IN THIS ISSUE:

Issue Theme: “Make Disciples of Jesus Christ”
Our Mission Reconsidered: Do We Really “Make” Disciples?
Sarah Heaner Lancaster
Worship and Becoming Disciples
Robin Knowles Wallace
Disciples for the Future: Small Groups and Vital Faith Development
Lisa R. Witbrow
Getting the Whole Job Done: Spiritual Nurture amid Committee Business
Susan W. N. Ruach
Making Disciples in the Wesleyan Tradition: Practicing the Means of Grace
Laceye Warner

Outside the Theme
Radical Orthodoxy and Methodism
D. Stephen Long

The Church in Review
The Judicial Council
Donald E. Messer
Susan Henry-Crowe

A Word on the Word
Lectionary Study
Warren Carter

Issues In: Christian Ethics
Robin W. Lovin

Book Review
The Company of Preachers: Wisdom on Preaching, Augustine to the Present
ed. by Richard Lischer (Eerdmans, 2002)
Reviewer: Patricia Farris

NEXT ISSUE:
PROVIDENCE AND THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD
Quarterly Review’s mission is to provide a context in which clergy, scholars, and laypeople can critically examine the theological issues, challenges, and demands of Christian ministry. QR’s website broadens its mission by adding features that help facilitate global dialogue about these issues.

The website features information about:
- The purpose of QR
- Editor
- Editorial board
- The table of contents of the current issue
- How to subscribe to QR
- How to obtain permission to reprint articles
- How to submit articles to QR
- Free sample article
- Articles from past issues in our QR Classics section
- Links to online journals, seminaries, and other organizations

Additionally, QR has an online bulletin board. We invite you to post your thoughts, questions, and feedback, as well as hear what others have to say.
Quarterly Review (ISSN 0270-9287) provides continuing education resources for scholars, Christian educators, and lay and professional ministers in The United Methodist Church and other churches. QR intends to be a forum in which theological issues of significance to Christian ministry can be raised and debated.

Editorial Offices: 1001 19th Avenue, South, P.O. Box 340007, Nashville, TN 37203-0007. Manuscripts should be in English and typed double-spaced, including notes.

QR is published four times a year, in March, June, September, and December, by the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry of The United Methodist Church and The United Methodist Publishing House. Periodicals postage paid at Nashville, Tennessee.

Subscription rate: $24 for one year; $44 for two years; and $60 for three years. Students: $16 for one year; $30 for two years. For all subscription orders, single-copy orders, and change-of-address information, contact Cokesbury toll-free (800) 672-1789, M–F 7:00 A.M.–6:30 P.M. CST and Saturday 8:00 A.M.–4:00 P.M. CST. Inquiries may also be sent in writing to the Cokesbury Subscription Services, P.O. Box 801, Nashville, TN 37202-0801.

Postmaster: Address changes should be sent to The United Methodist Publishing House, P.O. Box 801, Nashville, TN 37202-0801.

QR is printed on acid-free paper.

Lections are taken from Revised Common Lectionary (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992).

Scripture quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from the New Revised Standard Version Common Bible, copyright © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, and are used by permission.

Quarterly Review
Summer 2003

Editor: Hendrik R. Pieterse
Email: hpieterse@gbhem.org
Website: http://www.quarterlyreview.org
Copyright © 2003 by the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry and The United Methodist Publishing House
Editorial
Discipling in the Methodist Way .................................................. 115

ISSUE THEME:
“Make Disciples of Jesus Christ”
Our Mission Reconsidered: Do We Really “Make” Disciples? ............... 117
Sarah Heaner Lancaster

Worship and Becoming Disciples .................................................. 131
Robin Knowles Wallace

Disciples for the Future: Small Groups and
Vital Faith Development .............................................................. 141
Lisa R. Withrow

Getting the Whole Job Done: Spiritual Nurture amid
Committee Business ................................................................. 151
Susan W. N. Ruach

Making Disciples in the Wesleyan Tradition: Practicing
the Means of Grace ................................................................. 161
Lacey Warner

Outside the Theme
Radical Orthodoxy and Methodism .............................................. 173
D. Stephen Long

The Church in Review
The Judicial Council
Donald E. Messer ................................................................. 189
Susan Henry-Crowe ................................................................. 189
A Word on The Word

Lectionary Study

Warren Carter ................................................................. 198

Issues In: Christian Ethics

Robin W. Lovin ............................................................... 209

Book Review


Reviewer: Patricia Farris .................................................. 216
Discipling in the Methodist Way

HENDRIK R. PIETERSE

In 1996, the General Conference approved a new statement of the mission of The United Methodist Church, namely, “to make disciples of Jesus Christ.” On the face of it, the statement is a straightforward affirmation of the church’s marching orders (Matt. 28:19-20) and a faithful expression of the historic Methodist commitment to evangelism and mission. Not surprisingly, the phrase make disciples has become a slogan of sorts on denominational websites, in statements by church leaders, and in names of church programs and committees. At first glance, the practice seems innocuous. However, as the essays in this issue argue, wrested from the rich biblical and theological context within which it finds its essential orientation and nuance, the mandate to “make disciples” is vulnerable to cultural assumptions that can distort its meaning and can lead to practices that contradict its deepest intentions. After all, in a culture driven by the logic of the market—a culture to which the church succumbs more often than it would like to admit—what else could “making” mean but “manufacturing”?

It is in this context that Sarah Lancaster asks: Does the formulaic summons to “make” disciples not obfuscate the logical priority of God’s grace? And, adds Lisa Withrow, does it not suggest that disciple-making occurs essentially through human endeavor, albeit with divine participation? With troubling questions like these in view, the authors in this issue urge United Methodists to mine the riches of their theological traditions in order to find a theologically and missionally appropriate context and language for and practice of disciple-making.

Through a thorough analysis of Wesley’s writings on discipling, Lancaster exposes the truncated understanding of grace animating the church’s mission statement. Like Wesley, United Methodists need to locate their understanding of discipleship in the larger context of “the way of salvation.” This allows for a
nuanced construal of Christian formation as a “complex interaction of God’s grace and human responsiveness” that safeguards both the logical priority of God’s saving action and the complexity—both individual and communal—of human response to the divine invitation.

Implicit in Lancaster’s argument is a theme that features prominently through all the essays: Becoming disciples in the Methodist way is a holistic process. It encompasses the totality of our existence—from the first nudges of prevenient grace in our souls to our final transition into glory. And it subverts our all-too-human tendency to undermine the comprehensive dynamic of discipleship through an array of readily available dichotomies.

The articles by Robin Knowles Wallace, Lisa Withrow, Susan Ruach, and Laceye Warner examine a variety of such dichotomies and provide theological resources for nurturing holistic discipleship. Wallace argues persuasively for the need to integrate worship and daily life and so to allow worship to take its rightful place in the larger “web of behaviors necessary for becoming disciples.” In examining the success of the small group movement in churches in the United States, Withrow discovers a troubling tendency toward “feel good” spirituality and privatized faith that results in a subtle “domestication of the faith.” Drawing on Wesley’s model for small groups, Withrow argues for a form of “accountable discipleship” that holds in tension the personal and communal dimensions of faith formation.

For many people in our churches, “business”—outside and inside the church—has little to do with becoming disciples. Susan Ruach explodes this dichotomy by showing how the administrative life of congregations can become intentional faith-forming communities and thus form an important aspect of the holistic discipleship that marks Methodism at its best.

Laceye Warner addresses the disjunction between “personal” and “social” dimensions of discipleship—between “personal” and “social” holiness—so prevalent in communities of faith today. For Methodists, says Warner, the key to healing this dichotomy is the retrieval of the Wesleyan practice of the “means of grace.” The means of grace enable practices of disciple-making that aim to cultivate both personal piety and social justice, thus nurturing a form of holistic discipleship faithful to the Wesleyan vision of God’s kingdom.

Hendrik R. Pieterse is editor of Quarterly Review.
Our Mission Reconsidered:
Do We Really “Make” Disciples?

SARAH HEANER LANCASTER

At its 1996 General Conference, The United Methodist Church voted to include the following mission statement in its Book of Discipline: “The mission of the Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ. Local churches provide the most significant arena through which disciple-making occurs.”¹ The paragraphs that follow further explain the rationale for this mission, the process by which it may be carried out, and its global nature. Initially, this statement and its elaboration appeared at the beginning of the chapter on the local church in Part V, so that it provided the orientation for the organization and administration of local churches. After the 2000 General Conference, the statement was moved to the beginning of Part III, where it now provides the orientation for the ministry of all Christians. Clearly, the charge to “make disciples,” taken from the Great Commission in Matt. 28:19-20, is seen as central not simply for our identity as United Methodists but also for our identity as Christians.

This call to make disciples has not simply languished between the covers of the Discipline, known only by experts on denominational polity or by seminary students preparing for ministry. Instead, it has set the agenda for programmatic work in annual conferences, districts, and local churches. The phrase making disciples has found its way onto websites, into formal and informal statements by leaders in the church, and into committee names.² Both pastors and laypeople are being asked to commit themselves in ways large and small to the mission of making disciples; plans have even been developed that follow intentionally and closely the process “for carrying out
our mission” outlined in ¶122. The church’s mission statement has become prominent in the denomination and has the potential for creating long-lasting effects. Thus, it is important to consider very carefully what we mean by “making disciples.”

United Methodists have taken an important step toward clarifying their purpose as a church, and it has resulted in renewed motivation for sharing faith. However, with the widespread use of the phrase making disciples comes the very real possibility that our mission will be misunderstood. The phrase has become a slogan. By itself, though, the slogan does not reveal the theological assumptions about the mission of the church that underlie the phrase. We need to reflect much more carefully on the way we express our mission so that we can make our witness to the world appropriately and so that our mission will have integrity.

Wesley and the Great Commission

The phrase make disciples in the mission statement translates a Greek verb mathēteuein, used in Matt. 28:19. It is an active verbal form of the noun mathētēs. The exact English equivalent sounds odd to us because it involves using the noun disciple in a verbal form, that is, “to disciple.” Still, in his Explanatory Notes on the New Testament, Wesley uses that somewhat awkward verb when he translates the first part of Matt. 28:19 as “Go ye, and disciple all nations.” In the note to that verse, Wesley at first restates the phrase as “Make them My disciples” but then again uses the verbal form “discipling.” On those rare occasions when he refers to this verse in the rest of his writings, Wesley usually uses the verb disciple rather than the phrase make disciples.

These two ways of translating the Greek were alternatives to the more common translation of his time, which simply rendered the verb as “teach.” The English version of the Great Commission that would have been familiar to people in Wesley’s time was translated this way in the King James Version: “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen.” Wesley did on occasion use the conventional phrase “teach all nations,” but it also presented a problem for him. It seems that some in his day used this translation to argue that teaching should go before baptizing. They then used
this order to argue against infant baptism; that is, they held that infants cannot be taught before they are baptized. Wesley knew that the words *teach* and *teaching* in the King James Version translated two different verbs in the original Greek. By translating the first verb as *disciple*, Wesley had a ready answer to those who used Matt. 28:19 to object to infant baptism. A careful reading of this verse in the Greek shows that “teaching” actually comes after “baptizing” and that both baptizing and teaching are involved in “discipling.” Wesley was willing to examine and offer an alternative to conventional use of these words in order to find a better way to express a matter that was theologically important to him.

It has become almost commonplace among Wesleyan scholars to say that Methodism is better served by following Wesley’s example for theological reflection than by simply importing his conclusions into situations vastly different from those he faced. In other words, we should do in our time what Wesley did in his. In this article I suggest that, just as Wesley’s time required a new way of thinking about the phrase *teach all nations*, so our time calls for a fresh look at how we United Methodists employ the Matthean phrase *make disciples* in our mission statement. This translation has become formulaic for us, picked up and used as shorthand in countless public arenas, without explanation or reflection. We ought to reconsider the ease with which we isolate this phrase and broadcast it. The Greek imperative on which the phrase is based indicates that those who are already following Christ should play an active role in helping others become disciples. However, the question is this: How should this active role be described? Of the two options that Wesley himself gives us for translating the imperative, the simple verb *disciple* retains the form of the original Greek better and seems to be the translation Wesley preferred. Recognizing that “make disciples” is not the only, or even the best, way of rendering the Greek allows us to rethink the way we state the denomination’s mission. The active role implied by this imperative might be something other than what the word *make* suggests.

Why should we think of a new way to express our role in making disciples? The verb *make* has a variety of meanings, but its basic meaning is to “cause to exist or happen,” or “to create.” It is this meaning that most people will associate with the phrase *make disciples*, especially when it is used without explanation. But this meaning is enormously problematic. We do not “make” disciples by our efforts; and the church should not claim to
do more through its own activity than it can or ought to do. In fact, the idea that we make disciples contradicts the theological foundation of Methodism. To see why, we need to take a look at what is involved in Christian formation in the Wesleyan heritage.

**Wesleyan Discipling**

Randy Maddox recently prepared a paper for a United Methodist task force that reflects on the denomination’s mission statement in light of its Wesleyan heritage. As Maddox points out, Wesley did not often refer to the Great Commission, and when he did make direct reference to Matt. 28:19, it was usually to make some point about baptism rather than discipleship. However, Wesley was committed to calling and enabling people to become “real Christians.” Thus, to understand how Wesley might join in our present conversation about how the church participates in helping people become disciples, one has to look at his larger concerns about the “way of salvation.”

Wesley takes the meaning of salvation to include “the entire work of God,” which extends from “the first dawning of grace in the soul till it is consummated in glory.” From that first moment to the last, it is God who saves, although the way in which God works is never without human responsiveness. If it is right to understand the mission of the church in light of how Wesley conceived salvation, then any discussion of “discipling” must always be mindful that it is set in the framework of God’s grace, which comes to us before we can respond, enabling us to respond and bringing these efforts to fulfillment. The primary actor in discipling, then, is God; and insofar as the church has a mission to participate in this process, its role is secondary and instrumental. Furthermore, those of us who participate in the mission of discipling do so because we have been and continue to be discipled ourselves. The process Wesley describes is not finished for anyone until the final consummation in glory. Until then, Christian formation involves a complex interaction of God’s grace and human responsiveness—both the individual’s responsiveness in actively seeking to avail him- or herself of the grace that God offers and the community’s responsiveness in encouraging one another and providing conditions that foster receptivity of God’s grace.

These two aspects of human responsiveness can never be played off against each other. Communities are constituted by individuals, and individu
uals find their identities in communities. There can be no “me” and “them” among members of the church in their striving to become “real Christians.” Also, there is a sense in which even the difference between church members and nonmembers should not be framed in terms of “us” and “them.” To be sure, members are “sent” to proclaim the Good News; but both the ones sent and the ones to whom they are sent stand equally in need of God’s grace. Moreover, when the church invites others to become part of the community, it is presenting in concrete form the invitation of grace that God is always already extending to all. Church members, then, have also been invited. Not all those invited choose to become part of the community, but those who so choose have been given the freedom by grace (which is extended to all) to accept or reject the invitation. No simple, unidirectional description from “us” to “them” captures the complexity of how people respond to God’s offer of salvation through the church’s invitation. Theologically speaking, becoming a disciple involves active roles for community and individual, and both are ultimately dependent on God’s grace.

Notice how the denominational mission statement obscures this way of construing the meaning of salvation. The mission statement nowhere includes mention of the priority of God’s grace. As a result, it does nothing to prevent the suggestion that the church is the primary actor in this work of salvation. This problem is exacerbated when the words “make disciples” are taken out of context and used as a slogan. The paragraph immediately following the mission statement (¶121) outlines the rationale for the church’s mission of making disciples, noting that proclaiming grace is the church’s goal and responding to grace is its motivation. Yet, even this statement is inadequate. Grace is not simply a rationale—the reason that lies behind our mission and the goal that lies before us. It is central to the church’s mission, because it is constantly at work in every step of Christian formation. Compare the mission statement of The United Methodist Church with the vision statement of the British Methodist Church:

The calling of the Methodist Church is to respond to the gospel of God’s love in Christ and to live out its discipleship in worship and mission. It does this through: Worship, Learning & Caring, Service and Evangelism.¹⁰

Here, response to God’s love is made clear at the very beginning, and whatever the church does is predicated on that love. United Methodists do
not need to imitate their British counterparts; but it is instructive that another Methodist body has managed to effectively convey in its core statement the notion of human responsiveness to God’s prior grace. This way of framing the work of the church clearly reflects our Wesleyan heritage.

The United Methodist statement not only obscures the priority of grace but also inadequately explains the nature of human responsiveness. Maddox suggests that one of the motivating factors for defining the church’s mission as “making disciples” is to reclaim “Wesley’s commitment to the intentional formation of real Christian character in our members.”

This motive is important, and reclaiming this aspect of our Wesleyan heritage is surely crucial to the vitality of the church. Moreover, naming the local church as the primary arena for this formation and describing a process that includes nurture and service are welcome clarifications. However, the process for carrying out our mission outlined in the Book of Discipline falls short of reclaiming the Wesleyan commitment to forming “real” Christians. The structure of the language suggests that there are disciples already “made” reaching out to “make” other disciples. The paragraph reads as follows:

We make disciples as we:
—proclaim the gospel, seek, welcome and gather persons into the body of Christ;
—lead persons to commit their lives to God through baptism and profession of faith in Jesus Christ;
—nurture persons in Christian living through worship, the sacraments, spiritual disciplines, and other means of grace, such as Wesley’s Christian conferencing;
—send persons into the world to live lovingly and justly as servants of Christ by healing the sick, feeding the hungry, caring for the stranger, freeing the oppressed, and working to develop social structures that are consistent with the gospel; and
—continue the mission of seeking, welcoming and gathering persons into the community of the body of Christ.

One way to see the problem with this statement is to imagine an alternative statement that addresses Christian growth for those who are already members. Consider the following statement.

12
We become disciples as we:
—seek to understand the gospel, gather with and welcome those who also want to know the gospel, and share that good news with others;
—commit our lives to God through baptism and profession of faith in Jesus Christ;
—nurture our lives as Christians through worship, the sacraments, spiritual disciplines, and other means of grace, such as Wesley’s Christian conferencing;
—go into the world to live lovingly and justly as servants of Christ by healing the sick, feeding the hungry, caring for the stranger, freeing the oppressed, and working to develop social structures that are consistent with the gospel; and
—continue to seek, welcome, gather, and share the good news as members of the body of Christ.

The point of imagining this alternative is not to substitute “becoming” disciples for “making” disciples. Rather, it is to show that the current Disciplinary description is more one-sided than it should be, given the Wesleyan commitment that all of us need to continue to grow and are never in this life finished products. If we truly want to reflect our Wesleyan theology in our official discussion of the church’s mission, we need to rethink the way we describe it.

In addition to expressing our Wesleyan theology more clearly, another reason for recognizing the need to include the importance of becoming disciples is that living a life that really reflects our Wesleyan heritage is as hard as it is rewarding. On those few occasions when Wesley does mention the words disciple or discipleship in connection with how we ought to live as Christians, it is often in the context of introducing very difficult ideas, such as self-denial and persecution. Maddox provides a good discussion of self-denial as one of the three factors involved in effective discipleship.13 Methodists do not avoid all pleasure or seek deprivation or relish in suffering. Wesley’s intention in talking about self-denial is to call us to conform our own wills to the will of God, who alone knows and can provide what we really need. In the context of Wesley’s larger understanding of salvation, self-denial functions to turn us away from things that harm our life in Christ and toward those things that help us find fulfillment in him. In doing so, self-denial is a positive action that leads to true happiness in God.
Still, self-denial can lead to being out of step with the world, and it is for this reason that Wesley talks about persecution in his discussion of discipleship, calling contempt or persecution the “badge” of discipleship. While we today do not face the kind of contempt that early Methodists experienced, we do run the risk that the values we hold as Christians place us at a distance from the world. If the point of reclaiming our Wesleyan heritage is, as Maddox suggests, to transform the larger culture, then we should also be aware that much of what we do will be countercultural. One of the reasons why Methodists need to gather often and nurture one another is because this road is not always easy. If the mission of the church is really not just about “numbers” but about forming people who can take a different path, then it becomes all the more important to acknowledge that “we” are in constant need of grace to guide and sustain our efforts to become better disciples.

Formation of those who have already become part of the Christian—and, specifically, the United Methodist—community does not replace sharing faith with those who are outside the community. And yet, even when discipling involves faith sharing, the phrase make disciples is still misleading. In sharing our faith, too, God is the primary actor; and, as I have said, our invitation reflects God’s prior invitation. Furthermore, the need and ability of the invited person to make her or his own response should be seen and respected as God’s gift. Wesleyan theology always acknowledges human freedom, affirming in fact that God’s grace makes our freedom possible. If it is true that one individual’s response to grace leads that person to offer Christ to another, then it is also true that the other individual’s response can and should never be forced. No human being ever “makes” a disciple. We may invite, encourage, model a life with Christ, and so on; but we must always acknowledge that accepting that invitation ultimately depends on God’s grace enabling the person’s free response. Though we may participate in that process in important ways, the result is never finally up to us.

This discussion of what is commonly called conversion inevitably leads us into interfaith questions. This is the topic of our next section.

**Discipling, Pluralism, and Globalization**

Among the most important factors that make our time different from Wesley’s is our awareness of pluralism and our knowledge of and contact
with people from around the world. We need to remember how often in the Christian past “spreading the gospel” has meant forced conversion, manipulation of emotions, and mingling Western culture with Christian faith. Given these sobering facts, we should talk about the mission of the church with great care. In fact, it is in this context that misunderstanding of the phrase *make disciples* is most likely to happen.

The section in the *Discipline* that gives the rationale for the denomination’s mission attempts to acknowledge this need, stating, “We respect persons of all religious faiths and we defend religious freedom for all persons.” However, this sentence appears in a paragraph that in no other way mentions the issue of religious pluralism and does not connect the issue with the sentences around it in any meaningful way. Given the overall tenor of the language in this section, it is difficult to see this sentence as more than an awkward disclaimer that some felt compelled to include but that has no real place in how the church conceives of its mission.

This is unfortunate, since the General Conference has made very clear statements about our relationship to people of other faiths. The Social Principles reiterate the point about religious freedom, and other statements go even further. The statement “Called to Be Neighbors and Witnesses: Guidelines for Interreligious Relationships” in *The Book of Resolutions* specifically takes up the problem of witnessing to Jesus Christ in a pluralistic world. This document frankly acknowledges and discusses the tension created by seemingly competing affirmations: our need to proclaim our faith; our commitment to religious freedom; and the reality of living next to people of other faiths. This resolution honestly addresses how people of other faiths often suspect that interreligious dialogue with Christians may be a covert attempt at conversion. It also seeks biblical direction from the Great Commission; however, it concentrates on the verb translated as “go” (*τοιοθεντες*) rather than on the verb rendered as “make disciples.” According to the document, the original Greek form of the verb *go* involves a call to cross boundaries; to witness to Jesus Christ, who bridges boundaries; and to proclaim a God who binds humanity together despite our differences. This insight, it concludes, ought to inform any dialogue we undertake with people of other faiths.

This resolution reminds us that the church’s mission statement as we currently have it is one-sided in its appeal to the Great Commission, concentrating on only one imperative: to make disciples. It further demonstrates
that, in reflecting on the church’s mission, interfaith concerns deserve more than a brief disclaimer. On the two occasions that it adopted the above-mentioned resolution (1980, revised 2000), General Conference recognized that our call to witness in a pluralistic world requires significant reflection. The phrase *make disciples* does nothing to indicate everything General Conference has said and wants to say about our Christian witness. In fact, to someone who hears the phrase outside this larger context, it could suggest just the opposite of what General Conference intends to convey.

In addition to this general statement about our relationship with people of other faiths, General Conference has also adopted specific resolutions that address our relationship with Judaism and Islam. In each case, the resolutions imply that following Christ means learning about those who live among us but who are different from us, because we must know who our neighbors are in order to love them as Christ loves them. It would seem, then, that “discipling” could include our own formation as Christians with regard to our attitudes, knowledge, and actions toward those who follow other ways. It is certainly true that witnessing to persons outside Christianity and respecting their freedom to be who they are present an ongoing tension not simply for United Methodists but also for all Christians. My suggestion is that our stated mission should not resolve this tension in a direction that The United Methodist Church in other ways clearly rejects. We need to hold together the totality of the church’s concerns and resolutions regarding our relationship with persons of other faiths. By itself, the phrase *make disciples* simply is not able to do so.

Interfaith concerns become important not simply for thinking about how to live alongside people who are different from us. As the church grows in countries where other religions or philosophies have shaped the cultures, the question of what it means to be a disciple raises issues of identity, especially for those who are only one or two generations removed from these non-Christian faiths. At the Eleventh Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies held last year, thirty-three countries were represented, and conversations often revolved around what it means to have an indigenized Christianity. United Methodists outside the United States frequently face a number of troubling choices. Does one give up culture as well as religion when becoming a disciple of Jesus Christ? Conversely, does becoming a disciple mean embracing a different culture as well as a different religion? Or is it possible to integrate one’s Christian
faith with one’s inherited culture in an indigenized discipleship? If so, how? These questions lie at the heart of Christian formation; and to find our way through them, we need to engage in a conversation that is open to all voices. Even though these questions about identity are especially pressing in other parts of the world, they are also present in the United States for many of our ethnic minority members. Native Americans, for instance, struggle with integrating tribal heritage with Christian faith. Furthermore, as interreligious marriages increase, we will need to be sensitive to the needs of the children in these households.

These issues discussed so far present an ongoing tension for all Christians, not just for United Methodists. This tension is not easily resolved and cannot be addressed fully in a brief mission statement. Still, we should be mindful of the possible misunderstanding that can take place in this context. It is all too easy for “make disciples” to be understood as “make them like us.” In reflecting on their mission in the world, United Methodists need to work to find a way to acknowledge that formation as disciples can take different shapes in different contexts.

Moving Ahead

The inclusion of the mission statement in the *Book of Discipline* has served as an important catalyst for reflection and action in The United Methodist Church. It has placed before us the question of how to share faith with others and how to nurture faith responses into mature discipleship. We have gained much from the work it has prompted us to do, but there are also limits to what it can provide for our future reflection and action. The fact that so many documents are available to the larger public through the Internet makes a clear and careful statement especially important. At a time when religious misunderstandings can have serious consequences, we need to make sure that official statements and documents convey the church’s true intentions.

At a minimum, the use of the phrase *make disciples* ought to be reconsidered. As I have argued, the denomination’s mission is best served by a thoroughgoing revision of its mission statement. Partly because of the attention given to the church’s mission in the years since 1996, we now have more resources to draw from in drafting a mission statement. Classes on evangelism in United Methodist seminaries, articles by denominational leaders, implementation of programs in annual conferences, and more, in
recent years have focused attention on mission in a deliberate and thoughtful way. Now that more people have engaged more fully in thinking about the church’s mission, we are in a position to state that mission with greater clarity and comprehensiveness. Those who have developed this expertise should think seriously about drafting an alternative statement that more clearly communicates how mission is rooted in grace, how grace continually calls forth our response, and how our response takes many forms. In doing so, we have the opportunity to draw both from a broader biblical base than a single verse and from our Wesleyan heritage. If we want the world to understand that we offer a faith that matters, we need to use all our resources to communicate the fullness of God’s love, because it is this love that both draws us near and sends us to share with others.

Sarah Heaner Lancaster is Associate Professor of Theology in the Bishop Hazen G. Werner Chair of Theology at Methodist Theological School in Ohio in Delaware, Ohio.

Endnotes

2. Consider the following examples: the website for the General Board of Discipleship suggests “Making Disciples” training events; several local churches use the phrase on their websites; the North Texas Conference has established a “Making Disciples” task force; and the West Ohio Conference has developed a “core process” for “disciple-making and covenant building.”
4. The English phrase make disciples occurs at the end of “A Treatise on Baptism,” where Wesley answers the first objection. Elsewhere in the same


6. This objection and Wesley’s reply to it are found at the end of “A Treatise on Baptism,” *Works* (Jackson), 10:198-99.

7. The complete text of Maddox’s paper “Wesley’s Prescription for Making Disciples of Jesus Christ: Insights for the 21st Century Church” can be found on the Internet at http://www.pastoralleadership.duke.edu/maddox%20paper_9-23-02.pdf. References to Maddox’s paper are from this text. The purpose of the task force for which this paper was commissioned is to reflect on theological education and leadership. An abbreviated version of the paper appeared in *Quarterly Review* 23/1 (Spring 2003):15-28.

8. Ibid., 3.


10. This statement and links that further explicate the four activities mentioned may be found on the Internet at http://www.methodist.org.uk/welcome/calling.htm.


15. See Maddox’s discussion of human freedom in “Wesley’s Prescription”; or in *Responsible Grace: John Wesley’s Practical Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994). See also the discussion of human freedom in connection with mission by


18. This resolution mistakenly attributes the verb *go* to Matt. 28:20 when instead it appears in Matt. 28:19, the same verse in which “make disciples” occurs. The close connection between these two verbs suggests that reflection on the Great Commission as the foundation for our mission ought to include attention to both.
Worship and Becoming Disciples

ROBIN KNOWLES WALLACE

Although worship is the focus of much discussion in our day, our practice of worship too often consists of playing in shallow waters, as if we are afraid to take the plunge into God’s great baptismal waters of mercy, grace, and love to be soaked and regenerated. We are hesitant to eat of the meal that can heal our souls. We are content to make Band-Aid® repairs and to switch worship styles instead of drawing true healing and nourishment from God, from Scripture, and from Wesleyan theology.

This article proposes that we consider worship within the broader framework of our lives as a whole, thus providing a space for God to work in us and to make us more effective witnesses to the experience of God’s grace in the world. We will inquire about our practices of worship and use the “lens” of worship experiences to understand how these worship practices form us as disciples. We will examine several worship lenses: the United Methodist Book of Discipline, John Wesley’s sermons, the hymns of Charles Wesley found in The United Methodist Hymnal, and our own experiences of the gathered assembly at worship.

The key question animating the discussion that follows is this: Instead of worship being experienced as a place of tension, is it possible to envision and create worship experiences that remind us of our baptism, feed our souls, and help us “rehearse” behavior fit for the coming reign of God? As the italicized portions below indicate, the process for becoming disciples outlined in the Book of Discipline acknowledges the central role of worship and sacraments:

We make disciples as we:
—proclaim the gospel, seek, welcome and gather persons into the body of Christ;
—lead persons to commit their lives to God through baptism and profession of faith in Jesus Christ;
—nurture persons in Christian living through worship, the sacraments, spiritual disciplines, and other means of grace, such as Wesley’s Christian conferencing;
—send persons into the world to live lovingly and justly as servants of Christ by
healing the sick, feeding the hungry, caring for the stranger, freeing the oppressed, and working to develop social structures that are consistent with the gospel:
— and continue the mission of seeking, welcoming and gathering persons into the community of the body of Christ.³

The statement includes the usual elements of worship (proclamation, worship, sacraments, gathering); but it also notes the distinct form of discipleship that our best worship rehearses and empowers, namely, to “live lovingly and justly as servants of Christ.”

This process for becoming disciples is analogous to John Wesley’s schema of the Christian life, set out in his sermon “On Zeal.”⁴ In this work of practical theology, Wesley reminds us that while Scripture reading, public prayer, and the sacraments are important, they are part of a total life permeated by love, in which our “temper,” or dispositions, are refined through works of mercy and piety in the context of the body of Christ, the church.

For those who see worship as the center of the Christian life, it may be disconcerting to find worship listed as just one of the means of grace. In some discussions about “making disciples,” worship is considered the be-all and end-all for “getting people into the church.” Yet, worship is both less than and more than we have allowed it to be: human worship in and of itself cannot “make disciples”; however, it can be a place of “concentrated” grace, where we intentionally come into God’s presence to experience and
practice love, grace, mercy, and forgiveness. Worship without right action and loving responsiveness to God’s mercy and love has not fulfilled itself as a means of grace. However, when worship is seen as an important part of the web of behaviors necessary for becoming disciples, it has a lot to offer.

In his sermon “On Zeal,” as in many other sermons, Wesley reminds us that the Christian life bears fruit in our actions toward our neighbor as well as in our actions toward God. The scriptural starting point for this understanding is found in two places in the Gospel of John: “I give you a new commandment, that you love another. . . . By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (13:34-35) and “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you” (15:12). Coming in Jesus’ Farewell Discourses to his disciples, these words remind us that our worship bears fruit in our love not only for God but also for neighbor. And it is our love for others that demonstrates our discipleship, that names us as Christians.

Wesley is equally clear about the integration of worship and life in his sermon “Upon our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount”:

I answer. ‘God is a Spirit, and they that worship [God] must worship in spirit and in truth.’ . . . But then I would ask, ‘What is it to worship God, a Spirit, in spirit and in truth?’ Why, it is to worship [God] with our spirit; to worship in that manner which none but spirits are capable of. It is to believe in [God] as a wise, just, holy being, of purer eyes than to behold iniquity: and yet merciful, gracious, and longsuffering: forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin; casting all our sins behind [God’s] back, and accepting us in the beloved. It is to love [God], to delight in [God], to desire [God], with all our heart and mind and soul and strength; to imitate [the One] we love by purifying ourselves, even as [God] is pure; and to obey [God] whom we love, and in whom we believe, both in thought and word and work. Consequently one branch of the worshipping God in spirit and in truth is the keeping [God’s] outward commandments. To glorify [God] therefore with our bodies as well as with our spirits, to go through outward work with hearts lifted up, to make our daily employment a sacrifice to God, to buy and sell, to eat and drink to [God’s] glory: this is worshipping God in spirit and in truth as much as the praying in a wilderness.

Just as Wesley and the Discipline avoid pigeonholing worship, so we too can integrate worship and life, allowing these to shape our being and our
doing. God can so dwell in us that others will “know we are Christians by our love” and will desire to begin a journey of discipleship themselves. What hints can we gather from our Wesleyan heritage to guide and inspire us in integrating worship and life? In what follows, I suggest three aspects that need to be brought into worship in order to bring about the integration of worship and life: naming the reality of the human condition, teaching and learning the language of grace, and the responsibility of each Christian to become a “real Christian.”

In discussing the first two aspects, I draw on the *United Methodist Hymnal* (1989) as a book of “experimental [that is, experiential] and practical divinity,” the description John Wesley gave the *Collection of Hymns, for the Use of the People Called Methodists*. (In what follows, I use the acronym UMH to refer to hymns from *The United Methodist Hymnal*.) In examining the third aspect, I turn to Scripture.

**Naming the Reality of the Human Condition**

The joy of United Methodist worship begins with learning that God invites us before we even know we want to come (“Come, sinners, to the gospel feast,” *UMH*, 339). This prevenient grace invites us, how and where we are, to come to God. Like people throughout the Scriptures, the moment we move toward God, we realize how utterly human and unworthy we are—“that I, a child of wrath and hell, I should be called a child of God” (*UMH*, 342). Pastors and worship leaders often forget the deep conviction many people experience when exposed to God’s grace, as well as the joy and healing God offers us immediately and continuously. This sense of the healing nature of God—God as the “Great Physician” and “Physician of souls” has been lost in the revivalist image of God as Judge. In each of Charles Wesley’s hymns included in *The United Methodist Hymnal* under the section “Prevenient Grace,” the overwhelming sense of forgiveness and mercy is abundantly clear: “... in Christ a hearty welcome find” (*UMH*, 339); “Believe, and all your guilt’s forgiven, only believe—and yours is heaven” (*UMH*, 342); “Depth of mercy! Can there be mercy still reserved for me?” (*UMH*, 355).

In one way, this situation is simple: God invites, we repent. Yet, it is also extremely complex: God invites us in as many ways as there are human beings, multiplied by as many times as it takes us to respond. Add to that our need for forgiveness from sin ranging from sheer ignorance of God to the ways we try to “play God” to the out-and-out evil we choose. Worship in the Wesleyan heritage should invite us to honestly consider our
failings and shortcomings even as we move toward the onrush of God’s love and mercy. This is not easy to accomplish in one hour of worship, given that the worshipers—“churched” and “unchurched”—bring distinct personal histories needing God’s healing balm. It challenges worship planners to craft sermons, choose hymns, and word prayers of confession in ways that adequately convey to worshipers the assurance that they are forgiven and can leave their guilt at the throne of grace. It further requires sensitivity to the burdens people bring into worship; some of these burdens can be dealt with more appropriately in small groups and in pastoral counseling.

Learning the Language of Grace

In one sense, “naming” grace—learning the language of faith and praise—flows easily from our understanding of prevenient grace and its application to the human condition. But United Methodists have not adequately considered the rich language of their Wesleyan tradition for framing and understanding their faith journeys in terms of God’s grace. Wesley’s sermon “The Way of Salvation” sets out this understanding. The *Hymnal* reflects this heritage by dividing the section “The Power of the Holy Spirit” into subsections on prevenient grace, justifying grace, sanctifying grace, and perfecting grace. This is a wonderful aid for helping worshipers respond to God’s grace as they journey in discipleship, striving to become “real Christians.”

Let us turn first to justifying grace, focusing on pardon and assurance. The early Methodists, including John and Charles Wesley, had a yearning for assurance. This desire for assurance rings true to the anxieties underlying twenty-first-century life. With the world around us in turmoil, Christians seek assurance that someone can be counted on and is “on our side”—that someone greater than ourselves is in control. The hymn “And Can It Be” wonderfully captures the understanding of God’s pardon in the midst of our imprisonment in sin and distress: “Long my imprisoned spirit lay, bound in sin . . . [M]y chains fell off, my heart was free, I rose, went forth and followed thee” (*UMH*, 363).

As we grow in our understanding of the gift of pardon and freedom, we yearn all the more for assurance:

The meek and lowly heart that in our Savior was,
  to us that Spirit both impart and signs us with his cross.
Our nature’s turned, our mind transformed in all its powers,
And both the witnesses are joined, the Spirit of God with ours (UMH, 372).
The year of jubilee is come! Return, ye ransomed sinners, home (UMH, 379).

All the while, God’s grace is being evidenced in our lives and in the world around us and demands to be named. Learning to name grace in the lives of parishioners and in the community is an important part of acknowledging and inspiring growth in assurance—the Methodist class and band meetings attested to this. As we struggle with setbacks and with holding things together (see Col. 1:17b), our faith challenges us to maintain the tension between our humanity and sinfulness, on the one hand, and God’s grace and love, on the other. If we focus too much on our frailty and sin, we can easily miss the myriad ways in which God is at work in our lives, seeking to pardon, assure, sanctify, and perfect us. God is with us on the journey toward becoming disciples, a point captured beautifully in the hymn “Come, O Thou Traveler Unknown,” based on Jacob’s journey to meet Esau and his wrestling with the angel (UMH, 386). God’s regenerating grace keeps our journey fresh and our spirits motivated: “Come, Almighty to deliver, let us all thy life receive” (UMH, 384). This moves us toward right action, “saved by faith which works by love” (UMH, 385). Right action, through works of mercy, flows from our response to God’s love and grace: “I want the witness, Lord, that all I do is right, according to thy mind and word, well pleasing in thy sight” (UMH, 388).

Works of mercy can be personal: “I want a principle within” (UMH, 410), “A Charge to Keep I Have” (UMH, 413), and “O For a Heart to Praise My God” (UMH, 417). They can also be social, directed outward to world and neighbor: “Forth in Thy name, O Lord” (UMH, 438), “Our Earth We Now Lament to See” (UMH, 449), and “Let us for each other care, each the other’s burdens bear; to thy church the pattern give, show how true believers live” (UMH, 562).

Sanctifying and perfecting grace calls us to practice works of mercy and of piety, of prayer, trust, and hope: “Thou, O Christ, art all I want” (UMH, 479) and “kindle a flame of sacred love upon the mean altar of my heart” (UMH, 501). It is this practice—this spiritual discipline—that will strengthen us in tribulation, teaching our hearts and minds to turn more quickly to God when we are in trouble: “Pray, always, pray and never faint, pray, without ceasing pray” (UMH, 513); “In suffering be thy love my peace,
in weakness be thy love my power” (UMH, 183); “Leave to God’s sovereign sway to choose and to command” (UMH, 129); “. . . thou all-sufficient love divine” (UMH, 153).

The understanding of God’s grace in everyday experience reflected in these hymns is part of what propelled the Methodist movement, for it takes into account the fact that our journey toward and with God is fraught with human frailty and sin. Their view of the way of salvation gave early Methodists a goal and a map for the Christian journey, while acknowledging their constant need for companionship and accountability and for the enthusiasm for living that this journey can engender. This is why, in American Sign Language, the symbol for Methodism is the rubbing together of the palms, signifying enthusiasm for God, for one another, and for life. In our time, trumped-up enthusiasm and manipulation are real dangers; so pastors and worship leaders need to be deeply immersed in the faith journeys of those who come for worship. Thus, in addition to singing Wesleyan hymns, worship leaders should include opportunities for persons to share about their faith journeys through testimonies. This allows worshipers to prayerfully bring their whole selves into worship and to proclaim the good news of the gospel and of God’s grace there and to the world.

The Responsibility to Become a “Real Christian”

This leads us to the issues of responsibility and accountability. Randy Maddox was inspired when he named his work on John Wesley’s practical theology Responsible Grace, for it neatly captures the fact that grace calls every human being to respond to God’s beckoning. Each one of us is called to respond to God’s grace and to begin the life of discipleship. This life holds us accountable for the quality of our daily living and of our worship. It challenges us to hold together, by the power of Christ, our humanity, our experiences, God’s mercy and love, and our response to that love and grace.

We already know what to do:10 “[God] has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8). Worship is about doing justice: doing acts of mercy, “healing the sick, feeding the hungry, caring for the stranger, freeing the oppressed, and working to develop social structures that are consistent with the gospel.”11 Is our worship the sort of setting where healing happens, where we can name our sin and be reminded that we have already been forgiven, and where we can
leave those sins behind to walk into the world in Christian freedom? Do we feed hungry souls with the bread of Communion and, by learning to be more generous, approach life with a sense of abundance and blessing rather than with scarcity and greed? Do we care for the strangers in the church and in the neighborhood by practicing hospitality, by praying for them, and by growing in our own generosity toward others? Do we work at freeing those who experience spiritual or physical oppression? Do we seek ways to present Christ’s yoke for their burdens? What oppressions are we carrying around that ought to be left at the altar so that we might witness to the love of God more freely? Does our worship reflect the kingdom of God that is coming, where there is no racism, sexism, classism, bias, or prejudice?

Worship is about lovingkindness. Do we truly practice lovingkindness, or are we more adept at gossiping and passing judgment? Do our worship services teach us the mind of Christ, showing us how to practice it throughout the week? What would Jesus do about the crying baby two pews in front of you; the person who always sits alone in the back; the single parent who desperately tries to manage her three children; the person who lost a family member last month; the teenagers fearful of the possibility of war or of the draft? How many times do we sit in worship judging the prayer language, the anthem, the pastor’s choice of hymns, the sermon, someone else’s clothes, or the person who dared take our spot in the pew? Have we made our sanctuaries places of welcome and openness for all persons? Does the love of Christ emanate from our worship, often in spite of ourselves?

Worship is about walking humbly with our God. What does our worship say about what we believe and who and whose we are? Part of learning to have the mind of Christ is to be in the presence of Christ. Some of my thoughts about this have been radically challenged by my experience in September 2002 in the ecumenical community of Taizé. There, the three daily worship services contain spoken and sung prayer and Scripture reading; but the real focus of the service is silence, being in the presence of God together. A thirty- to sixty-minute service may have seven to twelve minutes of silence (about the length of a tightly constructed sermon!). The silence is spent in prayer, with worshipers invited to be in the presence of God and to listen for God’s guidance. The Taizé community attracts thousands of youth (primarily ages 17 to 25) year-round to worship, Bible study, and conversation (a practice Methodists call “Christian conferencing”). “Churched” and “unchurched,”
these young people speak dozens of languages. But in the silence of worship, all are one with God. Worshiping with eight-hundred people as I did is an amazing experience, particularly knowing that all of us desired the same things: to know God better, to have the mind of Christ, to be empowered by the Holy Spirit. How can we United Methodists capture this sort of experience in our weekly worship? We cannot walk humbly with God if we are always the ones doing the talking. (Even preachers need time in silence with the gathered body of Christ.) Silence in worship is different from solitude, for it happens in the context of the gathered body of Christ. The silence can take many forms: praying for concerns of the world, reflecting on Scripture, praying for personal needs. But most of all, silence teaches us to “rest in the Lord,” to know that we are loved and to be assured that God’s grace is sufficient—and to truly learn this takes a lifetime.

Perhaps our witness in the world has not been as effective as it should have been because our focus in worship has been on our activities rather than on making worship a space where we can be transformed for the sake of the world. Perhaps our witness has been impaired by our unwillingness to be honest before God in worship, naming our failures and knowing eternal grace and full assurance. Perhaps our witness has suffered because, rather than viewing the weekly worship hour as one—albeit crucial—part of our total Christian journey, we have allowed it to be the only opportunity for deepening our faith, for disciplined prayer, and for seeking to grow into the mind of Christ.

Conclusion

The time has come to make worship part of a whole web of ways for becoming disciples. While the water of Baptism and the bread and wine of Holy Communion are essential to the process of becoming real Christians, there are other necessary “vitamins”—Christian education, pastoral care, and the essential Wesleyan prescription of small groups where faith is nurtured and articulated. Expecting to get all the nourishment needed for discipleship from one hour of worship on Sunday diminishes the gift that worship can be.

For worship to fulfill its rightful role in helping us become disciples, the Sunday service should be

- full of grace in all its manifestations;
- an integral part of practicing and doing justice;
- a school of lovingkindness;
WORSHIP AND BECOMING DISCIPLES

• part of a humble, God-centered, corporate journey of faith.

   When worship is part of the process of becoming disciples, then it can take its proper place as a wellspring of grace—a “feeding station” along the way. When this happens, worship becomes a celebration of God’s presence with our whole being and encouragement to view everything we do as “worshipful work”—acts of mercy and piety, permeated by God’s love, that refine our characters and help us become real Christians. It is these kinds of lives that will witness to the world of the joy and gift of becoming a disciple of Jesus Christ.

Robin Knowles Wallace is Associate Professor of Worship and Music at Methodist Theological School in Ohio in Delaware, Ohio.

Endnotes

9. See the baptismal resources and study guides published by Discipleship Resources to complement the United Methodist statement on Baptism, “By Water and the Spirit”: Come to the Waters, Accompanying the Journey, Gracious Voices, and Echoing the Word.
10. Inspired by the sermon by Bishop Bruce Ough, preached at Christ United Methodist Church in Columbus, Ohio, on September 8, 2002.
Disciples for the Future: Small Groups and Vital Faith Development

Lisa R. Withrow

The biblical injunction to “go and make disciples” (Matt. 28:19) is the foundation for church-development vision statements based on revitalizing or growing faith communities. Since 1996, this biblical phrase has been part of The United Methodist Church’s mission statement, as found in the denomination’s Book of Discipline.¹ The language of “making disciples” implies that disciples can be made by human endeavor (albeit with divine participation); thus, church leaders often apply a formulaic framework to build up the church by making disciples, particularly through participation in small group experiences. Making disciples now becomes an integral part of efforts to “grow” the church, where the goal is to teach and nurture people in small groups and then to send them forth to bring others into church membership. In this way, ironically, rather than pointing toward God, the injunction to make disciples turns the focus on the church. John Wesley understood that people become disciples through God’s prevenient, justifying, and sanctifying grace, not through human effort. Sarah Lancaster’s article elsewhere in this issue provides an extensive examination of the phrase making disciples and its implications for the mission statement of The United Methodist Church.² In what follows, I explore how developing small group ministries can be a vital component for growing disciples without having to claim that we “make” them. Small groups, properly focused, have tremendous impact on the faith journeys of those persons connected to the body called “church.”

Small groups have become a significant part of the methodology used for “making” disciples in The United Methodist Church in the United States. In these groups, “new” disciples—those who have had a conversion experience or have recently joined the church—are nurtured in the faith. The aim of the group is to be a supportive environment for the new disciple’s initial steps in faith and to provide instruction in the ways of the church. Church leaders know that creating an environment where people
feel they “belong” is effective in retaining new members and in developing a sense among laity that they have “ownership” in the church’s programs. In inviting persons to join small groups, congregational leaders occasionally highlight the spiritual purpose of these small groups: they are places where faith narratives are enriched and discipleship is deepened.

Small group participation has increased in popularity among laity since the 1970s. An important reason for this interest is due to the transient nature of individuals and families. Both the lack of connection with extended family and the breakdown of long-term commitment to one geographic location contribute to the search for community wherever people live. Small group communities provide elements of belonging and allow individuals to determine their level of commitment to the group. However, a small group community may not inspire a life-changing experience so much as provide support through social connection, and then only as needed or desired. In fact, many small groups exist largely to help people cope with life challenges and with society at large rather than to call them to a more faithful Christian life. The groups that do focus on deepening discipleship often require a level of long-term commitment that not many members are willing to give.

One danger with small groups that offer little more than personal and social support is that the group dynamic can develop a homeostatic quality. In other words, the raison d’être of the group can unwittingly become to provide individuals with a “comfortable space.” When this happens, groups are often quite resistant to significant individual or corporate change. The internal culture of the group centers on the “comfort” of its members, making formal or informal input from outside the group very difficult. Further, once group members have built a history of sharing their personal narratives and of affirming one another, the function of the group’s culture is often to make members “feel good” about themselves. Not surprisingly, such a group no longer is open to spiritual challenge and accountability.

Another danger encountered in small groups today is the focus on spiritual development as a private concern rather than as both a personal and a communal endeavor. Private implies distance from others—concealment of one’s own spirit—while personal has to do with particularity that does not exclude the participation of other people in one’s spiritual maturation. Thus, in groups where spirituality is seen as private, people may gather together but they do not experience true community, because individual
narratives are considered private events to be shared but not tested against the wisdom of the collective experience. In such settings, discipling refers to the person’s private “connection” with Jesus Christ, which does not necessarily require ongoing corporate discernment. The language used in these groups to describe participants’ faith journeys (for example, “The Lord put it in my heart to . . .”) often betrays the group’s understanding of faith as a private relationship between the individual and God.

Both these dangers culminate in a subtle, ongoing domestication of faith. Small groups that fall into the trap of advancing “feel good” spirituality rather than face the challenge of engaging in theological and spiritual discourse about the human condition and relationship with God effectively promote complacency or even entrenched faith stances. Prophetic voices become less relevant and pastoral concerns come to the fore, thereby ignoring the challenging nature of faith development while caring for individuals’ needs. Once domestication occurs, it is very difficult for a group to grasp the nature of discipleship as a process of ongoing, accountable formation in faith.

In the eighteenth century, John Wesley developed a network of small groups (societies, classes, bands) to place persons on the path to salvation. In these small groups, individuals were formed into disciples of Jesus Christ through theological discourse, testimony, worship, and development of Christian character. Wesley’s model for discipleship can address effectively some of the problems with the contemporary small group movement that we examined above.

**Discipling: John Wesley**

Today, with the focus in the denomination on “making” disciples, it behooves us to know Wesley’s heritage in discipling the people called Methodists. Wesley’s model for small groups challenges the domestication of faith so prevalent in our postmodern times. Wesley’s groups were communities where personal spirituality matures through sharing narrative and testimony in the context of accountable discipleship. These groups provide an excellent framework for faith development and spiritual discernment and thus for ongoing transformation through God’s sanctifying grace.

Wesley’s concern in developing his small group method for spiritual discernment and discipling was to ensure that the relationship between believers and Christ remains vital. His intent was to provide arenas for faith sharing and mutual accountability, while encouraging people to grow in the
manifestation of Christ-likeness relevant to their own contexts. However, Wesley’s primary emphasis was on the power of God’s grace to help believers live lives based on the gospel. For Wesley, the Holy Spirit forms disciples by calling them to Christian identity and vocation. George R. Eli describes Wesley’s understanding of discipleship as beginning with grace, leading to the relationship between Christians and Christ, and determining the quality of life that disciples manifest. “Grace energizes Christian transformation into mature and accountable discipleship, creating possibilities for Christian response, and demanding human responsibility.”

Even as Wesley continued to work out his own theological understanding of discipleship and the way of salvation, he did not have a preconceived notion about how disciples might be fostered. He had, however, participated in Moravian meetings and had become convinced of the value of such conversations in the faith. After a number of people had heard him preach and requested further instruction, Wesley developed the Society in London in 1739. Societies formed quickly in other towns and cities where Wesley found himself preaching. Often, the meetings responded to the public preaching service with prayer, spiritual reading, a talk, a psalm, disciplinary matters, and the injunction to help and instruct the poor.

After Wesley developed the society, he formulated “bands,” initially in Bristol and London. Bands were divided by gender and marital status into groups of five to ten people; the intent was to provide strong spiritual support on a weekly basis. Bands were more exclusive than societies, though one had to be a member of a society to participate in a band. A network of band leaders regularly met to discuss the spiritual progress of each band member. Progress was based on conversations with members about specific sins committed, temptations encountered, temptations overcome, questions about what constituted sin, and whether a member was keeping any secrets.

Bands did not prove successful and ceased meeting a short time after Wesley’s death. Even during his life, Wesley had difficulty convincing people that they would benefit from these small group meetings; it seemed that deeper commitment to discipling, at least in this manner, did not provoke much interest.

The final type of group that Wesley developed was called the “class meeting.” This meeting gathered originally to find ways to pay off debt on a new preaching house in Bristol. The society in the area agreed to divide
into groups of twelve based on geography. A designated leader collected a penny per week by visiting each member of the class in hopes of alleviating the debt. As time passed, visits for collecting money started to include spiritual discussion with members, who often lived in poverty or other difficult circumstances. These leaders offered what we now call “pastoral care” but found such opportunities for private conversations difficult in a room full of people. Thus, class leaders began to hold weekly meetings. Wesley was so pleased with the mutual care shown in these classes that he went to the Society in London and developed the class structure there, too.

Typically, the meetings opened with prayer and singing. Then the leader shared a testimony of spiritual progress, followed by a question to members about the state of their souls. The leader’s task was to provide teaching, encouragement, or correction, as needed. The meeting closed with a hymn.

Attendance at class meetings was limited to those who had a ticket. Tickets were awarded based on attendance and behavior within a quarter. Wesley himself monitored levels of discipleship for class members and determined suitability for receipt of a ticket for the upcoming quarter.

Clearly, the class meeting was less stringent about accounting for sins and for naming temptations, though participants could be encouraged to speak about the state of their souls in terms of sin and grace. Its focus evolved into spiritual direction, pastoral care, and weekly accountability for discipleship. Eventually, the meetings began to perform an evangelistic function, benefiting those seeking new or deeper faith. Leaders often invited “seekers” to a limited number of class meetings, hoping for gradual conversion to Christian commitment.5

What stands out about Wesley’s system of class meetings was the expectation that each person remain constantly accountable to the class for his or her spiritual journey. For example, if one were to have a conversion experience or a significant change of heart, one was expected to testify about the event, followed by others describing their own experiences or the experience they were seeking. Class members would celebrate one another’s inner convictions, but would also watch for subsequent changes in will and action. Further, additional testimony would be expected to provide evidence of a class member’s progress in moving on to perfection; true inner conviction led to changed lifestyle and yielding of spiritual fruits. Finally, class meetings took the spiritual temperature of
their members by calling forth the need for confession of sin, repentance, and forgiveness, so that all were right in spirit with God. Worship was woven into class time together in order to invoke the presence of the Holy Spirit for all that took place, as well as to give thanks for blessings.

Wesley’s emphasis on small group meetings to foster disciples in the way of becoming real Christians allowed formative community to create space for further transformation and growth in faith. Though, because of their stringent rules and requirements, bands did not appeal to the general public, classes and societies continued to reach people for decades after Wesley’s death. However, the nature of these small groups changed as the first generation incorporated its children and the groups became more institutionalized in a movement that was fast becoming a church.

Privatizing Faith

By the 1889 Wesleyan Conference, many class meetings had become groups that cared for its members pastorally. Rather than address testimonies or the spiritual issues of confession, repentance, and forgiveness, members spent time in social conversation and encouragement. Indeed, in this era, the feelings experienced during transformational encounters, rather than the narrative of God’s salvific acts, became the focus of conversation in class meetings. Thus, the shift away from testimony as the way of discerning sanctification to testimony as a way of sharing a private event (requiring little or no outward signs of transformation) undermined discipling as a communal process.

In Wesley’s time, group process involved retaining a connection between individual and community, with emphasis on joining feeling and action with the intellect and moral nature. For Wesley, the “heart” is primarily a source not of emotion but of moral character. However, by the late-nineteenth century, the heart had come to signify the center for emotions. Not surprisingly, sanctification became a private affair, though it might find public expression. In Wesley’s view, by contrast, sanctification must be publicly verifiable: the renewed heart must be accompanied by ongoing testimony of changed conduct. This nineteenth-century shift allowing personal testimony to become private experience based on feelings rather than change in behavior or will meant that the class meeting—and, ultimately, the church—became only nominally relevant to one’s faith experience.6
Much of the nineteenth-century trend toward privatized sanctification continues in our postmodern era. Many persons attend worship in order to have a private experience of the Holy Spirit. While a congregation may offer faith development in small group settings, little testing and accountability occur in these gatherings. Testimony may be shared, but with little or no challenge for testimony to be matched with transformed behavior and improved moral character. Many people in our day are searching for a place to “belong,” a place where they feel comfortable and that does not demand a lot of them. Long-term discipling, especially if it involves sacrifice and significant personal change, is clearly not an attractive option for such folks.

According to Matt. 28:19, Christians are called to be radically different from the society in which they live. They are to be instruments of change in the world, preaching and teaching the good news. Moreover, Christians are summoned to create spaces where God can make disciples; and in these spaces persons are to be both encouraged and held accountable. Wesley’s primary objective in starting small groups was to fortify faithful obedience. United Methodists today need to reclaim this Wesleyan objective if they are to move beyond privatized, domesticated faith to a faith that can be an instrument of transformation in the world.

**Discipleship Groups**

The General Board of Discipleship of The United Methodist Church has begun to address the issue of discipling through small group ministries. Its Covenant Discipleship Group program revives Wesley’s emphasis on accountability by asking each group to write a covenant that addresses works of mercy and works of piety, based on Wesley’s General Rules. The program summarizes how congregations can form small group ministries to develop disciples for faith and works in the church and in the world.

Significantly, the board seems to place little emphasis on “making” disciples. Their program retrieves Wesley’s emphasis on discipling as a response to God’s grace and rejects the emphasis on disciple-making as a way of gaining members. The program models its discipling process after Wesley’s class meeting: trained leaders provide pastoral care for their “class” on a regular basis while continuing to participate in covenant discipleship groups themselves.

The General Board of Discipleship’s program is a move in the right
direction, particularly in its focus on accountability and holy living. However, the underlying concerns about homeostasis, privatized faith experience, and domestication of the faith continue to require conversation.

It is very difficult to resist a culture that focuses on individual fulfillment. There is a subtle temptation for groups that exist to seek deeper faith and stronger moral behavior to develop an “us” and “them” attitude: “insiders” have found the “right” path while “outsiders” are unfulfilled and shallow. When this happens, the group becomes comfortable with its chosen identity and tends to select persons for membership who share this identity. Thus, the group’s conversations tend to revolve around only commonly held and agreed-upon issues.

So, how do groups guard against these homeostatic tendencies? One way is to continue to invite new members into the group on a regular basis. Fresh insights and an ability to keep the definition of the group’s identity ever changing may lead to ongoing development of the group itself. However, the evolving group identity must be measured against a normative biblical or theological narrative so that there remains a foundation in the midst of change. The commitment to invite new people guards against the group’s identity becoming homeostatic and challenges members not to become complacent in their process of faith maturation.

Another way to address the problem of homeostasis is to ensure that the group is made up of persons from different ethnic backgrounds. This intentional commitment to diversity addresses the tendency for groups to self-select based on sameness. A covenant written by a diverse group will express values different from those usually reflected in the larger society. Ethnic voices are important in the process of faith development, because the world in which we live for God is not homogeneous. The narrative by which a group lives needs to include voices that counter its current social context, so that the group can learn to address injustice and to hear the voiceless.

A continuing problem for all discipleship groups is the ever-present temptation for members to privatize their faith experiences. Even in a group setting, individuals may still be tempted to place their own priorities for personal experience before the group’s priorities. In other words, these individuals focus on their own enrichment rather than on the benefit of the group as a whole. They continue to hold that the only “proof” necessary to show authentic discipleship is personal testimony. By contrast, individuals belonging to groups that are not homeostatic may be required to
sacrifice some of their own desires and needs for the sake of healthy group identity. This raises a crucial question: How can groups move from privatized faith to personal faith that remains open and connected with others?

Testimony is storytelling about one’s faith experience. When an individual shares a testimony, ideally the group will respond with support; but the group may also raise questions and perhaps even challenges. As more and more members share testimonies, common threads may begin to emerge, which, in time, are woven into the group’s understanding of its identity. As the group gains a sense of itself as a community with a distinct story, the predilection for privatized faith makes way for corporate faith. The commonly held narrative of the group now becomes the primary concern.

Linking the group narrative with the biblical story elicits a new level of discipleship—a discipleship of community. Individuals learn to look beyond their own spiritual needs as disciples and to engage in conversation about the needs and blessings of the group as a whole. Connecting the group’s story with the biblical witness challenges it to understand how it might spread the good news in the world.9

In attending to these elements, discipleship groups can avoid the tendency of falling into a domesticated faith. The group’s narrative continually challenges individual members to think beyond their own needs and desires. A group that honors the personal and the communal while searching for greater depths of discipleship is confident that its members can recognize and will confront the danger of homeostasis in the group’s life.10 For its part, the group benefits the individual’s growth in discipleship by resisting any tendencies toward privatizing faith. In this way, the group becomes a sacred space for discipling that interconnects the personal with the communal. This sacred space calls forth disciples of Jesus Christ through a lifelong engagement in the narrative of Christian faith, in the community and in the world.

Lisa R. Withrow is Assistant Professor and Director of Field Education at Methodist Theological School in Ohio in Delaware, Ohio.

Endnotes

1. The mission statement reads: “The mission of the Church is to make disci-
DISCIPLES FOR THE FUTURE: SMALL GROUPS AND VITAL FAITH DEVELOPMENT

Disciples of Jesus Christ. Local churches provide the most significant arena through which disciple-making occurs. See The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church—2000 (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2000), ¶120. For additional references to discipleship, see ¶¶120–22, 131–32.


6. For an in-depth discussion of historical perspectives on the evolution of the class meeting and spiritual discernment, see Margaret Jones, “The Closet and the Class: Some Historical Perspectives on Methodist Spiritual Discernment,” Quarterly Review 21/2 (Summer 2001):130-42.


8. For the General Rules, see the Book of Discipline, 71-74.


10. For further discussion of the relationship between individual and community, see Parker J. Palmer, A Place Called Community (Pendle Hill Pamphlet, 1977).
A friend who is pastor of a large church was at a church finance committee meeting. As the meeting was drawing to a close, it suddenly struck him that they had not prayed yet. He invited committee members to lift up prayer concerns or joys. About two-thirds of the way around the circle, a man said, “I’m going in for pretty serious cancer surgery tomorrow, and I’d appreciate your prayers.” The pastor was aghast at how close they had come to not offering prayer for this man at a church meeting. Since that experience, my friend has begun to change the practices of meetings in that church.

Wordsworth said, “The world is too much with us.” Unfortunately in the church, we have all too often used business, psychological, and educational models of operating, forgetting that we are the church of Jesus Christ and that our purpose is to be about his mission—to “make disciples,” in the fullest sense of that word. Of course we should be financially accountable according to the highest standards and should use all the knowledge available. But we should use the knowledge and practices of the world in ways that are consistent with and informed by the values of our faith.

We live in a culture that is not Christian. Come to think of it, we may never have lived in a culture that was Christian, although we often thought we did. Many of the values we see in culture are not ones we uphold as Christians. Violence assails us on TV and in reality. Greed is everywhere and has driven some to destroy the environment for personal or corporate gain. Almost daily we learn of one more shady financial practice and witness the destruction of families and health by the quest for ambition and power. Anxiety and fear are rampant in these days, and rugged individualism encourages us to trust only in ourselves. Yet culture is a powerful shaping force and its influence is overall. We are also shaped by how we use our time, by the people who surround us, and by the activities in which
we choose to participate. The choice is not whether we will be shaped by forces around us but rather who or what we will allow to shape us. We can choose to spend time in activities and practices that enhance Christian faith and with people who are also choosing to be formed in this way.

The phenomenon of being shaped by outside factors and forces is true for organizations and institutions as well. Events in the life of a church shape its identity. The people and their attitudes have a forming influence. The activities they choose, how they spend their money, and how they treat the church staff—all shape the institution, which in turn shapes the people. Therefore, it is imperative to make intentional choices about the practices of a congregation. Moreover, it is critical that these choices be deliberate and well thought-out; otherwise, the congregation will be shaped in ways antithetical to the values and mission of Christ.

For United Methodists, the church’s mission is defined in the Book of Discipline: “The mission of the Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ.” Since we are committed to this mission and since we recognize that we are being shaped at every moment of our lives, why would we not want to orient everything we do toward encouraging faithfulness and spiritual growth in ourselves and in the people in the congregations of which we are a part? Why would we not take seriously that our local congregations are faith-forming communities? It surely makes sense to intentionally orient the conduct of our collective life and business to inviting people to connect with God and to grow in their faith.

Craig Miller, in Newchurch.Now, raises a searching question of congregations: What do we want to have happen to the people who become and already are a part of our churches? Is the church a “holding area” for those who are saved and are waiting to go to heaven, or is it a training ground for nurturing and sending persons out to transform the world according to the mission of Christ?

If we were to view local churches as training grounds, how might our life together change? What kinds of things would we do differently, especially in our organizational and institutional functioning? Would our decision-making processes change? Would we exercise authority or spend our money differently? Would our meetings be any different? Would we treat our staff the same?

In this article, we take a look at ways in which our administrative functioning can change to be more spiritually nurturing and give examples of
how some churches and judicatories have been trying to do things differently. We also examine our early Methodist heritage for insight and resources. A case could certainly be made for looking at other areas of church life with an eye toward becoming a more intentionally faith-forming community. I would encourage such exploration; however, space does not allow me to address these issues here.

**Administrative Life that Helps Shape Faith**

Charles Olsen discovered that often people accept responsibility on church boards or committees with great excitement only to end their tenure exhausted and burned out. This shows the need, he says, for making boards and committees more spiritually nurturing for the people who serve on them. The lives of the people who serve on church boards and committees, Celia Hahn points out, are filled with pressures and responsibilities from many quarters; therefore, they need church meetings that are spiritually health giving, not draining. If connecting to God is what people yearn to find through the church, then every aspect of the church’s life ought to offer that possibility.

To understand how the church’s administrative life can play a role in helping persons grow in faith, it is important to keep in mind that people both experience God in different ways and learn in different ways. It is tempting to assume, when sharing with a group a method or exercise one has found helpful, that everyone else will find it helpful too. However, what speaks to a person of one spiritual type may not be useful to a person of another type. I like variety; so, for a while in one church I served, I tried to make every Communion service different. Only later did I realize what a disservice I was doing to those who find God through the continuity that the ritual provides. Thus, it is crucial to have a basic understanding of the ways in which the people in the congregation experience God—including the people who serve on boards and committees—and offer experiences that appeal to various spiritual types.

Congregations interested in helping their administrative life become more faith forming need to pay attention to three areas: self-understanding, skills, and practices. Let us take a look at each in turn.

**Self-Understanding**

In order for a faith-forming institutional lifestyle to take root in the congre-
gation, several changes in its self-understanding need to take place. First, it is crucial that committees and boards clearly understand the purpose of the church: to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. Each committee or board needs to be able to articulate theologically how its gifts and role in the church’s life express this purpose. Thus, committee and board members must continually ask the question: what is God’s will for this committee and its work? The congregation’s vision or mission statement can be an important tool in fostering this theological understanding; however, whatever vehicle is used, it is important that the congregation communicate this understanding regularly, especially when new members join a committee or board.

Second, it is fundamental that the congregation understand the church as a faith-forming community whose purpose is to exist as a training ground for nurturing, supporting, and strengthening the spiritual life of its members so that their work may help God transform the world. Such an understanding encourages committees and boards to ask how their meetings might be nurturing, supportive, and strengthening to members while ensuring that assigned tasks get accomplished.

Skills
Making the church’s administrative life a setting for faith formation requires more than a change in self-understanding; it also requires practical skills for implementing this self-understanding. Let us begin with skills. The first skill is conflict management. It is the nature of human organizations to have conflict. If congregations are to be “training grounds” for supporting and carrying out Christ’s mission in the world, then they need to know how to live together with differences—and this calls for skills in resolving and managing conflict.

Another skill—imperative for the Christian community—is hospitality. Indeed, the whole congregation should be trained to be welcoming to strangers and guests and to reflect theologically on the meaning of hospitality for its life together. Boards and committees, in particular, should receive such training and engage in reflection. It would be very helpful for a committee or board to examine the hospitality skills it already has and discern ways in which to strengthen those skills through additional training and practice.
Practices
Just as individuals practice the spiritual disciplines to help keep open to God, so boards and committees can incorporate the spiritual disciplines into their life together. These practices not only open board or committee members to God’s presence but also nurture them to become the heart, hands, and mind of Christ in the world. Some congregations have adopted a set of spiritual disciplines to govern the total work of the church. In one church, for example, every meeting begins with a time of Bible study, sharing, and prayer.

There are a number of ways to implement such corporate practices into a congregation’s administrative life. Let me mention a couple of possibilities. A committee may begin by discussing how everything that it does has a formative dimension. Then the committee may talk about how spiritual disciplines could enrich the formative dimension of its life while, at the same time, permitting the committee to get its work done. The committee should keep in mind that not all spiritual disciplines will appeal to all of its members. Therefore, it should exercise care to select practices that will nurture all of its members. By tailoring the process to the committee’s unique needs in this way, members have a sense of ownership and are therefore more likely to invest the energy needed to make it work.

Another possibility is for a committee to “try out” a particular spiritual discipline and to see how the members respond. In one task group I belong to, I once started the devotional time by setting a candle on the table, lighting it, and saying, “I believe Christ is always with us, but sometimes I need to be reminded of his presence. This candle is a reminder that Christ is with us.” The group adopted the practice. In another instance, the committee chair started using an agenda that was structured around the sections of a worship service, thus inviting the committee to do its work in a worshipful way. This practice soon became part of the committee’s life. The advantage of experimenting with different spiritual practices is that committee members have opportunity to experience a particular practice before deciding to adopt or reject it.

A third possibility is to invite committee members to reflect on questions like these: “What does God want to accomplish in and through our work?” “Where is God already at work in what we do?” Some groups close every meeting with a set of questions for reflection: “What have we learned?” “Where have we experienced God’s presence in our time
together?” “Were there times when God seemed distant or absent?” “How have our actions helped to make God’s love real in people’s lives?”

Finally, a committee or board may decide that it wants to learn how to make decisions through discernment. Discernment refers both to the act of trying to sense what God wants and to the process by which a person or group tries to discover God’s will in a particular situation. Three things are essential to discernment: (1) a relationship with God; (2) a desire to know God’s will more than one’s own; and (3) a willingness to act on what has been discerned. Discernment centers in the question, “What does God want?” Of course, we can never really be sure we have discerned God’s will correctly. However, if we believe that God wants to offer wisdom and guidance for our personal and corporate lives, then we need to try to understand what that wisdom and guidance are, always remembering with humility that God will forgive our failings. Discernment is deeply rooted in our Wesleyan heritage.

I once belonged to a group that decided to practice discernment in its budgeting process. For the next year, we spent part of every meeting learning and practicing discernment. Our first attempt at using discernment with the budgeting process did not go well (partly because of factors beyond our control). But we persisted and things improved. The second year went a little better and by the third year we noticed that people had begun to look at the budgeting process differently. They seemed to have had a better perception of the larger picture. However, I should point out that a few folks complained that the discernment process took too much time.

I am tempted to generate a list of 101 spiritually formative practices for administrative meetings. However, as should be clear by now, it is best for a board or committee to discover together the practices most suited to its unique character, gifts, and responsibilities.

**Ideas from Our Heritage**

Finally, let us look at John and Charles Wesley and the early Methodists for insight and resources as to how congregations might invite people to grow in their faith as a part of the church’s administrative life. The theology and practice of our Methodist forebears are rife with possibilities, but I mention only three: (1) the practice of beginning and ending meetings with singing and prayer; (2) John Wesley’s expectation that the lives of Methodists will show evidence of their desire for salvation; and (3) the idea of Christian
conferencing. Let us briefly look at each of these possibilities.

It is clear from journal entries and other records that the early Methodists began and ended every meeting with prayer and singing. It is important to recall that for these Methodists singing was a tool for teaching doctrine and belief. Methodists learned their faith through hymns; and singing the faith made it easier to remember doctrinal concepts and ideas. The hymns and prayers were chosen to fit the purpose and content of the meeting and thus served as a devotional focus—as a way of connecting with God and of inviting participants to reflect on the issues and concerns of the meeting from a spiritual perspective.

Modern-day Methodists can learn a great deal from this practice in structuring and conducting their meetings. Hymns can be incorporated in several ways. To facilitate robust singing, the committee might want to recruit a songleader (preferably a committee member) and a musician (a musician is particularly helpful in guiding the committee through unfamiliar hymns). If the committee is not a “singing” group, the lyrics could be read aloud or used for meditation.

The second resource from early Methodism is John Wesley’s expectation that those desiring salvation should show evidence of that desire in how they lived. Wesley enumerated this evidence in the form of three primary rules in the General Rules of 1743, reprinted in the *Book of Discipline*:

1) “Doing no harm, by avoiding all evil of every kind, especially that which is most generally practiced . . . ”
2) “Doing good; . . . of every possible sort, and, as far as possible, to all . . . ”
3) “Attending upon all the ordinances of God; such are: The public worship of God. The ministry of the Word, either read or expounded. The Supper of the Lord. Family and private prayer. Searching the Scriptures. Fasting and abstinence.”

These rules governed Wesley’s United Societies, defining the expectations of those who belonged to them. These rules can assist in the spiritual formation of boards and committees in two ways. First, they invite a board or committee to reflect on the rules they want to govern their time together. It is important for a committee or board to be clear about and agree upon the rules that guide how the group cares for its spiritual nurture and how it fulfills assigned responsibilities. Moreover, these rules
enable the group to ensure that conversations are open and honest and that each member’s contribution receives appropriate attention.

Second, these rules provide a board or committee with a set of moral and spiritual ideals in terms of which to measure its performance. In reviewing their work at the close of each meeting, committee members may ask questions like these: “Have we avoided evil of every kind in what we have done?” “Have we done good of every possible sort and to all?” “Have we worshiped God, searched the Scriptures, prayed, fasted (from negativity, perhaps)” and so on. In this way, these rules provide a useful way for a committee or board to evaluate its effectiveness in carrying on Christ’s mission and its faithfulness as a Christian community.

The third resource from our Wesleyan heritage is the idea of Christian conferencing—a practice John Wesley considered a means of grace. The term refers both to small group conversations about spiritual matters and to the conferences that Wesley held with his pastors. Christian conferencing means talking together with a spiritual attitude—an attitude tuned in to God. It has to do with conversations in which one looks deep inside oneself at thoughts and feelings, shares appropriately, and listens even more deeply to God and to others. It would be the kind of meeting that the apostles had in Acts 15. Such conversation edifies and encourages, even in the midst of disagreement. Christian conferencing is the meeting together of God’s people in ways that glorify God and build up the body of Christ.

This concept from our Wesleyan heritage reminds us of the importance of our perspective and attitude. We are the body of Christ even when we gather for business meetings. Given the consumer-driven world in which we live, most of us need to be reminded of this. Fifteen minutes spent in spiritual conversation can shape the environment of a meeting in new and amazing ways and can help the whole meeting become a form of Christian conferencing.

One way of creating spiritual conversation like this is to use a short passage of Scripture pertinent to the concerns of the meeting. Copies of the passage, together with the interpretive questions, could be distributed to the members; or participants could use Bibles with the questions written on newsprint or a blackboard. The questions should help participants reflect on how the biblical passage speaks to their lives and to the life of the committee or board, including the issues to be deliberated in the meeting. The final question often goes something like this: “What might
God be saying to this group through this passage?” After a few moments of silent reflection on all the questions, members could share insights in groups of two to five persons.

**Conclusion**

In this article, I have argued that it is crucial for congregations to conduct their business in ways that invite people to connect with God and to grow in faith. Indeed, I have challenged churches to begin to think of the whole of their administrative life as places of faith formation—of making disciples. I am convinced that boards and committees that seek to conduct their work under the guidance of God’s Spirit and that attend to their continued spiritual formation—both as individuals and as a group—will be able to bring together spirituality and business and thus get “the whole job done.”

Susan W. N. Ruach is Director of Spiritual Leadership Development for the General Board of Discipleship of The United Methodist Church in Nashville, Tennessee.

**Endnotes**

5. I have found the following resources particularly helpful: Richard J. Foster, Streams of Living Water: Celebrating the Great Traditions of Christian Faith (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001); John Ackerman, Spiritual Awakening: A Guide to Spiritual Life in Congregations (Washington, DC: Alban Institute, 1994); John Bryan Smith and Linda Graybeal, Spiritual Formation Workbook, rev. ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1999); and Sandra Krebs Hirsh and Jane Kise, Looking at Type and Spirituality (Gainesville, FL: Center for Applications of
Psychological Types, Inc., 1997).
6. See Olsen, Transforming Church Boards, Appendix 1, 81-82.
7. I am indebted to the Reverend Tom Albin, Dean of the Upper Room Chapel and Wesley scholar, for this insight.
8. The Book of Discipline, ¶103.
Making Disciples in the Wesleyan Tradition: Practicing the Means of Grace

LACEYE WARNER

According to the Book of Discipline, the mission of the church is “to make disciples of Jesus Christ. Local churches provide the most significant arena through which disciple-making occurs.” The church also makes disciples as we “send persons into the world to live lovingly and justly as servants of Christ by healing the sick, feeding the hungry, caring for the stranger, freeing the oppressed, and working to have social structures consistent with the gospel . . .”1 How should contemporary United Methodists understand the practice of disciple-making? Is disciple-making concerned only with personal experiences and practices of piety or does it include acts of charity or “social holiness,” to use Wesley’s phrase? If so, what is the relationship between the “personal” and the “social” dimensions of discipleship? And how does that relationship contribute to our contemporary practices of disciple-making?

Wesley’s spiritual journey, within the context of the rise of the people called Methodists, provides a framework within which to respond to these questions. Wesley’s spiritual journey and theological development influenced his organization and leadership of the Methodist movement. Wesley faced the pressure to emphasize either personal piety or social outreach in his spiritual development and within the Methodist movement. He responded by encouraging a balance between practices of personal and social holiness within communities of faith affiliated with the Methodist movement. Personal holiness, or works of piety, most often refer to practices of personal devotion such as prayer, biblical study, and fasting, while social holiness tends to indicate works of charity and mercy, such as caring for the poor, the infirm, or the imprisoned. A balance of personal and social holiness is embodied in Wesley’s ministry and theology, including his description of the practices of the means of grace. These practices are best understood within the context of Wesley’s spiritual journey and theological development. In this article, I explore John Wesley’s theology to provide some context for the relationship of the means of grace to prac-
tices of disciple-making. Wesley’s encouragement of a balance between personal and social holiness among the people called Methodists was not unique in his time. Wesley’s intentional emphasis on both personal and social holiness contributed to the practice of disciple-making within the early Methodist movement and can inform our contemporary practices.

Examining nineteenth- and early twentieth-century embodiments of Wesleyan theology and practices allows for a more balanced perspective from which to address contemporary questions regarding disciple-making in the Methodist tradition. Methodism in North America confronted different dynamics to those of the late-eighteenth century and the nineteenth century in Great Britain. The late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century American religious landscape is particularly pertinent to a discussion of contemporary disciple-making. Within American Protestantism during the late nineteenth century and the turn of the twentieth century, tensions persisted that eventually culminated in the Fundamentalist–Modernist controversy of the early twentieth century. Although Methodism in North America did not physically split along these ideological lines, the contemporary Wesleyan tradition continues to struggle with balancing personal and social holiness. Both Wesley’s response to the theological tensions of his context and an understanding of the early twentieth-century Fundamentalist–Modernist controversy can inform contemporary responses to questions related to practices of disciple-making in United Methodism. Thus, in addition to reflecting on Wesley’s theology, I offer reflections towards faithful practices of disciple-making shaped by Scripture and grounded in the Wesleyan tradition.

Influences on John Wesley: Calvinism and Arminianism

John Wesley’s spiritual journey and theological development was influenced by a seventeenth-century intra-Calvinist polemic. Wesley’s response to lingering embodiments of the polemic contributed to his emphasis upon practicing the means of grace (more about this in a later section). Prior to Wesley’s life and ministry serious tensions developed between Arminians and traditional Calvinists. Jacob Arminius (1560–1609), who led the Arminians, supported universal atonement—the doctrine that Christ died for all humankind. The traditional Calvinists were represented by Theodore Beza and others, who held a doctrine of predestination according to which the elect, or saved, are limited to a predetermined group.
The implications of this polemic for English Christianity during Wesley’s time led to opposing emphases upon complementary aspects of Christian discipleship. The Arminian doctrine of universal atonement focused upon the possibility of all humankind to choose to respond in faith. Such a response recognized the significance of disciplined Christian practices as fruits demonstrative of faith. The traditional Calvinist doctrine of predestination emphasized God’s sovereignty, with human response (limited to the elect) taking the form of faith alone and individual piety. This theological position deemphasized the importance of Christian practices as dangerously close to “works righteousness.” Arminius was able to avoid the faith–action dichotomy and affirmed that persons cannot be saved by any human action, much less by their decisions or practices. According to Arminius, only God saves human beings. The Arminian threat to Calvinism was confronted at the Synod of Dort in 1619, which resulted in the endorsement of the traditional Calvinist position.2

A similar polemic persisted into Wesley’s lifetime between radical Protestants and Puritans, on the one hand, and high-church Anglicans and Roman Catholics, on the other. The polemic was also characterized by opposing emphases upon sola fide (faith alone). Fears arose that a sola fide emphasis would result in antinomianism (the term literally means “without the law” or “above the law or outward works”). Antinomianism was suspected of leading to a disregard for faithful practices. Wesley expended a significant amount of energy through his sermons, tracts, and letters contributing to the discourse related to this controversy. At various times, he was accused of identifying with both positions. However, Wesley characterized himself as Arminian and throughout his ministry and theological development worked to maintain a balance between personal and social holiness.

John Wesley and the Means of Grace

One of the earliest catalysts for the birth of the Methodist movement was John Wesley’s desire for holy living. Early in his spiritual journey, Wesley was influenced by Jeremy Taylor’s text *Holy Living and Holy Dying* (1650). As a result of this influence and several others, Wesley used a diary to document the use of his time for the purpose of improving and maintaining his spiritual formation. He evaluated the use of his time and disposition towards spiritual growth in great detail. Using a cipher to maintain discretion, Wesley recorded his activities in fifteen-minute intervals and
evaluated his attitude during those periods on a scale of one to nine. In successfully deciphering Wesley’s diaries, Richard Heitzenrater has provided access to a wealth of material that reveals much of Wesley’s spiritual and theological development. Through the practice of keeping a diary, Wesley discovered that holiness began as a reality within the heart and then extended to one’s thoughts, words, and actions. For Wesley, holiness was never merely personal holiness—an inward individualistic piety—but consistently held implications for social holiness, or “good works.”

The earliest evidence of the Methodist movement in Oxford (1724–1735) demonstrates the balance between personal and social holiness. Wesley and the Holy Club prayed, sang, and studied the Scriptures, indicating the importance of personal holiness, or piety. The Holy Club also visited the imprisoned, sick, and aged and taught orphan children in the Oxford vicinity, demonstrating the importance of social holiness, or works of charity. In reflecting on how he used his time, Wesley recognized the significant role of works of piety and works of charity in facilitating his spiritual formation and that of others.

Later, Wesley codified these practices in the General Rules and their use in the “classes” and “bands” of the religious societies he organized. To join a religious society in the Methodist movement, an individual needed only to possess “a desire to flee from the wrath to come.” However, to continue in membership required following the General Rules, which can be summarized as (1) doing no harm and avoiding evil of every kind, (2) doing good, and (3) attending upon the ordinances of God. In the late 1730s and 1740s, classes and bands shaped by the General Rules would provide the structure for the Methodist revival that eventually spread across Britain.

The General Rules are included in the United Methodist Book of Discipline and are protected as a component of the denomination’s doctrine. As such, they continue to serve as a significant doctrinal resource for United Methodism. In their full detail, these rules provide an example of various practices that served as means of grace within the early Methodist movement and contributed to practices of disciple-making. Although the General Rules still exist as an aspect of our “doctrinal heritage,” local churches seem to have little, if any, memory of their significance as a resource for making disciples.

John Wesley’s theology was intimately related to his spiritual
pilgrimage. Throughout his life Wesley maintained an interest in soteriology, particularly his own salvation. Wesley provided an outline of his understanding of salvation, or *via salutis*, in one of his most-often preached sermons and the most comprehensive example of his mature theological reflection, “The Scripture Way of Salvation” (1765). For Wesley, faith alone was essential for salvation. However, as evidenced by his recognition of the danger of backsliding and by his endorsement of Christian disciplines for spiritual formation, faith is not sustained without participation in these means of grace. Wesley was clear that Christian practices are merely means of receiving God’s grace, not ends in themselves; thus, he avoided the danger of works righteousness.

According to his sermon “The Means of Grace,” Wesley divided the means of grace into two groups: those instituted by Jesus Christ and those that are prudential (those Wesley considered “prudent”). The instituted means of grace correspond to traditional Christian understandings of works of piety and personal holiness. These include prayer, searching the Scriptures, celebrating the Lord’s Supper, fasting, and Christian conferencing. The prudential means of grace correspond to traditional Christian understandings of works of charity and social holiness. They include feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, entertaining the stranger, visiting those that are in prison, sick, or variously afflicted, instructing the ignorant, awakening the sinner, quickening the lukewarm, confirming the wavering, comforting the afflicted, and succoring the tempted. Thus, taken together, the instituted and prudential means of grace represent practices of love of God (personal holiness) and love of neighbor (social holiness). John Wesley encouraged his Methodist societies to practice the means of grace in order to avoid the extremes of religious fanaticism and moral laxity rampant within the British Christianity of his day.

Wesley’s balancing of faith and good works is further demonstrated in his understanding of the doctrines of justification and sanctification. For him, justification describes the *imputation* to individuals of God’s righteousness through Jesus Christ, thus confirming his view that we are saved by faith alone. However, as we saw, Wesley also recognized that, as opportunity allows, faith should find expression in “fruits,” or good works. This latter process Wesley called “sanctification.” Beginning at the time of justification, sanctification is the *imparted* righteousness of Christ through the Holy Spirit. This imparted righteousness through sanctifying grace results in a real
change in persons. The language Wesley uses to describe sanctification is closely related to the language of holiness found in Scripture. Through sanctification people are made holy through the presence of the Holy Spirit in their lives and empowered to respond to God’s grace with practices of love for God and neighbor. Although sanctification may occur instantaneously, according to Wesley, such occasions are rare. Therefore, Wesley considered practices of piety and mercy, as outlined in the means of grace and General Rules for the United Societies, as significant aspects of the process of sanctification. In response to God’s gift of justifying grace in Jesus Christ, early Methodists practiced the means of grace in communities of faith. These practices facilitated the process of disciple-making in early Methodism. By participating in the means of grace, these Methodists witnessed to the spiritually and physically impoverished through their sharing of God’s love and message of salvation. The means of grace contributed to the spiritual formation of those recently justified by providing opportunities for cultivating the gift of holiness and sanctification.

The Twentieth-Century Fundamentalist–Modernist Controversy

In spite of Wesley’s balancing of personal and social holiness and his influence on practices of disciple-making in early Methodism, American Methodism in our day suffers from a polemic not unlike the one Wesley faced, namely, the question of how to relate personal and social holiness. Many mainline Protestant denominations, including The United Methodist Church, exhibit symptoms related to the Fundamentalist–Modernist controversy of the early twentieth century. Although international ecumenical conversations inspire hope that recovery is on the way, the remnants of the polemic continue to pervade contemporary practices of disciple-making. Thus, it is important to examine the major issues involved in the Fundamentalist–Modernist controversy in order to trace their continued effect on the meaning and practice of making disciples.

The roots of the Fundamentalist–Modernist controversy can be dated to the publication of Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* in 1859, which presented an argument for evolution. During this period a field of study emerged called “biblical criticism,” which included the examination of Scripture’s historicity and accuracy. The emergence of these and related intellectual and social movements developed into what some called the Modernist perspective (related to, but not exclusively representative of,
Enlightenment “modernism”). Modernism emphasized the historicity, and, therefore, the humanity of Jesus, which encouraged social reform movements aimed at alleviating human suffering. This emphasis on social systems and legislative reform developed in large part to the exclusion of individual spiritual formation, or personal holiness. In response to this “humanistic” trend—which included evolutionary theories, liberal theology, and biblical criticism—a gathering in Niagara in 1895 produced the “five points” of fundamentalism. These five points included the inerrancy of Scripture, the divinity of Jesus Christ, the Virgin Birth, a substitutionary theory of the atonement, and the physical and bodily return of Christ. The term fundamentalism eventually derived from a series of tracts entitled The Fundamentals, published between 1910 and 1915. The fundamentalist emphases tended to result in an exclusion of practices related to social holiness.

Although both parties emphasized scriptural themes, the sundering of personal and social holiness caused several Protestant denominations, including the Baptists, the Presbyterians, and the Disciples of Christ, to divide into Fundamentalist and Modernist wings. However, like Wesley, who sought to maintain a via media, or dialectical balance, between extremes like these, those in the Methodist connection strove to support both personal and social holiness. Although American Methodism has experienced divisiveness over a number of issues, in recent memory it has managed to maintain (albeit at times precarious) unity on issues directly related to personal and social holiness. Noteworthy are the ecumenical achievements of the twentieth century within the Wesleyan and Methodist traditions that have contributed to the amalgamations resulting in the formation of The United Methodist Church. United Methodism has inherited, and continues to struggle to live into, the Wesleyan tradition of maintaining a dialectical balance between personal and social holiness. Nevertheless, the repercussions of the Fundamentalist–Modernist debate continue to cause difficulties for United Methodists when it comes to the practice of disciple-making. Discourse related to the theology and practice of disciple-making, specifically the language of evangelism, demonstrates the volatile relationship, or lack thereof, between personal and social holiness in many local churches and judicatories.

Making Disciples within the Contemporary Context

The practice of making disciples, although always central to the life of
Christian communities of faith, is particularly imperative in the current situation. Since the 1960s, mainline Protestant denominations have experienced a steady decline in membership. In response to this trend, numerous studies of North American culture and religion have been conducted that show significant evidence of the presence of a pervasive spirituality within American society. This spirituality, particularly among mainline Protestants, tends to be broad but shallow. Many of our practices of disciple-making are shaped by a response to this cultural and religious context. Alongside this spirituality, which seems outwardly advantageous in disciple-making, is a consumer-driven ethos. The combination of widespread spirituality and consumerism results in a “marketplace” of spiritualities that provides “samples” of the most attractive and appetizing aspects of spirituality at “competitive prices.” The result is a limited supply of spiritual products whose value is determined by the market rather than by the richness of sustained relationships within faith communities characterized by accountability. The latter bear the costly price of covenant and disciplined practices and run counter to popular models of convenient spirituality.

Many of the church’s practices relating to membership development are characterized by this cultural ethos of consumption, predicated upon the need for church membership and without the richness of the Christian tradition and its practices. As a result of numerous influences, including democracy and the capitalist market economy, some churches have been formed to accept key values of industry, such as individualism and quantitative productivity in minimal time. These cultural influences compound the difficulty facing contemporary churches, who continue to experience residual effects of the Fundamentalist–Modernist controversy and the truncation of the balance between personal and social holiness.

Disciple-making formed by the biblical narrative and practiced as an aspect of sanctification within communities of faith provides an alternative to these cultural and ideological influences. This kind of holistic disciple-making recognizes the importance of qualitative as well as quantitative growth and nurture of disciples over their lifetime through practices that cultivate both personal and social holiness.

Several scholars and practitioners interested in practices of disciple-making continue to participate in international ecumenical conversations. Through their writings and ministry, these individuals (many related to the Wesleyan tradition) are making important contributions to the healing of the
Fundamentalist–Modernist split. For example, in *The Great Commission*, Mortimer Arias and Alan Johnson examine each of the four Gospel “commission” texts for the purpose of informing the church’s practices of disciple-making.⁶ The language of disciple-making is characteristic of the Gospel of Matthew and the well-known “Great Commission” text of Matt. 28:16-20.

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

The term *disciple* implies the practice of “following.” Throughout Matthew’s Gospel Jesus provides parables and examples “to follow” for the purpose of disciple-making. As Arias points out, the Commission text in Matthew specifies at least two activities that contribute to the making of disciples who would follow the example of Jesus: baptizing and teaching. The Gospel of Matthew as a whole is characteristically catechetical with its five teaching discourses that alternate with demonstrations of the kingdom of God. The Commission’s direction to teach is qualified by the content, “everything that I [Jesus] have commanded you.” For Matthew, making disciples is not only “orthodoxy” (right belief or doctrine) but also “orthopraxis” (right living).⁷ Matthew’s Commission text should be read in light of the entire Gospel so that these components may inform the Commission’s meaning for our current practices of disciple-making. Matthew’s paradigm for disciple-making, characterized by orthopraxis, requires the cultivation of personal piety (personal holiness) and practices of justice (social holiness) by individuals within communities of faith over a lifetime.

With the canon of Scripture, Matthew’s text maintains the balance between personal and social holiness within Christian discipleship and practices of disciple-making that embody the command to love God and neighbor.

“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” He said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul,
and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets” (Matt. 22:36-40).

This call to love God and neighbor proclaimed throughout canonical Scripture is represented in Wesley’s theological reflection on personal and social holiness. To focus on love and the emphasis in the great commandments on love of God and neighbor is to reflect on the pervasiveness of such love within our Christian faith and witness. Love is central to Christian discipleship and constitutes our response to God’s love offered through Jesus Christ. Therefore, love is not merely ethics or something that we do to “be nice”; rather, love is a response to our justification and constitutive of our sanctification, or holiness, as the image of God is renewed in us.

**Making Disciples through Practicing the Means of Grace**

Wesley’s pursuit of sanctification through the means of grace characterizes the commandment to love God and neighbor. As a result of God’s love and grace, people are invited and empowered to respond in faith. Our response, then, includes not only the cultivation of love of God through personal holiness but also demonstrations of love of neighbor through practices of social holiness. The embodiment and nurture of holiness through practices of the means of grace result in an invitational witness to discipleship as well as in provision of practices of disciple-making. The persistent engagement in both the instituted and prudential means of grace can provide an effective Christian witness, if understood as invitational rather than exclusive. By participating in weekly communal worship, including the proclamation of the Scriptures and administration of the sacraments, participants and observers experience the salvation narrative and the community’s response. Through continued spiritual nurture, or regular prayer and study in small groups, visitors have the opportunity to engage the Christian faith through conversation and fellowship. The consistent pursuit of social holiness through practices of charity and justice also provides a witness to the world as Jesus’ message of salvation is proclaimed through actions accompanied by words of compassion.

If we remain grounded in our Wesleyan heritage and in the practice of the means of grace—which demonstrate our love of God and neighbor—we will seek both personal and social holiness in response to the gift of grace.
and love of God in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit. Our practices of disciple-making will be about more than increasing worship attendance, tithes, or volunteers. Our practices of disciple-making will aim to cultivate personal piety and social justice within our communities of faith. These practices will arise out of a desire to love God and neighbor in response to God’s love for us and will contribute to the faithfulness of our Christian communities. Through the means of grace, we are empowered to continue the cultivation of our own discipleship as an aspect of sanctification, while embodying a Christian witness through our individual and communal practices of personal and social holiness.

Several theologians assert a claim that is implicit in my argument for an understanding of evangelism as embodied in Christian discipleship, namely, that the truth or falsity of theological claims is made tangible only in being lived out. If Christians do not actively receive the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives and communities as an aspect of the doctrine of sanctification embodied in practices that cultivate virtue (personal and social holiness), then for what purpose are we making disciples? Through practice of the means of grace, individuals are continuously being transformed and reminded of the purpose of Christian discipleship: participation in the kingdom of God through local communities of faith as the church in the world. Christian discipleship in the Wesleyan tradition consists of both personal and social holiness. Similarly, following Wesley’s example, our contemporary practices of disciple-making should include practices of piety and acts of charity as means of God’s saving work in the world.

Lacey Warner is Assistant Professor of the Practice of Evangelism and Methodist Studies and Royce and Jane Reynolds Teaching Fellow at Duke University Divinity School in Durham, North Carolina.

Endnotes
2. The results of the Synod of Dort are often summarized with the acronym TULIP, which stands for Total depravity, Unconditional election, Limited atonement, Irresistible grace, and Perseverance of the saints.
7. Ibid., 20.
Radical Orthodoxy and Methodism

D. STEPHEN LONG

Radical Orthodoxy is a “new” theological movement that has garnered significant attention within the academy and the church. In fact, theology seldom generates the kind of attention Radical Orthodoxy has seen since the initial publication in 1999 of a collection of essays by the same name. Much of this attention came from sources outside theological circles. The Chronicle of Higher Education, Time magazine, the National Catholic Reporter, and a host of other journals, newspapers, and magazines have noted its emergence. Some of the claims have been rather grand. One reporter referred to Radical Orthodoxy and postsecularism as “the knife’s edge of a broader movement . . . that may well become the biggest development in theology since Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the church door.”1 Such claims are surely overdrawn. Nevertheless, Radical Orthodoxy has generated sufficient attention that it provokes much criticism from various philosophical and theological camps.

Some Roman Catholic theologians see Radical Orthodoxy as trading on a Catholic tradition that its Anglican roots cannot sustain. Protestant theologians have repeatedly asked what role the Bible has in it. Barthians find the critique of Barth unconvincing and Anabaptists wonder why a theological movement so critical of Niebuhrian realism still seems to accept the inevitability of Christian participation in violence. Some philosophical theologians see Radical Orthodoxy as offering an overdetermined causality, where the existence of Wal-Mart can be traced back to some errors in metaphysics made by Duns Scotus. Aristotelians and Thomists worry it is too Platonic. By far the persons most alarmed at Radical Orthodoxy seem to be Liberal Protestant theologians, who find in it a betrayal of all the hard-won gains theologians achieved in their accommodation to modernity against a recalcitrant church. A nostalgic return to
Christian orthodoxy will prevent necessary new developments from the critical growing edges of theology in a postcolonial context. Thus, the Drew Colloquium in Transdisciplinary Theological Studies advertised its international colloquia as follows:

Currently the academic discipline of theology seems to oscillate between resuscitations of orthodoxy and abdications of the symbols of theology itself. The retreat to orthodoxy satisfies liturgical and intellectual desires for meaning, yet dulls the prophetic self-critical edge of its own traditions.²

Radical Orthodoxy appears here, as it has in other places, as a romantic quest for certainty in an age of flux. But the categories of liberal Protestantism remain: either prophetic or orthodox.³

Oddly enough, seminaries often seem most resistant to Radical Orthodoxy. There appears to be worry that a retrieval of orthodoxy will bring with it renewed concerns to label certain positions “heretical.” This has certainly been true; John Milbank, the main architect of Radical Orthodoxy, argues that modernity itself is heretical. But no one has called for a renewed Inquisition or for a fascist politics. Instead, the theological politics in Radical Orthodoxy argues the need for a genuine difference formed from a “complex political space” that the “simple space” of liberal politics cannot accommodate.⁴ While some fear what Radical Orthodoxy might lead to, others find it predictably Anglican—one more via media.⁵ Whether it deserves this kind of attention and criticism is an open question, for what it is and what it represents is by no means clear. It is in a nascent state and has not yet moved much outside the academy into the life of the church.

My purpose in this essay is not to evaluate these critiques and affirmations or to muster a response to them. Instead, I intend to position Radical Orthodoxy in terms of modern theology in order to illumine why it has received the kind of attention it has. Then I hope to relate it more directly to Methodism and the work of John Wesley to see how our Methodist tradition fits, or does not fit, within the concerns and critiques of Radical Orthodoxy. This is a propitious exercise, for the Anglo-Catholic theologian John Milbank is the son of a local preacher in the British Methodist Church. One might easily entertain the suspicion that Methodism contains both negative and positive elements that gave rise to Radical Orthodoxy.
Positively, Methodism contains elements of a Christian orthodoxy and Catholic liturgy that merge with a radical politics and socialist vision that is consistent with the aims of the movement. Negatively, Methodism is deeply committed to the “liberal Protestant metanarrative” against which Milbank and his colleagues fashioned Radical Orthodoxy. In this metanarrative, an interior secure realm of value and freedom—also known as “personality”—becomes the essence of religion and simply waits for Western forms of political and economic exchange to bring it to fruition. All “religion” is read as preparatory for these democratic, free exchanges. Despite Wesley’s and Methodism’s explicit influence, or lack thereof, when we compare Radical Orthodoxy to them we discover that both suspicions are indeed warranted. It is no surprise that, to the horror of some and delight of others, Radical Orthodoxy is quickly finding a home in Methodist, Wesleyan, and Nazarene circles.

**Why Radical Orthodoxy?**

As we enter the third millennium, we find that, for better or for worse, “religion” remains a significant social and political factor. Given developments in European thought since the seventeenth century, this is truly surprising; we moderns were unprepared for such a development. Religion, we thought, was like smallpox—something whose danger was behind us. Even though religion was never exterminated in European politics and culture, it had been reduced to a private preference, safely policed by the limits of what was considered to be universal reason. Religion appeared in university curricula as a psychological necessity for persons incapable of facing their own mortality. Or it was a political ruse used to legitimate somebody’s interest and power, either to be used by those in power or unmasked by the intellectually sophisticated. Or religion was a form of alienation of our own power as a species—something to which we aspire for the sake of ourselves.

Even those sympathetic to religion primarily found its usefulness in the foundation it provided for morality. If religion were to have a role in European culture, if it were not to be simply a sign of an immature phase of development in the natural progression of “reason,” then it could only be as “natural religion.” The apologists for religion in European culture assumed this would be the inevitable progression for all right-thinking people. As John Locke instructed us, natural religion was based on “precepts plain and intelligible to all Mankind” that “seldom come to be
controverted.” It was preferable to “revealed religion,” because the latter is mediated by “Books” and “languages,” which are “liable to the common and natural difficulties incident to Words.” Natural religion was the future. It was preferable precisely because it was not based on something as contingent and particular as language; it was grounded in a reason universally shared, a quality no language possessed.

Locke’s empiricism and Kant’s transcendental idealism shared this common understanding of religion’s basis in a universal quality of human being. Kant founded religion upon reason alone by grounding it in “personality.” But at least Kant and Locke gave apologetic reasons for religion to still have some role in European thought. The alternatives in d’Holbach, Hume, and, later, Feuerbach, Nietzsche, Freud, and Marx did not seem promising. Theologians found more promise by following Locke’s or Kant’s apologetic strategy. Theology could be salvaged through its mediation to future generations by modern forms of knowledge, especially by accepting and working within the epistemologies persons such as Locke and Kant bequeathed their posterity.

But there was also a reaction against this modern apologetic strategy. Some theologians avoided any accommodation to the modern spirit through a dogmatic or confessional theology. They refused mediation of any sort. Either way, “modernity” became the cornerstone upon which “modern” theology was constructed—either by accommodating its spirit and seeking to mediate theology via some notion of universal reason or by refusing accommodation altogether by positing a different epistemological space—revelation—that would be free from the corrosive effects of a mediating universal reason. Epistemological concerns were at the heart of modernity.

Then came “the end of modernity.” This expression and its correlative, “postmodernity,” are important in the development of Radical Orthodoxy. For modernity was a cultural strategy that policed what constituted a reasonable Christianity from what were thought to be necessary limitations on human knowledge. Once those limitations are no longer compelling, then Christian theology no longer needs to be policed by them. But the end of modernity does not name the conclusion of an epoch, as if we could easily segment history into a progression from the premodern to the modern to the postmodern. It signifies only that cultural strategy that assumed a natural progression toward the “new” by over-
coming the old that would lead us to a state of universal harmony and peace. Postmodernity is not what comes after the modern; rather, it is the “dissolution of the category of the new.” It seeks to turn us out of a progressive orientation toward the new that gives the illusion of movement when it, in fact, stands still, identically and interminably repeating the movement from absence (a past presence that never was) to a deferred presence (a future presence that never arrives); for this is the “end” of modernity.

Like postmodernity, radical orthodoxy is not the next stage of development in a progressive movement. It does not seek to serve the end of modernity. Instead it re-members the roots that nurture a Christian ontology, practical philosophy, and aesthetics in order to move us outside modernity’s interminable end. This re-membering of our theological roots turns the modern back upon itself to expose what it has forgotten, what it could never fully abandon, and yet what it cannot account for—the theological. Radical Orthodoxy does not seek to “overcome” modernity in order to become the next theological trend—at least in its best moments it avoids this. Instead, it works within modern categories of thought, showing how they cannot sustain what they claim without reference to Christian orthodoxy.

Radical Orthodoxy cannot be understood without some prior knowledge of the debates within and between modern and postmodern philosophy, particularly with the postmodern challenge to a “metaphysics of presence” that supposedly characterizes the Western philosophical and theological tradition from antiquity until Nietzsche, who is then characterized as “the last metaphysician” by Heidegger. A metaphysics of presence assumes a secure interior space that is free from the contingency of language and culture. This secure interior space can be traced back to Descartes’s cogito, where the one certain foundation for knowledge is that a subject cannot doubt that she or he can doubt. Our sense, our consciousness, objects in the world, even God could all mislead us; but if we assume a posture where we “suspend judgment,” then even if all these things mislead us we will not be taken in and can discover a secure foundation for certitude.

This secure interior space, free from the vagaries of language and contingency, leads simultaneously to both an absolute, objective form of knowledge and to a relative form of knowledge. It leads to the absolute claim that all knowledge is contextual and limited to that context. I know absolutely that all knowledge is mediated through the relativity of context,
and I know decisively the limits of my (and your) context, whether it is the empirical limits of my own body or the limits of my culture. By recognizing and confessing my own limits, I can then achieve as secure a foundation for knowledge as is possible. It is not because I know the world as it is that I arrive at such knowledge. Instead, it is because I know what I do not know and cannot know that I can achieve such knowledge.

Radical Orthodoxy is a theology that enters into this fray by being more skeptical about this absolute knowledge of our own contextual limits than either modern or postmodern philosophy and theology have permitted. Because these limits assured us that certain things could not be known—who God is and what can be said about God—they forced Christian theology, especially orthodox Christian claims, into a false humility. By showing that these limits themselves are no more secure than those orthodox claims, Christian orthodoxy reemerges as more reasonable than the dominating liberal Protestant metanarrative that thrives when we accept modernity’s metaphysics of presence. If that secure interior space does not exist, then liberal theology’s ability to relativize Christian doctrinal claims for something more basic, grounded in a preconceptual “experience,” no longer holds. Liberal theology finds itself wedged to an unsustainable foundation, which it can sustain only through institutional force and coercion.

After abandoning theology’s position of humility before a modern metaphysics of presence, Radical Orthodoxy re-members the Christological filling of space and time such that the space and time of the modern and postmodern are revealed for what they are: choreographed spontaneity. Like the food court at the mall, or The United Methodist Church’s “Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors” campaign, everything is orchestrated such that it appears to offer a “difference”; but it is illusory. The difference was all fabricated behind the lights of the cameras. Modernity is the repetition of sameness under the illusion of difference, because in it the new and improved have become our fate. Everything must appear as new, unique, and different—even when it is the same—if it is to attract our attention. Postmodernity is able to diagnose our problem, which is the problem of boredom; for what happens when the new and improved become so commonplace that they no longer hold our interest? But postmodernity has little to offer in its place, other than a constant deferral from being taken in by the modern and an assertion that the one thing that cannot be deconstructed is justice, whatever that means. It is at
this point that Christian orthodoxy becomes once again interesting and worthy of our attention. It holds forth the possibility of construing life on something other than the enticement of the new and improved and the concomitant force and coercion necessary to sustain it.

Radical Orthodoxy looks to the roots of the Christian faith and examines the political, social, and philosophical significance of neglected and forgotten Christian doctrines such as these:

- the doctrine of the Trinity and its perichoretic unity, where each Person is rendered intelligible by the gift and reception that defines each in terms of a mutual kenosis that is never a closed totality but an opening to the other that makes “creation” intelligible;
- Christ’s two natures, where each maintains its own distinct identity while at the same time hypostatically uniting so that God enters into that which is not God without ceasing to be God. This becomes the basis for an analogical use of speech about God as well as for a biblical hermeneutic. It is what makes Christian theology possible;
- creatio ex nihilo, where God creates not in order to contain a threatening primordial chaos but, consistent with God’s own being as triune, gives being to that which is not God without the need to posit any limitation or withdrawal in Triune Being to make room for created being;
- the real distinction between God and creation such that God’s essence is God’s existence, but the essence of created being is never identical with its existence. This avoids that univocity of being so characteristic of modern theology, whereby language about God is finally nothing but language about ourselves and theology becomes subordinated to philosophy—especially metaphysics and epistemology;
- the via eminentiae, where working analogically we recognize that the truth, goodness, and beauty we do see, along with their “imperfections,” only make sense when God signifies the “more excellent way” of these perfections;
- a concern to avoid “nominalism,” where it is understood as a fetishization of the particular such that words only signify discrete things whose meaning depends upon “clear and distinct definitions.” These discrete things do not participate in one another except through human convention, which is always illusory, albeit necessary. This has a political correlate, where the state of nature is understood as composed of discrete individuals (atoms), all contending against one
another, who must be brought into society by artifice. It also has an economic correlate, where everything can be turned into a formal object of value and traded with every other thing. In Christian ethics it assumes a Divine Command theory;

• a recovery of analogical language in speaking about God rather than assuming all language is metaphor;
• the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist as that which makes possible the condition for all human meaning;
• ecclesiology as the production of a liturgical time that is not a secure space to be strategically defended but rather a political tactic of God’s patient revolution.

But Radical Orthodoxy cannot develop theology solely by professing basic Christian dogma; it cannot have a singular confession for all adherents to sign. Instead, it develops theological doctrine always at the same time as it discusses politics, economics, and ethics. Thus, it claims to be “more mediating” of nontheological discourses than other forms of orthodox and confessional theology and “less accommodating” to modernity than Liberal theology. It is radical not only in re-membering the roots (radix) but also in re-membering the intrinsic and necessary connection between theology and politics, and this calls into question modern politics, culture, art, science, and philosophy. By looking to these roots, Radical Orthodoxy also questions the “roots” of modern social and political configurations, finding them often to be nothing but a bare assertion of will that too often subordinates truth, goodness, and beauty to its own devices. Modernity ends in nihilism, where a technological fascination holds sway that cannot be ruled by truth, goodness, or beauty.

Methodism

What relationship does Methodism have to Radical Orthodoxy? I think it safe to say that, since the latter part of the nineteenth century, the Methodist Church has been a thoroughly modern institution. By that I mean that it has grounded theology more in the modern assumption of some secure interior presence each individual possesses than in any common life mediated through doctrine, liturgy, or discipline. This is as true of the pietistic evangelicalism that characterizes Methodism as it is of the theological “progressives” who constantly seek to pull the rest of us into the future.

One important consequence of modernity’s influence on Methodism
has been its commitment to “ethics” as the essence of religion. Once ethics becomes the essence of Christianity, doctrine serves only a utilitarian role to that ethics. If it does not do it well, doctrine is dispensed with and changed to protect the ethics. A second consequence is an explicit rejection of Christian orthodoxy in favor of heretical forms of doctrine more appropriate to “ethics.” In fact, this became a new kind of “orthodoxy.” While we are supposedly a pluralistic church, when it comes to doctrine and liturgy, we developed creedal commitments to ethical principles that insured our reliance upon, and propagation of, modernist accounts of natural religion at the same time that we dispensed with, ridiculed, and rejected ecumenical, orthodoxy Christianity. This was given its decisive articulation in the 1908 “Social Creed.” Throughout the twentieth century, Methodism produced a number of systems of ethics and ethicists but had very little time for the development of Christian doctrine or theology. When theology was developed, it was often to buttress a system of ethics and was intentionally heretical. This tendency is most obvious in the early to mid-part of the twentieth century, when the school known as “Boston Personalism” had tremendous influence over Methodist intellectual life.

As Methodism became more ensconced in modernist forms of thought, the discipline of ethics worked itself ever more deeply into the Wesleyan tradition. In the latter part of the nineteenth century, it did so through the notion of the “supreme significance of the moral personality.” A clearer instance of “metaphysics of presence” could not be found.

Borden Parker Bowne offered the Methodist tradition its first systematic ethics. His work is a clear illustration of that metaphysical spirit that culminates in nihilism. A contest between nature and freedom characterizes the moral life. The “aim” of moral activity “is to lift the natural to the plane of the moral by setting the stamp of the free spirit upon it.” The chaotic flux that reason must tame is, for Bowne, the “predatory character” of “tribalism.” It has been rationalized by “industrial civilization,” but it is not yet complete. Only the application of moral ideals through a universal critical reason will finally accomplish the necessary moral progress.

Theologians such as Edgar Sheffield Brightman and Albert C. Knudsen continued the science of ethics introduced by Bowne into the Wesleyan tradition. In 1933, Brightman published his Moral Laws. He began the work with the distinction between descriptive sciences, based on “facts,” and “normative sciences,” based on values. “Ethics,” says Brightman, “is based
on this fact of purposive control by rational principles.” Brightman lays out eleven laws by which the moral ideal can be applied to the conflicting mass of data for purposes of human mastery. Following Kant closely, Brightman makes ethics “logically prior” to religion. The truth of the latter depends on the truth of the former. Brightman’s work represents the high-water mark of the accommodation of Wesleyan theology to a modernist ethics. Once theology becomes subordinate to ethics, it logically follows that Christian theology is radically challenged. Brightman had to create a new doctrine of God in which God is finite because limited by the “The Given” that always exists and that God cannot eradicate. The Trinity, Christ’s two natures, the real distinction, *creatio ex nihilo*—all disappear in Brightman’s work.

A. C. Knudsren continued this tradition of the logical priority of ethics in his 1943 *The Principles of Christian Ethics*. Although recognizing that a “sharp line between Christian ethics and Christian theology is gradually disappearing,” he nevertheless states that “in a sense the permanent element in Christianity is its ethical teaching.” Theology was becoming ethics, and not vice versa. Knudsren does bring Jesus back into the conversation. However, the Jesus to whom he appeals is someone for whom “the autonomy of the individual was a fundamental proposition.” For Knudsren, like for Brightman, ethics is grounded primarily in freedom. It offers a new source of causality into the natural flux of life that allows us to shape institutions and persons. The traditional notion of God’s perfection, as well as the *via eminentiae*, disappears altogether. As Knudsren puts it, “God himself as a moral being must distinguish between good and evil and must be metaphysically capable of choosing either.”

Knudsren’s theology is consistent with liberal political theory. In fact, like Hobbes, he finds the state of nature to be a state of war. Moral principles provide rights to individuals against this state of conflict and chaos. But Knudsren also applies this political theory to God. Thus he states, “The only way in which the idea of a moral universe can be maintained is by ascribing moral responsibility to God and a limited independence to man. As Creator of the world, God is a responsible Being, and we his creatures have rights over against him as well as duties to him.” That God does not want us to be passively dependent is certainly true, but Knudsren posits “rights” against God without recognizing the problems this poses for any reasonable theology. Why do we need to secure ourselves against God.
unless God is like other finite causes, so limited by the possibility of good and evil that God cannot finally be trusted? Unlike more reasonable expressions of the Christian faith, where God is understood in terms of the grammar of simplicity, perfection, and immutability, Knudsen’s ethics require a different grammar altogether to speak of God: the grammar of choice, freedom, and individual responsibility. A heretical theological language becomes necessary for the sake of our own ethical possibilities. Knudsen concludes, “The highest in man is a revelation of divine truth and divine will.”23 This statement can be read as showing us something Knudsen may not have intended to say. What is divine truth and divine will other than that which is highest in human beings? It comes as no surprise that Knudsen draws on Sabellius to explain the doctrine of the Trinity.24 After all, it is a unified totality that liberal political theory seeks.

Boston Personalism no longer holds sway over Methodism as it once did. Its loss of influence may very well signal the end of modernity, although its lingering influence in Methodism reminds us that the end of modernity is more a ceaseless repetition than a closure. The arguments found in Bowne, Knudsen, and Brightman are no longer rhetorically compelling. But this does not mean that the spirit of a metaphysics of presence has itself disappeared. It is still with us, especially in our dogged commitment to our “Social Principles” (as unintelligible as they are) and the complete lack of interest in our Articles of Religion, Confession of Faith, General Rules, and common liturgy. Perhaps it is still with us in the dominance of process theology, which continues to hold sway in Wesleyan intellectual circles. And it is certainly present in the uncritical acceptance of the sociological tools employed in the church-growth strategies United Methodism adopted in the past decade.

Perhaps the problem of modernity that characterizes Methodism is finally a problem Wesley himself bequeathed us. Jaroslav Pelikan calls John Wesley the first modern theologian.25 I fear that is truer than we think, even though it is also false. Wesley’s constant use of “inward” versus “outward” Christianity, his reliance upon Locke’s distinction between will and liberty, his putative “catholic” spirit—all are instances of his drift toward accommodating the spirit of modernity. But that is not all that is to be said about Wesley. And, fortunately, many of the modern epistemological presuppositions he explicitly adopted actually did little to no work in his preaching, teaching, and theology. He affirmed again and again that one
could not understand or perform the moral life without a proper understanding of the triune God, which was a kind of understanding incapable of separating knowledge from love.\textsuperscript{26} Given that he was contemporaneous with Hume and Kant, this is a remarkable achievement, and one that could be used to assist Methodists to think theologically at the end of modernity.

What then is the relationship between Radical Orthodoxy and Methodism? Twentieth-century Methodism clearly sided with the liberal Protestant metanarrative for which Radical Orthodoxy is a remedy. For those who are tired of that metanarrative, Radical Orthodoxy holds forth promise. For those wedded to one of its many progeny, it will be viewed as a threat. But I think there is a more positive relationship between the two as well. In explaining the rise of the Methodists at Oxford forty-some years after the fact, Wesley presented a socialist vision grounded in Christian orthodoxy with a common life, order, and discipline. Wesley explained what brought the early Methodists together this way:

They were all precisely of one judgment as well as of one soul. All tenacious of order to the last degree and observant, for conscience’ sake, of every rule of the church. . . . They were all orthodox in every point: firmly believing not only the three creeds, but whatsoever they judged to be the doctrine of the Church of England, as contained in her Articles and Homilies. As to that practice of the apostolic church (which continued till the time of Tertullian, at least in many churches) the ‘having of all things in common,’ they had no rule, nor any formed design concerning it. But it was so, in effect, and it could not be otherwise; for none could want anything that another could spare.\textsuperscript{27}

It would be more than a stretch to see in this narration of Methodism in early eighteenth-century Oxford a clear statement of the late twentieth-century Radical Orthodoxy that began at Cambridge. Wesley never contended with Nietzsche, Heidegger, Derrida, or von Balthasar. He did contend with Locke, Hume, and Hutcheson—and not always to Wesley’s credit. There were also Cudworth and Malebranche—and that may provide more of an explicit connection between Methodism and Radical Orthodoxy than I have yet suggested. But there was also Scripture, the creeds, and a desire for a faithful common life, as difficult as that may be to express or embody. Methodism was an ecclesial project that on Wesley’s own terms failed—especially because of its inability to maintain the unity of the church.
and a common teaching on economics. As an “ecclesial project,” Radical Orthodoxy offers an exciting way forward at the end of modernity, just as Methodism offered a promise yet unfulfilled beginning in the eighteenth century.

D. Stephen Long is Associate Professor of Systematic Theology at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary in Evanston, Illinois.

Endnotes

2. For more on the Colloquium’s objectives, see its website at http://users.drew.edu/mnausner/colloquiahistory.html.
3. Reinhold Niebuhr gave us these categories in An Interpretation of Christian Ethics. They now seem to have been adopted in some “postcolonial” theologies, which does seem a bit ironic.
6. Milbank explains the “liberal protestant metanarrative” in his Theology and Social Theory (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 92-98. This metanarrative reads the uniqueness of the catholicity of the church as an “always implicit presence in the west of a private realm of value, a presence which makes western history, in turn, the key to the history of the whole world.” That “private realm of value” is reflected in the assumption of an interior secure space in individuals where persons have a “freedom” to choose, and this becomes the foundation for political, economic, and even ecclesial society.
9. Kierkegaard and Barth are often viewed in such a confessional or dogmatic camp. Milbank seems to read Karl Barth in this sense and views him as a “modernist” who turns the category of revelation into an epistemology to answer the epistemological crisis that empiricism and transcendental idealism threw theology into. Fergus Kerr makes a similar move in his excellent work, *Theology after Aquinas* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002). Although one would be hard pressed to deny all such accusations against Barth, I do think there is a much more sympathetic reading of Barth that does not see him in this same light.


12. In fact, if we are at the end of modernity, then one wonders how anyone who is conversant with recent trends in theology and philosophy can use the term *progressive* non-ironically. This is one reason I find Bishop Joseph Sprague’s progressive manifesto *Affirmations of a Dissenter* uncompelling. Sprague posits two kinds of theologians: progressives and neoliteralists. The former are “inclusive and universal” and open to the new, while the latter represent “closed minds and fearful hearts” that remain trapped in the past through a “biblical literalism” and a commitment to the “god of classical theism.” Sprague expresses “incredulity that neoliteralism has been permitted, with little challenge from the contrary to many who know better, to take passages out of context and read a particular theology into them.” He chides progressives for their silence in allowing the neoliteralists their “attempted take over” of the church and calls them to action against the neoliteralists (see pages 7, 8, 16, and 22). It is unclear what Sprague means by “neoliteralists.” At times, it seems to represent something like the “Yale School” and the work of persons like Hans Frei, with his recovery of the “literal” reading of the Bible. At other times, it represents fundamentalism. If Sprague’s point is that fundamentalists should not be “permitted” to set forth their particular theological position within our seminaries and major institutions, then I would concur with him. In fact, such a *de facto* rule already operates in these places. Fundamentalists are excluded, and rightly so. (Republicans are basically excluded as well, about which, I must confess, I am more conflicted.) But if he means that the Yale school should not be permitted to be taught without episcopal challenge, then
I think we see that the “liberal and universal” progressive theology he represents concludes with the same kind of policing function it fears. This may be inevitable, given liberalism's presuppositions.


14. Ibid., 39.

15. Bowne writes, “Tribal and national groups have generally known no laws but that of selfishness and violence; and under such a law there is no place for morality. If the most civilized and Christianized nations would find itself threatened by such group, it would have no resort but massacre,” ibid, 156.


17. “Ethics is therefore logically prior to religion; religion cannot be true unless ethics is true, but ethics might be true and religion false . . . . [T]he history of religious progress is a history of purification of religious faith by appeal to moral law” (ibid., 265-66).

18. Brightman writes, “More confidently I express the view that if man is truly free, God must be finite as regards his knowledge. . . . Man's freedom is an actual limitation on the foreknowledge of God.” Brightman then cites Locke for support. He goes on to answer the problem of evil, which is also “the problem of God,” by arguing that there is “The Given” (he always capitalized it), which is “the source of an eternal problem and task for God.” The Given is that unconscious, chaotic force that always troubles God's plans, which is also the source of God's creativity. Brightman states, “Our hypothesis is that God can make an increasingly better conquest of it [The Given] through eternity without ever wholly eliminating it.” I find it intriguing how Brightman's use of The Given bears some resemblance to “The Khora” in some postmodern (a)theologies. See Brightman, *The Problem of God* (New York: Abingdon, 1930), 132, 182-83.


20. Ibid., 43. Later on in this work, Knudsen claims that Jesus’ “profoundest contribution to ethics” was his bringing to light “the infinite value of every personality in the sight of God” (79).

21. Ibid., 82. Of course, if God is capable of choosing evil, then the freedom to choose is more basic to our being than God and God is no longer worthy of our worship.

22. Ibid., 180.
23. Ibid., 283.
24. Knudsen argues that the “movement from Platonism to personalism” meant “less insistence” on the traditional doctrine of the Trinity. He states, “If God in the totality of his being is a unitary personality, it is at least confusing to continue to speak of three ‘Persons’ in the Godhead. The personality of God would seem to exclude the older idea of personality in God. Hence there is a tendency to fall back upon the psychological as opposed to the social interpretation of the Trinity and to combine it either with a form of Sabellianism or an agnostic attitude toward the problem.” See Knudsen, The Doctrine of God (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1930), 423.
25. I am indebted to Lyle Dabney for pointing this out to me.
26. See “On The Trinity,” where Wesley states that “the knowledge of the Three-One God is interwoven with all true Christian faith, with all vital religion. . . . Therefore I do not see how it is possible for any to have vital religion who denies that these three are one.” See The Works of John Wesley, Bicentennial edition, ed. by Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984–), 2:385-36. See also ibid., “The End of Christ’s Coming” (2:478), where Wesley recognizes that we cannot love God without Christ because we cannot know the Father without the Son who reveals him. Like Aquinas and the premodern tradition, Wesley correlates knowledge and love such that Christian doctrine and Christian ethics cannot be separated. Other examples of Wesley’s correlation between the doctrine of the Trinity and Christian ethics can be found in “The New Creation,” ibid., 509-510; “The Case of Reason Impartially Considered,” ibid., 598; “Spiritual Worship” (3:90ff); “The Unity of the Divine Being” (2:70); and “Sermon on the Mount III” (1:513).
An increasingly politicized and polarized Judicial Council endangers the future of United Methodism. The dynamic unity of the church requires not ideologues committed to special interests but fair-minded and impartial guardians of the church’s Constitution and rule of law.

If delegates to the 2004 General Conference follow the political trends evident in the lobbying and balloting of the past several General Conferences, then regardless of who wins the elections, United Methodism may be the long-term loser. If future judges are chosen more on caucus affiliations and predetermined political positions than on credentialed qualities of ability, merit, and judicious temperament, then the trust essential to church unity and mission could be seriously eroded.

Every ecclesial body needs some recognized authoritative system to adjudicate inevitable differences in interpreting church

continued on page 190

I was privileged to have served on the Judicial Council from 1992–2000. The Judicial Council is a constitutional body with an organic character charged with upholding and interpreting the law of the church. During those years the art of collaboration, which included respect, listening, and honest and forthright deliberation, guided the work entrusted to us by the church. This is a tribute to those who served on the Judicial Council in those years and all faithful church people who love both the law and the church. Tom Matheny, as a member since 1972 and president since 1976, and the other seven members have served various terms. This particular Council was about as diverse as any group in the church. Diversity of gender, race, region, as well as wide points of view were represented on the Council. It is a wonder that the Council in that eight-year period issued 237 decisions, or one-fourth of the total number of decisions

continued on page 194
rules, ensure due process, and maintain reasonable order so that the church’s mission and ministry can be fruitfully exercised. In United Methodism, the Judicial Council over the years has effectively fulfilled this theological and practical function with a minimum of friction and controversy. It is neither a legislative nor an evidentiary body. Members have set aside their personal preferences and beliefs in order to interpret conscientiously the meaning and intent of the church’s Constitution and Discipline.

Instituted as a result of a reform movement in the church, the Judicial Council itself, however, may now need to be reformed. The Judicial Council of The United Methodist Church is a relatively new creation within Methodism. Historically, the bishops of the church made decisions and interpretations of church law. Concerned with arbitrary episcopal decisions, a reform movement created the first Judicial Council in 1934 within The Methodist Episcopal Church, South.\(^1\) When The Methodist Church was formed in 1939, the Judicial Council approach was adopted. This polity persisted in the creation of The United Methodist Church in 1968, in contrast to the Evangelical United Brethren Church policy of giving the judiciary power to their bishops.

Though first initiated almost seventy years ago, the Judicial Council is a relatively unexamined creation. Successive Judicial Council bodies have made nearly 1,000 decisions on church law since 1940. The Judicial Council activities and procedures are generally not transparent and are highly secretive. Yet, United Methodist scholars have rarely reviewed these decisions, which are final and can be changed only by revisions of the Constitution or Discipline. The literature in the field is basically nonexistent. For example, no analysis exists as to what decisions were of major significance or were key turning points in the life of the denomination. Likewise, no comparative information is readily available on how decisions of law are reached in other denominations, such as British Methodism or other mainline Protestant denominations in the United States. United Methodist theologian Thomas Frank reports that “despite the growing influence of this legal material, no one has published a critical assessment of the impact of a distinct judiciary on the ecclesiology or practices of the church.”\(^2\)

While politics has never been completely absent from Judicial Council elections, recently it has been targeted for intense denominational political activity. The Book of Discipline entrusts the Council of Bishops with nomi-
nating a diverse slate of candidates worthy of being justices, with the provision that nominations can be made from the floor of the General Conference. No discussion of candidate credentials or viewpoints is permitted. Over the years, nominees have been few and most of the elections have been made from the list previewed in advance by the bishops. But the 1996 and 2000 General Conferences have witnessed extraordinary lobbying, caucus endorsements, and leafleting by persons nominated from the floor. Amazingly, powerful Judicial Council members, whose decisions on church law cannot be questioned or reversed, are selected without the lengthy detailed examination of candidates that goes on in the process of electing bishops.

Therefore, due to the Council’s power and influence, political caucus groups within the church have decided to use their influence and resources to impact General Conference election of members. The implicit belief is that if you can “capture” the majority of the Judicial Council you can “control” the church.

As a result, the polarization evident among United Methodists, particularly in regard to issues of homosexuality, has crept into the composition of the court and threatens the legitimacy of its decisions. Just as abortion has become the “litmus test” for all appointees of the United States Supreme Court, so various special interest groups in United Methodism use views on homosexuality and the church as their litmus test for elections.

If the future integrity of the judiciary and the fairness of their decisions become compromised by political or ideological loyalties, then the church will face a serious crisis of confidence. In good Christian conscience, persons will be tempted to disregard decisions if they believe the Council is making unfair or extra-Disciplinary decisions. Ultimately, the enforcement power of the Judicial Council rests on its honesty, integrity, accountability, and intellectual persuasiveness.

A review of recent decisions by the Judicial Council evidences a deeply divided judiciary. Of the first thirty-two decisions rendered by the new Council elected in 2000, seven were not unanimous. Four included dissenting opinions, two had concurring opinions, and one had a supplementary, or editorial, opinion. This polarized pattern persisted in the second round of deliberations in October 2002, with a hodgepodge of concurring and dissenting opinions. Similar to the United States Supreme Court, 5–4 decisions are becoming more customary and reflect deep
disagreement on how the laws of the church are to be interpreted. Far more serious are the latent theological presuppositions that reflect Council members’ divergent understandings of the nature of the church and its mission and ministry.

Critics of the Council suggest that in recent years there has been a tendency in certain cases to reach questionable conclusions, make obvious errors, and to chart new, unexpected, and problematic interpretations. In 1999, eighteen “watchdog” United Methodist lawyers from across the United States warned of the dangers of “judicial activism” being demonstrated on the Judicial Council, suggesting the Council was attempting to make laws rather than simply to interpret them. In particular, they suggested that the Council was violating the powerful legal argument of Stare Decisis (“to stand by that which is decided”), ignoring the principle that precedent decisions are to be followed.

In defense of the Council, it should be noted that the nine members (currently five clergy and four laity) are conscientious volunteer United Methodists, who receive neither professional staff assistance nor compensation for their work. They meet only twice a year for exceedingly short time periods. In an increasingly litigious church, the number of cases being sent for their judgment has escalated significantly in recent years. In the first 28 years, from 1940 to 1968, the Council made only 255 decisions; in the last ten years, it has issued nearly 300 opinions.

The workload of the Judicial Council could be reduced if various annual conferences and some bishops were more attentive to the Discipline, focusing only on questions of law and not on parliamentary issues. In a polarized church, people attempt to get the Judicial Council to rule their way on questions when they have failed to gain support at their home base. Increasingly, the Council has to rule cases as either outside their jurisdiction or as hypothetical, and, therefore, as moot.

Error, therefore, is probably inevitable. What is disturbing is not the mistakes but the apparent unwillingness of some Council members in certain cases to openly acknowledge their errors. For example, in two cases the Council of Bishops had to request reconsideration—once (#904, #910) in regard to what the Discipline specifies in reference to the powers of the Central Conferences and the other time (#920, #930) when the Judicial Council clearly failed to cite the words of the Discipline correctly.

The Judicial Council was instituted to curb the excesses of the
bishops; now the bishops have had to plead with the Council to act within the Discipline! What is disturbing is the reluctance within the Council to be forthcoming about some of its mistakes. Nothing could erode confidence in the judiciary and church law more quickly than a future arrogant court that conceals its own limitations and lacks accountability.

In order to minimize the politicalization and polarization of the Judicial Council, I would urge several steps. First, that delegates at the next General Conference give more attention to nominations presented by the Council of Bishops, exploring also ways of depoliticizing the process. Second, that scholars and other groups of concerned United Methodists give systematic theological attention to the work of the Judicial Council. Third, that the Judicial Council itself openly exercise judicial restraint rather than engage in judicial activism, finding also ways to make their work more understandable and transparent to the constituency they serve. Fourth, that legislation broadening the geographical base of Council members be adopted, limiting representation from a single jurisdiction to two or three members. Fifth, that the General Conference authorize an independent commission to be appointed by the bishops to review the history, contributions, and weaknesses of the present system and to present policy recommendations to the 2008 General Conference.

Donald E. Messer is Henry White Warren Professor of Practical Theology and President Emeritus at The Iliff School of Theology in Denver, Colorado.

Endnotes

that had been issued in the years since 1940. The church was faced with broad and diverse opinions and issues representing the diversity within the ever-changing face of United Methodism. It was President Tom Matheny’s commitment to the church and to fair-mindedness, the legal acumen, love of the church, and the graciousness of Sally Askew, Wayne Coffin, Lyn Caterson, John Corry, Wesley Bailey, Ted Walter, Zan Holmes, and Rex Bevins that made the Council work. It was deep respect, unwavering trust, and honest exchange in the face of great difference of philosophy and opinion that prevented division within the Council or compromise on the work of the church, as lived out in the Judicial Council.

Prior to 1939, the General Conference exercised both legislative and judicial powers, with the bishops of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, having limited veto power over General Conference actions deemed by them to be unconstitutional. The need for a Judicial Council of The Methodist Church, so the story goes, was to respond to the General Conference’s inability to address the judicial matters that it faced every four years.¹

Additionally, there was the problem of the need for interim judicial decisions which, by default, were then left to the bishops. The bishops became the interpreters of church law with no system of appeals. An additional problem had to do with the authority of the bishops’ rulings. When requests were made for opinions, the issue would be entertained and a response returned, but the General Conference granted no authority to the bishops. Thus, the decisions of the bishops would be advisory rather than authoritative.

From 1918–1940 there were numerous issues regarding the Judicial Council to be hammered out, but at the 1940 General Conference provision was made for a Judicial Council with nine members—five clergy and four lay. All were to be forty years of age or older and members of The Methodist Church. An interim Council was established in 1939 prior to the 1940 General Conference, which established statutory regulations for the permanent council. The intention was that the judicial powers heretofore exercised by the General Conference would be withdrawn and vested exclusively in the Judicial Council. The decisions of the Judicial Council would be final.² The General Conference has modified the *Book of Discipline* concerning the Judicial Council. One of the most significant
changes came at the 2000 session, when it limited a member’s tenure to sixteen years, or two consecutive eight-year terms.

The Judicial Council can best be understood in the framework of United Methodist polity. Imperfect though it may be, the genius of United Methodist governance is that it is designed to represent the historic theology, doctrine, and polity for the church’s work in the world, while facing a future that is unknown and not yet revealed. The polity of The United Methodist Church (the way in which we order our life together), while both timeless and changing, is designed to be a structure that does not need constant revision as the church lives out its understanding of the gospel in the world. The General Conference, at its best, brings to the table representatives of all God’s people so that the conversation includes the whole family of God as it deliberates and determines the mission of the church. The General Conference is the place where the most creative and forward-thinking work is done. It is the venue for discussion, lobbying, conversing, praying, debating, and determining the direction of the church. The annual conference is the heart of the church. The conference system stands over against a congregational system, which can be limited by internal desires, politics, and prejudices. A conference polity not only is designed to hold and honor myriad voices of the faithful but also is formed to keep the theological conversation faithful, lively, creative, and inclusive. Inherent in United Methodist polity is the General Conference, to which is entrusted the authority to legislate for the benefit of the whole church. To the Council of Bishops is given the responsibility to guard the faith, order, liturgy, doctrine, and discipline of the church, to seek and be a sign of unity of the faith, and to nurture the faithful. To the Judicial Council is given the responsibility to honor and uphold the Constitution, to hear and determine any appeal from a bishop’s decision of law, to issue declaratory decisions, to pass upon decisions of law made by bishops, and to hear and determine the legality of any action taken by any General Conference. The law is designed to strengthen the church. The Judicial Council must always be fair-minded and honest in protecting against the most powerful voices and resist “special interests,” which can at times be detrimental to the good of the whole church.

The Judicial Council guards the authority of the General Conference and the annual conference. It supports the authority of the bishops and helps the bishops by providing a framework for interpreting the law
uniformly and consistently across annual conference lines. The Judicial Council brings clarity, uniformity, and fairness to the church by resisting prejudices and special interests. The Council helps to maintain the balance of power that benefits the whole church.

The Judicial Council will always be vulnerable to certain accusations. Interpreting law rather than writing it is difficult and often more nuanced than it appears. Sometimes the Council is accused of overstepping its authority. The General Conference has tried to be clear in defining the powers of the Judicial Council. Paragraphs 2609–10 of the Book of Discipline are vitally important, because they both define and limit the authority of the Council. Always testing these questions internally, the Council itself should be vigilant in both claiming its rightful authority of interpreting the law of the church and in using its limited authority for the good of the church. And it should have the wisdom to know the difference between interpreting and legislating.

The Judicial Council is a wise and necessary addition to the structure of The United Methodist Church. The Council helps to preserve the authority of the General Conference without further encumbering the General Conference with judicial matters when the Conference’s constitutional authority is legislative. The Judicial Council was granted the authority to address judicial matters. The Council strengthens the authority of the Council of Bishops to guard and uphold the faith and protects the Council of Bishops from having to address judicial matters. In so doing, the role of bishops for episcopal oversight for the church is strengthened.

The Judicial Council brings uniformity of interpretation of the law to the church. At its best, the Council provides a venue that is fair, impartial, and unmoved by special interests. The larger issues of law, precedence, history, and identity are kept as clear and unencumbered as possible. Also significant is the fact that the Judicial Council has the final say in appeals processes when all other avenues have been exhausted.

The General Conference should seek to keep the Judicial Council as diverse as possible. Because the Council itself is a deliberative body, the members should be elected not because of points of view or particular special interests but because they are faithful church people who have integrity, are trustworthy, and will seek to honor and uphold the church, the Constitution, and ecclesiastical law.

The various branches of Methodism struggled for more than a century
without a Judicial Council and found all solutions they tried unworkable. To ignore their struggles is to have history repeat itself.

Susan Henry-Crowe is Dean of the Chapel and Religious Life at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia.

Endnotes
1. Arthur Sanford notes, “The General Conference exercises both legislative and judicial powers. For a body consisting of more than eight hundred members to exercise judicial powers, and with each delegate exercising the right to vote on any judicial question which is presented, is to perpetuate in the Church a procedure which has been abandoned by the States, a situation which nowhere now exists, so far as I am aware, in respect of judicial questions which arise in any country.” See Arthur Sanford, Reports of the Committee on Judiciary of the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church (New York: The Methodist Book Concern, 1924).
The location of Mark’s immediate audience is not known. The traditional Roman context still has much support, but there is growing attention to a Galilean location. Either way, the Gospel’s recipients live their discipleship in demanding and difficult socioeconomic and political circumstances. The four readings from Mark 10 below emphasize the demands of discipleship by presenting it as an alternative way of life that challenges dominant societal values. The chapter also provides encouragement for this difficult way of life with assurances of God’s gracious saving power (10:27, 52).

The narrative setting of Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem and two significant themes unify the chapter’s subscenes. The first theme is the way of the cross. Twice in the two previous chapters, Jesus has instructed his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem to die (8:31-33; 9:30-32; also 10:32-34). True to his word, in chapter 10 Jesus journeys from Galilee into Judea, entering Jerusalem in chapter 11. As he journeys in the shadow of the cross (10:1), he instructs the disciples, who are also called to take up the cross (8:34).

In the Roman Empire, the cross was the ultimate fate of those who did not “get on board” with the elite’s agenda of Roman domination and self-interest. It was the means of execution and societal exclusion for those who betrayed the status quo or who attacked, threatened, or resisted the demands and values of the Empire, often with acts of violence. To walk the way of the cross, then, has nothing to do with enduring minor irritations. It is to live against the grain, to challenge the status quo, and, at considerable risk, to embody and witness to a different reality with alternative commitments and practices.

The second theme in Mark 10 elaborates part of the content of this challenge. Throughout the chapter, Jesus addresses relationships and matters related to households: marriage and divorce (10:2-12), children (10:13-16), wealth (10:17-31), and being slaves (10:32-45). These were standard elements in a centuries-old tradition concerning household manage-
ment. Elite male philosophers and teachers understood the structuring of households to be foundational to society. Ideal households upheld certain societal values. They were hierarchical, patriarchal (male dominance as husband, father, and master) and androcentric (centered on male roles).

Throughout chapter 10, Jesus challenges this tradition of societal organization and unfolds a different form of societal structure and human relationships. Jesus’ alternative vision is based on the inclusive reign, or empire, of God that he announces in his ministry (1:15; cf. 10:14, 15, 23, 24, 25). He declares God’s very different purposes for human well-being that collide with these dominant societal values and structures.

Contemporary Christians, so used to being comforted by the gospel and to having our present way of life affirmed and blessed, struggle to hear the disturbing challenge of the way of the cross in this chapter. Identifying Jesus’ alternative practices requires us, then, to identify comparable points of tension with our own society. Chapter 10 points not to easy cultural conformity but to cultural questioning and critique. It requires a way of life not marked by accommodation but by a lived alternative. The way of the cross confronts our dominant societal complacency and self-satisfaction and counters our quests for wealth, success, power, and status. The preacher will need to walk a fine line between “getting a hearing” and being faithful to the biblical witness.

October 5, 2003–Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

Mark 10:2-16; Job 1:1, 2:1-10; Ps. 26 or Ps. 25; Heb. 1:1-4, 2:5-12

This difficult passage links two household emphases: marriage (10:2-12) and children (10:13-16). The first part is usually interpreted in terms of a trap to catch Jesus in his interpretation of Deut. 24:1-4, either being lax with the law or being harshly rigid in teaching about divorce. But Jesus’ response points to another concern. In response to the leaders’ question about what a man can do in divorcing a woman (10:2-5), Jesus talks about God’s purposes for marriage (10:6-9). From creation God envisions the marriage relationship to consist not of male dominance but of “one flesh” (Gen. 1:27 and 2:24). Marriage is not a means of perpetuating a male line, but a “one flesh” relationship in which the male leaves his patriarchal family to cleave to his wife in a relationship of mutuality and equality. Jesus undermines convenient male power, thereby challenging the presumption of patriarchy. In God’s vision for relationships between male and female,
the woman is not subject to male actions but is a partner in mutuality.

The resultant prohibition of divorce and remarriage in vv. 9-12 (whether initiated by a man or a woman) sounds very harsh, especially since divorced/remarried folks rightly belong to our congregations. Jesus’ emphasis on God’s marriage ideal “from the beginning” and his culturally unusual recognition of adultery against a wife counter two cultural norms: the easy use of male power to “put a woman away” in divorce and an understanding of adultery against a husband only. While that undercuts of male power is the good news, the ruling out of remarriage in vv. 11-12 (Matthew softens the teaching with a concession clause in 19:9) can have tragic consequences in confining people to harmful and destructive relationships—if these verses are read as divine law and not as an ideal. The text’s emphasis is understandable and even liberating in its resistance to a particular cultural practice. But its contemporary use requires pastoral and theological sensitivity, as well as an informed biblical hermeneutic. The passage does not address every dimension of the complex contemporary issues involving marriage, divorce, and remarriage. In preaching, it will be important to recognize that all marriage relationships fall within the purview of the whole gospel with its promise of new life and a fresh start, unfettered by the past and bathed in God’s graciously inclusive love.

As with household codes, the material on marriage is followed by a scene involving children (vv. 13-16). Jesus welcomes and blesses the children and then uses them as models for how any person is to receive God’s reign (cf. 9:33-37). Conventionally in sermons, childlikeness is interpreted in terms of innocence and/or trustworthy simplicity. But while those are characteristics that we post-Enlightenment people often associate with children (any parent, of course, knows that there are no innocent or simple two-year-olds!), they were not values associated with children in the first century. Rather, children were often understood in terms of vulnerability and weakness (given the high mortality rates) and as unpredictable and disruptive in their actions (not yet socialized into the adult male world). They were regarded as marginal to that adult world, without legal rights or social status, and as unpredictable threats to its order. Hence, in trying to dismiss the children (v. 13), the disciples live out the values of their society! But not for the last time in this chapter, Jesus instructs them that disciples are to take their cues not from the cultural norms but from God’s inclusive and merciful reign. Jesus welcomes, includes, and blesses these “insignificant” people.
Jesus’ invitation to discipleship—to become as a child—embraces the vulnerability, weakness, and marginality of first-century childhood as fundamental qualities. The experience of and commitment to God’s reign means for disciples a way of life that is marginalized by the status quo whose order, priorities, values, and structures they threaten and challenge. Disruptive disciples become vulnerable to the defensive response and ridicule of the social majority. That is the way of the cross.

October 12, 2003–Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Mark 10:17-31; Job 23:1-9, 16-17; Ps. 22:1-15; Heb. 4:12-16

Another household emphasis follows. The pursuit of wealth, and its attendant power and status, was a primary value in the hierarchical, imperial society of the first century. Within the (elite, ideal) household, it was the task of the ideal husband/father/master to provide for his household and to enhance its social status through acquiring and publicly displaying wealth. Three subsections develop aspects of this theme.

In vv. 17-22, affluence hinders discipleship. The man inquires from Jesus about participating in the completion of God’s purposes. “Eternal life” is literally “life of the age”—the age to come when God’s purposes are established (Dan. 12:2). By citing his observance of the commandments, the man presents as one who seeks to do God’s will.

But Jesus’ response exposes the man’s (self-)deception. He is hindered by one thing: “he had many possessions” (v. 22); or, more accurately, many possessions own or possess him since he is “rich” (v. 25). This is not a personal matter of his private wealth. He lives in a world in which about 5 percent of the population had wealth, power, and status, while the other 95 percent had very little. This affluent man, probably an owner of extensive land holdings, upholds and benefits from a profoundly unjust society. In v. 19, Jesus adds to his summary of the Decalogue a commandment that is not on Moses’ list: “you shall not defraud,” a verb used for not paying wages to laborers (Deut. 24:14). The man’s affluence is sustained, in part, by oppressive practices. And his declaration in v. 20 that he has kept these commandments reveals both his complicity in this system and his self-deception about his participation.

Jesus’ loving call to discipleship (v. 21) requires the man to abandon a way of life marked by exploitation and conspicuous consumption. He is to divest his wealth, power, and status; redistribute his wealth so as to undermine the hierarchical division of haves and have-nots; and invest himself in...
Jesus’ mission of embodying God’s reign in a world where all have access to the resources needed to sustain life. Jesus does not glorify poverty, but he does ask the rich man to identify with the poor, those without options and resources who do not matter to the wealthy. As in the household, where vulnerable and marginal children (vv. 13-16) and slaves (vv. 43-45) are central to God’s ways, so in socioeconomic life the poor have a special place. The rich man’s divestment and redistribution of wealth will mean his participation in Jesus’ mission.

In vv. 23-27, Jesus elaborates the issues evident in the man’s rejection of the call to discipleship. Wealth hinders people from entrusting themselves to God’s reign. Wealth defines people (“someone who is rich” [v. 25]), thereby preventing an identity that derives from relationship with God (“children,” the socially marginal and unimportant [vv. 13-16]). Wealth becomes the object of people’s trust and loyalties. It blinds people to the plight of others and to God’s different world of redefined relationships and reordered access to resources. The disciples, shaped by the value that wealth indicates desirable success and God’s blessing, wonder how such an alternative way of life can reflect God’s salvation (v. 26). The theme of the wealthy’s misdirected priorities and allegiances runs throughout Scripture. So too does an emphasis on the willingness of the poor to entrust themselves to God’s saving work (v. 27). The poor are like children (vv. 13-16) in that they are marginal to where the societal action is but central to God’s saving purposes and blessing.

The third subsection, vv. 28-31, also picks up on a biblical theme—that of salvific reward for those who entrust themselves to God’s just purposes. Jesus promises the disciples who have put following him ahead of all else two sorts of rewards (v. 30). First, in the present, they form a new community/family not defined by kinship but in which resources (houses, lands) are readily available to others. Interestingly, in the list of relationships in this new family, there is no mention of fathers, reinforcing the chapter’s focus on resisting conventional patriarchal societal values and shaping an alternative existence (v. 30). This new community does not remove disciples totally from existing structures, as a comparison of 1:16-20 and 10:35 indicates. But it does redefine the priorities and allegiances of disciples and the ways in which they structure social interaction and deploy wealth.

Second, disciples will be rewarded by taking part in the completion of God’s just and saving work in the age to come when there will be plentiful
resources for all and wholeness and health (Isa. 25:6; 35:5-6). In v. 30, Jesus refers to persecutions. The disciples’ alternative way of life threatens the values and structures of the status quo. There is always a backlash.

Is the term affluent Christian an oxymoron? In an age of aggressive marketing, contemporary Christians in the United States seem quite willing to believe the assurances of numerous advertisements that what we own and how much we own matter much more than anything else. Accordingly, we give little “air time” to Jesus’ warning about the dangers of wealth. And proclamation is difficult because, after all, we are all compromised by this cultural norm. And we have numerous rationalizations— theological and cultural—close at hand to deflect Jesus’ words. Yet this passage remains in the canon that we profess to value so much. It raises vastly troubling issues for “rich Christians in an age of hunger” about our priorities, greed, obsession with work and status, right to leisure and comfort, efforts to secure our futures, and the injustice and defiant indifference of our affluent lifestyles to the many in the global village who lack so many basics. Surely this collection of issues needs our honest, prayerful, sustained, and active attention, study, and openness to God’s saving work (v. 27).

October 19, 2003—Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Mark 10:35-45; Job 38:1-7; Ps. 104:1-9, 24, 35c; Heb. 5:1-10

The Lectionary strangely excludes Jesus’ third passion prediction (vv. 32-34). References to Jesus’ death introduce (vv. 32-34) and close (v. 45) this scene in which two disciples campaign for preeminence in God’s reign. Framing the scene with references to Jesus’ death vividly contrasts the self-giving way of the cross with the societal quest for greatness. The contrast underlines the scene’s focus on renouncing status and giving oneself in service as fundamental to being a disciple. The image of “slave,” used both for the disciples’ way of life and for Jesus’ death, again draws on household relationships and redefines the contours of the alternative family/community to which disciples belong (v. 30). If all are slaves, there can be, unlike in conventional households, no masters! Service, not power, marks discipleship. Again the scene puts the inconsequential, the lowly, the powerless, the marginalized, at the center of God’s workings. Such an alternative order challenges our certainty—personal and societal—that God is much more pleased with and impressed by success and status.

In stark contrast to Jesus’ self-giving death (vv. 32-34), James and John
ask Jesus to reserve for them the places of prominence in the establishment of God’s reign (vv. 35-37). Their request, like their attempt to turn away the children (v. 13) and their shock at Jesus’ disinterest in affluence (v. 26), encapsulates dominant cultural values, a yearning for public recognition of one’s status. A host’s allotment of seats to his guests at a banquet, for example, was a very public and dramatic measure of how others perceived a person’s status. A guest could be honored or shamed by such placement, as Jesus’ parable in Luke 14:7-11 illustrates. Donahue and Harrington draw attention to the highly structured, hierarchical seating order prescribed for the Qumran community’s meals and meetings, in imitation, so it was believed, of the eschatological banquet.  

Supposedly, the imagined end-time shapes their present; but, in fact, they have projected the present onto the future and created God’s reign in their own image! Instead of imitating the cultural values and structures, disciples must learn a different way of social interaction, a way of resistance and challenge.

Jesus’ response in vv. 38-40 highlights the way not of honor and status but of suffering and self-giving. The image of “cup” is ambivalent. It can depict suffering, punishment, wrath (often brought on by imperial powers; cf. Isa. 51:17-23; Ezek. 23:31-34); but it can also depict joyful salvation (Ps. 116:13). The disciples’ confident response in v. 39 suggests they hear the latter dimension but not the former, causing Jesus to emphasize that discipleship means identifying with him. It is the way of the cross. God alone grants eschatological rewards.

Joined by ten angry disciples (worried that James and John would get a jump on the desirable seats? The quest for glory runs deep.), Jesus again (cf. 9:33-37) underlines self-giving service as central to discipleship. He does so with another stark contrast to the values and political structures of their hierarchical society ruled over by a few wealthy and powerful men through force, intimidation, and alliances for the benefit of a few and at the expense of the most (v. 42). The sick and damaged people who populate the Gospels witness to the destructive impact of power that prevents people from having access to resources necessary to sustain life. The community of disciples is not to imitate this societal and political pattern of destructive domination. In redefining “greatness” in terms of the role of a slave (vv. 43-44), Jesus again refers to household structures.

Slavery, a tragic event in United States history, is an institution that we rightly deplore. Can there be any good news in this image? As it has done
with references to children and the poor, the chapter again picks up an image of the outsider, the marginal person, the unimportant, to image God’s ways of working and the way of discipleship. All disciples are to live this role. There are no masters in the community exercising self-serving power. The community puts itself at the disposal of God to work for God’s purposes. And in so doing it imitates and identifies with Jesus, who performs the ultimate act of benefiting others by giving his life.

Jesus describes his death as a “ransom for many” (v. 45). The phrase evokes the Suffering Servant of Isa. 53:12, who absorbs Babylon’s imperial violence and effects the people’s salvation or rescue. The term *ransom* derives from a word group meaning “redemption,” “freedom,” “liberation.” The word refers to God liberating Israel from slavery in Egypt (Exod. 6:6; Deut. 7:8) and exile in Babylon (Isa. 43:1). Jesus continues God’s redeeming work. His death “for many” is in the place of and for the benefit of others.

How does it do so? Jesus’ death reveals the destructive nature of the existing world and the lengths to which it will go to resist God’s life-giving purposes. Jesus absorbs this world’s destructive violence, but his being raised from the dead by God shows that the sinful world does not have the final word, that it cannot defeat God’s gracious purposes for all people. His resurrection anticipates the establishment of God’s good and just reign and the creation of a new heaven and earth. In the meantime, disciples live an alternative, faithful, and hopeful existence that challenges, not mimics, the world’s ways of operating. In this life of service, in imitation of Jesus, they know suffering is inevitable.

Jesus backs this teaching with his own example. This very difficult passage stands over against the human obsession with power, honor, status, domination, and greatness wherever it occurs, including and especially in the church. It stands against the church’s cultural imitation and accommodation. It challenges us to live against the cultural grain, to cultivate a completely different mindset, and to embody the reign of God in our relationships, structures, and lives of service.

**October 26, 2003—Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost**

**Mark 10:46-52; Job 42:1-6, 10-17; Ps. 34:1-8; Heb. 7:23-28**

This demanding chapter ends with a marvelous story that offers readers reassurance and strength. The way of the cross—the countercultural way of discipleship with its alternative patterns of social interaction—is hard, but
with God’s help and with Jesus’ transforming and life-giving power, it is possible (vv. 27, 51).

The scene, located in Jericho on the way to the cross in Jerusalem (v. 46a), exemplifies many of the chapter’s emphases. The central figure, Bartimaeus, a “blind beggar,” recalls the earlier healing in 8:22-26. He is not one of the elite but one of the physically damaged marginals whose place is, significantly, on the outskirts of Jericho beside the road. He hears that Jesus approaches and greets the proclamation with a response of insight (“Son of David” [v. 47]; see Ps. 72:4, 12-14 for a vision of the Davidic king committed to justice and to the poor and needy) and faith crying out for Jesus’ mercy.

Predictably, there is opposition, but he persists in his faithful response (v. 48). The “many” who rebuke him are not explicitly identified. Are they part of the “large crowd” (v. 46) or are they disciples, or a mixture of both? Whoever they are, they play the same role that disciples have played through the chapter as opponents of God’s purposes (see vv. 13, 26, 35-40). Interestingly, elite figures also oppose God’s purposes (vv. 22, 32-34), allying disciples and elites often as opponents of God’s reign, while the marginals, the “nobodies,” exhibit faith and welcome God’s intervention. Both dimensions have been woven through the previous chapters: the non-comprehending disciples who so often end up on the wrong side of God’s workings and the unlikely marginal figures who exhibit faith in surprising ways (vv. 24-30; 9:14-27). It is a salutary warning to the church not to be an obstacle to those outside its circle who exhibit faith. It is also encouraging that such faith exists in spite of (as well as in) the church.

The crowd does not dictate Jesus’ actions (v. 49). Jesus does not buy into its dominant cultural agenda, shaped by concerns of wealth, status, and honor, and dismissive of the broken and insignificant (cf. v. 48). Jesus’ alternative agenda embodies God’s inclusive mercy. In language that resembles some previous interactions between Jesus and disciples (“take heart” [6:50]; “called” [9:35]), Jesus summons the man who responds with enthusiastic determination and singlemindedness. Jesus’ wonderfully gracious question, “What do you want me to do for you?” repeats his response to the question of James and John in v. 36 about seats of prominence in God’s reign. The contrast between the blind man’s request for wholeness and that of the disciples for power is stark.

In response to the man’s request for sight, Jesus pronounces the man’s
healing: "your faith has made you well" (v. 52). The double meaning of the verb prevents any elevation of the spiritual and diminishing of the physical in the miracle. The scriptural tradition is not quick to make that division. Isaiah’s visions of what the world looks like when God’s reign is established in full—his visions of God’s salvation—hold the two dimensions together (see Isa. 25:1-10; 35:1-10). The day of salvation—the day of wiping away tears, suffering, and death—is a day of physical transformation. There is abundant food to eat and there is wholeness of body among “the ransomed of the LORD” (Isa. 35:10). That is, Jesus’ healings are a foretaste and demonstration of and a participation in the yet-future completion of God’s purposes for all creation. God’s embracing of the physical world (which, after all, God created) requires nothing less from disciples.

The story ends with a very significant summary of discipleship: “he . . . followed him on the way” (v. 52). The language of “following” is discipleship language (1:17, 18, 20). The way, of course, is Jesus’ road to Jerusalem—the way of the cross. It is a countercultural, alternative way of life. It challenges and disturbs conventional wisdom and cultural norms. It arouses opposition from non-disciples and resistance from disciples. It is the way of courage, discernment, perseverance, and faith—found often in surprising places.

Warren Carter is Pherigo Professor of New Testament at Saint Paul School of Theology in Kansas City, Missouri.

Endnotes
3. For good discussions of Mark 10, see Donahue and Harrington, The Gospel of Mark, 292-320; Pheme Perkins, “Mark,” in The New Interpreter’s Bible
LECTIONARY STUDY


Ethics often provides the point of contact between Christian faith and the worlds of thought and action beyond the church. When pastors speak out in the public life of their communities, they usually address moral issues related to discrimination, gambling, the needs of the poor, or the responsibility of public officials. When people bring their problems to church, the issues that trouble them are likely to be moral dilemmas in the workplace, hard choices about medical care, or deep moral questions about how to reconcile the ideals of faith and the responsibilities of citizenship.

It is hardly surprising, then, that Christian ethics has generally developed around the questions that arise when faith encounters life and when specifically Christian choices have to be related to secular ideas and institutions. In recent years, however, Christian ethics has become more concerned about the distinctiveness of the Christian message. If Christians have anything to contribute to the general moral discussion, it is not just because they work harder at it or are more serious about it. It must be because their faith sustains the moral life in unique ways and guides their choices through paths that cannot be reduced to rules and methods. Christian ethics cannot be just another way of thinking about the good human life. As Bonhoeffer put it, what is important in Christian ethics “. . . is now no longer that I should become good, or that the condition of the world should be made better by my action, but that the reality of God should show itself everywhere to be the ultimate reality.”

Of course, Christians have usually thought that their faith provides moral insights missing from other worldviews, secular or religious. Reinhold Niebuhr, who was perhaps the most effective Christian voice in public life in the past century, thought that Christians are able to deal with politics and history because their distinctive prophetic faith helps them grasp all the possibilities for both love and egoism that are inherent in human nature. Niebuhr, however, also believed that a careful reading of human history
would support this Christian interpretation. While Christians are attuned by biblical faith to see what is really going on, both they and their non-Christian neighbors can find corroboration of this insight in history, social science, and other forms of shared human knowledge.  

Many contemporary Christian ethicists are not so sure. Drawing attention to the uniqueness of Christian faith, they stress the differences between the Christian narrative and other ways of seeing the world. The Christian moral life cannot be reduced to “quandary ethics” that provides answers to specific moral questions in terms that anyone might appreciate. The Christian life has to be taken whole and on its own terms.

Stanley Hauerwas, the most important of these new voices, says that theology and ethics “divorced from a full doctrine of God cannot help but distort the character of God and, accordingly, of the world in which we find ourselves.” Niebuhr sought to present Christian ethics as moral wisdom that everyone could comprehend, even if the Christian language of sin and grace was sometimes strange to their ears. By contrast, Hauerwas argues that moral choices set in the context of a whole Christian life, lived in the community of the church, will often be incomprehensible to those outside, even though the church often uses familiar words about virtue and love to explain what it is doing. The implication is that we should rethink Christian ethics, not as a series of Christian answers to common moral problems, but as a story of what the church does and how it lives. Christian ethics is primarily a witness to the gospel’s shaping of the Christian community. Its value as a problem solver for society at large is limited, at best.

Hauerwas’s approach to Christian ethics is developed most completely in his recent work With the Grain of the Universe (Brazos, 2001). This book, derived from his Gifford Lectures delivered in 2001, articulates his position in relation to three other religious thinkers: William James and Reinhold Niebuhr, whose liberalism he criticizes; and Karl Barth, whose rediscovery of Christian witness and rejection of natural theology provides the starting point for Hauerwas’s own work. For those who seek a more general introduction to this approach, Hauerwas’s “primer in Christian ethics,” The Peaceable Kingdom (University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), is a good choice, along with a recent work, The Goodness of God: Theology, Church, and the Social Order (Brazos, 2001), by D. Stephen Long.

The emphasis on the distinctiveness of the Christian message and the
importance of seeing it as a whole shapes other recent work in Christian ethics as well. Some, however, continue to take a Niebuhrian approach, in contrast to Hauerwas's focus on ethics lived in the Christian community. Max Stackhouse provides a comprehensive theological assessment of emerging global realities in three volumes on God and globalization: Max Stackhouse, ed., *God and Globalization: Religion and the Powers of the Common Life*, 3 vols. (Trinity Press International, 2000). The immense economic and cultural changes that globalization has wrought in human life are seen here as evidence of God's work in history. Much of that evidence is available for assessment by historians, economists, anthropologists, and other students of the human condition. Stackhouse and his colleagues, in a collaboration that has extended over several years, compile much of that evidence and assess it from the standpoint of their own specialized disciplines. What they seek to provide that other studies of globalization do not is the theological perspective that ties it all together.

Stackhouse and his colleagues do not, of course, provide a blanket theological endorsement of globalization. They have a critical perspective that is shaped by a biblical understanding that God's power is manifest in history and yet remains incomplete and hidden until the eschaton. Globalization cannot be dismissed as evil or irrelevant. To ignore such massive changes would be to deny God's dominion over all the powers of this world. But neither can globalization be seen as the fulfillment of God's plan, in the way that an earlier generation of Social Gospel writers hoped for changes that would realize the kingdom of God on earth. Globalization provides the field of God's action in history within which our responses to God's dominion must be lived. Our response to God's dominion includes what we do as Christians living in the church, but it can never be confined only to that.

Stackhouse's project involves contributions from some twenty scholars, many of whom are well known in their fields. It thus defies easy summary, and readers with an interest in a specific globalization issue will want to explore the essays in each of the three volumes. Stackhouse's own approach to Christian ethics becomes clear in his essay in the third volume ("Introduction," in *Christ and the Dominions of Civilization*, 3:1-57). Stackhouse also provides a succinct summary of the project in a recent article ("Public Theology and Political Economy in a Globalizing Era," *Studies in Christian Ethics* 14 [November 2001]:63-86). The full development no doubt awaits the
promised fourth volume in the God and Globalization series.

Stackhouse calls for the development of a “public theology” that is shaped far more by biblical ideas than by the least-common-denominator ideas of “public ethics” or “civil religion.” Stackhouse’s public theology offers the covenantal understanding of salvation history as a framework through which everyone can grasp what is happening in globalization, precisely because that theology tells us what God is doing in history and allows us to see globalization as part of that narrative. The point for ethics, of course, is not only to understand but also to guide choice and action by which institutions and practices are shaped for the new global environment. In those tasks, the conclusions of public theology will be tested by the general experience of those around the world who wrestle with the multiple challenges that globalization poses to our common life.

A third important approach to these issues is provided by David Hollenbach, S.J., who writes about the common good and Christian ethics (The Common Good and Christian Ethics. New Studies in Christian Ethics [Cambridge University Press, 2002]). If Hauerwas and Stackhouse begin with the unique affirmations of Christian theology and then work toward ethics, Hollenbach begins with the moral problems of public life and seeks the distinctive contribution the Christian tradition offers toward their solution. Thus, The Common Good—and Christian ethics—begins with “the eclipse of the public,” the rise of individualism, and the loss of community that substitute an easy tolerance of diversity for shared moral commitments. This is a common lament, but Hollenbach makes it more pointed by showing how tolerance alone will not solve the problems of race and poverty that pose real threats to the citadels of freedom and security that many Americans are building for themselves, away from the evidence of the decay of public life (32-61).

The distinctive contribution that Christian ethics offers in this situation is the idea of “the common good”—a tradition of thinking about shared social values that goes back at least as far as Thomas Aquinas’s Christian reformulation of Aristotle’s ethics and politics. The Western liberal commitment to individual freedom, Hollenbach suggests, has played itself out. Freedom and tolerance should not be forsaken, but they cannot solve our most urgent social problems. This task requires an understanding of human dignity that implicates individual well-being more directly in the goods that the whole society creates and shares. Participation in this social
process, rather than individual rights to a share of the product, is the key to justice understood in terms of the common good. Christianity has long known how to realize this idea of justice without requiring everyone to share its theological presuppositions; but creating the common good in today’s society will require an openness to religious ideas that is frequently missing in the politics of liberal individualism. It may also require a commitment to public life that is missing in those versions of Christianity that are primarily concerned to develop the distinctive virtues of Christian life lived in a shared community of faith.

Hollenbach’s understanding of the common good reflects a tradition of American Catholic social teaching that has applied the papal social encyclicals especially to the problems of economic life and social justice. Increasingly, this way of bringing a distinctive Christian tradition of biblical teaching and ethical reflection to bear on specific problems of contemporary society has come to be emulated by leadership in other denominations; and it has become the most important way that churches speak to social issues today. That is a remarkable development, considering the marginal position that Catholicism occupied in American public life as recently as the 1960s. Perhaps, however, this leadership role could only be possible for a tradition that understood that its message was not a simple recapitulation of the culture’s prevailing values. Given the new emphasis on the distinctiveness of Christian ethics, those in the best position to provide leadership may well be those with some experience of teaching from the margins rather than from the center.

If this is the case, then we may expect future developments of importance in Christian ethics to come from Orthodox, evangelical, feminist, and liberation perspectives. These voices are not absent in the contemporary discussion, but they have not yet provided comprehensive views of North American social ethics with the scope of the three systematic proposals reviewed here.

To say that Hauerwas, Stackhouse, and Hollenbach offer comprehensive views and systematic proposals is not to suggest that their works are complete or that they anticipate every new development. All of the works mentioned here were written before the events of September 11, 2001; and even today we are still too close to this new experience to offer a comprehensive Christian understanding of it.

Nevertheless, the need to make sense of the destruction and loss of life
in New York, Washington, and Pennsylvania, and to provide a moral framework for the “war on terrorism” impels an immediate response. A sampling of that response appears in Strike Terror No More, a collection of essays by theologians and ethicists that appeared early in 2002. Max Stackhouse and Stanley Hauerwas are among the contributors. More extensive works will no doubt be forthcoming as Christian ethicists rethink their ideas about the state, violence, just war, and international relations in light of this new and rapidly developing situation. Those who seek to understand it in terms of Islamic and Christian ethics will want to give attention to a timely study by John Kelsay (Islam and War: A Study in Comparative Ethics [Westminster/John Knox, 1993]), first published just after the Gulf War and still highly relevant to understanding Iraq and the Islamic world today.

The adaptations that must be made to relate September 11 to the visions of Christian witness, globalization, and the common good that Hauerwas, Stackhouse, and Hollenbach provide are reminders that thinking about Christian ethics is never a matter of comparing one static system with another. We are always testing the systems against events. In this article, I have concentrated on Hauerwas, Stackhouse, and Hollenbach because their works seem comprehensive enough to explain much that has already happened and resilient enough to accommodate an unexpected future.

Robin W. Lovin is Cary M. Maguire University Professor of Ethics at Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas.

Endnotes

3. Stanley M. Hauerwas, With the Grain of the Universe: The Church’s Witness and Natural Theology (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2001), 15.
5. See, for example, Children and Poverty: An Episcopal Initiative, by The Council of Bishops of The United Methodist Church (1996). The document was revised
in 2001 under the title *Community with Children and the Poor: Renewing the Episcopal Initiative*. The revised statement can be accessed online at [http://www.umc.org/initiative/statement.html](http://www.umc.org/initiative/statement.html).

Every preacher who faces the relentless privilege and challenge, blessed yet daunting, of stepping into the pulpit Sunday after Sunday will find in this newly revised collection a treasure trove of material for reflection and renewal. Richard Lischer, the James T. and Alice Mead Cleland Professor of Preaching at Duke Divinity School, brings to his anthology the perspective of the life of the church in both parish and academia. He has assembled an extensive and deep resource for the classroom, for clergy study groups, and for individual pastors seeking to grow in an understanding of the preaching task.

This reader on preaching is organized into seven divisions, each addressing a dimension of preaching: What is Preaching?, the Preacher, Proclaiming the Word, Biblical Interpretation, Rhetoric, the Hearer, Preaching and the Church. Each division contains excerpts from six to eleven writers, spanning an astonishing range of time and perspective that includes Augustine, Karl Barth, Oscar Romero, Martin Luther, Justo and Catherine Gonzalez, Phoebe Palmer, Gardner Taylor, Richard B. Hays, Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, and many others. Lischer, himself a distinguished preacher and teacher, has written an interesting and helpful introduction to each selection that introduces the author, illuminates the particular contribution of the piece, and sets it in relationship to the aims of the larger collection.

That Lischer’s defining criterion in the selection of each piece is theological is precisely what makes this collection so engaging and timely. While many pieces do contain implications for technique or style, overall the collection provides a much-needed theological foundation for reflection on the preaching task. In contrast to many current offerings on preaching that oversimplify the task and infantilize the congregation, this is not a book about preaching for church growth, or preaching to meet the needs of the congregation, or preaching to entertain postmodern worshipers. Thankfully, there is no mention of overhead projectors or
sermon worksheet handouts designed for easy listening. Instead, the overall impact of the book is to explore what Barbara Brown Taylor refers to in her contribution as the “alchemy” of preaching, created in the fertile interplay among preacher, Word, and hearer. In Lischer’s words from the Introduction,

The many studies of form and design that so dominated our generation’s homiletical thinking, as well as more recent theories of culture and human consciousness, cannot produce the renewal promised by the gospel. Instead of seeking a scheme by which to clothe and communicate a religious idea, preachers will eventually ask the more integrated, theological question: What is it about the gospel that demands this particular expression? It is that question, and no other, that holds the promise of the renewal of preaching (xvi).

The book’s title is taken from the mistranslation of Ps. 68:11 in the Great Bible of 1560, immortalized in Handel’s Messiah: “The Lord gave the word: great was the company of the preachers.” All pastors who preach regularly from within the context of the opportunities and the complexities of congregational life will find vocational renewal in remembering what it is to be entrusted with the Word on behalf of God’s people. “Is there any word from the LORD?” the king asked the prophet. The voices in this collection, gathered from across the church’s experience, provide the reader with opportunities to first dig deep and rediscover the roots of faith that urged Jeremiah’s courageous reply of “Yes, there is!” and then to risk the consequences of the proclamation of God’s Word. Here is invitation to serious reflection and renewed commitment to the awesome charge of speaking that Word of life and hope. Here is solid ground for resisting the temptations of popularization, trivialization, and mediocrity. Here is found conviction and courage to dedicate the best of one’s abilities to the task of preaching.

Oddly, the Revised English Bible’s translation of the same verse from Psalm 68 reveals the book’s insufficiency: “The LORD speaks the word: the women with the good news are a mighty host.” (Note that these women are offered as an alternative reading in the NRSV.) As strong as this collection is, the preponderance of authors nevertheless represents a European male perspective. It is regrettable that more attention was not given to bringing forward a much more diverse and global perspective on the preaching task into an even more expansive and comprehensive collection.
Even so, *The Company of Preachers* is an important resource for both classroom and pastor's study. Lischer's historical perspective documents how the central questions and controversies of preaching have varied from age to age. In this time of ecclesiastical and liturgical change and turbulence, when many are flailing and rudderless, this work challenges every preacher to commit the time and energy necessary for the theological work that precedes renewal in preaching. It is a needed and essential challenge. This collection provides compelling resources for a renewal of awe, humility, and conviction.

Reviewed by Patricia Farris. Farris is Senior Minister at Santa Monica First United Methodist Church in Santa Monica, California. She is a member of the Quarterly Review Editorial Board.
IN THIS ISSUE:

Issue Theme: “Make Disciples of Jesus Christ”
- Our Mission Reconsidered: Do We Really “Make” Disciples?
  Sarah Heaner Lancaster
- Worship and Becoming Disciples
  Robin Knowles Wallace
- Disciples for the Future: Small Groups and Vital Faith Development
  Lisa R. Witbrow
- Getting the Whole Job Done: Spiritual Nurture amid Committee Business
  Susan W. N. Ruach
- Making Disciples in the Wesleyan Tradition: Practicing the Means of Grace
  Lacey Warner

Outside the Theme
- Radical Orthodoxy and Methodism
  D. Stephen Long

The Church in Review
- The Judicial Council
  Donald E. Messer
  Susan Henry-Crowe

A Word on the Word
- Lectionary Study
  Warren Carter

Issues In: Christian Ethics
- Robin W. Lovin

Book Review
- The Company of Preachers: Wisdom on Preaching, Augustine to the Present
  ed. by Richard Lischer (Eerdmans, 2002)
  Reviewer: Patricia Farris

NEXT ISSUE:
PROVIDENCE AND THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD

“...make disciples of Jesus Christ.”
THE MINISTRY OF ALL CHRISTIANS

Section I. The Church

120. The Mission: The mission of the Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ. Local churches provide the most significant arena for disciple-making.

121. Method—The mission of the Church is to proclaim the good news of God's reign and realm. In the world is the church before us. The United Methodist Church is the baptist mission for all persons of all religious faiths. The Church, through its mission, advances the kingdom of God here and now. The church is the place where God's reign and realm are lived out.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Affiliation and Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TED A. CAMPBELL</td>
<td>Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, Evanston, IL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MINERVA G. CARCANO</td>
<td>Metropolitan District, Portland, OR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DUANE A. EWERS</td>
<td>General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, The United Methodist Church, Nashville, TN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PATRICIA FARRIS</td>
<td>First United Methodist Church, Santa Monica, CA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GRANT HAGIYA</td>
<td>Los Angeles District Office, Los Angeles, CA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JEROME KING DEL PINO. CHAIR</td>
<td>General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, The United Methodist Church, Nashville, TN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MARY ANN MOMAN</td>
<td>General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, The United Methodist Church, Nashville, TN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THOMAS W. OGLETREE</td>
<td>The Divinity School, Yale University, New Haven, CT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HARRIETT JANE OLSON</td>
<td>The United Methodist Publishing House, Nashville, TN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RUSSELL E. RICHEY</td>
<td>Candler School of Theology, Atlanta, GA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LINDA E. THOMAS</td>
<td>Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, Chicago, IL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TRACI C. WEST</td>
<td>Theological School, Drew University, Madison, NJ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DAVID K. YEMBA</td>
<td>Faculty of Theology, Africa University, Mutare, Zimbabwe</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Editorial
Discipling in the Methodist Way ........................................ 115

ISSUE THEME:
"Make Disciples of Jesus Christ"
Our Mission Reconsidered: Do We Really "Make" Disciples? .......... 117
Sarah Heaner Lancaster

Worship and Becoming Disciples ...................................... 131
Robin Knowles Wallace

Disciples for the Future: Small Groups and
Vital Faith Development .............................................. 141
Lisa R. Withrow

Getting the Whole Job Done: Spiritual Nurture amid
Committee Business .................................................. 151
Susan W. N. Ruach

Making Disciples in the Wesleyan Tradition: Practicing
the Means of Grace .................................................. 161
Laceye Warner

Outside the Theme
Radical Orthodoxy and Methodism .................................. 173
D. Stephen Long

The Church in Review
The Judicial Council
Donald E. Messer ...................................................... 189
Susan Henry-Crowe ................................................... 189
A Word on The Word

Lectionary Study
  Warren Carter ................................................................. 196

Issues In: Christian Ethics
  Robin W. Lovin ............................................................... 209

Book Review

The Company of Preachers: Wisdom on Preaching, Augustine to the Present, ed. by Richard Lischer (Grand Rapids, Mi: Eerdmans, 2002)
  Reviewer: Patricia Farris .................................................. 216
Discipling in the Methodist Way

HENDRIK R. PIETERSE

In 1996, the General Conference approved a new statement of the mission of The United Methodist Church, namely, "to make disciples of Jesus Christ." On the face of it, the statement is a straightforward affirmation of the church's marching orders (Matt. 28:19-20) and a faithful expression of the historic Methodist commitment to evangelism and mission. Not surprisingly, the phrase make disciples has become a slogan of sorts on denominational websites, in statements by church leaders, and in names of church programs and committees. At first glance, the practice seems innocuous. However, as the essays in this issue argue, wrested from the rich biblical and theological context within which it finds its essential orientation and nuance, the mandate to "make disciples" is vulnerable to cultural assumptions that can distort its meaning and can lead to practices that contradict its deepest intentions. After all, in a culture driven by the logic of the market—a culture to which the church succumbs more often than it would like to admit—what else could "making" mean but "manufacturing"?

It is in this context that Sarah Lancaster asks: Does the formulaic summons to "make" disciples not obfuscate the logical priority of God's grace? And, adds Lisa Withrow, does it not suggest that disciple-making occurs essentially through human endeavor, albeit with divine participation? With troubling questions like these in view, the authors in this issue urge United Methodists to mine the riches of their theological traditions in order to find a theologically and missionally appropriate context and language for and practice of disciple-making.

Through a thorough analysis of Wesley's writings on discipling, Lancaster exposes the truncated understanding of grace animating the church's mission statement. Like Wesley, United Methodists need to locate their understanding of discipleship in the larger context of "the way of salvation." This allows for a
nuanced construal of Christian formation as a "complex interaction of God's grace and human responsiveness" that safeguards both the logical priority of God's saving action and the complexity—both individual and communal—of human response to the divine invitation.

Implicit in Lancaster's argument is a theme that features prominently through all the essays: Becoming disciples in the Methodist way is a *holistic* process. It encompasses the totality of our existence—from the first nudges of prevenient grace in our souls to our final transition into glory. And it subverts our all-too-human tendency to undermine the comprehensive dynamic of discipleship through an array of readily available dichotomies.

The articles by Robin Knowles Wallace, Lisa Withrow, Susan Ruach, and Laceye Warner examine a variety of such dichotomies and provide theological resources for nurturing holistic discipleship. Wallace argues persuasively for the need to integrate worship and daily life and so to allow worship to take its rightful place in the larger "web of behaviors necessary for becoming disciples." In examining the success of the small group movement in churches in the United States, Withrow discovers a troubling tendency toward "feel good" spirituality and privatized faith that results in a subtle "domestication of the faith." Drawing on Wesley's model for small groups, Withrow argues for a form of "accountable discipleship" that holds in tension the personal and communal dimensions of faith formation.

For many people in our churches, "business"—outside and *inside* the church—has little to do with becoming disciples. Susan Ruach explodes this dichotomy by showing how the administrative life of congregations can become intentional faith-forming communities and thus form an important aspect of the holistic discipleship that marks Methodism at its best.

Laceye Warner addresses the disjunction between "personal" and "social" dimensions of discipleship—between "personal" and "social" holiness—so prevalent in communities of faith today. For Methodists, says Warner, the key to healing this dichotomy is the retrieval of the Wesleyan practice of the "means of grace." The means of grace enable practices of disciple-making that aim to cultivate both personal piety and social justice, thus nurturing a form of holistic discipleship faithful to the Wesleyan vision of God's kingdom.

Hendrik R. Pieterse is editor of Quarterly Review.
At its 1996 General Conference, The United Methodist Church voted to include the following mission statement in its Book of Discipline: “The mission of the Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ. Local churches provide the most significant arena through which disciple-making occurs.” The paragraphs that follow further explain the rationale for this mission, the process by which it may be carried out, and its global nature. Initially, this statement and its elaboration appeared at the beginning of the chapter on the local church in Part V, so that it provided the orientation for the organization and administration of local churches. After the 2000 General Conference, the statement was moved to the beginning of Part III, where it now provides the orientation for the ministry of all Christians. Clearly, the charge to “make disciples,” taken from the Great Commission in Matt. 28:19-20, is seen as central not simply for our identity as United Methodists but also for our identity as Christians.

This call to make disciples has not simply languished between the covers of the Discipline, known only by experts on denominational polity or by seminary students preparing for ministry. Instead, it has set the agenda for programmatic work in annual conferences, districts, and local churches. The phrase making disciples has found its way onto websites, into formal and informal statements by leaders in the church, and into committee names. Both pastors and laypeople are being asked to commit themselves in ways large and small to the mission of making disciples; plans have even been developed that follow intentionally and closely the process for carrying out...
our mission" outlined in ¶122. The church's mission statement has become prominent in the denomination and has the potential for creating long-lasting effects. Thus, it is important to consider very carefully what we mean by "making disciples."

United Methodists have taken an important step toward clarifying their purpose as a church, and it has resulted in renewed motivation for sharing faith. However, with the widespread use of the phrase making disciples comes the very real possibility that our mission will be misunderstood. The phrase has become a slogan. By itself, though, the slogan does not reveal the theological assumptions about the mission of the church that underlie the phrase. We need to reflect much more carefully on the way we express our mission so that we can make our witness to the world appropriately and so that our mission will have integrity.

**Wesley and the Great Commission**

The phrase make disciples in the mission statement translates a Greek verb matheteuein, used in Matt. 28:19. It is an active verbal form of the noun mathetes. The exact English equivalent sounds odd to us because it involves using the noun disciple in a verbal form, that is, "to disciple." Still, in his Explanatory Notes on the New Testament, Wesley uses that somewhat awkward verb when he translates the first part of Matt. 28:19 as "Go ye, and disciple all nations." In the note to that verse, Wesley at first restates the phrase as "Make them My disciples" but then again uses the verbal form "discipling."3 On those rare occasions when he refers to this verse in the rest of his writings, Wesley usually uses the verb disciple rather than the phrase make disciples.4

These two ways of translating the Greek were alternatives to the more common translation of his time, which simply rendered the verb as "teach." The English version of the Great Commission that would have been familiar to people in Wesley's time was translated this way in the King James Version: "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen." Wesley did on occasion use the conventional phrase "teach all nations," but it also presented a problem for him.5 It seems that some in his day used this translation to argue that teaching should go before baptizing. They then used
this order to argue against infant baptism; that is, they held that infants
cannot be taught before they are baptized. Wesley knew that the words
*teach* and *teaching* in the King James Version translated two different verbs
in the original Greek. By translating the first verb as *disciple*, Wesley had a
ready answer to those who used Matt. 28:19 to object to infant baptism. A
careful reading of this verse in the Greek shows that “teaching” actually
comes after “baptizing” and that both baptizing and teaching are involved
in “discipling.” Wesley was willing to examine and offer an alternative to
conventional use of these words in order to find a better way to express a
matter that was theologically important to him.

It has become almost commonplace among Wesleyan scholars to say
that Methodism is better served by following Wesley’s example for theolog­
ical reflection than by simply importing his conclusions into situations
vastly different from those he faced. In other words, we should do in our
time what Wesley did in his. In this article I suggest that, just as Wesley’s
time required a new way of thinking about the phrase *teach all nations*, so
our time calls for a fresh look at how we United Methodists employ the
Matthean phrase *make disciples* in our mission statement. This translation
has become formulaic for us, picked up and used as shorthand in countless
public arenas, without explanation or reflection. We ought to reconsider
the ease with which we isolate this phrase and broadcast it. The Greek
imperative on which the phrase is based indicates that those who are
already following Christ should play an active role in helping others
become disciples. However, the question is this: How should this active
role be described? Of the two options that Wesley himself gives us for
translating the imperative, the simple verb *disciple* retains the form of the
original Greek better and seems to be the translation Wesley preferred.
Recognizing that “make disciples” is not the only, or even the best, way of
rendering the Greek allows us to rethink the way we state the denomina­
tion’s mission. The active role implied by this imperative might be some­
thing other than what the word *make* suggests.

Why should we think of a new way to express our role in making disci­
iples? The verb *make* has a variety of meanings, but its basic meaning is to
“cause to exist or happen,” or “to create.” It is this meaning that most
people will associate with the phrase *make disciples*, especially when it is
used without explanation. But this meaning is enormously problematic. We
do not “make” disciples by our efforts; and the church should not claim to
do more through its own activity than it can or ought to do. In fact, the idea that we make disciples contradicts the theological foundation of Methodism. To see why, we need to take a look at what is involved in Christian formation in the Wesleyan heritage.

**Wesleyan Discipling**

Randy Maddox recently prepared a paper for a United Methodist task force that reflects on the denomination's mission statement in light of its Wesleyan heritage. As Maddox points out, Wesley did not often refer to the Great Commission, and when he did make direct reference to Matt. 28:19, it was usually to make some point about baptism rather than discipleship. However, Wesley was committed to calling and enabling people to become "real Christians." Thus, to understand how Wesley might join in our present conversation about how the church participates in helping people become disciples, one has to look at his larger concerns about the "way of salvation."

Wesley takes the meaning of salvation to include "the entire work of God," which extends from "the first dawning of grace in the soul till it is consummated in glory." From that first moment to the last, it is God who saves, although the way in which God works is never without human responsiveness. If it is right to understand the mission of the church in light of how Wesley conceived salvation, then any discussion of "discipling" must always be mindful that it is set in the framework of God's grace, which comes to us before we can respond, enabling us to respond and bringing these efforts to fulfillment. The primary actor in discipling, then, is God; and insofar as the church has a mission to participate in this process, its role is secondary and instrumental. Furthermore, those of us who participate in the mission of discipling do so because we have been and continue to be discipled ourselves. The process Wesley describes is not finished for anyone until the final consummation in glory. Until then, Christian formation involves a complex interaction of God's grace and human responsiveness—both the individual's responsiveness in actively seeking to avail him- or herself of the grace that God offers and the community's responsiveness in encouraging one another and providing conditions that foster receptivity of God's grace.

These two aspects of human responsiveness can never be played off against each other. Communities are constituted by individuals, and indivi-
uals find their identities in communities. There can be no “me” and “them” among members of the church in their striving to become “real Christians.” Also, there is a sense in which even the difference between church members and nonmembers should not be framed in terms of “us” and “them.” To be sure, members are “sent” to proclaim the Good News, but both the ones sent and the ones to whom they are sent stand equally in need of God’s grace. Moreover, when the church invites others to become part of the community, it is presenting in concrete form the invitation of grace that God is always already extending to all. Church members, then, have also been invited. Not all those invited choose to become part of the community, but those who so choose have been given the freedom by grace (which is extended to all) to accept or reject the invitation. No simple, unidirectional description from “us” to “them” captures the complexity of how people respond to God’s offer of salvation through the church’s invitation. Theologically speaking, becoming a disciple involves active roles for community and individual, and both are ultimately dependent on God’s grace.

Notice how the denominational mission statement obscures this way of construing the meaning of salvation. The mission statement nowhere includes mention of the priority of God’s grace. As a result, it does nothing to prevent the suggestion that the church is the primary actor in this work of salvation. This problem is exacerbated when the words “make disciples” are taken out of context and used as a slogan. The paragraph immediately following the mission statement (¶121) outlines the rationale for the church’s mission of making disciples, noting that proclaiming grace is the church’s goal and responding to grace is its motivation. Yet, even this statement is inadequate. Grace is not simply a rationale—the reason that lies behind our mission and the goal that lies before us. It is central to the church’s mission, because it is constantly at work in every step of Christian formation. Compare the mission statement of The United Methodist Church with the vision statement of the British Methodist Church:

The calling of the Methodist Church is to respond to the gospel of God’s love in Christ and to live out its discipleship in worship and mission. It does this through: Worship, Learning & Caring, Service and Evangelism.¹⁰

Here, response to God’s love is made clear at the very beginning, and whatever the church does is predicated on that love. United Methodists do
not need to imitate their British counterparts; but it is instructive that another Methodist body has managed to effectively convey in its core statement the notion of human responsiveness to God's prior grace. This way of framing the work of the church clearly reflects our Wesleyan heritage.

The United Methodist statement not only obscures the priority of grace but also inadequately explains the nature of human responsiveness. Maddox suggests that one of the motivating factors for defining the church's mission as "making disciples" is to reclaim "Wesley's commitment to the intentional formation of real Christian character in our members."

This motive is important, and reclaiming this aspect of our Wesleyan heritage is surely crucial to the vitality of the church. Moreover, naming the local church as the primary arena for this formation and describing a process that includes nurture and service are welcome clarifications. However, the process for carrying out our mission outlined in the Book of Discipline falls short of reclaiming the Wesleyan commitment to forming "real" Christians. The structure of the language suggests that there are disciples already "made" reaching out to "make" other disciples. The paragraph reads as follows:

We make disciples as we:
- proclaim the gospel, seek, welcome and gather persons into the body of Christ;
- lead persons to commit their lives to God through baptism and profession of faith in Jesus Christ;
- nurture persons in Christian living through worship, the sacraments, spiritual disciplines, and other means of grace, such as Wesley's Christian conferencing;
- send persons into the world to live lovingly and justly as servants of Christ by healing the sick, feeding the hungry, caring for the stranger, freeing the oppressed, and working to develop social structures that are consistent with the gospel; and
- continue the mission of seeking, welcoming and gathering persons into the community of the body of Christ.

One way to see the problem with this statement is to imagine an alternative statement that addresses Christian growth for those who are already members. Consider the following statement.
We become disciples as we:
—seek to understand the gospel, gather with and welcome those who also want to know the gospel, and share that good news with others;
—commit our lives to God through baptism and profession of faith in Jesus Christ;
—nurture our lives as Christians through worship, the sacraments, spiritual disciplines, and other means of grace, such as Wesley's Christian conferencing;
—go into the world to live lovingly and justly as servants of Christ by healing the sick, feeding the hungry, caring for the stranger, freeing the oppressed, and working to develop social structures that are consistent with the gospel; and
—continue to seek, welcome, gather, and share the good news as members of the body of Christ.

The point of imagining this alternative is not to substitute "becoming" disciples for "making" disciples. Rather, it is to show that the current Disciplinary description is more one-sided than it should be, given the Wesleyan commitment that all of us need to continue to grow and are never in this life finished products. If we truly want to reflect our Wesleyan theology in our official discussion of the church's mission, we need to rethink the way we describe it.

In addition to expressing our Wesleyan theology more clearly, another reason for recognizing the need to include the importance of becoming disciples is that living a life that really reflects our Wesleyan heritage is as hard as it is rewarding. On those few occasions when Wesley does mention the words disciple or discipleship in connection with how we ought to live as Christians, it is often in the context of introducing very difficult ideas, such as self-denial and persecution. Maddox provides a good discussion of self-denial as one of the three factors involved in effective discipleship.13 Methodists do not avoid all pleasure or seek deprivation or relish in suffering. Wesley's intention in talking about self-denial is to call us to conform our own wills to the will of God, who alone knows and can provide what we really need. In the context of Wesley's larger understanding of salvation, self-denial functions to turn us away from things that harm our life in Christ and toward those things that help us find fulfillment in him. In doing so, self-denial is a positive action that leads to true happiness in God.
Still, self-denial can lead to being out of step with the world, and it is for this reason that Wesley talks about persecution in his discussion of discipleship, calling contempt or persecution the "badge" of discipleship. While we today do not face the kind of contempt that early Methodists experienced, we do run the risk that the values we hold as Christians place us at a distance from the world. If the point of reclaiming our Wesleyan heritage is, as Maddox suggests, to transform the larger culture, then we should also be aware that much of what we do will be countercultural. One of the reasons why Methodists need to gather often and nurture one another is because this road is not always easy. If the mission of the church is really not just about "numbers" but about forming people who can take a different path, then it becomes all the more important to acknowledge that "we" are in constant need of grace to guide and sustain our efforts to become better disciples.

Formation of those who have already become part of the Christian—and, specifically, the United Methodist—community does not replace sharing faith with those who are outside the community. And yet, even when discipling involves faith sharing, the phrase make disciples is still misleading. In sharing our faith, too, God is the primary actor; and, as I have said, our invitation reflects God's prior invitation. Furthermore, the need and ability of the invited person to make her or his own response should be seen and respected as God's gift. Wesleyan theology always acknowledges human freedom, affirming in fact that God's grace makes our freedom possible. If it is true that one individual's response to grace leads that person to offer Christ to another, then it is also true that the other individual's response can and should never be forced. No human being ever "makes" a disciple. We may invite, encourage, model a life with Christ, and so on; but we must always acknowledge that accepting that invitation ultimately depends on God's grace enabling the person's free response. Though we may participate in that process in important ways, the result is never finally up to us.

This discussion of what is commonly called conversion inevitably leads us into interfaith questions. This is the topic of our next section.

Discipling, Pluralism, and Globalization
Among the most important factors that make our time different from Wesley's is our awareness of pluralism and our knowledge of and contact
with people from around the world. We need to remember how often in the Christian past "spreading the gospel" has meant forced conversion, manipulation of emotions, and mingling Western culture with Christian faith. Given these sobering facts, we should talk about the mission of the church with great care. In fact, it is in this context that misunderstanding of the phrase make disciples is most likely to happen.

The section in the Discipline that gives the rationale for the denomination's mission attempts to acknowledge this need, stating, "We respect persons of all religious faiths and we defend religious freedom for all persons." However, this sentence appears in a paragraph that in no other way mentions the issue of religious pluralism and does not connect the issue with the sentences around it in any meaningful way. Given the overall tenor of the language in this section, it is difficult to see this sentence as more than an awkward disclaimer that some felt compelled to include but that has no real place in how the church conceives of its mission.

This is unfortunate, since the General Conference has made very clear statements about our relationship to people of other faiths. The Social Principles reiterate the point about religious freedom, and other statements go even further. The statement "Called to Be Neighbors and Witnesses: Guidelines for Interreligious Relationships" in The Book of Resolutions specifically takes up the problem of witnessing to Jesus Christ in a pluralistic world. This document frankly acknowledges and discusses the tension created by seemingly competing affirmations: our need to proclaim our faith; our commitment to religious freedom; and the reality of living next to people of other faiths. This resolution honestly addresses how people of other faiths often suspect that interreligious dialogue with Christians may be a covert attempt at conversion. It also seeks biblical direction from the Great Commission; however, it concentrates on the verb translated as "go" (poreuthentes) rather than on the verb rendered as "make disciples." According to the document, the original Greek form of the verb go involves a call to cross boundaries; to witness to Jesus Christ, who bridges boundaries; and to proclaim a God who binds humanity together despite our differences. This insight, it concludes, ought to inform any dialogue we undertake with people of other faiths.

This resolution reminds us that the church's mission statement as we currently have it is one-sided in its appeal to the Great Commission, concentrating on only one imperative: to make disciples. It further demonstrates
that, in reflecting on the church’s mission, interfaith concerns deserve more than a brief disclaimer. On the two occasions that it adopted the above-mentioned resolution (1980, revised 2000), General Conference recognized that our call to witness in a pluralistic world requires significant reflection. The phrase *make disciples* does nothing to indicate everything General Conference has said and wants to say about our Christian witness. In fact, to someone who hears the phrase outside this larger context, it could suggest just the opposite of what General Conference intends to convey.

In addition to this general statement about our relationship with people of other faiths, General Conference has also adopted specific resolutions that address our relationship with Judaism and Islam. In each case, the resolutions imply that following Christ means learning about those who live among us but who are different from us, because we must know who our neighbors are in order to love them as Christ loves them. It would seem, then, that “discipling” could include our own formation as Christians with regard to our attitudes, knowledge, and actions toward those who follow other ways. It is certainly true that witnessing to persons outside Christianity and respecting their freedom to be who they are present an ongoing tension not simply for United Methodists but also for all Christians. My suggestion is that our stated mission should not resolve this tension in a direction that The United Methodist Church in other ways clearly rejects. We need to hold together the totality of the church’s concerns and resolutions regarding our relationship with persons of other faiths. By itself, the phrase *make disciples* simply is not able to do so.

Interfaith concerns become important not simply for thinking about how to live alongside people who are different from us. As the church grows in countries where other religions or philosophies have shaped the cultures, the question of what it means to be a disciple raises issues of identity, especially for those who are only one or two generations removed from these non-Christian faiths. At the Eleventh Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies held last year, thirty-three countries were represented, and conversations often revolved around what it means to have an indigenized Christianity. United Methodists outside the United States frequently face a number of troubling choices. Does one give up culture as well as religion when becoming a disciple of Jesus Christ? Conversely, does becoming a disciple mean embracing a different culture as well as a different religion? Or is it possible to integrate one’s Christian
faith with one's inherited culture in an indigenized discipleship? If so, how? These questions lie at the heart of Christian formation; and to find our way through them, we need to engage in a conversation that is open to all voices. Even though these questions about identity are especially pressing in other parts of the world, they are also present in the United States for many of our ethnic minority members. Native Americans, for instance, struggle with integrating tribal heritage with Christian faith. Furthermore, as interreligious marriages increase, we will need to be sensitive to the needs of the children in these households.

These issues discussed so far present an ongoing tension for all Christians, not just for United Methodists. This tension is not easily resolved and cannot be addressed fully in a brief mission statement. Still, we should be mindful of the possible misunderstanding that can take place in this context. It is all too easy for "make disciples" to be understood as "make them like us." In reflecting on their mission in the world, United Methodists need to work to find a way to acknowledge that formation as disciples can take different shapes in different contexts.

Moving Ahead

The inclusion of the mission statement in the Book of Discipline has served as an important catalyst for reflection and action in The United Methodist Church. It has placed before us the question of how to share faith with others and how to nurture faith responses into mature discipleship. We have gained much from the work it has prompted us to do, but there are also limits to what it can provide for our future reflection and action. The fact that so many documents are available to the larger public through the Internet makes a clear and careful statement especially important. At a time when religious misunderstandings can have serious consequences, we need to make sure that official statements and documents convey the church's true intentions.

At a minimum, the use of the phrase make disciples ought to be reconsidered. As I have argued, the denomination's mission is best served by a thoroughgoing revision of its mission statement. Partly because of the attention given to the church's mission in the years since 1996, we now have more resources to draw from in drafting a mission statement. Classes on evangelism in United Methodist seminaries, articles by denominational leaders, implementation of programs in annual conferences, and more, in
recent years have focused attention on mission in a deliberate and thoughtful way. Now that more people have engaged more fully in thinking about the church's mission, we are in a position to state that mission with greater clarity and comprehensiveness. Those who have developed this expertise should think seriously about drafting an alternative statement that more clearly communicates how mission is rooted in grace, how grace continually calls forth our response, and how our response takes many forms. In doing so, we have the opportunity to draw both from a broader biblical base than a single verse and from our Wesleyan heritage. If we want the world to understand that we offer a faith that matters, we need to use all our resources to communicate the fullness of God's love, because it is this love that both draws us near and sends us to share with others.

Sarah Heener Lancaster is Associate Professor of Theology in the Bishop Hazen G. Werner Chair of Theology at Methodist Theological School in Ohio in Delaware, Ohio.

Endnotes


2. Consider the following examples: the website for the General Board of Discipleship suggests “Making Disciples” training events; several local churches use the phrase on their websites; the North Texas Conference has established a “Making Disciples” task force; and the West Ohio Conference has developed a “core process” for “disciple-making and covenant building.”


4. The English phrase *make disciples* occurs at the end of “A Treatise on Baptism,” where Wesley answers the first objection. Elsewhere in the same
SARAH HEANER LANCASTER

treatise, he twice uses the phrase *disciple all nations* (III.3 and IV.7). See The
*Works of John Wesley*, ed. by Thomas Jackson (London: Wesleyan Conference
Office, 1872; reprint Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House,

5. Wesley uses the more common translation of the verb, "teach all nations," in
"A Roman Catechism, Faithfully Drawn out of the Allowed Writings of the
Church of Rome, with a Reply Thereto," Section IV, Question 56, in *Works*
(Jackson), 10:114; and in *A Christian Library: Consisting of Extracts from and
Abridgments of the Choicest Pieces of Practical Divinity Which Have Been Published
in the English Tongue*, Preface to the Epistles of the Apostolic Fathers, To the

6. This objection and Wesley's reply to it are found at the end of "A Treatise on

7. The complete text of Maddox's paper "Wesley's Prescription for Making
Disciples of Jesus Christ: Insights for the 21st Century Church" can be found
on the Internet at http://www.pastoralleadership.duke.edu/maddox%20paper
9-23-02.pdf. References to Maddox's paper are from this text. The
purpose of the task force for which this paper was commissioned is to reflect
on theological education and leadership. An abbreviated version of the paper

8. Ibid., 3.

Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley*, ed. by Albert C. Outler

10. This statement and links that further explicate the four activities
mentioned may be found on the Internet at http://www.methodist.org.uk/
welcome/calling.htm.


14. John Wesley, Sermon 23, "Upon the Sermon on the Mount, Discourse III,
III.7, in *Works*, 1:525; and "Letter to the Revd. Samuel Wesley, Sen., Oxon,

15. See Maddox's discussion of human freedom in "Wesley's Prescription"; or
in *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994).
See also the discussion of human freedom in connection with mission by
OUR MISSION RECONSIDERED: DO WE REALLY “MAKE” DISCIPLES?


18. This resolution mistakenly attributes the verb go to Matt. 28:20 when instead it appears in Matt. 28:19, the same verse in which “make disciples” occurs. The close connection between these two verbs suggests that reflection on the Great Commission as the foundation for our mission ought to include attention to both.
Worship and Becoming Disciples

ROBIN KNOWLES WALLACE

Although worship is the focus of much discussion in our day, our practice of worship too often consists of playing in shallow waters, as if we are afraid to take the plunge into God’s great baptismal waters of mercy, grace, and love to be soaked and regenerated. We are hesitant to eat of the meal that can heal our souls. We are content to make Band-Aid® repairs and to switch worship styles instead of drawing true healing and nourishment from God, from Scripture, and from Wesleyan theology.

This article proposes that we consider worship within the broader framework of our lives as a whole, thus providing a space for God to work in us and to make us more effective witnesses to the experience of God’s grace in the world. We will inquire about our practices of worship and use the “lens” of worship experiences to understand how these worship practices form us as disciples. We will examine several worship lenses: the United Methodist Book of Discipline, John Wesley’s sermons, the hymns of Charles Wesley found in The United Methodist Hymnal, and our own experiences of the gathered assembly at worship.

The key question animating the discussion that follows is this: Instead of worship being experienced as a place of tension, is it possible to envision and create worship experiences that remind us of our baptism, feed our souls, and help us “rehearse” behavior fit for the coming reign of God?

As the italicized portions below indicate, the process for becoming disciples outlined in the Book of Discipline acknowledges the central role of worship and sacraments:

We make disciples as we:
—proclaim the gospel, seek, welcome and gather persons into the body of Christ;
—lead persons to commit their lives to God through baptism and profession of faith in Jesus Christ;
—nurture persons in Christian living through worship, the sacraments, spiritual disciplines, and other means of grace, such as Wesley’s Christian conferencing;
—send persons into the world to live lovingly and justly as servants of Christ by...
healing the sick, feeding the hungry, caring for the stranger, freeing the oppressed, and working to develop social structures that are consistent with
the gospel;
—and continue the mission of seeking, welcoming and gathering persons into the community of the body of Christ.¹

The statement includes the usual elements of worship (proclamation, worship, sacraments, gathering); but it also notes the distinct form of discipleship that our best worship rehearses and empowers, namely, to "live lovingly and justly as servants of Christ."

This process for becoming disciples is analogous to John Wesley's schema of the Christian life, set out in his sermon "On Zeal."⁴ In this work of practical theology, Wesley reminds us that while Scripture reading, public prayer, and the sacraments are important, they are part of a total life permeated by love, in which our "tempers," or dispositions, are refined through works of mercy and piety in the context of the body of Christ, the church.

For those who see worship as the center of the Christian life, it may be disconcerting to find worship listed as just one of the means of grace. In some discussions about "making disciples," worship is considered the be-all and end-all for "getting people into the church." Yet, worship is both less than and more than we have allowed it to be: human worship in and of itself cannot "make disciples"; however, it can be a place of "concentrated" grace, where we intentionally come into God's presence to experience and
practice love, grace, mercy, and forgiveness. Worship without right action and loving responsiveness to God's mercy and love has not fulfilled itself as a means of grace. However, when worship is seen as an important part of the web of behaviors necessary for becoming disciples, it has a lot to offer.

In his sermon "On Zeal," as in many other sermons, Wesley reminds us that the Christian life bears fruit in our actions toward our neighbor as well as in our actions toward God. The scriptural starting point for this understanding is found in two places in the Gospel of John: "I give you a new commandment, that you love another.... By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (13:34-35) and "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you" (15:12). Coming in Jesus' Farewell Discourses to his disciples, these words remind us that our worship bears fruit in our love not only for God but also for neighbor. And it is our love for others that demonstrates our discipleship, that names us as Christians.

Wesley is equally clear about the integration of worship and life in his sermon "Upon our Lord's Sermon on the Mount":

I answer, 'God is a Spirit, and they that worship [God] must worship in spirit and in truth.' ... But then I would ask, 'What is it to worship God, a Spirit, in spirit and in truth?' Why, it is to worship [God] with our spirit, to worship in that manner which none but spirits are capable of. It is to believe in [God] as a wise, just, holy being, of purer eyes than to behold iniquity, and yet merciful, gracious, and long-suffering, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin; casting all our sins behind [God's] back, and accepting us in the beloved. It is to love [God], to delight in [God], to desire [God], with all our heart and mind and soul and strength; to imitate [the One] we love by purifying ourselves, even as [God] is pure; and to obey [God] whom we love, and in whom we believe, both in thought and word and work. Consequently one branch of the worshipping God in spirit and in truth is the keeping [God's] outward commandments. To glorify [God] therefore with our bodies as well as with our spirits, to go through outward work with hearts lifted up, to make our daily employment a sacrifice to God, to buy and sell, to eat and drink to [God's] glory: this is worshipping God in spirit and in truth as much as the praying in a wilderness.3

Just as Wesley and the Discipline avoid pigeonholing worship, so we too can integrate worship and life, allowing these to shape our being and our
WORSHIP AND BECOMING DISCIPLES

doing. God can so dwell in us that others will “know we are Christians by our love” and will desire to begin a journey of discipleship themselves. What hints can we gather from our Wesleyan heritage to guide and inspire us in integrating worship and life? In what follows, I suggest three aspects that need to be brought into worship in order to bring about the integration of worship and life: naming the reality of the human condition, teaching and learning the language of grace, and the responsibility of each Christian to become a “real Christian.” In discussing the first two aspects, I draw on the United Methodist Hymnal (1989) as a book of “experimental [that is, experiential] and practical divinity,” the description John Wesley gave the Collection of Hymns, for the Use of the People Called Methodists. (In what follows, I use the acronym UMH to refer to hymns from The United Methodist Hymnal.) In examining the third aspect, I turn to Scripture.

Naming the Reality of the Human Condition

The joy of United Methodist worship begins with learning that God invites us before we even know we want to come (“Come, sinners, to the gospel feast,” UMH, 339). This prevenient grace invites us, how and where we are, to come to God. Like people throughout the Scriptures, the moment we move toward God, we realize how utterly human and unworthy we are—“that I, a child of wrath and hell, I should be called a child of God” (UMH, 342). Pastors and worship leaders often forget the deep conviction many people experience when exposed to God’s grace, as well as the joy and healing God offers us immediately and continuously. This sense of the healing nature of God—God as the “Great Physician” and “Physician of souls”—has been lost in the revivalist image of God as Judge. In each of Charles Wesley’s hymns included in The United Methodist Hymnal under the section “Prevenient Grace,” the overwhelming sense of forgiveness and mercy is abundantly clear: “... in Christ a hearty welcome find” (UMH, 339); “Believe, and all your guilt’s forgiven, only believe—and yours is heaven” (UMH, 342); “Depth of mercy! Can there be mercy still reserved for me?” (UMH, 355).

In one way, this situation is simple: God invites, we repent. Yet, it is also extremely complex: God invites us in as many ways as there are human beings, multiplied by as many times as it takes us to respond. Add to that our need for forgiveness from sin ranging from sheer ignorance of God to the ways we try to “play God” to the out-and-out evil we choose. Worship in the Wesleyan heritage should invite us to honestly consider our
failings and shortcomings even as we move toward the onrush of God's
love and mercy. This is not easy to accomplish in one hour of worship,
given that the worshipers—"churched" and "unchurched"—bring distinct
personal histories needing God's healing balm. It challenges worship plan­
ners to craft sermons, choose hymns, and word prayers of confession in
ways that adequately convey to worshipers the assurance that they are
forgiven and can leave their guilt at the throne of grace. It further requires
sensitivity to the burdens people bring into worship; some of these
burdens can be dealt with more appropriately in small groups and in
pastoral counseling.

Learning the Language of Grace

In one sense, "naming" grace—learning the language of faith and praise—
flows easily from our understanding of prevenient grace and its application
to the human condition. But United Methodists have not adequately
considered the rich language of their Wesleyan tradition for framing and
understanding their faith journeys in terms of God's grace. Wesley's sermon
"The Way of Salvation" sets out this understanding. The Hymnal reflects this
heritage by dividing the section "The Power of the Holy Spirit" into subsec­
tions on prevenient grace, justifying grace, sanctifying grace, and perfecting
grace. This is a wonderful aid for helping worshipers respond to God's grace
as they journey in discipleship, striving to become "real Christians."

Let us turn first to justifying grace, focusing on pardon and assurance.
The early Methodists, including John and Charles Wesley, had a yearning
for assurance. This desire for assurance rings true to the anxieties under­
lying twenty-first-century life. With the world around us in turmoil,
Christians seek assurance that someone can be counted on and is "on our
side"—that someone greater than ourselves is in control. The hymn "And
Can It Be" wonderfully captures the understanding of God's pardon in the
midst of our imprisonment in sin and distress: "Long my imprisoned spirit
lay, bound in sin . . . [M]y chains fell off, my heart was free, I rose, went
forth and followed thee" (UMH, 363).

As we grow in our understanding of the gift of pardon and freedom,
we yearn all the more for assurance:

The meek and lowly heart that in our Savior was,
to us that Spirit both impart and signs us with his cross.
Our nature's turned, our mind transformed in all its powers,
And both the witnesses are joined, the Spirit of God with ours (UMH, 372).
The year of jubilee is come! Return, ye ransomed sinners, home (UMH, 379).

All the while, God's grace is being evidenced in our lives and in the world around us and demands to be named. Learning to name grace in the lives of parishioners and in the community is an important part of acknowledging and inspiring growth in assurance—the Methodist class and band meetings attested to this. As we struggle with setbacks and with holding things together (see Col. 1:17b), our faith challenges us to maintain the tension between our humanity and sinfulness, on the one hand, and God's grace and love, on the other. If we focus too much on our frailty and sin, we can easily miss the myriad ways in which God is at work in our lives, seeking to pardon, assure, sanctify, and perfect us. God is with us on the journey toward becoming disciples, a point captured beautifully in the hymn "Come, O Thou Traveler Unknown," based on Jacob's journey to meet Esau and his wrestling with the angel (UMH, 386). God's regenerating grace keeps our journey fresh and our spirits motivated: "Come, Almighty to deliver, let us all thy life receive" (UMH, 384). This moves us toward right action, "saved by faith which works by love" (UMH, 385). Right action, through works of mercy, flows from our response to God's love and grace: "I want the witness, Lord, that all I do is right, according to thy mind and word, well pleasing in thy sight" (UMH, 388).

Works of mercy can be personal: "I want a principle within" (UMH, 410), "A Charge to Keep I Have" (UMH, 413), and "O For a Heart to Praise My God" (UMH, 417). They can also be social, directed outward to world and neighbor: "Forth in Thy name, O Lord" (UMH, 438), "Our Earth We Now Lament to See" (UMH, 449), and "Let us for each other care, each the other's burdens bear; to thy church the pattern give, show how true believers live" (UMH, 562).

Sanctifying and perfecting grace calls us to practice works of mercy and of piety, of prayer, trust, and hope: "Thou, O Christ, art all I want" (UMH, 479) and "kindle a flame of sacred love upon the mean altar of my heart" (UMH, 501). It is this practice—this spiritual discipline—that will strengthen us in tribulation, teaching our hearts and minds to turn more quickly to God when we are in trouble: "Pray, always, pray and never faint, pray, without ceasing pray" (UMH, 513); "In suffering be thy love my peace,
in weakness be thy love my power" (UMH, 183); "Leave to God's sovereign sway to choose and to command" (UMH, 129); "... thou all-sufficient love divine" (UMH, 153).

The understanding of God's grace in everyday experience reflected in these hymns is part of what propelled the Methodist movement, for it takes into account the fact that our journey toward and with God is fraught with human frailty and sin. Their view of the way of salvation gave early Methodists a goal and a map for the Christian journey, while acknowledging their constant need for companionship and accountability and for the enthusiasm for living that this journey can engender. This is why, in American Sign Language, the symbol for Methodism is the rubbing together of the palms, signifying enthusiasm for God, for one another, and for life. In our time, trumped-up enthusiasm and manipulation are real dangers; so pastors and worship leaders need to be deeply immersed in the faith journeys of those who come for worship. Thus, in addition to singing Wesleyan hymns, worship leaders should include opportunities for persons to share about their faith journeys through testimonies. This allows worshipers to prayerfully bring their whole selves into worship and to proclaim the good news of the gospel and of God's grace there and to the world.

The Responsibility to Become a "Real Christian"

This leads us to the issues of responsibility and accountability. Randy Maddox was inspired when he named his work on John Wesley's practical theology Responsible Grace, for it neatly captures the fact that grace calls every human being to respond to God's beckoning. Each one of us is called to respond to God's grace and to begin the life of discipleship. This life holds us accountable for the quality of our daily living and of our worship. It challenges us to hold together, by the power of Christ, our humanity, our experiences, God's mercy and love, and our response to that love and grace.

We already know what to do: "[God] has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:8). Worship is about doing justice: doing acts of mercy, 'healing the sick, feeding the hungry, caring for the stranger, freeing the oppressed, and working to develop social structures that are consistent with the gospel." Is our worship the sort of setting where healing happens, where we can name our sin and be reminded that we have already been forgiven, and where we can
leave those sins behind to walk into the world in Christian freedom? Do we feed hungry souls with the bread of Communion and, by learning to be more generous, approach life with a sense of abundance and blessing rather than with scarcity and greed? Do we care for the strangers in the church and in the neighborhood by practicing hospitality, by praying for them, and by growing in our own generosity toward others? Do we work at freeing those who experience spiritual or physical oppression? Do we seek ways to present Christ's yoke for their burdens? What oppressions are we carrying around that ought to be left at the altar so that we might witness to the love of God more freely? Does our worship reflect the kingdom of God that is coming, where there is no racism, sexism, classism, bias, or prejudice?

Worship is about **lovingkindness**. Do we truly practice lovingkindness, or are we more adept at gossiping and passing judgment? Do our worship services teach us the mind of Christ, showing us how to practice it throughout the week? What would Jesus do about the crying baby two pews in front of you; the person who always sits alone in the back; the single parent who desperately tries to manage her three children; the person who lost a family member last month; the teenagers fearful of the possibility of war or of the draft? How many times do we sit in worship judging the prayer language, the anthem, the pastor's choice of hymns, the sermon, someone else's clothes, or the person who dared take our spot in the pew? Have we made our sanctuaries places of welcome and openness for all persons? Does the love of Christ emanate from our worship, often in spite of ourselves?

Worship is about **walking humbly with our God**. What does our worship say about what we believe and who and whose we are? Part of learning to have the mind of Christ is to be in the presence of Christ. Some of my thoughts about this have been radically challenged by my experience in September 2002 in the ecumenical community of Taizé. There, the three daily worship services contain spoken and sung prayer and Scripture reading; but the real focus of the service is silence, being in the presence of God together. A thirty- to sixty-minute service may have seven to twelve minutes of silence (about the length of a tightly constructed sermon). The silence is spent in prayer, with worshippers invited to be in the presence of God and to listen for God's guidance. The Taizé community attracts thousands of youth (primarily ages 17 to 25) year-round to worship, Bible study, and conversation (a practice Methodists call "Christian conferencing"). "Churched" and "unchurched,"
these young people speak dozens of languages. But in the silence of worship, all are one with God. Worshiping with eight-hundred people as I did is an amazing experience, particularly knowing that all of us desired the same things: to know God better, to have the mind of Christ, to be empowered by the Holy Spirit. How can we United Methodists capture this sort of experience in our weekly worship? We cannot walk humbly with God if we are always the ones doing the talking. (Even preachers need time in silence with the gathered body of Christ.) Silence in worship is different from solitude, for it happens in the context of the gathered body of Christ. The silence can take many forms: praying for concerns of the world, reflecting on Scripture, praying for personal needs. But most of all, silence teaches us to "rest in the Lord," to know that we are loved and to be assured that God's grace is sufficient—and to truly learn this takes a lifetime.

Perhaps our witness in the world has not been as effective as it should have been because our focus in worship has been on our activities rather than on making worship a space where we can be transformed for the sake of the world. Perhaps our witness has been impaired by our unwillingness to be honest before God in worship, naming our failures and knowing eternal grace and full assurance. Perhaps our witness has suffered because, rather than viewing the weekly worship hour as one—albeit crucial—part of our total Christian journey, we have allowed it to be the only opportunity for deepening our faith, for disciplined prayer, and for seeking to grow into the mind of Christ.

Conclusion

The time has come to make worship part of a whole web of ways for becoming disciples. While the water of Baptism and the bread and wine of Holy Communion are essential to the process of becoming real Christians, there are other necessary "vitamins"—Christian education, pastoral care, and the essential Wesleyan prescription of small groups where faith is nurtured and articulated. Expecting to get all the nourishment needed for discipleship from one hour of worship on Sunday diminishes the gift that worship can be.

For worship to fulfill its rightful role in helping us become disciples, the Sunday service should be

- full of grace in all its manifestations;
- an integral part of practicing and doing justice;
- a school of lovingkindness;
WORSHIP AND BECOMING DISCIPLES

- part of a humble, God-centered, corporate journey of faith.

When worship is part of the process of becoming disciples, then it can take its proper place as a wellspring of grace—a "feeding station" along the way. When this happens, worship becomes a celebration of God's presence with our whole being and encouragement to view everything we do as "worshipful work"—acts of mercy and piety, permeated by God's love, that refine our characters and help us become real Christians. It is these kinds of lives that will witness to the world of the joy and gift of becoming a disciple of Jesus Christ.

Robin Knowles Wallace is Associate Professor of Worship and Music at Methodist Theological School in Ohio in Delaware, Ohio.

Endnotes

9. See the baptismal resources and study guides published by Discipleship Resources to complement the United Methodist statement on Baptism, "By Water and the Spirit": Come to the Waters, Accompanying the Journey, Gracious Voices, and Echoing the Word.
10. Inspired by the sermon by Bishop Bruce Ough, preached at Christ United Methodist Church in Columbus, Ohio, on September 8, 2002.
Disciples for the Future: 
Small Groups and Vital Faith Development

LISA R. WITHROW

The biblical injunction to "go and make disciples" (Matt. 28:19) is the foundation for church-development vision statements based on revitalizing or growing faith communities. Since 1996, this biblical phrase has been part of The United Methodist Church's mission statement, as found in the denomination's Book of Discipline. The language of "making disciples" implies that disciples can be made by human endeavor (albeit with divine participation); thus, church leaders often apply a formulaic framework to build up the church by making disciples, particularly through participation in small group experiences. Making disciples now becomes an integral part of efforts to "grow" the church, where the goal is to teach and nurture people in small groups and then to send them forth to bring others into church membership. In this way, ironically, rather than pointing toward God, the injunction to make disciples turns the focus on the church. John Wesley understood that people become disciples through God's prevenient, justifying, and sanctifying grace, not through human effort. Sarah Lancaster's article elsewhere in this issue provides an extensive examination of the phrase making disciples and its implications for the mission statement of The United Methodist Church. In what follows, I explore how developing small group ministries can be a vital component for growing disciples without having to claim that we "make" them. Small groups, properly focused, have tremendous impact on the faith journeys of those persons connected to the body called "church."

Small groups have become a significant part of the methodology used for "making" disciples in The United Methodist Church in the United States. In these groups, "new" disciples—those who have had a conversion experience or have recently joined the church—are nurtured in the faith. The aim of the group is to be a supportive environment for the new disciple's initial steps in faith and to provide instruction in the ways of the church. Church leaders know that creating an environment where people...
feel they "belong" is effective in retaining new members and in developing a sense among laity that they have "ownership" in the church's programs. In inviting persons to join small groups, congregational leaders occasionally highlight the spiritual purpose of these small groups: they are places where faith narratives are enriched and discipleship is deepened.

Small group participation has increased in popularity among laity since the 1970s. An important reason for this interest is due to the transient nature of individuals and families. Both the lack of connection with extended family and the breakdown of long-term commitment to one geographic location contribute to the search for community wherever people live. Small group communities provide elements of belonging and allow individuals to determine their level of commitment to the group. However, a small group community may not inspire a life-changing experience so much as provide support through social connection, and then only as needed or desired. In fact, many small groups exist largely to help people cope with life challenges and with society at large rather than to call them to a more faithful Christian life. The groups that do focus on deepening discipleship often require a level of long-term commitment that not many members are willing to give.

One danger with small groups that offer little more than personal and social support is that the group dynamic can develop a homeostatic quality. In other words, the raison d'être of the group can unwittingly become to provide individuals with a "comfortable space." When this happens, groups are often quite resistant to significant individual or corporate change. The internal culture of the group centers on the "comfort" of its members, making formal or informal input from outside the group very difficult. Further, once group members have built a history of sharing their personal narratives and of affirming one another, the function of the group's culture is often to make members "feel good" about themselves. Not surprisingly, such a group no longer is open to spiritual challenge and accountability.

Another danger encountered in small groups today is the focus on spiritual development as a private concern rather than as both a personal and a communal endeavor. Private implies distance from others—concealment of one's own spirit—while personal has to do with particularity that does not exclude the participation of other people in one's spiritual maturation. Thus, in groups where spirituality is seen as private, people may gather together but they do not experience true community, because individual
narratives are considered private events to be shared but not tested against the wisdom of the collective experience. In such settings, discipling refers to the person's private "connection" with Jesus Christ, which does not necessarily require ongoing corporate discernment. The language used in these groups to describe participants' faith journeys (for example, "The Lord put it in my heart to...") often betrays the group's understanding of faith as a private relationship between the individual and God.

Both these dangers culminate in a subtle, ongoing domestication of faith. Small groups that fall into the trap of advancing "feel good" spirituality rather than face the challenge of engaging theological and spiritual discourse about the human condition and relationship with God effectively promote complacency or even entrenched faith stances. Prophetic voices become less relevant and pastoral concerns come to the fore, thereby ignoring the challenging nature of faith development while caring for individuals' needs. Once domestication occurs, it is very difficult for a group to grasp the nature of disciplship as a process of ongoing, accountable formation in faith.

In the eighteenth century, John Wesley developed a network of small groups (societies, classes, bands) to place persons on the path to salvation. In these small groups, individuals were formed into disciples of Jesus Christ through theological discourse, testimony, worship, and development of Christian character. Wesley's model for disciplship can address effectively some of the problems with the contemporary small group movement that we examined above.

Discipling: John Wesley

Today, with the focus in the denomination on "making" disciples, it behooves us to know Wesley's heritage in disciplship the people called Methodists. Wesley's model for small groups challenges the domestication of faith so prevalent in our postmodern times. Wesley's groups were communities where personal spirituality matures through sharing narrative and testimony in the context of accountable disciplship. These groups provide an excellent framework for faith development and spiritual discernment and thus for ongoing transformation through God's sanctifying grace.

Wesley's concern in developing his small group method for spiritual discernment and disciplship was to ensure that the relationship between believers and Christ remains vital. His intent was to provide arenas for faith sharing and mutual accountability, while encouraging people to grow in the
manifestation of Christ-likeness relevant to their own contexts. However, Wesley's primary emphasis was on the power of God's grace to help believers live lives based on the gospel. For Wesley, the Holy Spirit forms disciples by calling them to Christian identity and vocation. George R. Eli describes Wesley's understanding of discipleship as beginning with grace, leading to the relationship between Christians and Christ, and determining the quality of life that disciples manifest. "Grace energizes Christian trans­formation into mature and accountable discipleship, creating possibilities for Christian response, and demanding human responsibility."3

Even as Wesley continued to work out his own theological understand­standing of discipleship and the way of salvation, he did not have a precon­ceived notion about how disciples might be fostered. He had, however, participated in Moravian meetings and had become convinced of the value of such conversations in the faith. After a number of people had heard him preach and requested further instruction, Wesley developed the Society in London in 1739. Societies formed quickly in other towns and cities where Wesley found himself preaching. Often, the meetings responded to the public preaching service with prayer, spiritual reading, a talk, a psalm, disciplinary matters, and the injunction to help and instruct the poor.

After Wesley developed the society, he formulated "bands," initially in Bristol and London. Bands were divided by gender and marital status into groups of five to ten people; the intent was to provide strong spiritual support on a weekly basis. Bands were more exclusive than societies, though one had to be a member of a society to participate in a band. A network of band leaders regularly met to discuss the spiritual progress of each band member. Progress was based on conversations with members about specific sins committed, temptations encountered, temptations over­come, questions about what constituted sin, and whether a member was keeping any secrets.4

Bands did not prove successful and ceased meeting a short time after Wesley's death. Even during his life, Wesley had difficulty convincing people that they would benefit from these small group meetings; it seemed that deeper commitment to discipling, at least in this manner, did not provoke much interest.

The final type of group that Wesley developed was called the "class meeting." This meeting gathered originally to find ways to pay off debt on a new preaching house in Bristol. The society in the area agreed to divide
into groups of twelve based on geography. A designated leader collected a penny per week by visiting each member of the class in hopes of alleviating the debt. As time passed, visits for collecting money started to include spiritual discussion with members, who often lived in poverty or other difficult circumstances. These leaders offered what we now call "pastoral care" but found such opportunities for private conversations difficult in a room full of people. Thus, class leaders began to hold weekly meetings. Wesley was so pleased with the mutual care shown in these classes that he went to the Society in London and developed the class structure there, too.

Typically, the meetings opened with prayer and singing. Then the leader shared a testimony of spiritual progress, followed by a question to members about the state of their souls. The leader's task was to provide teaching, encouragement, or correction, as needed. The meeting closed with a hymn.

Attendance at class meetings was limited to those who had a ticket. Tickets were awarded based on attendance and behavior within a quarter. Wesley himself monitored levels of discipleship for class members and determined suitability for receipt of a ticket for the upcoming quarter.

Clearly, the class meeting was less stringent about accounting for sins and for naming temptations, though participants could be encouraged to speak about the state of their souls in terms of sin and grace. Its focus evolved into spiritual direction, pastoral care, and weekly accountability for discipleship. Eventually, the meetings began to perform an evangelistic function, benefiting those seeking new or deeper faith. Leaders often invited "seekers" to a limited number of class meetings, hoping for gradual conversion to Christian commitment.

What stands out about Wesley's system of class meetings was the expectation that each person remain constantly accountable to the class for his or her spiritual journey. For example, if one were to have a conversion experience or a significant change of heart, one was expected to testify about the event, followed by others describing their own experiences or the experience they were seeking. Class members would celebrate one another's inner convictions, but would also watch for subsequent changes in will and action. Further, additional testimony would be expected to provide evidence of a class member's progress in moving on to perfection; true inner conviction led to changed lifestyle and yielding of spiritual fruits. Finally, class meetings took the spiritual temperature of
their members by calling forth the need for confession of sin, repentance, and forgiveness, so that all were right in spirit with God. Worship was woven into class time together in order to invoke the presence of the Holy Spirit for all that took place, as well as to give thanks for blessings.

Wesley's emphasis on small group meetings to foster disciples in the way of becoming real Christians allowed formative community to create space for further transformation and growth in faith. Though, because of their stringent rules and requirements, bands did not appeal to the general public, classes and societies continued to reach people for decades after Wesley's death. However, the nature of these small groups changed as the first generation incorporated its children and the groups became more institutionalized in a movement that was fast becoming a church.

Privatizing Faith
By the 1889 Wesleyan Conference, many class meetings had become groups that cared for its members pastorally. Rather than address testimonies or the spiritual issues of confession, repentance, and forgiveness, members spent time in social conversation and encouragement. Indeed, in this era, the feelings experienced during transformational encounters, rather than the narrative of God's salvific acts, became the focus of conversation in class meetings. Thus, the shift away from testimony as the way of discerning sanctification to testimony as a way of sharing a private event (requiring little or no outward signs of transformation) undermined discipling as a communal process.

In Wesley's time, group process involved retaining a connection between individual and community, with emphasis on joining feeling and action with the intellect and moral nature. For Wesley, the "heart" is primarily a source not of emotion but of moral character. However, by the late-nineteenth century, the heart had come to signify the center for emotions. Not surprisingly, sanctification became a private affair, though it might find public expression. In Wesley's view, by contrast, sanctification must be publicly verifiable: the renewed heart must be accompanied by ongoing testimony of changed conduct. This nineteenth-century shift allowing personal testimony to become private experience based on feelings rather than change in behavior or will meant that the class meeting— and, ultimately, the church—became only nominally relevant to one's faith experience.  

146

QUARTERLY REVIEW
Much of the nineteenth-century trend toward privatized sanctification continues in our postmodern era. Many persons attend worship in order to have a private experience of the Holy Spirit. While a congregation may offer faith development in small group settings, little testing and accountability occur in these gatherings. Testimony may be shared, but with little or no challenge for testimony to be matched with transformed behavior and improved moral character. Many people in our day are searching for a place to “belong,” a place where they feel comfortable and that does not demand a lot of them. Long-term discipling, especially if it involves sacrifice and significant personal change, is clearly not an attractive option for such folks.

According to Matt. 28:19, Christians are called to be radically different from the society in which they live. They are to be instruments of change in the world, preaching and teaching the good news. Moreover, Christians are summoned to create spaces where God can make disciples; and in these spaces persons are to be both encouraged and held accountable. Wesley’s primary objective in starting small groups was to fortify faithful obedience. United Methodists today need to reclaim this Wesleyan objective if they are to move beyond privatized, domesticated faith to a faith that can be an instrument of transformation in the world.

**Discipleship Groups**

The General Board of Discipleship of The United Methodist Church has begun to address the issue of discipling through small group ministries. Its Covenant Discipleship Group program revives Wesley’s emphasis on accountability by asking each group to write a covenant that addresses works of mercy and works of piety, based on Wesley’s General Rules. The program summarizes how congregations can form small group ministries to develop disciples for faith and works in the church and in the world.

Significantly, the board seems to place little emphasis on “making” disciples. Their program retrieves Wesley’s emphasis on discipling as a response to God’s grace and rejects the emphasis on disciple-making as a way of gaining members. The program models its discipling process after Wesley’s class meeting: trained leaders provide pastoral care for their “class” on a regular basis while continuing to participate in covenant discipleship groups themselves.

The General Board of Discipleship’s program is a move in the right
direction, particularly in its focus on accountability and holy living. However, the underlying concerns about homeostasis, privatized faith experience, and domestication of the faith continue to require conversation.

It is very difficult to resist a culture that focuses on individual fulfillment. There is a subtle temptation for groups that exist to seek deeper faith and stronger moral behavior to develop an "us" and "them" attitude: "insiders" have found the "right" path while "outsiders" are unfulfilled and shallow. When this happens, the group becomes comfortable with its chosen identity and tends to select persons for membership who share this identity. Thus, the group's conversations tend to revolve around only commonly held and agreed-upon issues.

So, how do groups guard against these homeostatic tendencies? One way is to continue to invite new members into the group on a regular basis. Fresh insights and an ability to keep the definition of the group's identity ever changing may lead to ongoing development of the group itself. However, the evolving group identity must be measured against a normative biblical or theological narrative so that there remains a foundation in the midst of change. The commitment to invite new people guards against the group's identity becoming homeostatic and challenges members not to become complacent in their process of faith maturation.

Another way to address the problem of homeostasis is to ensure that the group is made up of persons from different ethnic backgrounds. This intentional commitment to diversity addresses the tendency for groups to self-select based on sameness. A covenant written by a diverse group will express values different from those usually reflected in the larger society. Ethnic voices are important in the process of faith development, because the world in which we live for God is not homogeneous. The narrative by which a group lives needs to include voices that counter its current social context, so that the group can learn to address injustice and to hear the voiceless.

A continuing problem for all discipleship groups is the ever-present temptation for members to privatize their faith experiences. Even in a group setting, individuals may still be tempted to place their own priorities for personal experience before the group's priorities. In other words, these individuals focus on their own enrichment rather than on the benefit of the group as a whole. They continue to hold that the only "proof" necessary to show authentic discipleship is personal testimony. By contrast, individuals belonging to groups that are not homeostatic may be required to
sacrifice some of their own desires and needs for the sake of healthy group identity. This raises a crucial question: How can groups move from privatized faith to personal faith that remains open and connected with others?

Testimony is storytelling about one’s faith experience. When an individual shares a testimony, ideally the group will respond with support; but the group may also raise questions and perhaps even challenges. As more and more members share testimonies, common threads may begin to emerge, which, in time, are woven into the group’s understanding of its identity. As the group gains a sense of itself as a community with a distinct story, the predilection for privatized faith makes way for corporate faith. The commonly held narrative of the group now becomes the primary concern.

Linking the group narrative with the biblical story elicits a new level of discipleship—a discipleship of community. Individuals learn to look beyond their own spiritual needs as disciples and to engage in conversation about the needs and blessings of the group as a whole. Connecting the group’s story with the biblical witness challenges it to understand how it might spread the good news in the world.9

In attending to these elements, discipleship groups can avoid the tendency of falling into a domesticated faith. The group’s narrative continually challenges individual members to think beyond their own needs and desires. A group that honors the personal and the communal while searching for greater depths of discipleship is confident that its members can recognize and will confront the danger of homeostasis in the group’s life.10 For its part, the group benefits the individual’s growth in discipleship by resisting any tendencies toward privatizing faith. In this way, the group becomes a sacred space for discipling that interconnects the personal with the communal. This sacred space calls forth disciples of Jesus Christ through a lifelong engagement in the narrative of Christian faith, in the community and in the world.

Lisa R. Withrow is Assistant Professor and Director of Field Education at Methodist Theological School in Ohio in Delaware, Ohio.

Endnotes

1. The mission statement reads: ‘The mission of the Church is to make disci-
Disciples for the Future, Small Groups and Vital Faith Development

ples of Jesus Christ. Local churches provide the most significant arena through which disciple-making occurs. See The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church—2000 (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2000), ¶120. For additional references to discipleship, see ¶¶120–22, 131–32.


6. For an in-depth discussion of historical perspectives on the evolution of the class meeting and spiritual discernment, see Margaret Jones, "The Closet and the Class: Some Historical Perspectives on Methodist Spiritual Discernment," Quarterly Review 21/2 (Summer 2001): 130–42.


8. For the General Rules, see the Book of Discipline, 71-74.


10. For further discussion of the relationship between individual and community, see Parker J. Palmer, A Place Called Community (Pendle Hill Pamphlet, 1977).
Getting the Whole Job Done:
Spiritual Nurture amid Committee Business

SUSAN W. N. RUACH

A friend who is pastor of a large church was at a church finance committee meeting. As the meeting was drawing to a close, it suddenly struck him that they had not prayed yet. He invited committee members to lift up prayer concerns or joys. About two-thirds of the way around the circle, a man said, “I’m going in for pretty serious cancer surgery tomorrow, and I’d appreciate your prayers.” The pastor was aghast at how close they had come to not offering prayer for this man at a church meeting. Since that experience, my friend has begun to change the practices of meetings in that church.

Wordsworth said, “The world is too much with us.” Unfortunately in the church, we have all too often used business, psychological, and educational models of operating, forgetting that we are the church of Jesus Christ and that our purpose is to be about his mission—to “make disciples,” in the fullest sense of that word. Of course we should be financially accountable according to the highest standards and should use all the knowledge available. But we should use the knowledge and practices of the world in ways that are consistent with and informed by the values of our faith.

We live in a culture that is not Christian. Come to think of it, we may never have lived in a culture that was Christian, although we often thought we did. Many of the values we see in culture are not ones we uphold as Christians. Violence assails us on TV and in reality. Greed is everywhere and has driven some to destroy the environment for personal or corporate gain. Almost daily we learn of one more shady financial practice and witness the destruction of families and health by the quest for ambition and power. Anxiety and fear are rampant in these days, and rugged individualism encourages us to trust only in ourselves. Yet culture is a powerful shaping force and its influence is overall. We are also shaped by how we use our time, by the people who surround us, and by the activities in which
we choose to participate. The choice is not whether we will be shaped by forces around us but rather who or what we will allow to shape us. We can choose to spend time in activities and practices that enhance Christian faith and with people who are also choosing to be formed in this way.

The phenomenon of being shaped by outside factors and forces is true for organizations and institutions as well. Events in the life of a church shape its identity. The people and their attitudes have a forming influence. The activities they choose, how they spend their money, and how they treat the church staff—all shape the institution, which in turn shapes the people. Therefore, it is imperative to make intentional choices about the practices of a congregation. Moreover, it is critical that these choices be deliberate and well thought-out; otherwise, the congregation will be shaped in ways antithetical to the values and mission of Christ.

For United Methodists, the church’s mission is defined in the Book of Discipline: "The mission of the Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ." Since we are committed to this mission and since we recognize that we are being shaped at every moment of our lives, why would we not want to orient everything we do toward encouraging faithfulness and spiritual growth in ourselves and in the people in the congregations of which we are a part? Why would we not take seriously that our local congregations are faith-forming communities? It surely makes sense to intentionally orient the conduct of our collective life and business to inviting people to connect with God and to grow in their faith.

Craig Miller, in *Newchurch:Now*, raises a searching question of congregations: What do we want to have happen to the people who become and already are a part of our churches? Is the church a "holding area" for those who are saved and are waiting to go to heaven, or is it a training ground for nurturing and sending persons out to transform the world according to the mission of Christ?

If we were to view local churches as training grounds, how might our life together change? What kinds of things would we do differently, especially in our organizational and institutional functioning? Would our decision-making processes change? Would we exercise authority or spend our money differently? Would our meetings be any different? Would we treat our staff the same?

In this article, we take a look at ways in which our administrative functioning can change to be more spiritually nurturing and give examples of
how some churches and judicatories have been trying to do things differently. We also examine our early Methodist heritage for insight and resources. A case could certainly be made for looking at other areas of church life with an eye toward becoming a more intentionally faith-forming community. I would encourage such exploration; however, space does not allow me to address these issues here.

Administrative Life that Helps Shape Faith

Charles Olsen discovered that often people accept responsibility on church boards or committees with great excitement only to end their tenure exhausted and burned out. This shows the need, he says, for making boards and committees more spiritually nurturing for the people who serve on them.1 The lives of the people who serve on church boards and committees, Celia Hahn points out, are filled with pressures and responsibilities from many quarters; therefore, they need church meetings that are spiritually health giving, not draining.2 If connecting to God is what people yearn to find through the church, then every aspect of the church’s life ought to offer that possibility.

To understand how the church’s administrative life can play a role in helping persons grow in faith, it is important to keep in mind that people both experience God in different ways and learn in different ways. It is tempting to assume, when sharing with a group a method or exercise one has found helpful, that everyone else will find it helpful too. However, what speaks to a person of one spiritual type may not be useful to a person of another type. I like variety; so, for a while in one church I served, I tried to make every Communion service different. Only later did I realize what a disservice I was doing to those who find God through the continuity that the ritual provides. Thus, it is crucial to have a basic understanding of the ways in which the people in the congregation experience God—including the people who serve on boards and committees—and offer experiences that appeal to various spiritual types.

Congregations interested in helping their administrative life become more faith forming need to pay attention to three areas: self-understanding, skills, and practices. Let us take a look at each in turn.

Self-Understanding

In order for a faith-forming institutional lifestyle to take root in the congre-
gation, several changes in its self-understanding need to take place. First, it is crucial that committees and boards clearly understand the purpose of the church: to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. Each committee or board needs to be able to articulate theologically how its gifts and role in the church's life express this purpose. Thus, committee and board members must continually ask the question: what is God's will for this committee and its work? The congregation's vision or mission statement can be an important tool in fostering this theological understanding; however, whatever vehicle is used, it is important that the congregation communicate this understanding regularly, especially when new members join a committee or board.

Second, it is fundamental that the congregation understand the church as a faith-forming community whose purpose is to exist as a training ground for nurturing, supporting, and strengthening the spiritual life of its members so that their work may help God transform the world. Such an understanding encourages committees and boards to ask how their meetings might be nurturing, supportive, and strengthening to members while ensuring that assigned tasks get accomplished.

Skills
Making the church's administrative life a setting for faith formation requires more than a change in self-understanding; it also requires practical skills for implementing this self-understanding. Let us begin with skills. The first skill is conflict management. It is the nature of human organizations to have conflict. If congregations are to be "training grounds" for supporting and carrying out Christ's mission in the world, then they need to know how to live together with differences—and this calls for skills in resolving and managing conflict.

Another skill—imperative for the Christian community—is hospitality. Indeed, the whole congregation should be trained to be welcoming to strangers and guests and to reflect theologically on the meaning of hospitality for its life together. Boards and committees, in particular, should receive such training and engage in reflection. It would be very helpful for a committee or board to examine the hospitality skills it already has and discern ways in which to strengthen those skills through additional training and practice.
Practices

Just as individuals practice the spiritual disciplines to help keep open to God, so boards and committees can incorporate the spiritual disciplines into their life together. These practices not only open board or committee members to God's presence but also nurture them to become the heart, hands, and mind of Christ in the world. Some congregations have adopted a set of spiritual disciplines to govern the total work of the church. In one church, for example, every meeting begins with a time of Bible study, sharing, and prayer.

There are a number of ways to implement such corporate practices into a congregation's administrative life. Let me mention a couple of possibilities. A committee may begin by discussing how everything that it does has a formative dimension. Then the committee may talk about how spiritual disciplines could enrich the formative dimension of its life while, at the same time, permitting the committee to get its work done. The committee should keep in mind that not all spiritual disciplines will appeal to all of its members. Therefore, it should exercise care to select practices that will nurture all of its members. By tailoring the process to the committee's unique needs in this way, members have a sense of ownership and are therefore more likely to invest the energy needed to make it work.

Another possibility is for a committee to "try out" a particular spiritual discipline and to see how the members respond. In one task group I belong to, I once started the devotional time by setting a candle on the table, lighting it, and saying, "I believe Christ is always with us, but sometimes I need to be reminded of his presence. This candle is a reminder that Christ is with us." The group adopted the practice. In another instance, the committee chair started using an agenda that was structured around the sections of a worship service, thus inviting the committee to do its work in a worshipful way. This practice soon became part of the committee's life. The advantage of experimenting with different spiritual practices is that committee members have opportunity to experience a particular practice before deciding to adopt or reject it.

A third possibility is to invite committee members to reflect on questions like these: "What does God want to accomplish in and through our work?" "Where is God already at work in what we do?" Some groups close every meeting with a set of questions for reflection: "What have we learned?" "Where have we experienced God's presence in our time?"
together?" "Were there times when God seemed distant or absent?" "How have our actions helped to make God's love real in people's lives?"

Finally, a committee or board may decide that it wants to learn how to make decisions through discernment. Discernment refers both to the act of trying to sense what God wants and to the process by which a person or group tries to discover God's will in a particular situation. Three things are essential to discernment: (1) a relationship with God; (2) a desire to know God's will more than one's own; and (3) a willingness to act on what has been discerned. Discernment centers in the question, "What does God want?" Of course, we can never really be sure we have discerned God's will correctly. However, if we believe that God wants to offer wisdom and guidance for our personal and corporate lives, then we need to try to understand what that wisdom and guidance are, always remembering with humility that God will forgive our failings. Discernment is deeply rooted in our Wesleyan heritage.

I once belonged to a group that decided to practice discernment in its budgeting process. For the next year, we spent part of every meeting learning and practicing discernment. Our first attempt at using discernment with the budgeting process did not go well (partly because of factors beyond our control). But we persisted and things improved. The second year went a little better and by the third year we noticed that people had begun to look at the budgeting process differently. They seemed to have had a better perception of the larger picture. However, I should point out that a few folks complained that the discernment process took too much time.

I am tempted to generate a list of 101 spiritually formative practices for administrative meetings. However, as should be clear by now, it is best for a board or committee to discover together the practices most suited to its unique character, gifts, and responsibilities.

Ideas from Our Heritage

Finally, let us look at John and Charles Wesley and the early Methodists for insight and resources as to how congregations might invite people to grow in their faith as a part of the church's administrative life. The theology and practice of our Methodist forebears are rife with possibilities, but I mention only three: (1) the practice of beginning and ending meetings with singing and prayer; (2) John Wesley's expectation that the lives of Methodists will show evidence of their desire for salvation; and (3) the idea of Christian
conferencing. Let us briefly look at each of these possibilities.

It is clear from journal entries and other records that the early Methodists began and ended every meeting with prayer and singing. It is important to recall that for these Methodists singing was a tool for teaching doctrine and belief. Methodists learned their faith through hymns, and singing the faith made it easier to remember doctrinal concepts and ideas. The hymns and prayers were chosen to fit the purpose and content of the meeting and thus served as a devotional focus—as a way of connecting with God and of inviting participants to reflect on the issues and concerns of the meeting from a spiritual perspective.

Modern-day Methodists can learn a great deal from this practice in structuring and conducting their meetings. Hymns can be incorporated in several ways. To facilitate robust singing, the committee might want to recruit a songleader (preferably a committee member) and a musician (a musician is particularly helpful in guiding the committee through unfamiliar hymns). If the committee is not a "singing" group, the lyrics could be read aloud or used for meditation.

The second resource from early Methodism is John Wesley’s expectation that those desiring salvation should show evidence of that desire in how they lived. Wesley enumerated this evidence in the form of three primary rules in the General Rules of 1743, reprinted in the Book of Discipline:

1) “Doing no harm, by avoiding all evil of every kind, especially that which is most generally practiced ....” 2) “Doing good, ... of every possible sort, and, as far as possible, to all ....” and 3) “Attending upon all the ordinances of God: such are: The public worship of God. The ministry of the Word, either read or expounded. The Supper of the Lord. Family and private prayer. Searching the Scriptures. Fasting and abstinence.”

These rules governed Wesley’s United Societies, defining the expectations of those who belonged to them. These rules can assist in the spiritual formation of boards and committees in two ways. First, they invite a board or committee to reflect on the rules they want to govern their time together. It is important for a committee or board to be clear about and agree upon the rules that guide how the group cares for its spiritual nurture and how it fulfills assigned responsibilities. Moreover, these rules
enable the group to ensure that conversations are open and honest and that each member's contribution receives appropriate attention.

Second, these rules provide a board or committee with a set of moral and spiritual ideals in terms of which to measure its performance. In reviewing their work at the close of each meeting, committee members may ask questions like these: "Have we avoided evil of every kind in what we have done?" "Have we done good of every possible sort and to all?" "Have we worshiped God, searched the Scriptures, prayed, fasted (from negativity, perhaps)?" and so on. In this way, these rules provide a useful way for a committee or board to evaluate its effectiveness in carrying on Christ's mission and its faithfulness as a Christian community.

The third resource from our Wesleyan heritage is the idea of Christian conferencing—a practice John Wesley considered a means of grace. The term refers both to small group conversations about spiritual matters and to the conferences that Wesley held with his pastors. Christian conferencing means talking together with a spiritual attitude—an attitude tuned in to God. It has to do with conversations in which one looks deep inside oneself at thoughts and feelings, shares appropriately, and listens even more deeply to God and to others. It would be the kind of meeting that the apostles had in Acts 15. Such conversation edifies and encourages, even in the midst of disagreement. Christian conferencing is the meeting together of God's people in ways that glorify God and build up the body of Christ.

This concept from our Wesleyan heritage reminds us of the importance of our perspective and attitude. We are the body of Christ even when we gather for business meetings. Given the consumer-driven world in which we live, most of us need to be reminded of this. Fifteen minutes spent in spiritual conversation can shape the environment of a meeting in new and amazing ways and can help the whole meeting become a form of Christian conferencing.

One way of creating spiritual conversation like this is to use a short passage of Scripture pertinent to the concerns of the meeting. Copies of the passage, together with the interpretive questions, could be distributed to the members; or participants could use Bibles with the questions written on newsprint or a blackboard. The questions should help participants reflect on how the biblical passage speaks to their lives and to the life of the committee or board, including the issues to be deliberated in the meeting. The final question often goes something like this: "What might
God be saying to this group through this passage? After a few moments of silent reflection on all the questions, members could share insights in groups of two to five persons.

Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that it is crucial for congregations to conduct their business in ways that invite people to connect with God and to grow in faith. Indeed, I have challenged churches to begin to think of the whole of their administrative life as places of faith formation—of making disciples. I am convinced that boards and committees that seek to conduct their work under the guidance of God's Spirit and that attend to their continued spiritual formation—both as individuals and as a group—will be able to bring together spirituality and business and thus get "the whole job done."

Susan W. N. Ruach is Director of Spiritual Leadership Development for the General Board of Discipleship of The United Methodist Church in Nashville, Tennessee.

Endnotes

5. I have found the following resources particularly helpful: Richard J. Foster, Streams of Living Water: Celebrating the Great Traditions of Christian Faith (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001); John Ackerman, Spiritual Awakening: A Guide to Spiritual Life in Congregations (Washington, DC: Alban Institute, 1994); John Bryan Smith and Linda Graybeal, Spiritual Formation Workbook, rev. ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1999); and Sandra Krebs Hirsh and Jane Kise, Looking at Type and Spirituality (Gainesville, FL: Center for Applications of
6. See Olsen, Transforming Church Boards, Appendix 1, 81-82.
7. I am indebted to the Reverend Tom Albin, Dean of the Upper Room Chapel and Wesley scholar, for this insight.
8. The Book of Discipline, ¶103.
Making Disciples in the Wesleyan Tradition: Practicing the Means of Grace

LACEYE WARNER

According to the Book of Discipline, the mission of the church is "to make disciples of Jesus Christ. Local churches provide the most significant arena through which disciple-making occurs." The church also makes disciples as we "send persons into the world to live lovingly and justly as servants of Christ by healing the sick, feeding the hungry, caring for the stranger, freeing the oppressed, and working to have social structures consistent with the gospel..." How should contemporary United Methodists understand the practice of disciple-making? Is disciple-making concerned only with personal experiences and practices of piety or does it include acts of charity or "social holiness," to use Wesley's phrase? If so, what is the relationship between the "personal" and the "social" dimensions of discipleship? And how does that relationship contribute to our contemporary practices of disciple-making?

Wesley's spiritual journey, within the context of the rise of the people called Methodists, provides a framework within which to respond to these questions. Wesley's spiritual journey and theological development influenced his organization and leadership of the Methodist movement. Wesley faced the pressure to emphasize either personal piety or social outreach in his spiritual development and within the Methodist movement. He responded by encouraging a balance between practices of personal and social holiness within communities of faith affiliated with the Methodist movement. Personal holiness, or works of piety, most often refer to practices of personal devotion such as prayer, biblical study, and fasting, while social holiness tends to indicate works of charity and mercy, such as caring for the poor, the infirm, or the imprisoned. A balance of personal and social holiness is embodied in Wesley's ministry and theology, including his description of the practices of the means of grace. These practices are best understood within the context of Wesley's spiritual journey and theological development. In this article, I explore John Wesley's theology to provide some context for the relationship of the means of grace to prac-
practices of disciple-making. Wesley’s encouragement of a balance between personal and social holiness among the people called Methodists was not unique in his time. Wesley’s intentional emphasis on both personal and social holiness contributed to the practice of disciple-making within the early Methodist movement and can inform our contemporary practices.

Examining nineteenth- and early twentieth-century embodiments of Wesleyan theology and practices allows for a more balanced perspective from which to address contemporary questions regarding disciple-making in the Methodist tradition. Methodism in North America confronted different dynamics to those of the late-eighteenth century and the nineteenth century in Great Britain. The late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century American religious landscape is particularly pertinent to a discussion of contemporary disciple-making. Within American Protestantism during the late nineteenth century and the turn of the twentieth century, tensions persisted that eventually culminated in the Fundamentalist-Modernist controversy of the early twentieth century. Although Methodism in North America did not physically split along these ideological lines, the contemporary Wesleyan tradition continues to struggle with balancing personal and social holiness. Both Wesley’s response to the theological tensions of his context and an understanding of the early twentieth-century Fundamentalist-Modernist controversy can inform contemporary responses to questions related to practices of disciple-making in United Methodism. Thus, in addition to reflecting on Wesley’s theology, I offer reflections towards faithful practices of disciple-making shaped by Scripture and grounded in the Wesleyan tradition.

Influences on John Wesley: Calvinism and Arminianism

John Wesley’s spiritual journey and theological development was influenced by a seventeenth-century intra-Calvinist polemic. Wesley’s response to lingering embodiments of the polemic contributed to his emphasis upon practicing the means of grace (more about this in a later section). Prior to Wesley’s life and ministry serious tensions developed between Arminians and traditional Calvinists. Jacob Arminius (1560–1609), who led the Arminians, supported universal atonement—the doctrine that Christ died for all humankind. The traditional Calvinists were represented by Theodore Beza and others, who held a doctrine of predestination according to which the elect, or saved, are limited to a predetermined group.
The implications of this polemic for English Christianity during Wesley's time led to opposing emphases upon complementary aspects of Christian discipleship. The Arminian doctrine of universal atonement focused upon the possibility of all humankind to choose to respond in faith. Such a response recognized the significance of disciplined Christian practices as fruits demonstrative of faith. The traditional Calvinist doctrine of predestination emphasized God's sovereignty, with human response (limited to the elect) taking the form of faith alone and individual piety. This theological position deemphasized the importance of Christian practices as dangerously close to "works righteousness." Arminius was able to avoid the faith-action dichotomy and affirmed that persons cannot be saved by any human action, much less by their decisions or practices. According to Arminius, only God saves human beings. The Arminian threat to Calvinism was confronted at the Synod of Dort in 1619, which resulted in the endorsement of the traditional Calvinist position.2

A similar polemic persisted into Wesley's lifetime between radical Protestants and Puritans, on the one hand, and high-church Anglicans and Roman Catholics, on the other. The polemic was also characterized by opposing emphases upon sola fide (faith alone). Fears arose that a sola fide emphasis would result in antinomianism (the term literally means "without the law" or "above the law or outward works"). Antinomianism was suspected of leading to a disregard for faithful practices. Wesley expended a significant amount of energy through his sermons, tracts, and letters contributing to the discourse related to this controversy. At various times, he was accused of identifying with both positions. However, Wesley characterized himself as Arminian and throughout his ministry and theological development worked to maintain a balance between personal and social holiness.

John Wesley and the Means of Grace
One of the earliest catalysts for the birth of the Methodist movement was John Wesley's desire for holy living. Early in his spiritual journey, Wesley was influenced by Jeremy Taylor's text Holy Living and Holy Dying (1650). As a result of this influence and several others, Wesley used a diary to document the use of his time for the purpose of improving and maintaining his spiritual formation. He evaluated the use of his time and disposition towards spiritual growth in great detail. Using a cipher to maintain discretion, Wesley recorded his activities in fifteen-minute intervals and
evaluated his attitude during those periods on a scale of one to nine. In successfully deciphering Wesley’s diaries, Richard Heitzenrater has provided access to a wealth of material that reveals much of Wesley’s spiritual and theological development. Through the practice of keeping a diary, Wesley discovered that holiness began as a reality within the heart and then extended to one’s thoughts, words, and actions. For Wesley, holiness was never merely personal holiness—an inward individualistic piety—but consistently held implications for social holiness, or “good works.”

The earliest evidence of the Methodist movement in Oxford (1724–1735) demonstrates the balance between personal and social holiness. Wesley and the Holy Club prayed, sang, and studied the Scriptures, indicating the importance of personal holiness, or piety. The Holy Club also visited the imprisoned, sick, and aged and taught orphan children in the Oxford vicinity, demonstrating the importance of social holiness, or works of charity. In reflecting on how he used his time, Wesley recognized the significant role of works of piety and works of charity in facilitating his spiritual formation and that of others.

Later, Wesley codified these practices in the General Rules and their use in the “classes” and “bands” of the religious societies he organized. To join a religious society in the Methodist movement, an individual needed only to possess “a desire to flee from the wrath to come.” However, to continue in membership required following the General Rules, which can be summarized as (1) doing no harm and avoiding evil of every kind, (2) doing good, and (3) attending upon the ordinances of God. In the late 1730s and 1740s, classes and bands shaped by the General Rules would provide the structure for the Methodist revival that eventually spread across Britain.

The General Rules are included in the United Methodist Book of Discipline and are protected as a component of the denomination’s doctrine. As such, they continue to serve as a significant doctrinal resource for United Methodism. In their full detail, these rules provide an example of various practices that served as means of grace within the early Methodist movement and contributed to practices of disciple-making. Although the General Rules still exist as an aspect of our “doctrinal heritage,” local churches seem to have little, if any, memory of their significance as a resource for making disciples.

John Wesley’s theology was intimately related to his spiritual
LACEYE WARNER

Throughout his life Wesley maintained an interest in soteriology, particularly his own salvation. Wesley provided an outline of his understanding of salvation, or via salutis, in one of his most-often preached sermons and the most comprehensive example of his mature theological reflection, "The Scripture Way of Salvation" (1765). For Wesley, faith alone was essential for salvation. However, as evidenced by his recognition of the danger of backsliding and by his endorsement of Christian disciplines for spiritual formation, faith is not sustained without participation in these means of grace. Wesley was clear that Christian practices are merely means of receiving God's grace, not ends in themselves; thus, he avoided the danger of works righteousness.

According to his sermon "The Means of Grace," Wesley divided the means of grace into two groups: those instituted by Jesus Christ and those that are prudential (those Wesley considered "prudent"). The instituted means of grace correspond to traditional Christian understandings of works of piety and personal holiness. These include prayer, searching the Scriptures, celebrating the Lord's Supper, fasting, and Christian conferencing. The prudential means of grace correspond to traditional Christian understandings of works of charity and social holiness. They include feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, entertaining the stranger, visiting those that are in prison, sick, or variously afflicted, instructing the ignorant, awakening the sinner, quickening the lukewarm, confirming the wavering, comforting the afflicted, and succoring the tempted. Thus, taken together, the instituted and prudential means of grace represent practices of love of God (personal holiness) and love of neighbor (social holiness). John Wesley encouraged his Methodist societies to practice the means of grace in order to avoid the extremes of religious fanaticism and moral laxity rampant within the British Christianity of his day.

Wesley's balancing of faith and good works is further demonstrated in his understanding of the doctrines of justification and sanctification. For him, justification describes the imputation to individuals of God's righteousness through Jesus Christ, thus confirming his view that we are saved by faith alone. However, as we saw, Wesley also recognized that, as opportunity allows, faith should find expression in "fruits," or good works. This latter process Wesley called "sanctification." Beginning at the time of justification, sanctification is the imparted righteousness of Christ through the Holy Spirit. This imparted righteousness through sanctifying grace results in a real
change in persons. The language Wesley uses to describe sanctification is closely related to the language of holiness found in Scripture. Through sanctification, people are made holy through the presence of the Holy Spirit in their lives and empowered to respond to God's grace with practices of love for God and neighbor. Although sanctification may occur instantaneously, according to Wesley, such occasions are rare. Therefore, Wesley considered practices of piety and mercy, as outlined in the means of grace and General Rules for the United Societies, as significant aspects of the process of sanctification. In response to God's gift of justifying grace in Jesus Christ, early Methodists practiced the means of grace in communities of faith. These practices facilitated the process of disciple-making in early Methodism. By participating in the means of grace, these Methodists witnessed to the spiritually and physically impoverished through their sharing of God's love and message of salvation. The means of grace contributed to the spiritual formation of those recently justified by providing opportunities for cultivating the gift of holiness and sanctification.

The Twentieth-Century Fundamentalist–Modernist Controversy

In spite of Wesley's balancing of personal and social holiness and his influence on practices of disciple-making in early Methodism, American Methodism in our day suffers from a polemic not unlike the one Wesley faced, namely, the question of how to relate personal and social holiness. Many mainline Protestant denominations, including The United Methodist Church, exhibit symptoms related to the Fundamentalist–Modernist controversy of the early twentieth century. Although international ecumenical conversations inspire hope that recovery is on the way, the remnants of the polemic continue to pervade contemporary practices of disciple-making. Thus, it is important to examine the major issues involved in the Fundamentalist–Modernist controversy in order to trace their continued effect on the meaning and practice of making disciples.

The roots of the Fundamentalist–Modernist controversy can be dated to the publication of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* in 1859, which presented an argument for evolution. During this period a field of study emerged called "biblical criticism," which included the examination of Scripture's historicity and accuracy. The emergence of these and related intellectual and social movements developed into what some called the Modernist perspective (related to, but not exclusively representative of,
LACEYI WARNER

Enlightenment "modernism". Modernism emphasized the historicity, and, therefore, the humanity of Jesus, which encouraged social reform movements aimed at alleviating human suffering. This emphasis on social systems and legislative reform developed in large part to the exclusion of individual spiritual formation, or personal holiness. In response to this "humanistic" trend—which included evolutionary theories, liberal theology, and biblical criticism—a gathering in Niagara in 1895 produced the "five points" of fundamentalism. These five points included the inerrancy of Scripture, the divinity of Jesus Christ, the Virgin Birth, a substitutionary theory of the atonement, and the physical and bodily return of Christ. The term fundamentalism eventually derived from a series of tracts entitled The Fundamentals, published between 1910 and 1915. The fundamentalist emphases tended to result in an exclusion of practices related to social holiness.

Although both parties emphasized scriptural themes, the sundering of personal and social holiness caused several Protestant denominations, including the Baptists, the Presbyterians, and the Disciples of Christ, to divide into Fundamentalist and Modernist wings. However, like Wesley, who sought to maintain a via media, or dialectical balance, between extremes like these, those in the Methodist connection strove to support both personal and social holiness. Although American Methodism has experienced divisiveness over a number of issues, in recent memory it has managed to maintain (albeit at times precarious) unity on issues directly related to personal and social holiness. Noteworthy are the ecumenical achievements of the twentieth century within the Wesleyan and Methodist traditions that have contributed to the amalgamations resulting in the formation of The United Methodist Church. United Methodism has inherited, and continues to struggle to live into, the Wesleyan tradition of maintaining a dialectical balance between personal and social holiness. Nevertheless, the repercussions of the Fundamentalist–Modernist debate continue to cause difficulties for United Methodists when it comes to the practice of disciple-making. Discourse related to the theology and practice of disciple-making, specifically the language of evangelism, demonstrates the volatile relationship, or lack thereof, between personal and social holiness in many local churches and judicatories.

Making Disciples within the Contemporary Context

The practice of making disciples, although always central to the life of
Christian communities of faith, is particularly imperative in the current situation. Since the 1960s, mainline Protestant denominations have experienced a steady decline in membership. In response to this trend, numerous studies of North American culture and religion have been conducted that show significant evidence of the presence of a pervasive spirituality within American society. This spirituality, particularly among mainline Protestants, tends to be broad but shallow. Many of our practices of disciple-making are shaped by a response to this cultural and religious context. Alongside this spirituality, which seems outwardly advantageous in disciple-making, is a consumer-driven ethos. The combination of widespread spirituality and consumerism results in a "marketplace" of spiritualities that provides "samples" of the most attractive and appetizing aspects of spirituality at "competitive prices." The result is a limited supply of spiritual products whose value is determined by the market rather than by the richness of sustained relationships within faith communities characterized by accountability. The latter bear the costly price of covenant and disciplined practices and run counter to popular models of convenient spirituality.

Many of the church's practices relating to membership development are characterized by this cultural ethos of consumption, predicated upon the need for church membership and without the richness of the Christian tradition and its practices. As a result of numerous influences, including democracy and the capitalist market economy, some churches have been formed to accept key values of industry, such as individualism and quantitative productivity in minimal time. These cultural influences compound the difficulty facing contemporary churches, who continue to experience residual effects of the Fundamentalist-Modernist controversy and the truncation of the balance between personal and social holiness.

Disciple-making formed by the biblical narrative and practiced as an aspect of sanctification within communities of faith provides an alternative to these cultural and ideological influences. This kind of holistic disciple-making recognizes the importance of qualitative as well as quantitative growth and nurture of disciples over their lifetime through practices that cultivate both personal and social holiness.

Several scholars and practitioners interested in practices of disciple-making continue to participate in international ecumenical conversations. Through their writings and ministry, these individuals (many related to the Wesleyan tradition) are making important contributions to the healing of the
Fundamentalist–Modernist split. For example, in *The Great Commission*, Mortimer Arias and Alan Johnson examine each of the four Gospel "commission" texts for the purpose of informing the church’s practices of disciple-making. The language of disciple-making is characteristic of the Gospel of Matthew and the well-known "Great Commission" text of Matt. 28:16-20.

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

The term *disciple* implies the practice of "following." Throughout Matthew's Gospel Jesus provides parables and examples "to follow" for the purpose of disciple-making. As Arias points out, the Commission text in Matthew specifies at least two activities that contribute to the making of disciples who would follow the example of Jesus: baptizing and teaching. The Gospel of Matthew as a whole is characteristically catechetical with its five teaching discourses that alternate with demonstrations of the kingdom of God. The Commission's direction to teach is qualified by the content, "everything that I have commanded you." For Matthew, making disciples is not only "orthodoxy" (right belief or doctrine) but also "orthopraxis" (right living). Matthew's Commission text should be read in light of the entire Gospel so that these components may inform the Commission's meaning for our current practices of disciple-making. Matthew's paradigm for disciple-making, characterized by orthopraxis, requires the cultivation of personal piety (personal holiness) and practices of justice (social holiness) by individuals within communities of faith over a lifetime.

With the canon of Scripture, Matthew's text maintains the balance between personal and social holiness within Christian discipleship and practices of disciple-making that embody the command to love God and neighbor.

"Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" He said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul,
and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets" (Matt. 22:36-40).

This call to love God and neighbor proclaimed throughout canonical Scripture is represented in Wesley's theological reflection on personal and social holiness. To focus on love and the emphasis in the great commandments on love of God and neighbor is to reflect on the pervasiveness of such love within our Christian faith and witness. Love is central to Christian discipleship and constitutes our response to God's love offered through Jesus Christ. Therefore, love is not merely ethics or something that we do to 'be nice'; rather, love is a response to our justification and constitutive of our sanctification, or holiness, as the image of God is renewed in us.

Making Disciples through Practicing the Means of Grace

Wesley's pursuit of sanctification through the means of grace characterizes the commandment to love God and neighbor. As a result of God's love and grace, people are invited and empowered to respond in faith. Our response, then, includes not only the cultivation of love of God through personal holiness but also demonstrations of love of neighbor through practices of social holiness. The embodiment and nurture of holiness through practices of the means of grace result in an invitational witness to discipleship as well as in provision of practices of disciple-making. The persistent engagement in both the instituted and prudential means of grace can provide an effective Christian witness, if understood as invitational rather than exclusive. By participating in weekly communal worship, including the proclamation of the Scriptures and administration of the sacraments, participants and observers experience the salvation narrative and the community's response. Through continued spiritual nurture, or regular prayer and study in small groups, visitors have the opportunity to engage the Christian faith through conversation and fellowship. The consistent pursuit of social holiness through practices of charity and justice also provides a witness to the world as Jesus' message of salvation is proclaimed through actions accompanied by words of compassion.

If we remain grounded in our Wesleyan heritage and in the practice of the means of grace—which demonstrate our love of God and neighbor—we will seek both personal and social holiness in response to the gift of grace.
and love of God in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit. Our practices of disciple-making will be about more than increasing worship attendance, tithes, or volunteers. Our practices of disciple-making will aim to cultivate personal piety and social justice within our communities of faith. These practices will arise out of a desire to love God and neighbor in response to God’s love for us and will contribute to the faithfulness of our Christian communities. Through the means of grace, we are empowered to continue the cultivation of our own discipleship as an aspect of sanctification, while embodying a Christian witness through our individual and communal practices of personal and social holiness.

Several theologians assert a claim that is implicit in my argument for an understanding of evangelism as embodied in Christian discipleship, namely, that the truth or falsity of theological claims is made tangible only in being lived out. If Christians do not actively receive the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives and communities as an aspect of the doctrine of sanctification embodied in practices that cultivate virtue (personal and social holiness), then for what purpose are we making disciples? Through practice of the means of grace, individuals are continuously being transformed and reminded of the purpose of Christian discipleship: participation in the kingdom of God through local communities of faith as the church in the world. Christian discipleship in the Wesleyan tradition consists of both personal and social holiness. Similarly, following Wesley’s example, our contemporary practices of disciple-making should include practices of piety and acts of charity as means of God’s saving work in the world.

Lacey Warner is Assistant Professor of the Practice of Evangelism and Methodist Studies and Royce and Jane Reynolds Teaching Fellow at Duke University Divinity School in Durham, North Carolina.

Endnotes

2. The results of the Synod of Dort are often summarized with the acronym TULIP, which stands for Total depravity, Unconditional election, Limited atonement, Irresistible grace, and Perseverance of the saints.
7. Ibid., 20.
Radical Orthodoxy is a "new" theological movement that has garnered significant attention within the academy and the church. In fact, theology seldom generates the kind of attention Radical Orthodoxy has seen since the initial publication in 1999 of a collection of essays by the same name. Much of this attention came from sources outside theological circles. The Chronicle of Higher Education, Time magazine, the National Catholic Reporter, and a host of other journals, newspapers, and magazines have noted its emergence. Some of the claims have been rather grand. One reporter referred to Radical Orthodoxy and postsecularism as "the knife’s edge of a broader movement... that may well become the biggest development in theology since Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the church door." Such claims are surely overdrawn. Nevertheless, Radical Orthodoxy has generated sufficient attention that it provokes much criticism from various philosophical and theological camps.

Some Roman Catholic theologians see Radical Orthodoxy as trading on a Catholic tradition that its Anglican roots cannot sustain. Protestant theologians have repeatedly asked what role the Bible has in it. Barthians find the critique of Barth unconvincing and Anabaptists wonder why a theological movement so critical of Niebuhrian realism still seems to accept the inevitability of Christian participation in violence. Some philosophical theologians see Radical Orthodoxy as offering an overdetermined causality, where the existence of Wal-Mart can be traced back to some errors in metaphysics made by Duns Scotus. Aristotelians and Thomists worry it is too Platonic. By far the persons most alarmed at Radical Orthodoxy seem to be Liberal Protestant theologians, who find in it a betrayal of all the hard-won gains theologians achieved in their accommodation to modernity against a recalcitrant church. A nostalgic return to
Christian orthodoxy will prevent necessary new developments from the critical growing edges of theology in a postcolonial context. Thus, the Drew Colloquium in Transdisciplinary Theological Studies advertised its international colloquia as follows:

Currently the academic discipline of theology seems to oscillate between resuscitations of orthodoxy and abdications of the symbols of theology itself. The retreat to orthodoxy satisfies liturgical and intellectual desires for meaning, yet dulls the prophetic self-critical edge of its own traditions.

Radical Orthodoxy appears here, as it has in other places, as a romantic quest for certainty in an age of flux. But the categories of liberal Protestantism remain either prophetic or orthodox. Oddly enough, seminaries often seem most resistant to Radical Orthodoxy. There appears to be worry that a retrieval of orthodoxy will bring with it renewed concerns to label certain positions "heretical." This has certainly been true; John Milbank, the main architect of Radical Orthodoxy, argues that modernity itself is heretical. But no one has called for a renewed Inquisition or for a fascist politics. Instead, the theological politics in Radical Orthodoxy argues the need for a genuine difference formed from a "complex political space" that the "simple space" of liberal politics cannot accommodate. While some fear what Radical Orthodoxy might lead to, others find it predictably Anglican—one more via media. Whether it deserves this kind of attention and criticism is an open question, for what it is and what it represents is by no means clear. It is in a nascent state and has not yet moved much outside the academy into the life of the church.

My purpose in this essay is not to evaluate these critiques and affirmations or to muster a response to them. Instead, I intend to position Radical Orthodoxy in terms of modern theology in order to illuminate why it has received the kind of attention it has. Then I hope to relate it more directly to Methodism and the work of John Wesley to see how our Methodist tradition fits, or does not fit, within the concerns and critiques of Radical Orthodoxy. This is a propitious exercise, for the Anglo-Catholic theologian John Milbank is the son of a local preacher in the British Methodist Church. One might easily entertain the suspicion that Methodism contains both negative and positive elements that gave rise to Radical Orthodoxy.
Positively, Methodism contains elements of a Christian orthodoxy and Catholic liturgy that merge with a radical politics and socialist vision that is consistent with the aims of the movement. Negatively, Methodism is deeply committed to the "liberal Protestant metanarrative" against which Milbank and his colleagues fashioned Radical Orthodoxy. In this metanarrative, an interior secure realm of value and freedom—also known as "personality"—becomes the essence of religion and simply waits for Western forms of political and economic exchange to bring it to fruition. All "religion" is read as preparatory for these democratic, free exchanges. Despite Wesley's and Methodism's explicit influence, or lack thereof, when we compare Radical Orthodoxy to them we discover that both suspicions are indeed warranted. It is no surprise that, to the horror of some and delight of others, Radical Orthodoxy is quickly finding a home in Methodist, Wesleyan, and Nazarene circles.

Why Radical Orthodoxy?

As we enter the third millennium, we find that, for better or for worse, "religion" remains a significant social and political factor. Given developments in European thought since the seventeenth century, this is truly surprising; we moderns were unprepared for such a development. Religion, we thought, was like smallpox—something whose danger was behind us. Even though religion was never exterminated in European politics and culture, it had been reduced to a private preference, safely policed by the limits of what was considered to be universal reason. Religion appeared in university curricula as a psychological necessity for persons incapable of facing their own mortality. Or it was a political ruse used to legitimate somebody's interest and power, either to be used by those in power or unmasked by the intellectually sophisticated. Or religion was a form of alienation of our own power as a species—something to which we aspire for the sake of ourselves. Even those sympathetic to religion primarily found its usefulness in the foundation it provided for morality. If religion were to have a role in European culture, if it were not to be simply a sign of an immature phase of development in the natural progression of "reason," then it could only be as "natural religion." The apologists for religion in European culture assumed this would be the inevitable progression for all right-thinking people. As John Locke instructed us, natural religion was based on "precepts plain and intelligible to all Mankind" that "seldom come to be
controverted." It was preferable to "revealed religion," because the latter is mediated by "Books" and "languages," which are "liable to the common and natural difficulties incident to Words." Natural religion was the future. It was preferable precisely because it was not based on something as contingent and particular as language; it was grounded in a reason universally shared, a quality no language possessed.

Locke's empiricism and Kant's transcendental idealism shared this common understanding of religion's basis in a universal quality of human being. Kant founded religion upon reason alone by grounding it in "personality." But at least Kant and Locke gave apologetic reasons for religion to still have some role in European thought. The alternatives in d'Holbach, Hume, and, later, Feuerbach, Nietzsche, Freud, and Marx did not seem promising. Theologians found more promise by following Locke's or Kant's apologetic strategy. Theology could be salvaged through its mediation to future generations by modern forms of knowledge, especially by accepting and working within the epistemologies persons such as Locke and Kant bequeathed their posterity.

But there was also a reaction against this modern apologetic strategy. Some theologians avoided any accommodation to the modern spirit through a dogmatic or confessional theology. They refused mediation of any sort. Either way, "modernity" became the cornerstone upon which "modernity" theology was constructed—either by accommodating its spirit and seeking to mediate theology via some notion of universal reason or by refusing accommodation altogether by positing a different epistemological space—revelation—that would be free from the corrosive effects of a mediating universal reason. Epistemological concerns were at the heart of modernity.

Then came "the end of modernity." This expression and its correlative, "postmodernity," are important in the development of Radical Orthodoxy. For modernity was a cultural strategy that policed what constituted a reasonable Christianity from what were thought to be necessary limitations on human knowledge. Once those limitations are no longer compelling, then Christian theology no longer needs to be policed by them. But the end of modernity does not name the conclusion of an epoch, as if we could easily segment history into a progression from the premodern to the modern to the postmodern. It signifies only that cultural strategy that assumed a natural progression toward the "new" by over-
D. STEPHEN LONG

coming the old that would lead us to a state of universal harmony and peace. Postmodernity is not what comes after the modern; rather, it is the “dissolution of the category of the new.”¹¹ It seeks to turn us out of a progressive orientation toward the new that gives the illusion of movement when, in fact, stands still, identically and interminably repeating the movement from absence (a past presence that never was) to a deferred presence (a future presence that never arrives); for this is the “end” of modernity.

Like postmodernity, radical orthodoxy is not the next stage of development in a progressive movement.¹² It does not seek to serve the end of modernity. Instead it re-members the roots that nurture a Christian ontology, practical philosophy, and aesthetics in order to move us outside modernity’s interminable end. This re-membering of our theological roots turns the modern back upon itself to expose what it has forgotten, what it could never fully abandon, and yet what it cannot account for—the theological. Radical Orthodoxy does not seek to “overcome” modernity in order to become the next theological trend—at least in its best moments it avoids this. Instead, it works within modern categories of thought, showing how they cannot sustain what they claim without reference to Christian orthodoxy.

Radical Orthodoxy cannot be understood without some prior knowledge of the debates within and between modern and postmodern philosophy, particularly with the postmodern challenge to a “metaphysics of presence” that supposedly characterizes the Western philosophical and theological tradition from antiquity until Nietzsche, who is then characterized as “the last metaphysician” by Heidegger. A metaphysics of presence assumes a secure interior space that is free from the contingency of language and culture. This secure interior space can be traced back to Descartes’s cogito, where the one certain foundation for knowledge is that a subject cannot doubt that she or he can doubt. Our sense, our consciousness, objects in the world, even God could all mislead us; but if we assume a posture where we “suspend judgment,” then even if all these things mislead us we will not be taken in and can discover a secure foundation for certitude.

This secure interior space, free from the vagaries of language and contingency, leads simultaneously to both an absolute, objective form of knowledge and to a relative form of knowledge. It leads to the absolute claim that all knowledge is contextual and limited to that context. I know absolutely that all knowledge is mediated through the relativity of context.
and I know decisively the limits of my (and your) context, whether it is the empirical limits of my own body or the limits of my culture. By recognizing and confessing my own limits, I can then achieve as secure a foundation for knowledge as is possible. It is not because I know the world as it is that I arrive at such knowledge. Instead, it is because I know what I do not know and cannot know that I can achieve such knowledge.

Radical Orthodoxy is a theology that enters into this fray by being more skeptical about this absolute knowledge of our own contextual limits than either modern or postmodern philosophy and theology have permitted. Because these limits assured us that certain things could not be known—who God is and what can be said about God—they forced Christian theology, especially orthodox Christian claims, into a false humility. By showing that these limits themselves are no more secure than those orthodox claims, Christian orthodoxy reemerges as more reasonable than the dominating liberal Protestant metanarrative that thrives when we accept modernity's metaphysics of presence. If that secure interior space does not exist, then liberal theology's ability to relativize Christian doctrinal claims for something more basic, grounded in a preconceptual "experience," no longer holds. Liberal theology finds itself wedded to an unsustainable foundation, which it can sustain only through institutional force and coercion.

After abandoning theology's position of humility before a modern metaphysics of presence, Radical Orthodoxy re-members the Christological filling of space and time such that the space and time of the modern and postmodern are revealed for what they are: choreographed spontaneity. Like the food court at the mall, or The United Methodist Church's "Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors" campaign, everything is orchestrated such that it appears to offer a "difference"; but it is illusory. The difference was all fabricated behind the lights of the cameras. Modernity is the repetition of sameness under the illusion of difference, because in it the new and improved have become our fate. Everything must appear as new, unique, and different—even when it is the same—if it is to attract our attention. Postmodernity is able to diagnose our problem, which is the problem of boredom; for what happens when the new and improved become so commonplace that they no longer hold our interest? But postmodernity has little to offer in its place, other than a constant deferral from being taken in by the modern and an assertion that the one thing that cannot be deconstructed is justice, whatever that means. It is at
this point that Christian orthodoxy becomes once again interesting and worthy of our attention. It holds forth the possibility of construing life on something other than the enticement of the new and improved and the concomitant force and coercion necessary to sustain it.

Radical Orthodoxy looks to the roots of the Christian faith and examines the political, social, and philosophical significance of neglected and forgotten Christian doctrines such as these:

• the doctrine of the Trinity and its perichoretic unity, where each Person is rendered intelligible by the gift and reception that defines each in terms of a mutual kenosis that is never a closed totality but an opening to the other that makes "creation" intelligible;

• Christ's two natures, where each maintains its own distinct identity while at the same time hypostatically uniting so that God enters into that which is not God without ceasing to be God. This becomes the basis for an analogical use of speech about God as well as for a biblical hermeneutic. It is what makes Christian theology possible;

• creatio ex nihilo, where God creates not in order to contain a threatening primordial chaos but, consistent with God's own being as triune, gives being to that which is not God without the need to posit any limitation or withdrawal in Triune Being to make room for created being;

• the real distinction between God and creation such that God's essence is God's existence, but the essence of created being is never identical with its existence. This avoids that univocity of being so characteristic of modern theology, whereby language about God is finally nothing but language about ourselves and theology becomes subordinated to philosophy—especially metaphysics and epistemology;

• the via eminentiae, where working analogically we recognize that the truth, goodness, and beauty we do see, along with their "imperfections," only make sense when God signifies the "more excellent way" of these perfections;

• a concern to avoid "nominalism," where it is understood as a fetishization of the particular such that words only signify discrete things whose meaning depends upon "clear and distinct definitions." These discrete things do not participate in one another except through human convention, which is always illusory, albeit necessary. This has a political correlate, where the state of nature is understood as composed of discrete individuals (atoms), all contending against one
another, who must be brought into society by artifice. It also has an economic correlate, where everything can be turned into a formal object of value and traded with every other thing. In Christian ethics it assumes a Divine Command theory:

• a recovery of analogical language in speaking about God rather than assuming all language is metaphor;
• the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist as that which makes possible the condition for all human meaning;
• ecclesiology as the production of a liturgical time that is not a secure space to be strategically defended but rather a political tactic of God's patient revolution.

But Radical Orthodoxy cannot develop theology solely by professing basic Christian dogma; it cannot have a singular confession for all adherents to sign. Instead, it develops theological doctrine always at the same time as it discusses politics, economics, and ethics. Thus, it claims to be "more mediating" of nontheological discourses than other forms of orthodox and confessional theology and "less accommodating" to modernity than Liberal theology. It is radical not only in re-membering the roots (radix) but also in re-membering the intrinsic and necessary connection between theology and politics, and this calls into question modern politics, culture, art, science, and philosophy. By looking to these roots, Radical Orthodoxy also questions the "roots" of modern social and political configurations, finding them often to be nothing but a bare assertion of will that too often subordinates truth, goodness, and beauty to its own devices. Modernity ends in nihilism, where a technological fascination holds sway that cannot be ruled by truth, goodness, or beauty.

Methodism

What relationship does Methodism have to Radical Orthodoxy? I think it safe to say that, since the latter part of the nineteenth century, the Methodist Church has been a thoroughly modern institution. By that I mean that it has grounded theology more in the modern assumption of some secure interior presence each individual possesses than in any common life mediated through doctrine, liturgy, or discipline. This is as true of the Pietistic evangelicalism that characterizes Methodism as it is of the theological "progressives" who constantly seek to pull the rest of us into the future.

One important consequence of modernity's influence on Methodism
has been its commitment to "ethics" as the essence of religion. Once ethics becomes the essence of Christianity, doctrine serves only a utilitarian role to that ethics. If it does not do it well, doctrine is dispensed with and changed to protect the ethics. A second consequence is an explicit rejection of Christian orthodoxy in favor of heretical forms of doctrine more appropriate to "ethics." In fact, this became a new kind of "orthodoxy." While we are supposedly a pluralistic church, when it comes to doctrine and liturgy, we developed creedal commitments to ethical principles that insured our reliance upon, and propagation of, modernist accounts of natural religion at the same time that we dispensed with, ridiculed, and rejected ecumenical, orthodoxy Christianity. This was given its decisive articulation in the 1908 "Social Creed." Throughout the twentieth century, Methodism produced a number of systems of ethics and ethicists but had very little time for the development of Christian doctrine or theology. When theology was developed, it was often to buttress a system of ethics and was intentionally heretical. This tendency is most obvious in the early to mid-part of the twentieth century, when the school known as "Boston Personalism" had tremendous influence over Methodist intellectual life.

As Methodism became more ensconced in modernist forms of thought, the discipline of ethics worked itself ever more deeply into the Wesleyan tradition. In the latter part of the nineteenth century, it did so through the notion of the "supreme significance of the moral personality." A clearer instance of "metaphysics of presence" could not be found.

Borden Parker Bowne offered the Methodist tradition its first systematic ethics. His work is a clear illustration of that metaphysical spirit that culminates in nihilism. A contest between nature and freedom characterizes the moral life. The "aim" of moral activity "is to lift the natural to the plane of the moral by setting the stamp of the free spirit upon it." The chaotic flux that reason must tame is, for Bowne, the "predatory character" of "tribalism." It has been rationalized by "industrial civilization," but it is not yet complete. Only the application of moral ideals through a universal critical reason will finally accomplish the necessary moral progress.

Theologians such as Edgar Sheffield Brightman and Albert C. Knudsen continued the science of ethics introduced by Bowne into the Wesleyan tradition. In 1933, Brightman published his *Moral Laws*. He began the work with the distinction between descriptive sciences, based on "facts," and "normative sciences," based on values. "Ethics," says Brightman, "is based
on this fact of purposive control by rational principles. Brightman lays out eleven laws by which the moral ideal can be applied to the conflicting mass of data for purposes of human mastery. Following Kant closely, Brightman makes ethics "logically prior" to religion. The truth of the latter depends on the truth of the former. Brightman's work represents the high-water mark of the accommodation of Wesleyan theology to a modernist ethics. Once theology becomes subordinate to ethics, it logically follows that Christian theology is radically challenged. Brightman had to create a new doctrine of God in which God is finite because limited by the "The Given" that always exists and that God cannot eradicate. The Trinity, Christ's two natures, the real distinction, creatio ex nihilo—all disappear in Brightman's work.

A. C. Knudsen continued this tradition of the logical priority of ethics in his 1943 *The Principles of Christian Ethics*. Although recognizing that a "sharp line between Christian ethics and Christian theology is gradually disappearing," he nevertheless states that "in a sense the permanent element in Christianity is its ethical teaching." Theology was becoming ethics, and not vice versa. Knudsen does bring Jesus back into the conversation. However, the Jesus to whom he appeals is someone for whom "the autonomy of the individual was a fundamental proposition." For Knudsen, like for Brightman, ethics is grounded primarily in freedom. It offers a new source of causality into the natural flux of life that allows us to shape institutions and persons. The traditional notion of God's perfection, as well as the *via eminentiae*, disappears altogether. As Knudsen puts it, "God himself as a moral being must distinguish between good and evil and must be metaphysically capable of choosing either."

Knudsen's theology is consistent with liberal political theory. In fact, like Hobbes, he finds the state of nature to be a state of war. Moral principles provide rights to individuals against this state of conflict and chaos. But Knudsen also applies this political theory to God. Thus he states, "The only way in which the idea of a moral universe can be maintained is by ascribing moral responsibility to God and a limited independence to man. As Creator of the world, God is a responsible Being, and we his creatures have rights over against him as well as duties to him." That God does not want us to be passively dependent is certainly true, but Knudsen posits "rights" against God without recognizing the problems this poses for any reasonable theology. Why do we need to secure ourselves against God?
unless God is like other finite causes, so limited by the possibility of good and evil that God cannot finally be trusted? Unlike more reasonable expressions of the Christian faith, where God is understood in terms of the grammar of simplicity, perfection, and immutability, Knudsen's ethics require a different grammar altogether to speak of God: the grammar of choice, freedom, and individual responsibility. A heretical theological language becomes necessary for the sake of our own ethical possibilities. Knudsen concludes, "The highest in man is a revelation of divine truth and divine will." This statement can be read as showing us something Knudsen may not have intended to say. What is divine truth and divine will other than that which is highest in human beings? It comes as no surprise that Knudsen draws on Sabellius to explain the doctrine of the Trinity.

This statement can be read as showing us something Knudsen may not have intended to say. What is divine truth and divine will other than that which is highest in human beings? It comes as no surprise that Knudsen draws on Sabellius to explain the doctrine of the Trinity.

After all, it is a unified totality that liberal political theory seeks. Boston Personalism no longer holds sway over Methodism as it once did. Its loss of influence may very well signal the end of modernity, although its lingering influence in Methodism reminds us that the end of modernity is more a ceaseless repetition than a closure. The arguments found in Bowne, Knudsen, and Brightman are no longer rhetorically compelling. But this does not mean that the spirit of a metaphysics of presence has itself disappeared. It is still with us, especially in our dogged commitment to our "Social Principles" (as unintelligible as they are) and the complete lack of interest in our Articles of Religion, Confession of Faith, General Rules, and common liturgy. Perhaps it is still with us in the dominance of process theology, which continues to hold sway in Wesleyan intellectual circles. And it is certainly present in the uncritical acceptance of the sociological tools employed in the church-growth strategies United Methodism adopted in the past decade.

Perhaps the problem of modernity that characterizes Methodism is finally a problem Wesley himself bequeathed us. Jaroslav Pelikan calls John Wesley the first modern theologian. I fear that is truer than we think, even though it is also false. Wesley's constant use of "inward" versus "outward" Christianity, his reliance upon Locke's distinction between will and liberty, his putative "catholic" spirit—all are instances of his drift toward accommodating the spirit of modernity. But that is not all that is to be said about Wesley. And, fortunately, many of the modern epistemological presuppositions he explicitly adopted actually did little to no work in his preaching, teaching, and theology. He affirmed again and again that one
could not understand or perform the moral life without a proper understanding of the triune God, which was a kind of understanding incapable of separating knowledge from love. Given that he was contemporaneous with Hume and Kant, this is a remarkable achievement, and one that could be used to assist Methodists to think theologically at the end of modernity.

What then is the relationship between Radical Orthodoxy and Methodism? Twentieth-century Methodism clearly sided with the liberal Protestant metanarrative for which Radical Orthodoxy is a remedy. For those who are tired of that metanarrative, Radical Orthodoxy holds forth promise. For those wedded to one of its many progeny, it will be viewed as a threat. But I think there is a more positive relationship between the two as well. In explaining the rise of the Methodists at Oxford forty-some years after the fact, Wesley presented a socialist vision grounded in Christian orthodoxy with a common life, order, and discipline. Wesley explained what brought the early Methodists together this way:

They were all precisely of one judgment as well as of one soul. All tenacious of order to the last degree and observant, for conscience' sake, of every rule of the church. . . . They were all orthodox in every point; firmly believing not only the three creeds, but whatsoever they judged to be the doctrine of the Church of England, as contained in her Articles and Homilies. As to that practice of the apostolic church (which continued till the time of Tertullian, at least in many churches) the 'having of all things in common' they had no rule, nor any formed design concerning it. But it was so, in effect, and it could not be otherwise; for none could want anything that another could spare.

It would be more than a stretch to see in this narration of Methodism in early eighteenth-century Oxford a clear statement of the late twentieth-century Radical Orthodoxy that began at Cambridge. Wesley never contended with Nietzsche, Heidegger, Derrida, or von Balthasar. He did contend with Locke, Hume, and Hutcheson—and not always to Wesley's credit. There were also Cudworth and Malebranche—and that may provide more of an explicit connection between Methodism and Radical Orthodoxy than I have yet suggested. But there was also Scripture, the creeds, and a desire for a faithful common life, as difficult as that may be to express or embody. Methodism was an ecclesial project that on Wesley's own terms failed—especially because of its inability to maintain the unity of the church.
and a common teaching on economics. As an "ecclesial project," Radical Orthodoxy offers an exciting way forward at the end of modernity, just as Methodism offered a promise yet unfulfilled beginning in the eighteenth century.

D. Stephen Long is Associate Professor of Systematic Theology at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary in Evanston, Illinois.

Endnotes


2. For more on the Colloquium's objectives, see its website at http://users.drew.edu/mnausner/colloquiahistory.html.

3. Reinhold Niebuhr gave us these categories in An Interpretation of Christian Ethics. They now seem to have been adopted in some "postcolonial" theologies, which does seem a bit ironic.


5. As John Milbank notes, "In Britain it seems to be regarded as an extreme, frightening movement. In North America, especially among Catholics, it is seen rather as a typically Anglican attempt at mediation." See John Milbank, "The Programme of Radical Orthodoxy," in Radical Orthodoxy? A Catholic Enquiry, ed. by Laurence Paul Hemming (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2000), 33.

6. Milbank explains the "liberal protestant metanarrative" in his Theology and Social Theory (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 92-98. This metanarrative reads the uniqueness of the catholicity of the church as an "always implicit presence in the west of a private realm of value, a presence which makes western history, in turn, the key to the history of the whole world." That "private realm of value" is reflected in the assumption of an interior secure space in individuals where persons have a "freedom" to choose, and this becomes the foundation for political, economic, and even ecclesial society.


9. Kierkegaard and Barth are often viewed in such a confessional or dogmatic camp. Milbank seems to read Karl Barth in this sense and views him as a "modernist" who turns the category of revelation into an epistemology to answer the epistemological crisis that empiricism and transcendental idealism threw theology into. Fergus Kerr makes a similar move in his excellent work, *Theology after Aquinas* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002). Although one would be hard pressed to deny all such accusations against Barth, I do think there is a much more sympathetic reading of Barth that does not see him in this same light.


12. In fact, if we are at the end of modernity, then one wonders how anyone who is conversant with recent trends in theology and philosophy can use the term *progressive* non-ironically. This is one reason I find Bishop Joseph Sprague's progressive manifesto *Affirmations of a Dissenter* uncompelling. Sprague posits two kinds of theologians: progressives and neoliteralists. The former are "inclusive and universal" and open to the new, while the latter represent "closed minds and fearful hearts" that remain trapped in the past through a "biblical literalism" and a commitment to the "god of classical theism." Sprague expresses "incredulity that neoliteralism has been permitted, with little challenge from the contrary to many who know better, to take passages out of context and read a particular theology into them." He chides progressives for their silence in allowing the neoliteralists their "attempted take over" of the church and calls them to action against the neoliteralists (see pages 7, 8, 16, and 22). It is unclear what Sprague means by "neoliteralists." At times, it seems to represent something like the "Yale School" and the work of persons like Hans Frei, with his recovery of the "literal" reading of the Bible. At other times, it represents fundamentalism. If Sprague's point is that fundamentalists should not be "permitted" to set forth their particular theological position within our seminaries and major institutions, then I would concur with him. In fact, such a *de facto* rule already operates in these places. Fundamentalists are excluded, and rightly so. (Republicans are basically excluded as well, about which, I must confess, I am more conflicted.) But if he means that the Yale school should not be permitted to be taught without episcopal challenge, then...
I think we see that the 'liberal and universal' progressive theology he represents concludes with the same kind of policing function it fears. This may be inevitable, given liberalism's presuppositions.


14. Ibid., 39.

15. Bowne writes, "Tribal and national groups have generally known no laws but that of selfishness and violence; and under such a law there is no place for morality. If the most civilized and Christianized nations would find itself threatened by such group, it would have no resort but massacre," ibid, 156.


17. "Ethics is therefore logically prior to religion; religion cannot be true unless ethics is true, but ethics might be true and religion false . . . . [T]he history of religious progress is a history of purification of religious faith by appeal to moral law" (Ibid., 265-66).

18. Brightman writes, "More confidently I express the view that if man is truly free, God must be finite as regards his knowledge. . . . Man's freedom is an actual limitation on the foreknowledge of God." Brightman then cites Locke for support. He goes on to answer the problem of evil, which is also "the problem of God," by arguing that there is "The Given" (he always capitalized it), which is "the source of an eternal problem and task for God." The Given is that unconscious, chaotic force that always troubles God's plans, which is also the source of God's creativity. Brightman states, "Our hypothesis is that God can make an increasingly better conquest of it [The Given] through eternity without ever wholly eliminating it." I find it intriguing how Brightman's use of The Given bears some resemblance to "The Khora" in some postmodern (a)theologies. See Brightman, *The Problem of God* (New York: Abingdon, 1930), 132, 182-63.


20. Ibid., 43. Later on in this work, Knudsen claims that Jesus' "profoundest contribution to ethics" was his bringing to light "the infinite value of every personality in the sight of God" (79).

21. Ibid., 82. Of course, if God is capable of choosing evil, then the freedom to choose is more basic to our being than God and God is no longer worthy of our worship.

22. Ibid., 180.
23. Ibid., 283.
24. Knudsen argues that the "movement from Platonism to personalism" meant "less insistence" on the traditional doctrine of the Trinity. He states, "If God in the totality of his being is a unitary personality, it is at least confusing to continue to speak of three 'Persons' in the Godhead. The personality of God would seem to exclude the older idea of personality in God. Hence there is a tendency to fall back upon the psychological as opposed to the social interpretation of the Trinity and to combine it either with a form of Sabellianism or an agnostic attitude toward the problem." See Knudsen, The Doctrine of God (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1930), 423.
25. I am indebted to Lyle Dabney for pointing this out to me.
26. See "On The Trinity," where Wesley states that "the knowledge of the Three-One God is interwoven with all true Christian faith, with all vital religion. . . . Therefore I do not see how it is possible for any to have vital religion who denies that these three are one." See The Works of John Wesley, Bicentennial edition, ed. by Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984-), 2:385-386. See also ibid., "The End of Christ's Coming" (2:478), where Wesley recognizes that we cannot love God without Christ because we cannot know the Father without the Son who reveals him. Like Aquinas and the premodern tradition, Wesley correlates knowledge and love such that Christian doctrine and Christian ethics cannot be separated. Other examples of Wesley's correlation between the doctrine of the Trinity and Christian ethics can be found in "The New Creation," ibid., 509-510; "The Case of Reason Impartially Considered," ibid., 598; "Spiritual Worship" (3:90f); "The Unity of the Divine Being" (2:70); and "Sermon on the Mount III" (1:513).
Does the Judicial Council still have a place in The United Methodist Church?

DONALD E. MESSER

An increasingly politicized and polarized Judicial Council endangers the future of United Methodism. The dynamic unity of the church requires not ideologues committed to special interests but fair-minded and impartial guardians of the church’s Constitution and rule of law.

If delegates to the 2004 General Conference follow the political trends evident in the lobbying and balloting of the past several General Conferences, then regardless of who wins the elections, United Methodism may be the long-term loser. If future judges are chosen more on caucus affiliations and predetermined political positions than on credentialed qualities of ability, merit, and judicious temperament, then the trust essential to church unity and mission could be seriously eroded.

Every ecclesial body needs some recognized authoritative system to adjudicate inevitable differences in interpreting church

SUSAN HENRY-CROWE

I was privileged to have served on the Judicial Council from 1992-2000. The Judicial Council is a constitutional body with an organic character charged with upholding and interpreting the law of the church. During those years the art of collaboration, which included respect, listening, and honest and forthright deliberation, guided the work entrusted to us by the church. This is a tribute to those who served on the Judicial Council in those years and all faithful church people who love both the law and the church. Tom Matheny, as a member since 1972 and president since 1976, and the other seven members have served various terms. This particular Council was about as diverse as any group in the church. Diversity of gender, race, region, as well as wide points of view were represented on the Council. It is a wonder that the Council in that eight-year period issued 237 decisions, or one-fourth of the total number of decisions
rules, ensure due process, and maintain reasonable order so that the church's mission and ministry can be fruitfully exercised. In United Methodism, the Judicial Council over the years has effectively fulfilled this theological and practical function with a minimum of friction and controversy. It is neither a legislative nor an evidentiary body. Members have set aside their personal preferences and beliefs in order to interpret conscientiously the meaning and intent of the church's Constitution and Discipline.

Instituted as a result of a reform movement in the church, the Judicial Council itself, however, may now need to be reformed. The Judicial Council of The United Methodist Church is a relatively new creation within Methodism. Historically, the bishops of the church made decisions and interpretations of church law. Concerned with arbitrary episcopal decisions, a reform movement created the first Judicial Council in 1934 within The Methodist Episcopal Church, South. When The Methodist Church was formed in 1939, the Judicial Council approach was adopted. This polity persisted in the creation of The United Methodist Church in 1968, in contrast to the Evangelical United Brethren Church policy of giving the judiciary power to their bishops.

Though first initiated almost seventy years ago, the Judicial Council is a relatively unexamined creation. Successive Judicial Council bodies have made nearly 1,000 decisions on church law since 1940. The Judicial Council activities and procedures are generally not transparent and are highly secretive. Yet, United Methodist scholars have rarely reviewed these decisions, which are final and can be changed only by revisions of the Constitution or Discipline. The literature in the field is basically nonexistent. For example, no analysis exists as to what decisions were of major significance or were key turning points in the life of the denomination. Likewise, no comparative information is readily available on how decisions of law are reached in other denominations, such as British Methodism or other mainline Protestant denominations in the United States. United Methodist theologian Thomas Frank reports that "despite the growing influence of this legal material, no one has published a critical assessment of the impact of a distinct judiciary on the ecclesiology or practices of the church."2

While politics has never been completely absent from Judicial Council elections, recently it has been targeted for intense denominational political activity. The Book of Discipline entrusts the Council of Bishops with nomi-
nating a diverse slate of candidates worthy of being justices, with the provision that nominations can be made from the floor of the General Conference. No discussion of candidate credentials or viewpoints is permitted. Over the years, nominees have been few and most of the elections have been made from the list previewed in advance by the bishops. But the 1996 and 2000 General Conferences have witnessed extraordinary lobbying, caucus endorsements, and leafleting by persons nominated from the floor. Amazingly, powerful Judicial Council members, whose decisions on church law cannot be questioned or reversed, are selected without the lengthy detailed examination of candidates that goes on in the process of electing bishops.

Therefore, due to the Council's power and influence, political caucus groups within the church have decided to use their influence and resources to impact General Conference election of members. The implicit belief is that if you can "capture" the majority of the Judicial Council you can "control" the church.

As a result, the polarization evident among United Methodists, particularly in regard to issues of homosexuality, has crept into the composition of the court and threatens the legitimacy of its decisions. Just as abortion has become the "litmus test" for all appointees of the United States Supreme Court, so various special interest groups in United Methodism use views on homosexuality and the church as their litmus test for elections.

If the future integrity of the judiciary and the fairness of their decisions become compromised by political or ideological loyalties, then the church will face a serious crisis of confidence. In good Christian conscience, persons will be tempted to disregard decisions if they believe the Council is making unfair or extra-Disciplinary decisions. Ultimately, the enforcement power of the Judicial Council rests on its honesty, integrity, accountability, and intellectual persuasiveness.

A review of recent decisions by the Judicial Council evidences a deeply divided judiciary. Of the first thirty-two decisions rendered by the new Council elected in 2000, seven were not unanimous. Four included dissenting opinions, two had concurring opinions, and one had a supplementary, or editorial, opinion. This polarized pattern persisted in the second round of deliberations in October 2002, with a hodgepodge of concurring and dissenting opinions. Similar to the United States Supreme Court, 5-4 decisions are becoming more customary and reflect deep
disagreement on how the laws of the church are to be interpreted. Far more serious are the latent theological presuppositions that reflect Council members' divergent understandings of the nature of the church and its mission and ministry.

Critics of the Council suggest that in recent years there has been a tendency in certain cases to reach questionable conclusions, make obvious errors, and to chart new, unexpected, and problematic interpretations. In 1999, eighteen "watchdog" United Methodist lawyers from across the United States warned of the dangers of "judicial activism" being demonstrated on the Judicial Council, suggesting the Council was attempting to make laws rather than simply to interpret them. In particular, they suggested that the Council was violating the powerful legal argument of Stare Decisis ("to stand by that which is decided"), ignoring the principle that precedent decisions are to be followed.

In defense of the Council, it should be noted that the nine members (currently five clergy and four laity) are conscientious volunteer United Methodists, who receive neither professional staff assistance nor compensation for their work. They meet only twice a year for exceedingly short time periods. In an increasingly litigious church, the number of cases being sent for their judgment has escalated significantly in recent years. In the first 28 years, from 1940 to 1968, the Council made only 255 decisions; in the last ten years, it has issued nearly 300 opinions.

The workload of the Judicial Council could be reduced if various annual conferences and some bishops were more attentive to the Discipline, focusing only on questions of law and not on parliamentary issues. In a polarized church, people attempt to get the Judicial Council to rule their way on questions when they have failed to gain support at their home base. Increasingly, the Council has to rule cases as either outside their jurisdiction or as hypothetical, and, therefore, as moot.

Error, therefore, is probably inevitable. What is disturbing is not the mistakes but the apparent unwillingness of some Council members in certain cases to openly acknowledge their errors. For example, in two cases the Council of Bishops had to request reconsideration—once (#904, #910) in regard to what the Discipline specifies in reference to the powers of the Central Conferences and the other time (#920, #930) when the Judicial Council clearly failed to cite the words of the Discipline correctly.

The Judicial Council was instituted to curb the excesses of the
bishops; now the bishops have had to plead with the Council to act within the Discipline. What is disturbing is the reluctance within the Council to be forthcoming about some of its mistakes. Nothing could erode confidence in the judiciary and church law more quickly than a future arrogant court that conceals its own limitations and lacks accountability.

In order to minimize the politicalization and polarization of the Judicial Council, I would urge several steps. First, that delegates at the next General Conference give more attention to nominations presented by the Council of Bishops, exploring also ways of depoliticizing the process. Second, that scholars and other groups of concerned United Methodists give systematic theological attention to the work of the Judicial Council. Third, that the Judicial Council itself openly exercise judicial restraint rather than engage in judicial activism, finding also ways to make their work more understandable and transparent to the constituency they serve. Fourth, that legislation broadening the geographical base of Council members be adopted, limiting representation from a single jurisdiction to two or three members. Fifth, that the General Conference authorize an independent commission to be appointed by the bishops to review the history, contributions, and weaknesses of the present system and to present policy recommendations to the 2008 General Conference.

Donald E. Messer is Henry White Warren Professor of Practical Theology and President Emeritus at The Iliff School of Theology in Denver, Colorado.

Endnotes

that had been issued in the years since 1940. The church was faced with broad and diverse opinions and issues representing the diversity within the ever-changing face of United Methodism. It was President Tom Matheny's commitment to the church and to fair-mindedness, the legal acumen, love of the church, and the graciousness of Sally Askew, Wayne Coffin, Lyn Caterson, John Corry, Wesley Bailey, Ted Walter, Zan Holmes, and Rex Bevins that made the Council work. It was deep respect, unwavering trust, and honest exchange in the face of great difference of philosophy and opinion that prevented division within the Council or compromise on the work of the church, as lived out in the Judicial Council.

Prior to 1939, the General Conference exercised both legislative and judicial powers, with the bishops of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, having limited veto power over General Conference actions deemed by them to be unconstitutional. The need for a Judicial Council of The Methodist Church, so the story goes, was to respond to the General Conference's inability to address the judicial matters that it faced every four years.1

Additionally, there was the problem of the need for interim judicial decisions which, by default, were then left to the bishops. The bishops became the interpreters of church law with no system of appeals. An additional problem had to do with the authority of the bishops' rulings. When requests were made for opinions, the issue would be entertained and a response returned, but the General Conference granted no authority to the bishops. Thus, the decisions of the bishops would be advisory rather than authoritative.

From 1918–1940 there were numerous issues regarding the Judicial Council to be hammered out, but at the 1940 General Conference provision was made for a Judicial Council with nine members—five clergy and four lay. All were to be forty years of age or older and members of The Methodist Church. An interim Council was established in 1939 prior to the 1940 General Conference, which established statutory regulations for the permanent council. The intention was that the judicial powers heretofore exercised by the General Conference would be withdrawn and vested exclusively in the Judicial Council. The decisions of the Judicial Council would be final? The General Conference has modified the Book of Discipline concerning the Judicial Council. One of the most significant
changes came at the 2000 session, when it limited a member’s tenure to sixteen years, or two consecutive eight-year terms.

The Judicial Council can best be understood in the framework of United Methodist polity. Imperfect though it may be, the genius of United Methodist governance is that it is designed to represent the historic theology, doctrine, and polity for the church’s work in the world, while facing a future that is unknown and not yet revealed. The polity of The United Methodist Church (the way in which we order our life together), while both timeless and changing, is designed to be a structure that does not need constant revision as the church lives out its understanding of the gospel in the world. The General Conference, at its best, brings to the table representatives of all God’s people so that the conversation includes the whole family of God as it deliberates and determines the mission of the church. The General Conference is the place where the most creative and forward-thinking work is done. It is the venue for discussion, lobbying, conversing, praying, debating, and determining the direction of the church. The annual conference is the heart of the church. The conference system stands over against a congregational system, which can be limited by internal desires, politics, and prejudices. A conference polity not only is designed to hold and honor myriad voices of the faithful but also is formed to keep the theological conversation faithful, lively, creative, and inclusive. Inherent in United Methodist polity is the General Conference, to which is entrusted the authority to legislate for the benefit of the whole church. To the Council of Bishops is given the responsibility to guard the faith, order, liturgy, doctrine, and discipline of the church, to seek and be a sign of unity of the faith, and to nurture the faithful. To the Judicial Council is given the responsibility to honor and uphold the Constitution, to hear and determine any appeal from a bishop’s decision of law, to issue declaratory decisions, to pass upon decisions of law made by bishops, and to hear and determine the legality of any action taken by any General Conference. The law is designed to strengthen the church. The Judicial Council must always be fair-minded and honest in protecting against the most powerful voices and resist “special interests,” which can at times be detrimental to the good of the whole church.

The Judicial Council guards the authority of the General Conference and the annual conference. It supports the authority of the bishops and helps the bishops by providing a framework for interpreting the law.
uniformly and consistently across annual conference lines. The Judicial Council brings clarity, uniformity, and fairness to the church by resisting prejudices and special interests. The Council helps to maintain the balance of power that benefits the whole church.

The Judicial Council will always be vulnerable to certain accusations. Interpreting law rather than writing it is difficult and often more nuanced than it appears. Sometimes the Council is accused of overstepping its authority. The General Conference has tried to be clear in defining the powers of the Judicial Council. Paragraphs 2609–10 of the *Book of Discipline* are vitally important, because they both define and limit the authority of the Council. Always testing these questions internally, the Council itself should be vigilant in both claiming its rightful authority of interpreting the law of the church and in using its limited authority for the good of the church. And it should have the wisdom to know the difference between interpreting and legislating.

The Judicial Council is a wise and necessary addition to the structure of The United Methodist Church. The Council helps to preserve the authority of the General Conference without further encumbering the General Conference with judicial matters when the Conference’s constitutional authority is legislative. The Judicial Council was granted the authority to address judicial matters. The Council strengthens the authority of the Council of Bishops to guard and uphold the faith and protects the Council of Bishops from having to address judicial matters. In so doing, the role of bishops for episcopal oversight for the church is strengthened.

The Judicial Council brings uniformity of interpretation of the law to the church. At its best, the Council provides a venue that is fair, impartial, and unmoved by special interests. The larger issues of law, precedence, history, and identity are kept as clear and unencumbered as possible. Also significant is the fact that the Judicial Council has the final say in appeals processes when all other avenues have been exhausted.

The General Conference should seek to keep the Judicial Council as diverse as possible. Because the Council itself is a deliberative body, the members should be elected not because of points of view or particular special interests but because they are faithful church people who have integrity, are trustworthy, and will seek to honor and uphold the church, the Constitution, and ecclesiastical law.

The various branches of Methodism struggled for more than a century
without a Judicial Council and found all solutions they tried unworkable. To ignore their struggles is to have history repeat itself.

Susan Henry-Crowe is Dean of the Chapel and Religious Life at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia.

Endnotes
1. Arthur Sanford notes, "The General Conference exercises both legislative and judicial powers. For a body consisting of more than eight hundred members to exercise judicial powers, and with each delegate exercising the right to vote on any judicial question which is presented, is to perpetuate in the Church a procedure which has been abandoned by the States, a situation which nowhere now exists, so far as I am aware, in respect of judicial questions which arise in any country." See Arthur Sanford, Reports of the Committee on Judiciary of the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church (New York: The Methodist Book Concern, 1924).
The location of Mark's immediate audience is not known. The traditional Roman context still has much support, but there is growing attention to a Galilean location. Either way, the Gospel's recipients live their discipleship in demanding and difficult socioeconomic and political circumstances. The four readings from Mark 10 below emphasize the demands of discipleship by presenting it as an alternative way of life that challenges dominant societal values. The chapter also provides encouragement for this difficult way of life with assurances of God's gracious saving power (10:27, 52).

The narrative setting of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem and two significant themes unify the chapter's subscenes. The first theme is the way of the cross. Twice in the two previous chapters, Jesus has instructed his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem to die (8:31-33; 9:30-32; also 10:32-34). True to his word, in chapter 10 Jesus journeys from Galilee into Judea, entering Jerusalem in chapter 11. As he journeys in the shadow of the cross (10:1), he instructs the disciples, who are also called to take up the cross (8:34).

In the Roman Empire, the cross was the ultimate fate of those who did not "get on board" with the elite's agenda of Roman domination and self-interest. It was the means of execution and societal exclusion for those who betrayed the status quo or who attacked, threatened, or resisted the demands and values of the Empire, often with acts of violence. To walk the way of the cross, then, has nothing to do with enduring minor irritations. It is to live against the grain, to challenge the status quo, and, at considerable risk, to embody and witness to a different reality with alternative commitments and practices.

The second theme in Mark 10 elaborates part of the content of this challenge. Throughout the chapter, Jesus addresses relationships and matters related to households: marriage and divorce (10:2-12), children (10:13-16), wealth (10:17-31), and being slaves (10:32-45). These were standard elements in a centuries-old tradition concerning household manage-
ment. Elite male philosophers and teachers understood the structuring of households to be foundational to society. Ideal households upheld certain societal values. They were hierarchical, patriarchal (male dominance as husband, father, and master) and androcentric (centered on male roles).

Throughout chapter 10, Jesus challenges this tradition of societal organization and unfolds a different form of societal structure and human relationships. Jesus' alternative vision is based on the inclusive reign, or empire, of God that he announces in his ministry (1:15; cf. 10:14, 15, 23, 24, 25). He declares God's very different purposes for human well-being that collide with these dominant societal values and structures.

Contemporary Christians, so used to being comforted by the gospel and to having our present way of life affirmed and blessed, struggle to hear the disturbing challenge of the way of the cross in this chapter. Identifying Jesus' alternative practices requires us, then, to identify comparable points of tension with our own society. Chapter 10 points not to easy cultural conformity but to cultural questioning and critique. It requires a way of life not marked by accommodation but by a lived alternative. The way of the cross confronts our dominant societal complacency and self-satisfaction and counters our quests for wealth, success, power, and status. The preacher will need to walk a fine line between "getting a hearing" and being faithful to the biblical witness.

**October 5, 2003—Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost**

**Mark 10:2-16; Job 1:1, 2:1-10; Ps. 26 or Ps. 25; Heb. 1:1-4, 2:5-12**

This difficult passage links two household emphases: marriage (10:2-12) and children (10:13-16). The first part is usually interpreted in terms of a trap to catch Jesus in his interpretation of Deut. 24:1-4, either being lax with the law or being harshly rigid in teaching about divorce. But Jesus' response points to another concern. In response to the leaders' question about what a man can do in divorcing a woman (10:2-5), Jesus talks about God's purposes for marriage (10:6-9). From creation God envisions the marriage relationship to consist not of male dominance but of "one flesh" (Gen. 1:27 and 2:24). Marriage is not a means of perpetuating a male line, but a "one flesh" relationship in which the male leaves his patriarchal family to cleave to his wife in a relationship of mutuality and equality. Jesus undermines convenient male power, thereby challenging the presumption of patriarchy. In God's vision for relationships between male and female,
the woman is not subject to male actions but is a partner in mutuality.

The resultant prohibition of divorce and remarriage in vv. 9-12 (whether initiated by a man or a woman) sounds very harsh, especially since divorced/remarried folks rightly belong to our congregations. Jesus' emphasis on God's marriage ideal "from the beginning" and his culturally unusual recognition of adultery against a wife counter two cultural norms: the easy use of male power to "put a woman away" in divorce and an understanding of adultery against a husband only. While that undercutting of male power is the good news, the ruling out of remarriage in vv. 11-12 (Matthew softens the teaching with a concession clause in 19:9) can have tragic consequences in confining people to harmful and destructive relationships—if these verses are read as divine law and not as an ideal. The text's emphasis is understandable and even liberating in its resistance to a particular cultural practice. But its contemporary use requires pastoral and theological sensitivity, as well as an informed biblical hermeneutic. The passage does not address every dimension of the complex contemporary issues involving marriage, divorce, and remarriage. In preaching, it will be important to recognize that all marriage relationships fall within the purview of the whole gospel with its promise of new life and a fresh start, unlettered by the past and bathed in God's graciously inclusive love.

As with household codes, the material on marriage is followed by a scene involving children (vv. 13-16). Jesus welcomes and blesses the children and then uses them as models for how any person is to receive God's reign (cf. 9:33-37). Conventionally in sermons, childlikeness is interpreted in terms of innocence and/or trustworthy simplicity. But while those are characteristics that we post-Enlightenment people often associate with children (any parent, of course, knows that there are no innocent or simple two-year-olds!), they were not values associated with children in the first century. Rather, children were often understood in terms of vulnerability and weakness (given the high mortality rates) and as unpredictable and disruptive in their actions (not yet socialized into the adult male world). They were regarded as marginal to that adult world, without legal rights or social status, and as unpredictable threats to its order. Hence, in trying to dismiss the children (v. 13), the disciples live out the values of their society! But not for the last time in this chapter, Jesus instructs them that disciples are to take their cues not from the cultural norms but from God's inclusive and merciful reign. Jesus welcomes, includes, and blesses these "insignificant" people.
Jesus' invitation to discipleship—to become as a child—embraces the vulnerability, weakness, and marginality of first-century childhood as fundamental qualities. The experience of and commitment to God's reign means for disciples a way of life that is marginalized by the status quo whose order, priorities, values, and structures they threaten and challenge. Disruptive disciples become vulnerable to the defensive response and ridicule of the social majority. That is the way of the cross.

October 12, 2003—Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Mark 10:17-31; Job 23:1-9, 16-17; Ps. 22:1-15; Heb. 4:12-16

Another household emphasis follows. The pursuit of wealth, and its attendant power and status, was a primary value in the hierarchical, imperial society of the first century. Within the (elite, ideal) household, it was the task of the ideal husband/father/master to provide for his household and to enhance its social status through acquiring and publicly displaying wealth. Three subsections develop aspects of this theme.

In vv. 17-22, affluence hinders discipleship. The man inquires from Jesus about participating in the completion of God's purposes. "Eternal life" is literally "life of the age"—the age to come when God's purposes are established (Dan. 12:2). By citing his observance of the commandments, the man presents as one who seeks to do God's will.

But Jesus' response exposes the man's (self-)deception. He is hindered by one thing: "he had many possessions" (v. 22); or, more accurately, many possessions own or possess him since he is "rich" (v. 25). This is not a personal matter of his private wealth. He lives in a world in which about 5 percent of the population had wealth, power, and status, while the other 95 percent had very little. This affluent man, probably an owner of extensive land holdings, upholds and benefits from a profoundly unjust society. In v. 19, Jesus adds to his summary of the Decalogue a commandment that is not on Moses' list: "you shall not defraud," a verb used for not paying wages to laborers (Deut. 24:14). The man's affluence is sustained, in part, by oppressive practices. And his declaration in v. 20 that he has kept these commandments reveals both his complicity in this system and his self-deception about his participation.

Jesus' loving call to discipleship (v. 21) requires the man to abandon a way of life marked by exploitation and conspicuous consumption. He is to divest his wealth, power, and status; redistribute his wealth so as to undermine the hierarchical division of have- nots and have-nots; and invest himself in...
Jesus' mission of embodying God's reign in a world where all have access to the resources needed to sustain life. Jesus does not glorify poverty, but he does ask the rich man to identify with the poor, those without options and resources who do not matter to the wealthy. As in the household, where vulnerable and marginal children (vv. 13-16) and slaves (vv. 43-45) are central to God's ways, so in socioeconomic life the poor have a special place. The rich man's divestment and redistribution of wealth will mean his participation in Jesus' mission.

In vv. 23-27, Jesus elaborates the issues evident in the man's rejection of the call to discipleship. Wealth hinders people from entrusting themselves to God's reign. Wealth defines people ("someone who is rich" [v. 25]), thereby preventing an identity that derives from relationship with God ("children," the socially marginal and unimportant [vv. 13-16]). Wealth becomes the object of people's trust and loyalties. It blinds people to the plight of others and to God's different world of redefined relationships and reordered access to resources. The disciples, shaped by the value that wealth indicates desirable success and God's blessing, wonder how such an alternative way of life can reflect God's salvation (v. 26). The theme of the wealthy's misdirected priorities and allegiances runs throughout Scripture. So too does an emphasis on the willingness of the poor to entrust themselves to God's saving work (v. 27). The poor are like children (vv. 13-16) in that they are marginal to where the societal action is but central to God's saving purposes and blessing.

The third subsection, vv. 28-31, also picks up on a biblical theme—that of salvific reward for those who entrust themselves to God's just purposes. Jesus promises the disciples who have put following him ahead of all else two sorts of rewards (v. 30). First, in the present, they form a new community/family not defined by kinship but in which resources (houses, lands) are readily available to others. Interestingly, in the list of relationships in this new family, there is no mention of fathers, reinforcing the chapter's focus on resisting conventional patriarchal societal values and shaping an alternative existence (v. 30). This new community does not remove disciples totally from existing structures, as a comparison of 1:16-20 and 10:35 indicates. But it does redefine the priorities and allegiances of disciples and the ways in which they structure social interaction and deploy wealth.

Second, disciples will be rewarded by taking part in the completion of God's just and saving work in the age to come when there will be plentiful...
resources for all and wholeness and health (Isa. 25:6; 35:5-6). In v. 30, Jesus refers to persecutions. The disciples' alternative way of life threatens the values and structures of the status quo. There is always a backlash.

Is the term affluent Christian an oxymoron? In an age of aggressive marketing, contemporary Christians in the United States seem quite willing to believe the assurances of numerous advertisements that what we own and how much we own matter much more than anything else. Accordingly, we give little "air time" to Jesus' warning about the dangers of wealth. And proclamation is difficult because, after all, we are all compromised by this cultural norm. And we have numerous rationalizations— theological and cultural—close at hand to deflect Jesus' words. Yet this passage remains in the canon that we profess to value so much. It raises vastly troubling issues for "rich Christians in an age of hunger" about our priorities, greed, obsession with work and status, right to leisure and comfort, efforts to secure our futures, and the injustice and defiant indifference of our affluent lifestyles to the many in the global village who lack so many basics. Surely this collection of issues needs our honest, prayerful, sustained, and active attention, study, and openness to God's saving work (v. 27).

October 19, 2003—Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Mark 10:35-45; Job 38:1-7; Ps. 104:1-9, 24, 35c; Heb. 5:1-10

The lectionary strangely excludes Jesus' third passion prediction (vv. 32-34). References to Jesus' death introduce (vv. 32-34) and close (v. 45) this scene in which two disciples campaign for preeminence in God's reign. Framing the scene with references to Jesus' death vividly contrasts the self-giving way of the cross with the societal quest for greatness. The contrast underlines the scene's focus on renouncing status and giving oneself in service as fundamental to being a disciple. The image of "slave," used both for the disciples' way of life and for Jesus' death, again draws on household relationships and redefines the contours of the alternative family/community to which disciples belong (v. 30). If all are slaves, there can be, unlike in conventional households, no masters! Service, not power, marks discipleship. Again the scene puts the inconsequential, the lowly, the powerless, the marginalized, at the center of God's workings. Such an alternative order challenges our certainty—personal and societal—that God is much more pleased with and impressed by success and status.

In stark contrast to Jesus' self-giving death (vv. 32-34), James and John
ask Jesus to reserve for them the places of prominence in the establishment of God's reign (vv. 35-37). Their request, like their attempt to turn away the children (v. 13) and their shock at Jesus' disinterest in affluence (v. 26), encapsulates dominant cultural values, a yearning for public recognition of one's status. A host's allotment of seats to his guests at a banquet, for example, was a very public and dramatic measure of how others perceived a person's status. A guest could be honored or shamed by such placement, as Jesus' parable in Luke 14:7-11 illustrates. Donahue and Harrington draw attention to the highly structured, hierarchical seating order prescribed for the Qumran community's meals and meetings, in imitation, so it was believed, of the eschatological banquet. Supposedly, the imagined end-time shapes their present; but, in fact, they have projected the present onto the future and created God's reign in their own image! Instead of imitating the cultural values and structures, disciples must learn a different way of social interaction, a way of resistance and challenge.

Jesus' response in vv. 38-40 highlights the way not of honor and status but of suffering and self-giving. The image of "cup" is ambivalent. It can depict suffering, punishment, wrath (often brought on by imperial powers; cf. Isa. 51:17-23; Ezek. 23:31-34); but it can also depict joyful salvation (Ps. 116:13). The disciples' confident response in v. 39a suggests they hear the latter dimension but not the former, causing Jesus to emphasize that discipleship means identifying with him. It is the way of the cross. God alone grants eschatological rewards.

Joined by ten angry disciples (worried that James and John would get a jump on the desirable seats? The quest for glory runs deep.), Jesus again (cf. 9:33-37) underlines self-giving service as central to discipleship. He does so with another stark contrast to the values and political structures of their hierarchical society ruled over by a few wealthy and powerful men through force, intimidation, and alliances for the benefit of a few and at the expense of the most (v. 42). The sick and damaged people who populate the Gospels witness to the destructive impact of power that prevents people from having access to resources necessary to sustain life. The community of disciples is not to imitate this societal and political pattern of destructive domination. In redefining "greatness" in terms of the role of a slave (vv. 43-44), Jesus again refers to household structures.

Slavery, a tragic event in United States history, is an institution that we rightly deplore. Can there be any good news in this image? As it has done
with references to children and the poor, the chapter again picks up an image of the outsider, the marginal person, the unimportant, to image God’s ways of working and the way of discipleship. All disciples are to live this role. There are no masters in the community exercising self-serving power. The community puts itself at the disposal of God to work for God’s purposes. And in so doing it imitates and identifies with Jesus, who performs the ultimate act of benefiting others by giving his life.

Jesus describes his death as a “ransom for many” (v. 45). The phrase evokes the Suffering Servant of Isa. 53:12, who absorbs Babylon’s imperial violence and effects the people’s salvation or rescue. The term ransom derives from a word group meaning “redemption,” “freedom,” “liberation.” The word refers to God liberating Israel from slavery in Egypt (Exod. 6:6; Deut. 7:8) and exile in Babylon (Isa. 43:1). Jesus continues God’s redeeming work. His death “for many” is in the place of and for the benefit of others.

How does it do so? Jesus’ death reveals the destructive nature of the existing world and the lengths to which it will go to resist God’s life-giving purposes. Jesus absorbs this world’s destructive violence, but his being raised from the dead by God shows that the sinful world does not have the final word, that it cannot defeat God’s gracious purposes for all people. His resurrection anticipates the establishment of God’s good and just reign and the creation of a new heaven and earth. In the meantime, disciples live an alternative, faithful, and hopeful existence that challenges, not mimics, the world’s ways of operating. In this life of service, in imitation of Jesus, they know suffering is inevitable.

Jesus backs this teaching with his own example. This very difficult passage stands over against the human obsession with power, honor, status, domination, and greatness wherever it occurs, including and especially in the church. It stands against the church’s cultural imitation and accommodation. It challenges us to live against the cultural grain, to cultivate a completely different mindset, and to embody the reign of God in our relationships, structures, and lives of service.

October 26, 2003—Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

This demanding chapter ends with a marvelous story that offers readers reassurance and strength. The way of the cross—the countercultural way of discipleship with its alternative patterns of social interaction—is hard, but
with God's help and with Jesus' transforming and life-giving power, it is possible (vv. 27, 51).

The scene, located in Jericho on the way to the cross in Jerusalem (v. 46a), exemplifies many of the chapter's emphases. The central figure, Bartimaeus, a "blind beggar," recalls the earlier healing in 8:22-26. He is not one of the elite but one of the physically damaged marginals whose place is, significantly, on the outskirts of Jericho beside the road. He hears that Jesus approaches and greets the proclamation with a response of insight ("Son of David" [v. 47]; see Ps. 72:4, 12-14 for a vision of the Davidic king committed to justice and to the poor and needy) and faith crying out for Jesus' mercy.

Predictably, there is opposition, but he persists in his faithful response (v. 48). The "many" who rebuke him are not explicitly identified. Are they part of the "large crowd" (v. 46) or are they disciples, or a mixture of both? Whoever they are, they play the same role that disciples have played through the chapter as opponents of God's purposes (see vv. 13, 26, 35-40). Interestingly, elite figures also oppose God's purposes (vv. 22, 32-34), allying disciples and elites often as opponents of God's reign, while the marginals, the "nobodies," exhibit faith and welcome God's intervention. Both dimensions have been woven through the previous chapters: the non-comprehending disciples who so often end up on the wrong side of God's workings and the unlikely marginal figures who exhibit faith in surprising ways (vv. 24-30; 9:14-27). It is a salutary warning to the church not to be an obstacle to those outside its circle who exhibit faith. It is also encouraging that such faith exists in spite of (as well as in) the church.

The crowd does not dictate Jesus' actions (v. 49). Jesus does not buy into its dominant cultural agenda, shaped by concerns of wealth, status, and honor, and dismissive of the broken and insignificant (cf. v. 48). Jesus' alternative agenda embodies God's inclusive mercy. In language that resembles some previous interactions between Jesus and disciples ("take heart" [6:50]; "called" [9:35]), Jesus summons the man who responds with enthusiastic determination and singlemindedness. Jesus' wonderfully gracious question, "What do you want me to do for you?" repeats his response to the question of James and John in v. 36 about seats of prominence in God's reign. The contrast between the blind man's request for wholeness and that of the disciples for power is stark.

In response to the man's request for sight, Jesus pronounces the man's
healing: "your faith has made you well" (v. 52). The double meaning of the verb prevents any elevation of the spiritual and diminishing of the physical in the miracle. The scriptural tradition is not quick to make that division. Isaiah's visions of what the world looks like when God's reign is established in full—his visions of God's salvation—hold the two dimensions together (see Isa. 25:1-10; 35:1-10). The day of salvation—the day of wiping away tears, suffering, and death—is a day of physical transformation. There is abundant food to eat and there is wholeness of body among "the ransomed of the LORD" (Isa. 35:10). That is, Jesus' healings are a foretaste and demonstration of and a participation in the yet-future completion of God's purposes for all creation. God's embracing of the physical world (which, after all, God created) requires nothing less from disciples.

The story ends with a very significant summary of discipleship: "he ... followed him on the way" (v. 52). The language of "following" is discipleship language (1:17, 18, 20). The way, of course, is Jesus' road to Jerusalem—the way of the cross. It is a countercultural, alternative way of life. It challenges and disturbs conventional wisdom and cultural norms. It arouses opposition from non-disciples and resistance from disciples. It is the way of courage, discernment, perseverance, and faith—found often in surprising places.

Warren Carter is Pherigo Professor of New Testament at Saint Paul School of Theology in Kansas City, Missouri.

Endnotes


3. For good discussions of Mark 10, see Donahue and Harrington, The Gospel of Mark, 292-320; Pheme Perkins, "Mark," in The New Interpreter's Bible
LECTIONARY STUDY


4. Donahue and Harrington, Gospel of Mark, 314.
Ethics often provides the point of contact between Christian faith and the worlds of thought and action beyond the church. When pastors speak out in the public life of their communities, they usually address moral issues related to discrimination, gambling, the needs of the poor, or the responsibility of public officials. When people bring their problems to church, the issues that trouble them are likely to be moral dilemmas in the workplace, hard choices about medical care, or deep moral questions about how to reconcile the ideals of faith and the responsibilities of citizenship.

It is hardly surprising, then, that Christian ethics has generally developed around the questions that arise when faith encounters life and when specifically Christian choices have to be related to secular ideas and institutions. In recent years, however, Christian ethics has become more concerned about the distinctiveness of the Christian message. If Christians have anything to contribute to the general moral discussion, it is not just because they work harder at it or are more serious about it. It must be because their faith sustains the moral life in unique ways and guides their choices through paths that cannot be reduced to rules and methods. Christian ethics cannot be just another way of thinking about the good human life. As Bonhoeffer put it, what is important in Christian ethics "... is now no longer that I should become good, or that the condition of the world should be made better by my action, but that the reality of God should show itself everywhere to be the ultimate reality."

Of course, Christians have usually thought that their faith provides moral insights missing from other worldviews, secular or religious. Reinhold Niebuhr, who was perhaps the most effective Christian voice in public life in the past century, thought that Christians are able to deal with politics and history because their distinctive prophetic faith helps them grasp all the possibilities for both love and egoism that are inherent in human nature. Niebuhr, however, also believed that a careful reading of human history...
would support this Christian interpretation. While Christians are attuned by biblical faith to see what is really going on, both they and their non-Christian neighbors can find corroboration of this insight in history, social science, and other forms of shared human knowledge.2

Many contemporary Christian ethicists are not so sure. Drawing attention to the uniqueness of Christian faith, they stress the differences between the Christian narrative and other ways of seeing the world. The Christian moral life cannot be reduced to "quandary ethics" that provides answers to specific moral questions in terms that anyone might appreciate. The Christian life has to be taken whole and on its own terms.

Stanley Hauerwas, the most important of these new voices, says that theology and ethics "divorced from a full doctrine of God cannot help but distort the character of God and, accordingly, of the world in which we find ourselves." Niebuhr sought to present Christian ethics as moral wisdom that everyone could comprehend, even if the Christian language of sin and grace was sometimes strange to their ears. By contrast, Hauerwas argues that moral choices set in the context of a whole Christian life, lived in the community of the church, will often be incomprehensible to those outside, even though the church often uses familiar words about virtue and love to explain what it is doing. The implication is that we should rethink Christian ethics, not as a series of Christian answers to common moral problems, but as a story of what the church does and how it lives. Christian ethics is primarily a witness to the gospel's shaping of the Christian community. Its value as a problem solver for society at large is limited, at best.

Hauerwas's approach to Christian ethics is developed most completely in his recent work With the Grain of the Universe (Brazos, 2001). This book, derived from his Gifford Lectures delivered in 2001, articulates his position in relation to three other religious thinkers: William James and Reinhold Niebuhr, whose liberalism he criticizes; and Karl Barth, whose rediscovery of Christian witness and rejection of natural theology provides the starting point for Hauerwas's own work. For those who seek a more general introduction to this approach, Hauerwas's "primer in Christian ethics," The Peaceable Kingdom (University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), is a good choice, along with a recent work, The Goodness of God: Theology, Church, and the Social Order (Brazos, 2001), by D. Stephen Long.

The emphasis on the distinctiveness of the Christian message and the
The importance of seeing it as a whole shapes other recent work in Christian ethics as well. Some, however, continue to take a Niebuhrian approach, in contrast to Hauerwas's focus on ethics lived in the Christian community. Max Stackhouse provides a comprehensive theological assessment of emerging global realities in three volumes on God and globalization: Max Stackhouse, ed., *God and Globalization: Religion and the Powers of the Common Life*, 3 vols. (Trinity Press International, 2000). The immense economic and cultural changes that globalization has wrought in human life are seen here as evidence of God's work in history. Much of that evidence is available for assessment by historians, economists, anthropologists, and other students of the human condition. Stackhouse and his colleagues, in a collaboration that has extended over several years, compile much of that evidence and assess it from the standpoint of their own specialized disciplines. What they seek to provide that other studies of globalization do not is the theological perspective that ties it all together.

Stackhouse and his colleagues do not, of course, provide a blanket theological endorsement of globalization. They have a critical perspective that is shaped by a biblical understanding that God's power is manifest in history and yet remains incomplete and hidden until the eschaton. Globalization cannot be dismissed as evil or irrelevant. To ignore such massive changes would be to deny God's dominion over all the powers of this world. But neither can globalization be seen as the fulfillment of God's plan, in the way that an earlier generation of Social Gospel writers hoped for changes that would realize the kingdom of God on earth. Globalization provides the field of God's action in history within which our responses to God's dominion must be lived. Our response to God's dominion includes what we do as Christians living in the church, but it can never be confined only to that.

Stackhouse's project involves contributions from some twenty scholars, many of whom are well known in their fields. It thus defies easy summary, and readers with an interest in a specific globalization issue will want to explore the essays in each of the three volumes. Stackhouse's own approach to Christian ethics becomes clear in his essay in the third volume ("Introduction," in *Christ and the Dominions of Civilization*, 3:1-57). Stackhouse also provides a succinct summary of the project in a recent article ("Public Theology and Political Economy in a Globalizing Era," *Studies in Christian Ethics* 14 [November 2001]:63-86). The full development no doubt awaits the
CHRIStIAn ETHICS

promised fourth volume in the God and Globalization series.

Stackhouse calls for the development of a "public theology" that is shaped far more by biblical ideas than by the least-common-denominator ideas of "public ethics" or "civil religion." Stackhouse's public theology offers the covenantal understanding of salvation history as a framework through which everyone can grasp what is happening in globalization, precisely because that theology tells us what God is doing in history and allows us to see globalization as part of that narrative. The point for ethics, of course, is not only to understand but also to guide choice and action by which institutions and practices are shaped for the new global environment. In those tasks, the conclusions of public theology will be tested by the general experience of those around the world who wrestle with the multiple challenges that globalization poses to our common life.

A third important approach to these issues is provided by David Hollenbach, S.J., who writes about the common good and Christian ethics (The Common Good and Christian Ethics. New Studies in Christian Ethics [Cambridge University Press, 2002]). If Hauerwas and Stackhouse begin with the unique affirmations of Christian theology and then work toward ethics, Hollenbach begins with the moral problems of public life and seeks the distinctive contribution the Christian tradition offers toward their solution. Thus, The Common Good—and Christian ethics—begins with "the eclipse of the public," the rise of individualism, and the loss of community that substitute an easy tolerance of diversity for shared moral commitments. This is a common lament, but Hollenbach makes it more pointed by showing how tolerance alone will not solve the problems of race and poverty that pose real threats to the citadels of freedom and security that many Americans are building for themselves, away from the evidence of the decay of public life (32-61).

The distinctive contribution that Christian ethics offers in this situation is the idea of "the common good"—a tradition of thinking about shared social values that goes back at least as far as Thomas Aquinas's Christian reformulation of Aristotle's ethics and politics. The Western liberal commitment to individual freedom, Hollenbach suggests, has played itself out. Freedom and tolerance should not be forsaken, but they cannot solve our most urgent social problems. This task requires an understanding of human dignity that implicates individual well-being more directly in the goods that the whole society creates and shares. Participation in this social
process, rather than individual rights to a share of the product, is the key to justice understood in terms of the common good. Christianity has long known how to realize this idea of justice without requiring everyone to share its theological presuppositions; but creating the common good in today’s society will require an openness to religious ideas that is frequently missing in the politics of liberal individualism. It may also require a commitment to public life that is missing in those versions of Christianity that are primarily concerned to develop the distinctive virtues of Christian life lived in a shared community of faith.

Hollenbach’s understanding of the common good reflects a tradition of American Catholic social teaching that has applied the papal social encyclicals especially to the problems of economic life and social justice. Increasingly, this way of bringing a distinctive Christian tradition of biblical teaching and ethical reflection to bear on specific problems of contemporary society has come to be emulated by leadership in other denominations; and it has become the most important way that churches speak to social issues today. That is a remarkable development, considering the marginal position that Catholicism occupied in American public life as recently as the 1960s. Perhaps, however, this leadership role could only be possible for a tradition that understood that its message was not a simple recapitulation of the culture’s prevailing values. Given the new emphasis on the distinctiveness of Christian ethics, those in the best position to provide leadership may well be those with some experience of teaching from the margins rather than from the center.

If this is the case, then we may expect future developments of importance in Christian ethics to come from Orthodox, evangelical, feminist, and liberation perspectives. These voices are not absent in the contemporary discussion, but they have not yet provided comprehensive views of North American social ethics with the scope of the three systematic proposals reviewed here.

To say that Hauerwas, Stackhouse, and Hollenbach offer comprehensive views and systematic proposals is not to suggest that their works are complete or that they anticipate every new development. All of the works mentioned here were written before the events of September 11, 2001; and even today we are still too close to this new experience to offer a comprehensive Christian understanding of it.

Nevertheless, the need to make sense of the destruction and loss of life
in New York, Washington, and Pennsylvania, and to provide a moral framework for the “war on terrorism” impels an immediate response. A sampling of that response appears in Strike Terror No More, a collection of essays by theologians and ethicists that appeared early in 2002. Max Stackhouse and Stanley Hauerwas are among the contributors. More extensive works will no doubt be forthcoming as Christian ethicists rethink their ideas about the state, violence, just war, and international relations in light of this new and rapidly developing situation. Those who seek to understand it in terms of Islamic and Christian ethics will want to give attention to a timely study by John Kelsay (Islam and War: A Study in Comparative Ethics [Westminster/John Knox, 1993]), first published just after the Gulf War and still highly relevant to understanding Iraq and the Islamic world today.

The adaptations that must be made to relate September 11 to the visions of Christian witness, globalization, and the common good that Hauerwas, Stackhouse, and Hollenbach provide are reminders that thinking about Christian ethics is never a matter of comparing one static system with another. We are always testing the systems against events. In this article, I have concentrated on Hauerwas, Stackhouse, and Hollenbach because their works seem comprehensive enough to explain much that has already happened and resilient enough to accommodate an unexpected future.

Robin W. Lovin is Cary M. Maguire University Professor of Ethics at Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas.

Endnotes

3. Stanley M. Hauerwas, With the Grain of the Universe: The Church’s Witness and Natural Theology (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2001), 15.
5. See, for example, Children and Poverty: An Episcopal Initiative, by The Council of Bishops of The United Methodist Church (1996). The document was revised.
in 2001 under the title *Community with Children and the Poor: Renewing the Episcopal Initiative*. The revised statement can be accessed online at [http://www.umc.org/initiative/statement.html](http://www.umc.org/initiative/statement.html).


Every preacher who faces the relentless privilege and challenge, blessed yet daunting, of stepping into the pulpit Sunday after Sunday will find in this newly revised collection a treasure trove of material for reflection and renewal. Richard Lischer, the James T. and Alice Mead Cleland Professor of Preaching at Duke Divinity School, brings to his anthology the perspective of the life of the church in both parish and academia. He has assembled an extensive and deep resource for the classroom, for clergy study groups, and for individual pastors seeking to grow in an understanding of the preaching task.

This reader on preaching is organized into seven divisions, each addressing a dimension of preaching: What is Preaching?, the Preacher, Proclaiming the Word, Biblical Interpretation, Rhetoric, the Hearer, Preaching and the Church. Each division contains excerpts from six to eleven writers, spanning an astonishing range of time and perspective that includes Augustine, Karl Barth, Oscar Romero, Martin Luther, Justo and Catherine Gonzalez, Phoebe Palmer, Gardner Taylor, Richard B. Hays, Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, and many others. Lischer, himself a distinguished preacher and teacher, has written an interesting and helpful introduction to each selection that introduces the author, illuminates the particular contribution of the piece, and sets it in relationship to the aims of the larger collection.

That Lischer's defining criterion in the selection of each piece is theological is precisely what makes this collection so engaging and timely. While many pieces do contain implications for technique or style, overall the collection provides a much-needed theological foundation for reflection on the preaching task. In contrast to many current offerings on preaching that oversimplify the task and infantilize the congregation, this is not a book about preaching for church growth, or preaching to meet the needs of the congregation, or preaching to entertain postmodern worshipers. Thankfully, there is no mention of overhead projectors or
sermon worksheet handouts designed for easy listening. Instead, the overall impact of the book is to explore what Barbara Brown Taylor refers to in her contribution as the "alchemy" of preaching, created in the fertile interplay among preacher, Word, and hearer. In Lischer's words from the Introduction,

The many studies of form and design that so dominated our generation's homiletical thinking, as well as more recent theories of culture and human consciousness, cannot produce the renewal promised by the gospel. Instead of seeking a scheme by which to clothe and communicate a religious idea, preachers will eventually ask the more integrated, theological question: What is it about the gospel that demands this particular expression? It is that question, and no other, that holds the promise of the renewal of preaching [xvi].

The book's title is taken from the mistranslation of Ps. 68:11 in the Great Bible of 1560, immortalized in Handel's Messiah: "The Lord gave the word; great was the company of the preachers." All pastors who preach regularly from within the context of the opportunities and the complexities of congregational life will find vocational renewal in remembering what it is to be entrusted with the Word on behalf of God's people. "Is there any word from the LORD?" the king asked the prophet. The voices in this collection, gathered from across the church's experience, provide the reader with opportunities to first dig deep and rediscover the roots of faith that urged Jeremiah's courageous reply of "Yes, there is!" and then to risk the consequences of the proclamation of God's Word. Here is invitation to serious reflection and renewed commitment to the awesome charge of speaking that Word of life and hope. Here is solid ground for resisting the temptations of popularization, trivialization, and mediocrity. Here is found conviction and courage to dedicate the best of one's abilities to the task of preaching.

Oddly, the Revised English Bible's translation of the same verse from Psalm 68 reveals the book's insufficiency: "The LORD speaks the word: the women with the good news are a mighty host." (Note that these women are offered as an alternative reading in the NRSV.) As strong as this collection is, the preponderance of authors nevertheless represents a European male perspective. It is regrettable that more attention was not given to bringing forward a much more diverse and global perspective on the preaching task into an even more expansive and comprehensive collection.
Even so, The Company of Preachers is an important resource for both classroom and pastor's study. Lischer's historical perspective documents how the central questions and controversies of preaching have varied from age to age. In this time of ecclesiastical and liturgical change and turbulence, when many are flailing and rudderless, this work challenges every preacher to commit the time and energy necessary for the theological work that precedes renewal in preaching. It is a needed and essential challenge. This collection provides compelling resources for a renewal of awe, humility, and conviction.

Reviewed by Patricia Farris. Farris is Senior Minister at Santa Monica First United Methodist Church in Santa Monica, California. She is a member of the Quarterly Review Editorial Board.
Issue Theme:  
"Make Disciples of Jesus Christ"  

Our Mission Reconsidered: Do We Really "Make" Disciples?  
Sarah Heiner Lancaster  

Worship and Becoming Disciples  
Robin Knowles Wallace  

Disciples for the Future: Small Groups and Vital Faith Development  
Lisa R. Withrow  

Getting the Whole Job Done: Spiritual Nurture amid Committee Business  
Susan W. N. Ruach  

Making Disciples in the Wesleyan Tradition: Practicing the Means of Grace  
Laceye Warner  

Outside the Theme  
Radical Orthodoxy and Methodism  
D. Stephen Long  

The Church in Review  
The Judicial Council  
Donald E. Messer  
Susan Henry-Crowe  

A Word on the Word  
Lectionary Study  
Warren Carter  

Issues In: Christian Ethics  
Robin W. Lovin  

Book Review  
The Company of Preachers: Wisdom on Preaching, Augustine to the Present  
ed. by Richard Lischer (Eerdmans. 2002)  
Reviewer: Patricia Farris  

NEXT ISSUE:  
PROVIDENCE AND THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD