the Communist era resided in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs!

2. The above totalitarian claim was accompanied by administrative control, close supervision, and also oppression and persecution.

These factors made for hard conditions; but the Czech theologian Josef L. Hromádka used to say, “We are as free as we dare to be. Christians are not only victims of a system. Whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s (Rom. 14:8).”

Ten years ago, the changes led from a state of distress into new freedom. Our feet were set in a broad place. The new freedom gave a strong impetus for the life of the church, and we started off with great enthusiasm for evangelism and church planting. But very soon we realized that we were not prepared for this development. It was clear that the new conditions also brought new challenges: The churches have moved from the diaspora of a pseudomodern Communist world into the diaspora of a postmodern society. Let me explore this statement in three points.

1. The Attraction of Relativistic Pluralism

After the monopoly of the Communist ideology follows a pluralism of political philosophy and views of life. In a longstanding democracy there is consensus (albeit often unarticulated) about the society’s basic values. But in post-Communist societies this consensus does not exist. So pluralism reigns, and with it relativism and particularism. This creates in both the political life and the churches an atmosphere of disloyalty and a feeling that nothing is binding—that “anything goes.” Thus, United Methodist annual conferences in Eastern Europe began to experience new difficulties in the decision-making process, finding it hard to get the majorities needed for
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important decisions. Many members, without saying so, were abandoning
the church community and following their personal and private views,
without pondering the effect their actions might have on the community.
Even clergy of long standing fell victims to the philosophy of relativistic
pluralism, to the point of risking ethical misconduct. The churches were
leaving the connection and behaving like congregationalist movements.

2. The Magic of the Market
The new market system was criticized by Vaclav Klaus, a state leader in the
Czech Republic, as being brutal and without any values to regulate it. He
spoke about a market without any attributes. This state of affairs has a
dehumanizing influence on personal relationships. It influences relation­
ships even within the church, expressing itself in attitudes like this: "If you
do not buy my strategy, my understanding of mission, I'll quit!" The church
is living in a brutal market of homemade religious menus.

How do we in the church deal with this "anything goes" mentality, on
the one hand, and an egotistic particularism, on the other? How do we find
and set common goals for the future? How do leaders and local churches
again become reliable partners? How do we develop—alongside the new
sense of freedom—a concern for responsibility, truth, and values, so that
the church might be salt and light for a new generation? Wesley’s approach,
based on Gal. 5:6, is very much needed: "The only thing that counts is faith
working through love."

3. A Renaissance of Religion
A large number of new religious movements began to fill the spiritual
vacuum left by the atheistic states of Eastern Europe: Unification Church,
Hare Krishna, Scientology, the Mormons, and fundamentalist and charis­
matic hardliners. The monopoly of the national churches was dissolved and
an atmosphere of discordance created. The philosopher Jurgen Habermas
has referred to this new atmosphere as "der neue Unübersichtlichkeit"3—
"the new confusion." The religious scene is no longer comprehensible at a
glance.

The parable of the unclean spirit that was cast out of the house and
then returned with a phalanx of evil spirits (Matt. 12:43-45) is an apt way to
explain the feelings of the people in the post-Communist society. How do
we fill the empty house of the post-Communist society? The only response
for United Methodists is this: with faith working through love.

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Three Options in Setting New Goals

The churches in post-Communist European countries have three options:

1. They can look and go backwards by restoring the conditions and expressions of church life that existed in pre-Communist times. One of the main issues facing those who select this option is having to request the government to restore church buildings expropriated under Communism and also to rehabilitate the status of the church to pre-Communist times. Many of the state churches have chosen this option. They are trying to restore the church buildings not so much as instruments of their mission but more as symbols of inherited power and glory. These churches, very clergy oriented, think that they can reinstitute the former glory of the priesthood and the hierarchy. They have not yet discovered the new call to evangelism and especially the role of the laity in this new field of mission.

2. The churches can opt to rely on the experiences of the churches in the West to provide the answers for a liberal and pluralistic society. But the position of the churches in Western Europe is weak. (Church attendance amounts to 3 to 5 percent of the official membership.) Sociologist of religion Peter Berger likes to speak of the church in Western Europe as the zone of disaster and debacle. While the churches in Eastern Europe can learn from the churches in Western Europe, perhaps the churches in the West stand to benefit more by listening to and learning from those in the East, particularly about how these churches survived in a highly secular, hostile context.

3. The churches in Eastern Europe can learn from their experiences under Communism and extrapolate the results into the new conditions of the post-Communist era. The approach could be a mix of the three options. However, regardless of the option a church selects for entering the post-Communist era, it should do so based on a solid evaluation of its past and a clear sense of where it wants to go in the future.

Wanting to assist, many Western churches simply introduced Western programs and methods into the Eastern churches. However, they were unwilling to travel with their Eastern brothers and sisters down the path of change and transition from the Communist to the post-Communist era.

The process of transition requires attention to the following components:

- The church’s role in the transition from a monolithic to a pluralistic society
- The role of laity, particularly women and youth, during the Communist era and in the time of transition
- The models of leadership under Communism and now...
The lack of middle-aged and younger pastors and the question of how to recruit and educate new leaders
The presence of the church in the secular media
The church’s relation to money and self-sufficiency
The church’s role in the emerging situation of religious pluralism
Religion and national identity
Ecumenical cooperation in an open society
Christian education in an open society
Learning afresh about the church’s diaconal dimension as it enters a post-Communist area

If the churches in the West and the East would be open to share experiences and to listen, they could truly learn a lot from one another. And what the churches have to learn, the societies in Europe also have to learn.

The famous Spanish emissary and philosopher Salvador de Madariaga said in 1952:

Above all, we have to love Europe . . . because Europe is still in the process of becoming Europe. Only if a Spaniard would start to speak about “our Copenhagen” and a Norwegian about “our Belgrade.” Only then, Europe will no longer be a battlefield of self-interests, but a community trustworthy for our partners in the other continents of the world. Fiat Europæ! 

II

Let us now take a closer look at the United Methodist presence in the post-Communist countries of Eastern Europe.

Methodists have a history in Eastern Europe.
The United Methodist churches in Eastern Europe fall into three episcopal areas: The Nordic and Baltic Area, the Eurasia Area, and the Central and Southern Europe Area.

The list of Eastern European countries with a United Methodist presence is impressive. Indeed, it is easier to name a country in which the church is not present than to name where it is. The only countries lacking a United Methodist presence are Rumania, Belarus, Georgia, Armenia, and Slovenia.

By contrast, The United Methodist Church is established in the following post-Communist countries: Albania, Bulgaria, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia,
Czech Republic, Estonia, Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Moldavia, Poland, Russia, Slovakia, Ukraine.

For historical reasons, we could divide the countries into four categories. (1) About 150 years ago, the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, started a missionary conference for the region of Bulgaria and Macedonia. (2) Methodist work in the Czech and Slovak republics and in Poland began when the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, undertook relief work in these countries following World War I. (3) The third category in the development of Methodism in Eastern Europe is the result of Germans who settled in Hungary and Yugoslavia about one hundred years ago. (4) Methodist work in Russia and the Baltics began about one hundred years ago, too, at the initiative of the Methodist Episcopal Church. Extension into the Ukraine was spearheaded by United Methodists in Poland, Slovakia, and Hungary.

With the exception of the work in Albania, Bosnia, and Moldavia, the Methodist presence in all these countries listed above is the result of Methodist missionary outreach. But even in Albania, Bosnia, and Moldavia, a Methodist agency was present to provide humanitarian aid following the two world wars.

The long history of Methodism in Eastern Europe is an important factor when entering into ecumenical discussions, for the attitude is still prevalent that Methodists are "invading" Orthodox territory in search of proselytes. But Methodists are hardly invaders; they have been in Eastern Europe for more than one hundred years!

This situation simply adds to the urgency for United Methodists in the post-Communist countries to write and publish their history. Evidence is emerging that United Methodists in these countries want to remember their history. Take the Bulgarian United Methodists as an example. The younger churches in the annual conference showed little interest in the history of the denomination in the region. Their primary interest was to live and witness in the present and the future. But things changed at the 2000 annual conference. The annual conference featured an evening of storytelling during which people told stories about the history of Methodism in Bulgaria. The response to the stories was very positive. One story, in particular, bears repeating here.

In the Bulgarian city of Varna, one of the most beautiful cities on the Black Sea, the Methodist mission started in 1885. In 1889 a beautiful church building was erected in the downtown area—a work of art in stonemasonry,
with a bell tower. In 1965 the city took over the church building, and the Communists converted the building into a puppet theater for the children of Varna. The bell tower had to go. With the help of three other men, Bedros Altunian, now superintendent of Bulgaria, stole the bell under cover of darkness and buried it in a field outside the city. Persecution reduced the congregation to a small group of faithful Methodists. After Communism gave way, the congregation was revitalized in 1990. The church was growing rapidly and soon in need of more space. In spite of difficult circumstances, a new, six-story church center is nearing completion, virtually face to face with the tower building of the Communist party.

There was extensive debate about whether the modern, six-story construction in the downtown area should have a tower; but, finally, everyone supported the idea. When the tower was finished in 2000, the secret behind the tower was revealed. It turns out that the bell in the tower was the same one buried by Altunian and friends in the 1960s! The three men who collaborated with Altunian were the only ones who remembered the whereabouts of the bell, and they excavated it for the new tower. What is more, after the bell was polished, it revealed two inscriptions: "Varna" and "Baltimore." Thus, after thirty-five years, this bell, donated by Methodists in Baltimore, was restored to its place of honor. The bell will call together the congregation for worship, weddings, and funerals. It will also stand as a witness to the power of the Methodist connection, which endured the difficult times of the Communist era. The congregation, like the bell, was forced to go underground for a time, but the connection between Varna and Baltimore remained intact.

Methodists in Eastern Europe are minorities and are open to minorities.

In most countries in Eastern Europe, The United Methodist Church is small. Belonging to the worldwide Methodist connection is an encouragement to these churches. It provides them with an identity and saves them from parochialism. However, these churches face the dilemma of being a minority church in the context of predominantly national churches. This renders them very vulnerable, especially when the minority church is sponsored from abroad. Consequently, The United Methodist Church is often lumped together with "foreign sects." Not surprisingly, United Methodists in Eastern Europe are eager to stress that their church has a history of
more than one hundred years in the region.

Let us explore the history of the Bulgarian Methodist Church. The first American missionaries entered Bulgaria in 1857 through Istanbul. The Sultan Abdul Mejid of Istanbul had issued an edict in favor of the Protestant mission, hoping thereby to weaken the influence of the Orthodox Church. But the Protestant mission did not support the oppressors; on the contrary, the Methodists worked to strengthen the national identity of the oppressed by giving them back the Bulgarian language (which was virtually lost). The official language of Bulgaria was Turkish, and the Orthodox churches used Greek or the ancient Church-Slavonic language. The Methodists, on the other hand, translated the Bible into the national Bulgarian language in 1864, thus saving the language from extinction. That is why one finds a "Dr. Long Street" in every major Bulgarian town, named after the first Methodist missionary in Bulgaria.

The minority church was siding in a very practical way with those in need. But a minority church, claiming to belong to a global church, is vulnerable. In 1949, fifteen Protestant churchmen were arrested by the new Communist state on the charge of spying for the United States and the British Intelligence Services. The Communists made this false accusation to decimate the church's leadership. These church leaders were sentenced to from five to fifteen years of prison and work camp.

Methodists in Eastern Europe are minorities and are open to minorities. In Bulgaria today, for example, one-fifth of Methodist Church activity takes place among Armenian refugees and Turkish-speaking gypsies. Methodists are a connecting people, and not nationally bound. In the war zone of the Balkans, the national churches and other communities were giving preference to their own ethnic groups when lending aid. However, the Methodists were free to distribute humanitarian aid to everyone. The response of the national churches has its roots in long-standing enmities and atrocities, provoking a strong sense of nationalism. And nationalism was abetted by a kind of romanticism that stressed the validity of subjective experience at the level of the nation. This led to unhealthy national pride and also bias against strangers.

With its roots in the Church of England, the Methodist movement developed in the New World as a church for everybody. Our Constitution reads, "In The United Methodist Church no conference or other organiza-
By the way, the Methodists came to Europe as immigrants or reimmigrants. They know what it means to be strangers.

Methodism in post-Communist countries is largely a lay mission. Like early Methodism, Eastern European Methodists are working with lay missionaries and local pastors. The church in Bulgaria, for example, has six ordained clergy, but seventeen local pastors and eight lay missionaries. The superintendent of Bulgaria commented recently that it is "the lay people who are developing new churches, not the clergy. Every lay person who is employed full time is expected to develop at least three new churches during his or her tenure of service."

The resurgence of The United Methodist Church in Bulgaria is the work of lay people. In 1990, there were three congregations; in 2000, the church boasted thirty local churches and eleven preaching points.

Methodism is struggling with pluralism versus identity. The church always reflects society more than we would like. As I said earlier, Eastern European societies are marked by an "anything goes" mentality, on the one hand, and an egotistic particularism, on the other—and this has influenced the churches. Thus, Methodists struggle with the question: How does the church develop, parallel to the new sense of freedom, a sense of responsibility, truth, and values, so that we might be salt and light for the new generation?

An example from the Czech Republic may elucidate the problem. Most of the newly developed Czech churches were so charismatic in style that the gap between the new and the traditional churches was becoming a threat to the unity of the annual conference. The "anything goes" mentality started to paralyze the annual conference, because the new Christians were willing to accept neither the church's discipline nor ecumenical agreements, such as the prohibition against rebaptism.

Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the annual conference covenanted to undergo a three-year process in search of new unity. The process, called "UMC 2000," culminated in "Faith Festival 2000," held in Praha. We celebrated not only the beginning of The Methodist Church in
Czechoslovakia some eighty years ago but also the fact that in the three-year process we lost only one congregation. We celebrated our unity and diversity, acknowledging that Christianity is “faith working through love,” which is the basic expression of the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Methodists care about the poor.
The Methodists in Eastern Europe are very close to the poor, because they themselves are poor. The clergy and lay workers receive small salaries and they and their families live at poverty level. As of yet, the churches are unable to survive without considerable support from Western Europe and the United States. We have too many unemployed members (especially the young people) and too many elderly people, who have yet to see a penny of their pensions, the state being unable to pay.

Many of the local churches are running programs to support the poor: food distribution, soup kitchens, medical aid, heating in the winter, and so forth. It is very interesting that, in the countries where all diaconal and social work was taken away from the churches, the churches are engaging in many new diaconal initiatives: homes for the elderly and orphans, shelters for the homeless, and therapy for drug addicts and alcoholics. Prison ministry is done mostly by volunteers.

Methodists build ecumenical bridges.
As is clear by now, the Methodists as a minority church are not always welcomed by the national churches. Nevertheless, Methodists are fostering ecumenical relationships wherever possible; for example, the Conference of European Churches (Protestant and Orthodox); the Concordat of the Leuenberg Churches (Reformed, Lutheran, and Methodist); and the World Council of Churches. On the national level, Methodists negotiate with the leadership of the national churches, while, at the local level, they extend a hand of friendship to their sister churches.

Following the complaints of the Orthodox churches about proselytism in Eastern Europe, the Conference of European Churches, together with the Council of the Roman Catholic Bishops in Europe, are discussing a Charta Ecumenica, a codex on ecumenical behavior for the mission of the churches in Europe.

In my travels in Eastern Europe, I always try to visit with the bishops of other churches. We very often have good friendships. A recurring question from the Orthodox bishops is this: Could United Methodists not help
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with scholarships for their students of theology, making it possible for them to study in a Western university so that they can become acquainted with other cultures and other confessional families?

III

Societies in rapid transition, such as those in Eastern Europe, experience many challenges. This demands of the church extraordinary levels of performance in ministry. Sometimes we are tempted to pray for stability; but we know that only as long as we dare to face the challenges of transition will we continue to grow.

The challenges are many. Some church personnel are close to being burned out. New congregations, after four or more years, need people who are educated in pastoral theology. For everything there is a time: a time for learning by doing and a time for leadership based on solid education. The United Methodist Church in Eastern Europe needs both right now.

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Endnotes


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What does the authority of the Bible mean for United Methodists?

KENNETH J. COLLINS

When John Wesley preached a celebratory sermon on the occasion of the opening of the New Chapel in City Road, London, in 1777, he reminded the congregation that "Methodism, so called, is the old religion, the religion of the Bible." Indeed, as the octogenarian reminisced a decade later upon the rise of Methodism, he observed that the young band at Oxford had been continually reproached for being "Bible bigots" and "Bible moths," feeding upon the Bible as moths do upon cloth.

Knowing church history quite well, Wesley affirmed in his own day the canonical status of the sixty-six books that Protestants call the Bible. Earlier, in a lengthy process, the universal church had recognized the canon of the New Testament in the Festal Letter of Athanasius in 367 and in the work of the Council of Carthage in 397. This body of literature, together with the Old Testament (canonized by the Jews at the Council of

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In recent years, questions about the authority of Scripture have occupied the attention of The United Methodist Church in several official forums. Because of tensions in the denomination about certain issues, most notably homosexuality, the General Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns (GCCUIC) sponsored a dialogue on theological diversity, at which it soon became apparent that underlying our different opinions about particular issues were equally different understandings about the authority of Scripture and divine revelation. Soon after, an issue of the Circuit Rider was devoted to the topic of the authority of Scripture. Then in December 1999, the GCCUIC cosponsored with the General Board of Discipleship a "Consultation on Scriptural Authority and the Nature of God's Revelation." With all the attention that has been paid to this issue, have we made any progress toward a common understanding?

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Jamnia at the end of the first century), were deemed Sacred Scripture by the church. In other words, although these writings came to the church through very human means—that is, through a diversity of times, authors and locations—they were nevertheless unlike all other literature in that their canonical status meant that they were holy.

Confronted with the realities of both persecution and heresy, and taking into account the inspiration of the Holy Spirit in the creation of the Bible, the early church looked to the biblical canon as a “rule, measure or standard” in order to guide its course as it proclaimed God’s faithful activity with respect to two key stories: (1) the history of Israel, and (2) the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Indeed, Athanasius and others in the fourth century realized that the clarity and integrity of this twofold witness could be lost through the “party spirit” or “faddism” of heresy. Self-willed in many respects, and therefore unwilling to submit to any authority higher than their own judgments, heretics often reveled in idiosyncratic teachings that were rightly put aside by the ecumenical church.

Scripture in the Community of the Church

Though the Bible is read profitably in private devotion and study, where the believing community, though absent, is presupposed, it is read best, perhaps, in the context of the liturgical community, bathed in both prayer and worship. To be sure, the stories of Scripture have the uncanny ability to evoke; they call us forth as a people, beyond egoism and all sorts of tribalism, to participate in something far greater than ourselves—the very life of God. In particular, United Methodists participate in three important interpretive communities that help to define the substance—the ethos—of our witness and tradition. On the most general level, our reading of Scripture is guided by the ecumenical consensus of all orthodox Christians (Roman Catholics, Protestants, and Eastern Orthodox) of whom we are a part. Here our interpretation of Scripture is informed by the careful judgment of the early church at the councils of Nicaea, Constantinople, Ephesus, and Chalcedon and by the regula fidei of the Apostles’ Creed, as our Book of Discipline carefully reminds us.

Second, The United Methodist Church acknowledges two great creedal epochs, not just one. The first period naturally includes the christological and trinitarian work of the fourth and fifth centuries, and it constitutes our
ecumenical witness. The second period embraces the reforming labors of
the sixteenth century, when the great Protestant creeds and confessions
were articulated; as, for example, in The Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion of
the Church of England. These articles, carefully crafted and expressed,
found their way in a reduced form, through the editorial judgment of John
Wesley, into the life of Methodism. Indeed, so important are the Methodist
Articles as a guide for the proper interpretation of Scripture, as a regula
fidei, that they are protected from alteration and amendment by the first
restrictive rule of the Constitution of The United Methodist Church.

Third, the substance of our distinctive Methodist witness to the
broader church, as well as to society at large, is held in place by the guiding
and illuminative value of John Wesley’s Sermons and Notes, which are
included “in our present existing and established standards of doctrine.”
This literature, which constitutes a salient part of Methodist tradition, not
only underscores the witness of the Holy Spirit—that is, the doctrine of
assurance for which Wesley was so strongly criticized by eighteenth-
century rationalists—but also highlights the goal, or telos, of the Christian
faith itself by displaying the doctrine of entire sanctification, not as a theo-
logical oddity or a distinctive doctrine but as the actualization, the instanti-
ation, of the great twofold commandment of Jesus Christ to love God with
all our heart and our neighbor as ourselves.

So then, on the one hand, the canonical status of Scripture points to its
authority as the norma normans (the norm that norms) in that the Bible
constitutes the highest standard of appeal in terms of both faith and prac-
tice. On the other hand, the diversity of social locations in which the Word
of God is actually read, the distinct interpretive communities, comprise
nothing less than living traditions that are carefully passed on from genera-
tion to generation. In a real sense, tradition is the signet which holds the
jewel in place. Again, we properly read Scripture within the believing
community, not apart from it. The Holy Spirit inspired the biblical authors
and continues to illuminate and guide the contemporary community of
faith as it reads, studies, and meditates upon the Word of God.

Even with canon and tradition in place in an authoritative way, there
may, however, still be room for interpretive error—for idiosyncratic, self-
invested readings or, on a group level, for the emergence of an ethnocen-
tric, tribal spirit which sets aside, or deflects, the universal love of God and
neighbor. To prevent such a possibility in his own age, Augustine postu-
lated a key hermeneutical principle in his De Doctrina Christiana and wrote to the effect, "if the interpretation violates or goes against love, then it is in error." In a similar way, in considering the canon as well as tradition, both ecumenical and Wesleyan, we United Methodists might summarize our guiding hermeneutical principle in the following fashion: "If the interpretation violates or goes against holy love, then it is simply wrong." That is, on the one hand, our exegetical findings should never be a matter of love apart from holiness, for this would quickly and easily devolve into the sentimentality of a masked self-will. On the other hand, our findings should also not be a matter of holiness apart from love, for this would result in a dour, all-too-human religion—a different, but no less misguided, expression of self-will. Scripture, then, is a unique and cherished means of grace that takes us beyond human autonomy and self-will, beyond all sorts of provincialism, on both personal and social levels. It invites us all, male and female, young and old, rich and poor, to a far greater journey than we could have ever imagined.

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Endnotes

Certainly, consensus in a denomination of several million would be an unlikely outcome for any dialogue on any issue. Still, the report by the 1999 Consultation, while not claiming to speak for everyone, does indicate two areas in which there seems to be general agreement: (1) the question for United Methodists is not whether Scripture has authority but rather how the Bible may function authoritatively; (2) our doctrinal standards affirm that Scripture reveals what is necessary for our salvation.1 These two points, as spare as they may at first seem, do provide an important foundation for further discussion. I would like to suggest some ways in which they may provide direction for future reflection.

The first point of agreement indicates that the concept of authority itself needs to be given careful consideration, probably more than it has received up to this point. Authority is a term that can be understood in many different ways, and it can also be misunderstood. Authority, for instance, is not the same as authoritarianism, which is really a misuse of authority; but in many cases, reactions against authority are colored by past experiences of authoritarianism. Furthermore, authority may be held or exercised in many different ways. A judge, for instance, has very different authority than a teacher, a parent than a senator. Authority may involve imposing discipline, giving orders, sharing expertise, modeling behavior, and more, depending on its context and purpose. Authority does not come in "one size fits all," and our dialogues regarding Scripture's authority should give careful attention to the kind that is appropriate to the Bible.

In light of this point, it is also important to see that different kinds of authority do share a common structure. At its heart, authority is relational; it cannot be exercised in isolation. Someone or something "bears" authority, and someone else is "subject to" authority? The language of being subject to authority carries a great deal of negative weight; but the work of several philosophers indicates that authority actually exists for the benefit of the person who is subject to it. It may feel at times confining to be subject to laws, but they exist to protect citizens. Any school age child has wished to be free from the assignments that teachers make, but doing those assignments is how students learn. It is always possible for authority to be misused, and certainly those bearing authority can make mistakes; but when it works as it should, authority serves an important function for those who are under it.
One common misuse of authority is the failure to recognize that it is properly exercised only in a particular domain. For instance, a police officer has authority to arrest criminals but not to arrest just anyone. Taking into custody someone who has not broken the law would constitute misuse of that officer's authority. A college professor with a specialization in English literature is not authorized to give exams to students in a political science course. At ordination, we charge clergy to "take authority," but we recognize limits to and the need for appropriate use of that authority when we talk about clergy ethics. To recognize that authority functions in a particular domain does not diminish the authority of the person or thing under discussion. It simply specifies where and how this authority pertains in order to avoid confusions that give rise to problems for its proper exercise within its domain.

So how could this understanding of the concept of authority help in thinking about the Bible's authority? At this point, the second insight of the Consultation becomes important. According to our doctrinal standards, Scripture reveals what is necessary for salvation. One could say, then, that the domain of its authority is salvation. This seemingly simple (and perhaps obvious) statement provides important information about the proper exercise of scriptural authority. The Bible has authority in a particular domain, namely, in those things necessary for our salvation. God has given the Bible this authority for our benefit, because God wishes to save us. Its purpose, then, is not to impose constricting regulations or provide information in other fields of knowledge (such as science) but to bring us into a saving relationship with God. The Bible exercises its authority properly when it does so, and its purpose ought to shape the kind of authority we recognize it to have. The Bible's authority is misused when it is extended beyond its proper domain into areas that are not essential to our salvation. This is not to say, though, that its scope is narrow. If salvation involves the whole person, and if John Wesley is right that it is available to us now, then the Bible may exercise its authority for our lives in many ways; for instance, by providing principles by which we should live, examples of consequences for certain behaviors, models of faithful people, and so forth. Far from limiting the Bible, recognizing the appropriate domain in which Scripture exercises its authority calls us to pay close attention to the ways in which it does speak God's word to us.

Although there is promise for developing a better understanding of the
The Authority of the Bible

Bible's authority when these clarifications are kept in mind, they will not eliminate all disagreement. For one thing, we are likely to have different views about what is “necessary for salvation.” Whether the “essentials” include specific doctrinal beliefs or particular moral codes, or even certain religious practices, have been and undoubtedly will continue to be questions that divide us. The long history of denominational schism within Christianity and the more recent attempts at ecumenical dialogue are instructive regarding the difficulty of reaching consensus on any of these points. In many cases, these disputes arose because of different kinds of appeals to Scripture, and we are learning that God manages to work through us despite our disagreements with one another. Although conversation about Scripture's authority is important because it keeps us focused on what it means to live by the Word of God, we should not expect that any statement about the Bible's authority will settle all our disputes. Even if we cannot hope for much more consensus than we have now, we need not despair. Ultimately, the Bible's authority rests on the way God uses it to touch and change our lives, and any further dialogue about scriptural authority should keep that focus clearly in mind.

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Endnotes

2. It is possible for the “thing” to bear authority when it represents the thoughts or intentions of a person or persons. For instance, one may consult a dictionary regarding the proper use of a word rather than having to contact the person who wrote the definition.
The Book of Jeremiah is the complex product of turbulent times. Pain, loss, dislocation, and death are the subjects of most of the book. The prophet Jeremiah ministered during the last decades of the kingdom of Judah and the beginning of the exilic period. He suffered persecution for prophesying judgment to people who wanted to hear about peace, for calling for surrender to God's plan for a new Israel when his audience wanted to believe in the past, and for inviting repentance and faith among survivors who rejected God. During his long ministry, prophecies originally spoken to one audience were addressed again to another. Small collections were formed and expanded. The Book of Jeremiah gathered materials from and about his long ministry and addressed them to later generations for whom the death of the kingdom of Judah and exile were bitter present realities.

Poetry and prose in chapters 2-24 account for the removal of the institutions and beliefs that had rooted Judah's sense of security and identity. The covenant theology of Deuteronomy provides the explanation for these losses. Scattered through the first half of the book, but concentrated in chapters 29-33, are the passages that reveal God's plan to restore and rebuild the people according to a transformed pattern. The lectionary readings are from this part of the book. The land had been lost, because the people had broken the covenant (Jer. 2:17). Yet God promises blessing and answered prayer even in exile (29:1-4-7), eventual restoration to the land (32:1-3a, 6-15), and a new covenant (31:27-34). The Davidic dynasty had been removed (21-22), but God will raise up another shepherd from the line of David (23:1-6; cf. 30:8-9; 33:14-26). God's promise to bring back the
ones who will repent is rooted in the revelation of God’s everlasting love (31:3) that breaks the bounds of covenant curses and retribution.

September 30, 2001—Twenty-sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15; Ps. 91:1-6, 14-16; 1 Tim. 6:6-19; Luke 16:19-31

Jeremiah, “the weeping prophet,” should have laughed. Perhaps he did laugh at the brazen hope of his cousin who asked him to buy a piece of land occupied by the enemy. Perhaps he laughed with delight over Hanamel’s relief and gratitude when he agreed to do it. Perhaps he laughed with skepticism when God’s word made this transaction a sign of his people’s eventual return to their lost homes, as Sarah had laughed over her promised pregnancy (Gen. 18:12). But is anything impossible with God (Gen. 18:14; Jer. 32:17, 27)?

If Jeremiah laughed, he laughed alone. Judah was conquered and Jerusalem besieged by the Babylonians. Starvation and death already stalked the city’s inhabitants. Their ultimate destruction was imminent. (This episode fits chronologically following chapter 37.) Jeremiah was also under siege, confined in the court of the guard within the palace complex. Yet he complied with his cousin’s request to redeem his field, to give silver in exchange for a piece of land Jeremiah could not use and might never even see.

Even in ordinary circumstances acting as redeemer exhibited an extra measure of compassion, family loyalty, and generosity. One way that an Israelite could repay a large debt was by selling his inherited property. In Old Testament understanding the land belonged to God, who apportioned it to the Israelite tribes, clans, and family households (Lev. 25:23; Josh. 14:1-5). Law and custom preserved family inheritances for use within the clan and tribe. The law of redemption gave the closest male relative the legal right and moral encouragement to purchase his impoverished kin’s land (Lev. 25:25). The law could not require him to do it, however, since he might be poor himself. The nearest relative had the freedom to choose whether to act as redeemer or not. He might risk his own security by paying his bankrupt relative’s debt, but he was also free to refuse (cf. Ruth 4:6). Perhaps some redeemers were so generous that they gave back the land to their impoverished kin instead of keeping it for their own use.

Land was valuable because of the life-sustaining food and raw materials it produced. Unusable land was worthless. Hanamel’s field in Anathoth was...
behind enemy lines. Perhaps it was occupied by Babylonian troops, or its crops had been requisitioned to feed them. The field had become useless to Hanamel or anyone else in Jerusalem; yet he was bold and desperate enough to ask Jeremiah to redeem this worthless field with money. As a refugee from the countryside Hanamel needed cash to survive. Jerusalem was already on siege rations. Jeremiah himself received one loaf of bread per day (Jer 37:21) as the king's prisoner until the bread in the city ran out. Hanamel may have been planning to escape southward, or even to go out to the Babylonians. Through Jeremiah God had promised survival to anyone who would surrender to Nebuchadnezzar's forces (Jer. 21:9). One may imagine several stories for Hanamel, but the account focuses on Jeremiah and the significance of his actions. Jeremiah put his trust and hope in God, not in silver (1 Tim. 6:10). He spent seventeen shekels of silver (slightly less than 200 grams) to redeem Hanamel's field. Hanamel left with ready cash, but Jeremiah chose to take refuge in God by faith and obedience.

Earlier in Jeremiah's ministry his relatives from Anathoth had plotted to kill him in order to silence his message of judgment from God (Jer. 11:19, 21; 12:6). Did Hanamel or his father participate in that conspiracy? Chapter 11 implies that they did. A man who had wanted Jeremiah dead now asks Jeremiah to help him live! There is no hint in chapter 32 of the bitterness of Jeremiah's appeal for retribution against his would-be assassins in 11:20 and 12:3. He had committed his cause to God's justice and relinquished his desire for revenge. Now, as an act of compassion, personal sacrifice, and prophetic ministry he redeems his kinsman-enemy's field. We do not know if Hanamel had come to believe God's word through Jeremiah or if he simply considered the imprisoned prophet to be an easy mark. Nevertheless, the redemption transaction is a token of reconciliation between Jeremiah and his extended family.

This account of Jeremiah's redeeming a field contributes to the book's portrait of his individual faith, but it is primarily an act of his public ministry. By considering this act within the circumstances of its setting and in the context of the book, one may discern Jeremiah the individual relinquishing material security and the status of resentful victim in order to help his enemy. This act also goes on the public record to serve as a sign of God's promise of restoration for the people. The redemption was carried out according to standard procedure in full view of the people in the court.
of the guard. There were many witnesses to Jeremiah's foolish transaction, and the perplexity expressed in 32:25 was no doubt theirs as well as his: "Yet you, O Lord God, have said to me, 'Buy the field for money and get witnesses'—though the city has been given into the hands of the Chaldeans." God's word of promise makes sense of Jeremiah's inexplicable transaction. "Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land" (32:15). By buying Hanamel's field Jeremiah is living in the future promised by God. Observers see a prophet literally putting his money where his mouth is! Furthermore, the procedural details about signature, seals, witnesses, and duplicate copies of the deed present this as an actual transaction, not as a pantomime or merely symbolic act. Sobering reality intrudes when Jeremiah instructs Baruch to store the copies of the deed in a clay jar so that "they may last for a long time" (32:14). Babylonian rule would last for seventy years (25:12; 29:10). God's promises of restoration in chapters 30–33 now provide an extended interpretation of the deed stored in a jar. God had promised restoration even before the final Babylonian conquest.

Compassion, sacrificial generosity, and reconciliation are fruits of faith. By living in the future promised by God and not in the fearful present, one is free to give up trying to save oneself.

October 14, 2001—Twenty-eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7; Ps. 66:1-12; 2 Tim. 2:8-15; Luke 17:11-19

In 597 B.C.E. Nebuchadnezzar's army conquered Jerusalem for the first time. They captured the king and the royal household and deported priests, prophets, and people with them to Babylon. What was the meaning of their exile? Some of the people left behind thought that the exiles had been removed from the scene to purge the nation (Ezek. 11:14-15; Jer. 24). Other prophets predicted that their exile would be brief, because Babylonian power was already in decline (Jer. 28:2-4, 11; 29:24-32). This interpretation was patriotic and theologically conservative. Yahweh, the God of Israel, would protect and preserve the king and the Temple (cf. 2 Kings 19:34). Jeremiah's message, however, warned that the worst was yet to come. The Babylonians would complete their conquest of Judah and Jerusalem and rule the whole region for three generations of kings (27:7) or seventy years (25:12; 29:10). God had granted them this realm and called upon Judah and the neighboring countries to submit to their authority (27:5-7, 12-15). The
exiles of 597 had experienced what was in store for many others in Judah. In the decade between the two conquests Jeremiah used the exiles as an example of how to live under the divinely authorized Babylonian regime. The short book of prophecies that comprise chapter 29 offered them explanation, instruction, and promises for a hopeful future (29:11). This divine word to the first exiles found a larger audience after 586 B.C.E., when thousands more were taken away by the victorious Babylonians; and it continued to address generations of Jews scattered throughout the world's kingdoms.

The people described in v. 1 as the ones whom Nebuchadnezzar had carried off are addressed by God in v. 4 as “the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon.” Nebuchadnezzar has been God’s servant (27:6) in this matter, not a victorious opponent. In the Book of Jeremiah, most of the prophet’s ministry is devoted to exposing the justice of the death sentence against the kingdom of Judah (e.g., 29:17-19; 5:20-29; 11:1-17; 17:4). Accepting by faith that their exile is part of God’s plan provides a foundation for obedience and hope. Nebuchadnezzar’s victory does not disprove God’s power.

The simple commands to build, plant, and marry are another way of saying, “Do not plan an armed rebellion.” According to Deut. 20:5-9, a man who had built a house, planted a vineyard, or become engaged to marry was exempt from military service. Establishing a home took precedence over making war.

The pairs of imperatives in vv. 4-6 are commands with the implied promise of success. The same grammatical form is found in Gen. 1:28, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it,” and in Jer. 27:17, “[S]erve the king of Babylon and live.” These promises that exiles will live in the houses they build, eat the fruit of the gardens they plant, and see their children and grandchildren are much more than logical consequences. Each promise cancels one of the futility curses in effect against the covenant violators in Judah (Deut. 28:30-32; Jer. 5:15-17; 6:12). In exile life is possible under divine blessing (cf. Isa. 65:21-23). Build and plant are also key words from Jeremiah’s call (1:10), and “multiply” echoes the creation command and blessing (Gen. 1:28). This domestic scene among the exiles is a modest beginning of God’s plan to give new life to the people Israel (“I will make them many, and they shall not be few,” 30:19) and to build and plant nations and kingdoms (1:10). By settling down, the exiles were not giving up; they were
acting in faith that their descendants would be the recipients of God’s promises. (Compare the three generations in 29:6 and 27:7.)

Worshippers prayed for the peace of Jerusalem (Ps. 122:6-9), but God had denied the petition. The prophets who announced peace did not bring a true word from God (6:14; 8:11). Just as royal authority had been transferred from the kings of Judah and neighboring states to the king of Babylon for a set period (27:6-7), so the locus of peace and security had moved from Jerusalem to Babylon (29:7). The commands to “seek” and “pray for” Babylon’s shalom (well-being) call for intercession on its behalf and requests for divine promises of salvation. Seek also implies action. By building up their own faithful communities, God’s people in exile contributed to the well-being of the kingdom in which they made their homes. Babylonian rule was not the ultimate good or God’s eternal kingdom, any more than the kingdom of Judah had been; but seeking the welfare of Babylon during its allotted time was compatible with faith in God’s promises of restoration.

Suffering the loss of home, position, and freedom, exiles are vulnerable to false hope conjured out of denial and to apostasy arising from despair. They do not automatically become “good figs,” ready to receive God’s promises, just because they are exiles (24:4-7). They must believe God’s word and live by it.

October 21, 2001—Twenty-ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Jeremiah 31:27-34; Ps. 119:97-104 or Ps. 19; 2 Tim. 3:14-4:5; Luke 18:1-8

The generation of Israelites in Judah and Jerusalem who suffered the most severe blows of conquest and exile used a proverb that expressed their despair over an unnatural and inexplicable experience, “The fathers have eaten sour grapes and the children’s teeth go numb.” The consequences of their ancestors’ accumulated sins had fallen unfairly on them (cf. Lam. 5:7). The Book of Jeremiah is punctuated by the motif of the people’s persistent refusal to respond to God’s word through the prophets (7:13-14, 25-26; 11:7-8; 32:31-34; 44:9-10). Was their generation really more guilty than any other had been? If this disaster could happen again, what hope existed for the lasting future promised to Israel and Judah? Sins could build up over the course of many generations until catastrophic judgment fell once more. God promises to silence the proverb by restoring the just and consistent application of the law in Deut. 24:16, “only for their own crimes may
persons be put to death." The people who will be planted and built in the land will be free from their ancestors' guilt but responsible for their own. The promise of a new covenant in 31:31-34 provides a more radical solution to the sin that would threaten the community. The Book of Jeremiah explains the death of the kingdom of Israel and the kingdom of Judah as the result of their unremitting failure to keep the terms of the Sinai/Horeb covenant. God, who had offered the covenant relationship to Israel in the first place, had the right to declare the covenant broken. Through Jeremiah God had done so (11:1-17), refusing the overtures by the people (14:7-9, 12) and forbidding intercession by the prophet (11:14; 14:11) to renew the broken covenant once more. Even if Moses were present to pray for forgiveness and renewal, God would not agree (15:1). The recipients of the hopeful prophecies in Jeremiah had already experienced the effects of the covenant curses (Deut. 28:15-68). Within the terms of the covenant, Israel had no further claim on God and no right to be called the Lord's people anymore. Yet God promised Israel that they would be God and people to each other again (24:7; 30:22; 31:1). This restoration of relationship would be made possible by a new covenant. Since Yahweh's offer of covenant to the Exodus generation had been an act of grace, how much more gracious is this promise of a new covenant to a people with a long history of unfaithfulness and rebellion!

Could anything prevent God's people from breaking the new covenant as they had the old? The comparison between the old and new covenants set forth in this passage focuses on this question. Some things will not change. God will first forgive their sin so that they will begin with a clean slate (31:34; cf. Exod. 34:9; Num. 14:19-20). The parties to the covenant are the same—Yahweh and the house of Israel—and the relationship created by the covenant is defined by the same formula, "I will be their God, and they shall be my people" (31:33; 7:23; 11:4). Israel's obligation in the covenant is still Yahweh's torah, the law or instruction that articulates the divine will. The innovative feature of this new covenant is the place where the torah will be written. Law written on stone or scrolls is vulnerable. Stone tablets may be broken (Exod. 32:19), scrolls may be lost (2 Kings 22:8-20) or burned (Jer. 36:23), teachers may fail (Jer. 8:8-9), and the people regularly refuse to know and follow the Lord's way (Jer. 5:1-5). God will overcome the vulnerability of the old covenant by inscribing the new covenant document on the hearts of the people.
The metaphor of the heart is not sentimental or emotional but rational. In the Old Testament, the human mind is in the heart, not the head. With the heart one considers and makes commitments (e.g., "circumcise...your hearts," 4:4). Life choices leave their marks there. Jeremiah 17:1 describes Judah’s sin inscribed deeply on the tablets of their hearts. Sin and Yahweh’s torah cannot be written on the same heart. God will have to chip and polish off the sin inscription in order to replace it with the covenant obligations. Hearts transformed by God will enable and ensure the faithfulness of the restored people of God (24:7; 32:39-40).

People with God's law in their hearts know the Lord. In Jeremiah, knowing God incorporates familiarity with God's character and the nature of divine actions (9:24), the memory of how God had saved Israel (2:6-8), and the acceptance of God's authority by obeying divine commands (9:3; 22:15-16; 24:7). In Psalm 119 (e.g., vv. 11, 34, 97-104) the psalmist seeks what is promised in Jer. 31:31-34. The poet meditates on God's word, memorizes it, and is taught by God. In the promised new covenant, by God's grace, people's desires and decisions will embrace God's self-revelation without reservation.

The date of this new covenant is vague ("the days are coming"). It will follow the return and restoration of God's people promised in Jeremiah 30:1-31:28 ("after those days," 31:33; cf. 32:37-41). Jeremiah 31:27-28 summarizes the message of the book, using key terms from the first chapter. When God's plan to pluck up, break down, overthrow, destroy, and bring calamity (1:10, 14) has been brought to completion, then God will build and plant Israel and Judah again (1:10) and establish the new covenant. The experience of prophesied judgment serves as evidence that God will also watch over the promises until they are fulfilled. In several places, the New Testament reflects on the fulfillment and reinterpretation of the new covenant promise in Jesus' ministry (Luke 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:25; 2 Cor. 3:1-18; Heb. 8:8-13; 10:11-18). Yet Christian believers still apply themselves to know and do God's will by studying the Word (2 Tim. 3:14-17), praying always (Luke 18:1), and seeking the illumination and guidance of the Holy Spirit.

November 25, 2001—Reign of Christ Sunday
Kings and prophets were often in conflict over different views of the rights and responsibilities of monarchs toward God and toward their subjects.
Kings were attracted to the idea that a monarch should secure his kingdom by impressing other kings. Displays of wealth and armies, treaties, conspiracies, and revolts maneuvered a king and his realm to avoid the many threats to their survival among the nations of the world. Support from a powerful deity provided the foundation of a king’s political support at home. The descendants of David who ruled from Jerusalem were able to claim legitimacy and security on the basis of Yahweh’s eternal covenant with David (2 Samuel 7; 23:1-7). Prophets like Jeremiah and the authors of the prophetic books in the Old Testament ministered with the knowledge that the kingdoms of Israel and Judah would die. The kings could not save them. According to God’s word through these prophets and books the kings were primarily responsible for leading their subjects in life-giving paths by doing justice and righteousness and by supporting true and exclusive worship of Yahweh (e.g., Jer. 22:15-17; 1 Kings 15:11-14; 16:25-26; cf. Pss. 72, 101). The latter position seems idealistic and naive. No nation could survive in the real world of the Ancient Near East by attending only to the internal matters of social justice and the spiritual needs of its people. David himself had been used by God to defeat the Philistines, gain control of the full extent of the promised land, and grant Israel rest from their enemies (2 Samuel 8). The Deuteronomistic History and the Book of Jeremiah argue that loyal service to Yahweh alone was directly related to Israel’s success against external enemies (Joshua 23; Judges 2:16; Jer. 5:20-29).

The kings of Judah had been the cause of much of the nation’s suffering. Jehoiakim had oppressed, enslaved, and even killed the subjects entrusted to him in order to increase his wealth and embellish the image of his power (22:13-17). He killed a prophet and burned a scroll in the attempt to silence God’s accusation and warning (26:20-23; 36:23). Zedekiah could never find the courage or faith to obey God and submit peacefully to Nebuchadnezzar. His city, people, and family suffered violent overthrow as a result of his arrogance (38:17-28). The woe saying against the shepherds in 23:1-2 summarizes the collection of sayings against Judah’s last four kings in chapters 21–22.

The Babylonian conquest in 586 B.C.E. ended the reign of the last Davidic king in Jerusalem. God had promised David an eternal dynasty (2 Sam. 7:16). Psalm 89 eloquently articulates the distress caused by this contradiction. What was the meaning of that promise when there was no more king on the throne? The metaphor of king and subjects as shepherd and sheep hints at an answer. Between the shepherds who destroyed and
scattered the flock (23:1-2) and the new shepherds whom God will raise up (23:4). God promises to gather “my flock” back to the land (23:3). The gap in the rule of kings in the line of David will be filled by God.

The second promise identifies the shepherd whom the Lord will “raise up” (vv. 4-5) as a righteous branch, the legitimate descendant of the house of David. The reign of the king to come will provide safety for Israel and Judah (23:6). His rule will integrate protection from enemies without and oppressors within. The promise that he will “deal wisely, and ... execute justice and righteousness” epitomizes the type of royal leadership that had always been desired but had seldom been enjoyed (21:12; 22:3, 15). His defense of the alien, orphan, widow, and other oppressed people will create a kingdom within which no one will be afraid, dismayed, or lost. This king’s name, “Yahweh is our righteousness,” testifies to his leadership in worship. The prophet’s depiction of the righteous reigns of both the king and the Lord points Christians toward the coming reign of Christ.

Conclusion

In the New Testament, Zechariah and John the Baptist join the line of prophets who repeat God’s merciful promises and proclaim the coming of the Savior from David’s house (Luke 1:68-79). God has fulfilled these promises of forgiveness, salvation, and light by means of Jesus’ death under the mocking title “King of the Jews” (Luke 23:35-38) and his resurrection as the first-born from the dead (Col. 1:18). In the kingdom of the beloved Son we enjoy redemption and the forgiveness of sin (Col. 1:13-14), the capacity to serve the Lord in holiness and righteousness (Luke 1:75), and light to walk the path of peace (Luke 1:79; Col. 1:12). May we, therefore, endure all things with patience and give thanks to God with joyful hearts (Col. 1:11-12)!

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A Word on The Word

Issues In: Jesus Research and Scholarship

MARK ALLAN POWELL

The "quest for the historical Jesus" has returned and is currently generating more publications than at any time in the history of scholarship. The central issue is the question of what can be reliably asserted about the person of Jesus on the basis of historical evidence alone—apart from the imposition of a faith perspective. I sometimes explain this to laity by asking the question, "What would it be appropriate for a teacher to say about Jesus in the public schools?" Most Christians in the United States recognize that it would not be appropriate for such a teacher to tell students that Jesus was born of a virgin; though we might believe this as Christians, it is a conclusion of faith rather than of historical research. That Jesus was crucified, however, or that he befriended outcasts and taught a radical ethic of love—these are matters that virtually all scholars (Christian or not) accept as indisputable facts of history.

Most pastors will know that the historical study of Jesus was in vogue in the nineteenth century but was derailed by the work of Albert Schweitzer, who seemed to demonstrate the futility and irrelevance of such research. The movement was taken up again in the 1960s in a chastened and more critical movement called "the new quest." For those who wish to review some of the essential documents of these periods, an anthology has recently been published, 


The current explosion of scholarship on the historical Jesus is sometimes called "the third quest," because it takes off in directions that were not pursued previously. One noteworthy facet of this third quest is its interdisciplinary character: scholars draw on resources of archaeology, literary criticism, cultural anthropology, sociological analysis, and even psycho-historical study in ways that were not possible in previous generations. This essay only begins to describe what is afoot, but it does so with attention to the questions that I hear most often from pastors and parishioners.
How Can I Get Up to Date?

So much is being written so quickly that it may be impossible to stay current on this issue; but I can recommend three surveys of recent scholarship that provide a general orientation:
- Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus in Contemporary Scholarship* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity, 1994)
- Mark Allan Powell, *Jesus as a Figure in History: How Modern Historians View the Man from Galilee* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1998)

Witherington writes from a conservative theological perspective, seeking to correct notions that are most challenging to traditional Christian understandings of Jesus. Borg also critiques research from an explicitly Christian perspective, but he is more open to ideas that challenge traditional or even orthodox understandings of Jesus. Powell’s book is intended as a classroom text and so strives for neutrality, describing positions without indicating whether they are right or wrong.

Who Are the Major Players?

Many of the world’s most important biblical scholars and theologians are now involved in historical Jesus studies; but if pressed to name “the top three,” I would list the following (with their major works):

These works are for the truly committed. They are dense tomes, devoted to explicating Jesus’ life and teaching with exhaustive attention to detail. Was Jesus really baptized by John? Did he have twelve disciples? Was he born in Bethlehem? Did he tell the story of the Good Samaritan?
Whatever the question, these scholars compile the data, weigh the arguments, and render their verdicts. Crossan’s work generally favors a secularized view of Jesus as an innovative social reformer not particularly interested in matters of theological doctrine. Meier sticks pretty close to the biblical portrait of Jesus as an eschatological Jewish prophet who announced that God’s kingdom was imminent, while challenging some Jewish traditions in startling ways. Wright radicalizes this view by presenting Jesus as a politically charged prophet to Israel who became convinced that he was the Messiah appointed to die as an atoning sacrifice for his people’s sins.

There are shorter works also, ones that would be more appropriate for use in an adult study group. The following three books are merely examples of the dozens of fine “biographies of Jesus” that are being produced:

- E. P. Sanders, The Historical Figure of Jesus (London: Penguin, 1993)
- Paula Fredriksen, Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews: A Jewish Life and the Emergence of Christianity (New York: Knopf, 1999)

All three of these works are written in a lively and engaging style. They do not assume an advanced level of theological awareness. All three are written by Christians with sensitivity to the impact that historical study can have on faith and piety; but all three also allow scholarship to challenge traditional notions in what they consider to be responsible ways. Borg does not (in this book) dispute facts about Jesus so much as encourage Christians to envision certain aspects of Jesus that are often ignored. What does it mean for us to realize that Jesus was a social revolutionary who defied the conventional wisdom of the political and religious authorities of his day? Do we really appreciate the charismatic quality of Jesus’ personality—the fact that he was a mystic who saw visions, heard voices, and often devoted himself to long periods of prayer and fasting? Both Sanders and Fredriksen are more concerned with the historical reliability of biblical reports. They think that much of what the Synoptic Gospels tell us can be sustained, but there are specific instances where they conclude that the Bible is wrong. For both of them, a recurring problem is that the Gospels are written for a church engaged in Gentile mission, to the extent that the specifically Jewish aspects of Jesus’ life and ministry are often transformed.
What about the Controversial Jesus Seminar?

Many laity have heard about historical Jesus studies primarily through reports about the Jesus Seminar. This group was a consortium of scholars who met during the 1990s and voted (with colored marbles) as to whether Jesus really did say or do the things attributed to him in the Bible. Their conclusions were often widely reported in national news outlets, especially when the verdict was negative. Headlines would scream, "Scholars Decide Jesus Did Not Teach the Lord's Prayer." Borg and Crossan were members of the Jesus Seminar, though they did not necessarily agree with all of that group's findings.

The Jesus Seminar seems to be off the radar screen at present; but for those who remain exercised over the group or simply want to understand better the role that it played, I cautiously recommend two books that should be read in tandem:


Johnson's book is a blistering attack on the Seminar by a theologian who believes its work is not only misguided but antagonistic to Christianity. Miller writes as a member of the Seminar and responds to Johnson's charges, while also offering a sober analysis of what the group did and did not seek to accomplish.

What about Those Other Gospels?

Historical Jesus studies have brought new attention to the oft-ignored apocryphal gospels, such that many parishioners are now hearing of these works for the first time. A certain sensationalism attaches to the phenomenon when the volumes are touted as "secret gospels" that the church has tried to keep hidden from the public. In fact, they are readily available in theological libraries but are of less interest to the general public than conspiracy theorists would have us believe. For one thing, the only apocryphal gospel that any scholar regards as conveying authentic information about Jesus is the Gospel of Thomas. All of the other apocryphal gospels are studied for what they reveal about later Christianity, not what they say
about the historical person of Jesus. This is a rare point on which virtually all scholars of all persuasions agree. The Gospel of Thomas, furthermore, is not thought to reveal anything authentic about Jesus that would counter traditional concepts—at most, it enhances those concepts with similar, parallel material. The Jesus Seminar probably has a higher estimate of the worth of the Gospel of Thomas than any other group of scholars; and in the entire book they find only two unique sayings (that is, sayings not also found in our canonical Gospels) to be authentic. Neither of these unique sayings would alter the biblical portrait of Jesus. Finally, many laity may confuse the Gospel of Thomas with the Infancy Gospel of Thomas, which is a completely different work. The book that may contain some historically authentic material is simply a collection of sayings attributed to Jesus. The Infancy Gospel of Thomas is a second-century account of fanciful stories about Jesus when he was a child; no scholar considers these stories to be historically authentic.

What Was the Message of Jesus?

When we inquire historically as to the content of Jesus’ teaching, we discover that scholars are divided. In general, the teaching contained in material attributed to the Q source is regarded as most reliable; material derived from Mark’s Gospel belongs in a second tier; and that which is found only in John is least regarded. But we may also construe this topically.

The greatest level of agreement concerns what the Bible presents as Jesus’ ethical teaching. Almost all historical scholars accept the authenticity of this material (e.g., the bulk of what is in the Sermon on the Mount). Most stress that Jesus proclaimed a social ethic in addition to personal morality, and many insist that this was geared specifically to the context of Israel’s crisis as a puppet state of Rome. Crossan emphasizes Jesus’ critique of the patron-client relations and brokerage systems that had evolved under Hellenistic rule. Wright argues for the hope of liberation and articulates Jesus’ message as a prophetic call to dependence on God.

There is less agreement with regard to the authenticity of eschatological sayings attributed to Jesus: did he really think that the kingdom of God was at hand, and what did that mean? Many scholars (Meier, Sanders, Witherington, Wright) insist that Jesus expected the end of the world [or, at least, the end of a world] and proclaimed the imminent activity of God in this light. Recently, however, several scholars departed from this former
consensus. Borg, Crossan, and others associated with the Jesus Seminar argue that Jesus was not a future-oriented prophet but a down-to-earth sage, extolling lessons for a life focused on the present. These scholars attribute the eschatological material in the Gospels to later Christians who were responding to such apocalyptic crises as the disastrous Jewish war with Rome.

The material attributed to Jesus that is least likely to be regarded as authentic by historians is that in which he describes his own person or mission. When the Bible presents Jesus as saying that he must "give his life a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45) or as proclaiming "I am the way, and the truth, and the life" (John 14:6), most historians dismiss these remarks as projections of later Christians who are putting their own ideas about Jesus' significance on the lips of the teacher himself. There is a growing movement among many scholars, however, to ground apostolic christology in the historical teaching of Jesus. Wright asks, for instance, whether it is reasonable to presume that the radically monotheistic followers of Jesus would have attributed divinity to him if he had not told them that he was, in some sense, a manifestation of God.

The following volume offers a summary on the teaching of Jesus from a perspective that grants a high degree of authenticity to what is found in the Bible:

- Scot McKnight, A New Vision for Israel: The Teachings of Jesus in National Context (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999)

As the title implies, McKnight tries to relate all of Jesus' teaching (his ethics, prophetic announcements regarding the future, and articulation of his purpose and mission) to the context of Palestinian Judaism rather than to the later context of Gentile-oriented Christianity.

**Did Jesus Work Miracles?**

Most Christians are curious as to what historians do with all the reports of Jesus' miracles. It should come as no surprise that most scholars dismiss these stories as legendary or else bracket them out as unsuitable for historical discussion. To believe in a miracle requires faith. Therefore, by definition, no one can ever say on the basis of historical science alone that a miracle happened. This is not the end of the matter, however. Meier has recently broken with this longstanding tradition of avoiding discussion of the miraculous. He devotes several hundred pages in the second volume of
his study to a detailed examination of every miracle story in the Gospels. His conclusion is that, although historians cannot say whether or not the miracles occurred, they can (indeed, must) say that Jesus did inexplicable things that the people of his day regarded as miracles. This much, he avers, is historical fact. Wright goes even further, questioning whether historical reporting must restrict itself to limits set by post-Enlightenment scientific theory. If historical evidence points to something that scientists cannot explain (as he believes it does in this case), the tension should be allowed to stand. The following volume offers an in-depth study of the miracles from a perspective that is basically compatible with that of Meier and Wright:

- Graham H. Twelftree, *Jesus the Miracle Worker: A Historical and Theological Study* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999)

**Conclusion**

It is no doubt obvious that church leaders must approach this topic with the utmost sensitivity. Parishioners rightly perceive that what is being said about the historical Jesus has implications for the legitimacy of Christian doctrine and popular piety. Academic distinctions between “the Jesus of history” and “the Christ of faith” are artificial and unconvincing to the average churchgoer who hears whatever the academicians say about Jesus as applicable to the One they worship as Lord and Savior. A degree of humility is warranted—and perhaps attainable—by emphasizing the operative word: *quest.* The Bible presents the kingdom of God as something that must be sought (Matt. 6:33). Above all else, historical Jesus scholars are seekers.

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As mainline denominations see their membership shrink, it is all too tempting to look beyond our borders to the secular world or non-denominational churches for ways to lure folks back. What many Christians seek, however, is a strong tradition with which to identify and one that is relevant to our changing world. *Doctrines and Discipline*, the third volume in a series dealing with United Methodism and U.S. American culture, suggests that our Wesleyan theological heritage is just such a tradition.

In *Doctrines and Discipline*, articles by a dozen different scholars examine aspects of our theological history and how recovery of the Wesleyan spirit can revitalize the contemporary church. Several themes emerge from the volume that make Methodism especially suited to a world marked by change: the dynamic character of Wesleyan theology; the diverse traditions that United Methodism holds in tension; rooting in a practical, lived-out faith; and a focus on Christian community, an important corrective to the U.S. American focus on individualism.

The dynamic character of Methodist theology is discussed in Dennis Campbell's introduction to the book, Randy Maddox's chapter on John Wesley's practical theology, Gregory Jones's look at distinctive features of Methodist theology, and Gregory Schneider's chapter on the Holiness Movement. Jones points to the place of theological creativity alongside doctrines, while Campbell and Schneider emphasize the work of the Holy Spirit in theological reflection. The dynamic character of Methodism is, in fact, what makes this volume possible. With no set creeds or liturgy, the Methodist church can bring a variety of theological perspectives and methods into conversation with one another. For Methodists, theology is more a process than a set of doctrines; yet that process is increasingly absent from the lives of Methodist clergy and laity outside the academy.

The diverse traditions that comprise Methodism are explored in several
articles. Steven O'Malley describes the distinctive and often overlooked doctrines of the Evangelical United Brethren, a tradition that in itself embraces numerous influences. Schneider urges a balance of the Holiness tradition with the institutional aspects of connectionalism. Michael Cartwright points out the place doctrinal standards have held in African-American Methodist denominations, suggesting lessons these churches hold for The United Methodist Church and its possible reunification with Black Methodist denominations. Douglas Strong writes of the Methodist church's history of making room for both mainstream ideas and those on the margin.

Randy Maddox defines practical theology as the ongoing task of connecting life stories with the larger narrative of God's work in the world, and he traces the erosion of the role of the Methodist pastor-theologian. Other chapters in the volume discuss specific practical aspects of our faith: the importance of family and midweek worship (Karen Westerfield-Tucker); advocacy of public education (Elliott Wright); the process of moral discourse (Jack Keller); and the importance of small group experiences (David Lowes Watson). An article by the late Frederick Herzog cuts to the heart of the relationship between culture and religion, namely, the extent to which money has influenced the church and, specifically, its missional task. While Herzog addresses the priorities of the larger United Methodist Church, his critique can challenge the practical day-to-day choices of many individuals and local congregations.

Watson, Maddox, and Campbell deal with the communal aspects of Methodism, as does Bruce Robbins, who compares Methodist connectionalism to the ecumenical concept of koinonia. Both connectionalism and koinonia emphasize fellowship based on matters of the heart and offer much-needed organic models to an age defined by distinctiveness and individuality.

All of the articles provide historical background that is unfamiliar to many United Methodists, both clergy and laity. Some chapters bring this context into dialogue with the contemporary church better than others, with Maddox, Jones, and Watson offering specific suggestions for recovering Wesleyan ideals and practices. Several articles assess the current situation in The United Methodist Church but offer no constructive suggestions for applying the background they have outlined. This is especially unfortunate in Westerfield-Tucker's article on family and midweek worship,
Wright's article on public education, and Strong's chapter on reconciling those on the margins with those in the middle. By addressing these topics, the writers clearly believe they are relevant to the contemporary church, but, by and large, they fail to define that relevance or any concrete actions the church might take in these directions.

Parish ministers will benefit from the entire book, but especially Maddox's chapter, in which he suggests that mainline churches are failing in the task of practical theology. By suggesting that the proper arena for theology is not the academy but the broader Christian community, Maddox encourages pastors and congregations to take up the task of theology, and he suggests ways for greater interaction between the parish and the academy. Since few ministers find time to "practice" theology, or even read a book such as this, they could plan to study chapters from the book at pastors' schools or with district or parish groups involving clergy and laity. Each chapter is accompanied by a summary of its argument and a number of reflection questions that can enrich individual or group study of the book. Such study can help move theological activity into the lives of those outside the academy and, given the dynamic character of Wesleyan theology, enliven and equip The United Methodist Church to accept its own inherent diversity and to meet the challenges of a changing world.

Reviewed by Jane Ellen Nickell. Nickell is Associate Pastor at First United Methodist Church in Huntington, West Virginia.
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