Do United Methodists Still Believe in

HOLINESS?
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; $35 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, 1992).

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Quarterly Review
Summer 2005

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Website: http://www.quarterlyreview.org
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The question "Do United Methodists still believe in holiness?" may strike some readers as anachronistic—an exercise in nostalgia that the church can ill afford in the face of the pressing social, political, economic, and religious issues of the new century. For others, the question betrays an ecclesial self-preoccupation typical of a church that believes that retrieving a stable denominational "identity" will secure its survival in a world in which, to use Marx's famous depiction of the modern age, "all that is solid melts into air." Yet other readers may view the question as a welcome and long-overdue opportunity for United Methodists to mine the riches of their tradition for a self-understanding that aims not at institutional survival but at faithful witness precisely in and for these turbulent and uncertain times. The essays that follow are clear-eyed and unflinching in their analysis and critique of the neglect of the doctrine and practice of holiness in United Methodism and some of its sister churches in the Wesleyan tradition. Yet in different ways they also agree that a critical retrieval of their heritage of holiness of heart and life will allow United Methodists and their fellow Wesleyans to be caught up in the transforming winds of God's Spirit blowing across our world today.

In her article, Elaine Heath laments the fact that for many United Methodists "the volcanic intensity of Wesley's drive to spread scriptural holiness across the land has cooled to a lukewarm memory." Yet she detects a new holiness movement aborning in our day in what is variously known as the "emerging church," the "missional church," the "convergence movement," and the "new monasticism." Instead of dismissing it, United Methodists should embrace the best of this new movement and so join an expression of the holy life fit for our postmodern times.

Rebekah Miles agrees that Wesley's vision of holiness of heart and life...
COME, HOLY SPIRIT

has largely lost its centrality and force in the lives of United Methodists. For Miles, United Methodists today struggle to embrace again Wesley's vision of the holy life because we live in a culture whose ceaseless busyness and compulsion to control militate against the rhythms of love of God and neighbor. Miles offers a vision of the holy life that is grounded in the means of grace and she points out fascinating ways in which the "arts of holy living" speak to the deepest challenges of our times.

Samuel Powell tells a story that most United Methodists likely know little or nothing about, namely, the Holiness Movement that emerged in Methodism in the nineteenth century and today is heir to more than twenty denominations in the United States, including the Church of the Nazarene and the Salvation Army. The import of Powell's chronicle extends beyond the need to educate United Methodists about a little-known part of their history. It reminds us continually to pray for "ears to hear" the voices in our midst that call us back—and not always politely!—to our raison d'etre: for these passionate provocations might just open us to hear anew what the Spirit is saying to the churches.

Henry Whelchel provides a fascinating and salutary insight into the experience and practice of holiness among African Americans in the United States. From early days, Methodism's appeal to African Americans has been its understanding of holiness as both personal and social. Beginning with the Spirit-inspired preaching of Jarena Lee, Amanda Berry Smith, Richard Allen, and others, the message of holiness has held up a holistic vision of the Christian faith that resonates deeply with the religious experience of African Americans. And, says Whelchel, today the fastest-growing African-American Methodist churches are places where a "holy fire of Pentecost" has been rekindled, giving rise to a vision of holiness as a "religion of the head, the heart, and the hands."

COME, HOLY SPIRIT!

Hendrik R. Pieterse is the editor of Quarterly Review.
During an interview concerning his recent appointment to the East Ohio Conference, Bishop John L. Hopkins was asked to explain his vision for the church. With prophetic clarity the bishop named the central truth that seems to have been forgotten by many of us in The United Methodist Church, namely, that Methodism essentially is a holiness movement, not a denomination.

In our Wesleyan heritage, we believe in personal and social holiness, where the assurance of our justification yields fruit in our sanctification. That is, we not only affirm Jesus Christ as Savior, but live daily with Jesus Christ as Lord. John Wesley did not intend to start a new church. He started a holiness movement that was both very personal and very social. I came to know God’s love in Jesus Christ through that movement. I joined that movement to share that love with others. When we work together at the local level we can help the movement of Christ thrive.¹

Bishop Hopkins’s emphasis on our tradition as a holiness movement excites me. I want to hear more. I want this to be our self-understanding. I want our orthodoxy and our orthopraxis to ring true to the bishop’s words. Yet life in the average local church tells me that we have “miles to go before we sleep.”

Other than in the ordination liturgy, I have not heard much about holiness or perfection when clergy gather for annual conference. We talk about it in the class on United Methodist doctrine that I teach, especially in reading Wesley’s sermons, but my students and I do not hear much about
it from pulpits. For many contemporary Methodists, the very words perfection, holiness, and entire sanctification seem antiquated. Holiness tends to be presented and understood either as personal growth in grace through spiritual disciplines or as corporate commitments to social justice, such as those expressed in the Book of Resolutions.

Quite honestly, for too many United Methodist churches the theological conversation—much less the activity of the local church—never gets around to holiness of heart and life because the focus is on survival. Conflict is the order of the day, with congregations embroiled in power struggles, worship wars, and financial crises. Clergy dropout rates are at an all-time high because of this kind of conflict. Also, many United Methodist clergy who have a heart for leading declining churches to recapture the Wesleyan vision of holiness of heart and life experience disillusionment. For even when they succeed against great odds, navigating the many conflicts and the spiritual and emotional drain of leading a declining congregation through renewal, there is no guarantee that the next pastor (who could be appointed the following year) will have the same vision. When the new pastor does not (which happens far too often) the inevitable loss of momentum and the resulting crisis of faith in the congregation are devastating. Congregations do not rise above or grow beyond the vision of the pastor.

For these and other reasons, I am not convinced that most United Methodists see ourselves as pilgrims, much less as pioneers, of a holiness movement. We have read Wesley’s sermons; we know the stories of the circuit riders and the class and band meetings; and we remember the great names of Asbury, Coke, and others along the way. But where is the fire? For too many of us the volcanic intensity of Wesley’s drive to spread scriptural holiness across the land has cooled to a lukewarm memory.

However, something new is on the horizon—a breath of God that bears an uncanny resemblance to the original holiness movement. It is organic, humble, hard to define, widespread, untamed, ecumenical, subversive, prophetic, and grass-roots. I believe a new holiness movement is in the process of being born; and if we are wise and respond with the generosity and teachability of heart that Albert Outler called “the Wesleyan spirit,” we will welcome and not stifle this move of God within The United Methodist Church. Instead of letting it divide us, we will let it lead us back to the deepest wisdom of our own theology.

The new movement has the potential to restore to us Wesley’s brilliant
vision of personal and social holiness. It could help return to us Wesley's ecumenical genius, not only in scholarly conversation but also in the reality of day-to-day life in the local church. The new movement could actually heal some conflicted churches and assist us in constructively working our way through thorny ecclesiological and ethical issues facing our church.

A Brief History of Holiness

Just what is this new movement and why haven't more of us heard about it? And how can it deliver all these fruits? We can best understand the emerging movement if we first recall the evolution of thought about holiness, from Wesley's day to our own. There is much to be gained from remembering our own story.

When John Wesley set out to spread scriptural holiness across the land, he had specific goals in mind. In his sermon "The New Birth," Wesley explains:

\[\text{Gospel holiness is no less than the image of God stamped upon the heart. It is no other than the whole mind which was in Christ Jesus. It consists of all heavenly affections and tempers mingled together in one. It implies such a continual, thankfull love to him who hath not withheld from us his Son, his only Son, as makes it natural, and in a manner necessary to us, to love every child of man, as fills us with bowels of mercies, kindness, gentleness, long-suffering. It is such a love of God as teaches us to be blameless in all manner of conversation; as enables us to present our souls and bodies, all we are and all we have, all our thoughts, words and actions, a continual sacrifice to God, acceptable through Christ Jesus.}\]

Holiness is about loving God and neighbor as fully as possible, which includes having the power to say no to sin. Wesley's sermon "The Scripture Way of Salvation" summarizes his vision of Christian perfection. It explains that perfection is not about freedom from human ignorance, limitations, or mistakes but rather is about the progressive work of the Holy Spirit within the believer, bringing increasing freedom and power to love as God loves. Methodist ordinands today still use Wesley's language when they promise that they are "going on to perfection," "expect to be made perfect in love in this life," and are "earnestly striving after perfection." For Wesley, holiness of heart and life is a result of faith and is the fruit of the Holy Spirit living...
THE EMERGING HOLINESS MOVEMENT

... in and through us, leading us to maturity. In other words, holiness is not works righteousness. Like justification, sanctification comes by faith and is the gift of God's grace that leads us to maturity.

However, Wesley had scarcely entered glory when Methodism encountered what Outler describes as "the greatest tragedy in Methodist history":

... the nineteenth-century conflicts that swirled around Wesley's emphasis upon "holiness of heart and life" and its alterations and distortions at the hands of men and women who were seeking to be faithful Wesleyans (on both sides!) without having experienced anything close to the theological and spiritual struggles out of which his own original synthesis had emerged. The ironic outcome of this process (especially in America) was that the keystone in the arch of Wesley's own theological "system" came to be a pebble in the shoes of standard-brand Methodists, even as a distorted version of Wesley's doctrine of sanctification (as "a second and separate work of grace subsequent to regeneration") was becoming a shibboleth of self-righteous Methodists who professed themselves holier than the rest.5

Is Outler's assessment of the second Wesleyan holiness movement accurate? Did Holiness Movement leaders such as Phoebe Palmer actually think of themselves as more righteous than everyone else and were they "the problem" with their renewal emphasis on holiness of heart and life? Or was the problem a combination of factors, including a Methodist church that increasingly accommodated the world, with the resultant drift away from Wesley's original theological vision? That the keystone became a pebble is unquestionably true. But how that happened is a question requiring the prayer of examen on a grand scale for all in the Wesleyan tradition.

It is beyond the limits of this brief essay to explore all the permutations of the nineteenth-century Holiness Movement, the motivations of its leaders, and its effects on the Methodist church.6 It is true that language about "Christian perfection," "going on to perfection," "entire sanctification," and "holiness" came to be associated with the program (particularly the excesses) of the nineteenth-century Holiness Movement. Increasingly, holiness became codified and in some ways trivialized as a set of externally observable rules regarding dress, abstinence from worldly amusements, avoidance of tobacco and alcohol, and so on. In addition, interpreters of the first generation of nineteenth-century Holiness leaders tended to be lay
preachers rather than theologians; and the primary venues for teaching the "new" holiness doctrine were camp meetings and popular publications. Given these variables, the distortion of Wesley's original doctrine of sanctification is not surprising. Within a few years after her death, Phoebe Palmer's "altar theology" was being presented by interpreters as a quick, simple formula for guaranteed and instant sanctification, something Palmer probably never intended. 7

Between polemic language, increasing asceticism in matters of dress and lifestyle within the Holiness Movement, and the conflict generated within Methodist churches by the claims of the Holiness Movement, mainstream Methodism distanced itself from the holiness vocabulary that was central to Wesley's message. As Outler comments, "That conflict and its abrasions had the effect of leaving the average Methodist (and many much above that average) alienated even by the bare terms—'holiness,' 'Christian perfection,' 'sanctification'—not to speak of an aversion toward those persons who actually profess such spiritual attainments." 8

As mainstream Methodism moved into the twentieth century and beyond, Protestant Liberalism, Fundamentalist controversies, and Neo-Orthodox trends contributed to further theological divergence among Methodists, including divergent understandings of holiness. Wesley's holistic ability to let theology and practice inform and shape each other, including faith and practice around the doctrine of holiness, has been difficult to maintain. As Langford notes, "Wesley's effort and achievement have remained a challenge to Methodist theology. He is a theological mentor who demonstrates the value of holistic theological activity and challenges his tradition to attempt this mode of theological effort." 9 Twentieth-century theological divergence, combined with the schisms and resultant aversion to the Holiness Movement, are probably the biggest culprits in our collective marginalization of Wesley's central doctrine.

The Emerging Holiness Movement

What does this loss mean for United Methodists today? Is it possible for us to remain Wesleyan without Wesley's overarching vision of holiness of heart and life? What would it look like for Methodists to reclaim Wesley's vision in our postmodern context? These are big questions, for which I can only suggest the beginnings of an answer. While I am deeply interested in this issue as a theologian, I write here primarily as a pastor.

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ELAINE A. HEATH

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I believe that Wesley’s vision of a holiness movement that would renew the church and impact the world (the holiness movement described by Bishop Hopkins) is much larger than Methodism. It is at the very heart of the gospel and thus can never be simply a relic from the past. As long as there have been people of God a holiness movement of some kind has existed. The bringing of holiness to the world is central in Abram’s call, in the giving of the Law, in the renewal efforts of Deborah, and in Amos’s call to repentance. The whole story of God is the story of Love spreading holiness through the land, renewing God’s people and, through them, bringing renewal and healing to a broken world.

Today God is raising up a holiness movement that is not attached to one denomination (not even our) or a particular charismatic leader. We may properly call it a “new” holiness movement, because we are living in a new era in human history (postmodernity); but the divine impulse driving the movement is older than the earth. The seeds of the new movement are found in what is variously being described as the “emerging church,” the “missional church,” the “convergence movement,” and the “new monasticism.” Like all other great moves of God, this one holds the potential for excess, errors, bad theology, hype, fraud, and “enthusiasm.” Yet the best of what is emerging is exactly the sort of thing Wesley had in mind, only in forms appropriate for a postmodern world. Whether The United Methodist Church will be able to embrace the gifts of the emerging church and have the courage and vision to join God in what God is doing remains to be seen.

For some time, Leonard Sweet has been prodding United Methodist leaders to wake up and pay attention to the cataclysmic changes in our culture. Books such as Post-Modern Pilgrims, SoulTsunami, and Aqua Church map some of the transitions that have beset the contemporary world as we moved from modern to postmodern life. If the church ignores these transitions and continues to function in a modern paradigm, Sweet argues, we will become increasingly irrelevant. To carry the vitality of the Wesleyan vision into the twenty-first century, the church must understand its postmodern context and offer Christ in ways that will reach postmoderns. This is what the emerging church is all about.

Rather than describe two or three “leading” emerging churches that we should imitate (something that generally infuriates those with an emergent church philosophy), I will simply list a few qualities of the emerging church that sound remarkably like a holiness movement. For a fine introduction to...
the emerging church, its philosophies of ministry, and some of the approaches it takes to theology and praxis. I recommend two books by Brian D. McLaren: *A New Kind of Christian* and *A Generous Orthodoxy.* There are numerous websites that can assist in giving a more comprehensive overview. One of the best is www.emergentvillage.com.

In general, the emergent church/missional church/convergence movement/new monasticism is a grass-roots phenomenon that is a response to the widespread hunger for spiritual experience, authentic community, and engagement in Christ’s mission in this world. The use of “monastic” practices such as a communal rule of life, some form of a daily office, a corporate mission of prayer and service for the world, and a return to ancient forms of prayer and sacramental spirituality is common. However, these practices are presented in ways that are culturally relevant to postmoderns. The corporate as well as personal use of disciplines such as silence, fasting, and financial stewardship is widespread. There is a holistic emphasis on the interrelationship of mind, body, and spirit, as well as a great appreciation for creation spirituality, including Celtic Christian spirituality. Leaders in the emerging church are often bivocational and do not earn a living through “professional” ministry. The emergent church often is a home-church network or “web”; it discourages putting resources into owning buildings and strongly emphasizes resourcing justice ministries and missional outreach into the community. Egalitarian leadership between women and men is usually a core value, as are cultural diversity, decentralized leadership, and teamwork.

One of the most distinctive features of the emerging church is its ecumenical commitment, something reflected in the subtitle of McLaren’s *A Generous Orthodoxy.* Participants in the emerging church generally long for an experience of Christian community that incarnates the multidenominationalism of “one holy, catholic, apostolic church.” This drive is different from nondenominationalism, which tends to cultivate amnesia toward church history and the formation and contributions of various Christian faith traditions. Instead, the emerging church attempts to bring together (thus the name “convergence movement”) all Christian faith traditions with their multiplicity of gifts and insights, appreciating each tradition’s history and diversity. Just as most Americans would no longer attempt to describe American ethnic diversity in terms of “a melting pot,” so emergent Christians prefer the description “multidenominational” to “nondenominational.”
tional." Many who are attracted to the emerging church are under age thirty.

Virtually all the core values and the drive behind the emerging church are consonant with Wesley's original vision for spreading scriptural holiness. Wesley's ecumenism; commitment to justice; use of class and band meetings for spiritual formation; development of authentic community; attentiveness to the means of grace, both corporately and privately; use of lay circuit riders and lay class leaders rather than professional clergy to lead the movement; and unique blend of practical theology—all are present, in postmodern forms, in the emerging church.

It is clear that the emerging church has much to teach United Methodists who have forgotten Wesley's central theological vision. Yet the process of learning will not come without cost or pain. The emerging church, with its commitment to authentic community, liturgical fluidity, emphasis on justice and evangelism, and de-emphasis on buildings and programs is prophetic; for so many of the habits, methods, programs, and structures that we have come to regard as necessary in Methodism are no longer effective. Are we willing to let go of old wineskins?

There is also the matter of ecumenism. What will a truly ecumenical holiness movement look like when expressed in a United Methodist congregation? What will stay the same and what will need to change? And what about worship? Can we get over the tragedy of "worship wars" and learn to appreciate and incorporate ancient liturgy, prayer practices, creeds, and the sacraments in ways that make sense and are culturally relevant to postmoderns? Are our seminaries equipping our pastors to lead our church to participate in this kind of holiness movement? Is our bureaucratic structure capable of handling the paradigm shifts necessary for all of this to happen?

These are questions for which only the passage of time will hold the answers. What I do know is that Wesley's original vision for holiness of heart and life is the reason I am a Wesleyan Christian. I do not believe that we can be truly Methodist without Wesley's vision of holiness. With Ted Campbell, I believe that the goal of Methodist doctrine is not Methodism at all but rather a movement that should contribute to the renewal and unification of the "one holy, catholic, apostolic church."

The end or goal of Methodist teaching is not the advancement of Methodism. Our heritage has been used by God for a much greater end: the coming of God's reign or kingdom. So we should pray fervently for the day when Methodism
ceases to exist, for that great day when, our historic mission having been accomplished by divine grace, the Wesleyan heritage finally dissolves into the glory of the "one, holy, catholic and apostolic church." In the words of Charles Wesley, "Names and sects and parties fall; thou, O Christ, art all in all." 11

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Endnotes

5. Outler, Evangelism and Theology in the Wesleyan Spirit, 118.
7. See Elaine A. Heath, "Becoming a Bible Christian: Toward a New Reading of Phoebe Palmer’s Sanctification Theology in Light of Roman Catholic Mystical Traditions, with Implications for Ecumenical and Interdisciplinary Dialogue between Theology and Spirituality" (Ph.D. diss., Duquesne University, 2002).
8. Outler, Evangelism and Theology in the Wesleyan Spirit, 118.
The Theological Significance of the Holiness Movement

SAMUEL M. POWELL

My task in this essay is to explain some of the theological issues that the Holiness Movement faces today and to discuss their theological significance. The first step is to get clear about what the Holiness Movement is. The Christian Holiness Partnership (formerly the Christian Holiness Association) is one of the main organizational forms that the Holiness Movement has taken. As such, it provides us with a way of seeing what comprised the movement. The Partnership includes twenty-one denominations and associated colleges and seminaries, publishing houses, and camp meetings. Although individually comparatively small, put together these denominations, with their associated educational and other institutions, are a considerable part of the American church landscape. Nonetheless, their small size and the fact that traditionally their membership has been drawn from those who are not a part of the cultural mainstream in the United States mean that Holiness churches have often failed to register in the chronicles of the country's religious history.

The next step is to understand what the movement was about. Briefly put, the movement stood for the doctrine and experience of holiness, also known (from its roots in John Wesley’s theology) as “Christian perfection” and “entire sanctification.” It also stood for practices related to holiness and regarded as essential to it. But it is not enough to state the matter this way. In some sense, every Christian church stands for the doctrine, experience, and practice of holiness. The Holiness Movement stood for a particular understanding, experience, and practice of holiness. The particular understanding and the theology in which it was embedded were the raison d'être of the Holiness Movement.

A Historical Prelude

On that premise, let us have a closer look at the defining doctrine, experience, and practices of the Holiness Movement. How did this doctrine and
experience and these practices come to be and what was their relation to the Methodist tradition in America? The most effective way of obtaining this look is to rehearse the history of the Holiness Movement and to allow its distinctive emphases to emerge from that history.

The history of the Holiness Movement may be divided into four phases. The first phase began roughly in the 1830s, when some influential members of the Methodist Episcopal Church, notably Nathan Bangs, Timothy Merritt, and Phoebe Palmer, began promoting the doctrine of Christian perfection through publications, speaking, and organizational endeavors. They were responding to the fact that the emphasis of American Methodism in the early decades of the nineteenth century had necessarily been on securing conversions. Consequently, John Wesley's teaching about Christian perfection had become a matter to be pursued in the future, after the work of converting the nation was under way. By the 1830s, Methodists such as Palmer and Bangs were convinced that the time was right for a revival of interest in Christian perfection. Judging from the subsequent facts, their assessment was correct, for the Methodist church witnessed increasing interest in the doctrine of holiness; and those at the forefront of its revival saw their influence within the denomination increase.

Although this resurgence of interest was regarded as a revival of John Wesley's teaching, there were some important alterations in the understanding of holiness, introduced mainly by Palmer. As is well known, Wesley taught that sanctification begins at conversion and continues by degrees until completed. For him, sanctification consists in the replacing of inward sin (evil thoughts and tempers) with perfect love. It is accomplished by disciplines such as self-denial, prayer, and other classical forms of Christian exertion, as well as the exercise of faith in God. With diligence, Wesley believed, one could come to a state in which perfect love had completely replaced inward sin.

Moreover, he was convinced that many had arrived at this point and had testified to it. Palmer made an important contribution to the Holiness Movement by introducing an alternative way of obtaining Christian perfection—a way that she expressly called "the shorter way." Instead of a possibly quite long period of self-denial and other disciplines, the shorter way involved an act of consecration whereby one devoted the sum-total of one's life to God. It was this act of consecration, argued Palmer, that brought entire sanctification. It was a shorter way because it was accomplished as an act of faith, that is, as a decision. Palmer added two other critical points. First, becoming entirely sanc-
tified was regarded as a duty, so that failure to get there was a sin and was due to an express lack of faith. Second, once one had become entirely sanctified, one was duty bound to testify to this fact to others. Failure to testify publicly was regarded as a grave fault. In spite of Palmer's departure from Wesley's understanding, proponents of holiness in this period were thought to be contributing something of great value to the Methodist cause and exerted considerable influence on the Methodist Episcopal Church.

The second phase of the Holiness Movement began with the formation, in 1867, of the National Camp Meeting Association for the Promotion of Holiness (NCMAPH). This event was a stroke of brilliance, for it combined two impulses deeply rooted in American religion—the perfectionist impulse and the revivalistic impulse. By hearkening back to the days of widespread awakenings, NCMAPH was identifying the cause of holiness with one of the most pervasive and influential features of American Christianity. By linking the revivalistic impulse to the doctrine and experience of holiness, the Association signaled a change in strategy for the Holiness Movement. In the days of Bangs and Palmer, the movement was propagated by literature, sermons, and personal influence, such as was exerted in Palmer's Tuesday Meeting for the Promotion of Holiness. But NCMAPH had plotted a far more ambitious strategy. By utilizing the idea and fervor of the revival and camp meeting tradition, the Association intended to advance the cause of holiness at a popular level and to increase the numbers directly involved in the Holiness Movement.

At this point it is important to note an important feature of the Holiness Movement, namely, its ecumenical character. It is customary today to think of perfectionism as a Methodist preoccupation; but, in fact, in the nineteenth century the Holiness Movement was far from being the exclusive predilection of Methodists. Significant aspects of the movement's theology were contributed by the Congregationalists Charles G. Finney and Asa Mahan. Moreover, the movement had a strong bent toward social reform in such areas as the abolition of slavery and the temperance movement. In these endeavors the Holiness Movement found common cause with other reform-minded groups that were dissatisfied with the modest effect that Christians were having on society. They believed that a more elevated standard of Christian living would be the instrument of widespread social reform. In short, we should think of the Holiness Movement as a transdenominational phenomenon, even if Methodists were among its
leading participants. It is important to keep the ecumenical character of the Holiness Movement in mind, because that character later helped give rise to tensions between some leaders of the movement and the leadership of the Methodist Episcopal Church.

The National Camp Meeting Association enjoyed great success. Within a decade, it had spawned a host of regional and state camp-meeting associations, all focused on the single goal of bringing about a nationwide revival of the experience of Christian perfection. The success of the various camp meetings encouraged those in the movement to believe that America was on the verge of a great revival. But the leaders of the Holiness Movement were interested in more than just the revival. Under the influence of Finney and Mahan, the doctrine of holiness had come to be linked to Pentecost; and Holiness expositors routinely identified entire sanctification with the baptism with the Holy Spirit. Moreover, they thought of Pentecost not only as an event that had happened at the founding of the church in the first century but also as a promised eschatological event. That is, they believed that just before the return of Jesus God would again pour out the Spirit. Only this time the Spirit would be poured out literally on all humankind. This pouring out of the Spirit would be the eschatological event that would prepare the world for the return of Jesus. As a result of this interpretation, the leaders of the Holiness Movement believed that their movement, in which Christian perfection was identified with receiving the Spirit, was the eschatological event that was preparing the world for Jesus' return. The ecumenical character of the movement seemed to confirm this belief, for it suggested that the Holiness Movement was uniting Christians and overcoming denominational barriers. Since at least the 1830s there had been several movements in the United States that aimed at the union of Christians and the abolition of denominations. The Holiness Movement believed that it was the divinely appointed means for accomplishing this desirable goal.

However, the success of the camp-meeting associations and the ecumenical character of the Holiness Movement did not prevent problems. The main problem was tension between the movement and the Methodist Church. It resulted from a combination of the movement's ecumenism and the fervor associated with its mission. The leadership of the National Camp Meeting Association consistently succeeded in maintaining good relations with the Methodist Church. Although it was not an officially sponsored
ministry of the Methodist Church, the Association’s leaders were all
Methodists and they took great care to coordinate the Association’s efforts
with those of the church. The same was not true of the regional and state
associations that sprang up in the 1870s. Generally speaking, they were less
committed to coordination with the Methodist Church and more
committed to spreading an increasingly ecumenical movement. One particu-
lar point of contention was the use of evangelists. At the national level,
the Association always made sure that in its camp meetings it used evange-
lists who were members in good standing in the Methodist Church and
that its meetings had the support of local Methodist clergy. However, the
state and regional associations increasingly saw no great value in this
policy and were inclined to use any evangelists who proved effective,
regardless of denominational affiliation. They were also inclined to press
ahead with holiness camp meetings and revivals even if local Methodist
clergy were unenthusiastic. In increasing measure the state and regional
associations loosened their bonds with the national Association and
became autonomous entities, setting their own policies and creating their
own schedules of camp meetings, with their own favored evangelists.
Inevitably, this led to conflict, with local associations sponsoring camp
meetings, urging local Methodists to attend, and then using evangelists
whose preaching might at some points be at odds with Methodist doctrine
and practice. Understandably, Methodist pastors were nervous about
supporting such endeavors.

The third phase of the Holiness Movement was the direct result of
these tensions with the Methodist Church. From the perspective of the
local associations, the Methodist hierarchy was setting institutional
propriety over the needs of the revival. From the Methodist perspective, the
associations were abandoning Methodist doctrine and discipline. If this
were the extent of the dispute, a happy resolution might have been reached.
In fact, other issues had begun to surface that ultimately led to schism.

Prominent among these other issues was the question of “worldliness.”
From the time of John Wesley, Methodism had stood for a well-defined
stance toward wealth and physical pleasures. Briefly put, Methodists were
an abstemious people. They were careful about their dress and manner of
living, abstained from alcohol and frivolous pursuits, and were devout and
disciplined. But in the course of the nineteenth century, American
Methodism (at least in the eastern part of the country) joined the social
mainstream. This was attested by, among other things, the founding of universities and the building of costly church buildings. Whether this assimilation to American social standards was a good or a bad thing may be debated. But in the opinion of the Holiness Movement, it was definitely a bad thing. It is no exaggeration to say that, by the 1870s, the Holiness Movement saw itself as upholding the behavioral standards that had always characterized Methodism and that, in its opinion, the Methodist Church had now largely abandoned. This view had antecedents in the formation (in 1860) of the Free Methodist Church, whose origin lay in a protest over pew-rents and its effect on the poor who wished to worship in a Methodist church. The Holiness Movement of the 1870s simply extended this sort of critique. As far as Holiness people were concerned, the Methodist Church was a victim of growing worldliness, as evidenced by extravagant living, costly clothing, lavish buildings, and so on. One effect of this critique was the tendency to define holiness in reaction to behaviors that were taken to embody worldliness. Theater attendance, dancing, gambling, and many other behaviors thus gave concrete form to the image of worldliness, to which the holy life was opposed.

The other main point of contention between the Holiness Movement and the Methodist Church concerned the nature and centrality of Christian perfection. By the 1870s, the movement had an elaborated doctrine of holiness that was an amalgamation of the thought of John Wesley, Charles Finney, and Phoebe Palmer. In particular, it emphasized Palmer’s teaching that the way to entire sanctification lay in an act of faith and consecration, that this act was a duty upon everyone, and that testimony about one’s having made this act was likewise a duty. The first of these points—the way to entire sanctification lay in an act of faith and consecration—meant that Christian perfection is received in an instant and that it is not the result of a process of growth. The more this point was emphasized, the more it made nervous those theologians and pastors who were convinced that perfection is attained gradually. Moreover, the Holiness Movement increasingly argued that, far from being the culmination of a process of growth, entire sanctification is the basis of spiritual growth. In other words, it tended to present sanctification as the moment in one’s life before which there was no significant spiritual development. The time between conversion and sanctification was regarded as a temporary (and, it was hoped, short) period, marked by frustration and spiritual
Entire sanctification represented the solution to this frustration and defeat. One result of this teaching was that the importance of Christian perfection was magnified. It was no longer just a desideratum of the spiritual life—a goal to be striven after—but an obtainable obligation and the vital center of Christian life and doctrine.

In other words, the Holiness Movement was a single-issue movement. Admittedly, that issue had several facets, including the doctrine and experience of entire sanctification, the eschatological and ecumenical understanding of the significance of that doctrine, and the social reforming tendencies deduced from the doctrine. Nonetheless, the movement poured all its energy into promulgating that single issue. In contrast, by the 1870s, the Methodist Church was a full-service church, with missionary endeavors, educational programs, concerns for theological precision and comprehensiveness, growing concerns about liturgical worship, and so on. There was indeed an important place for holiness within the denomination, but with its multiple commitments, the church could never—and did not wish to—emphasize holiness to the extent the Holiness Movement thought necessary. The question was whether holiness was to be one important concern amidst other important concerns or instead the one dominating concern around which all else should revolve.

The collision course established by these issues assumed concrete form in the so-called "church question" of the 1880s and 1890s. From the perspective of the Holiness Movement, the movement was under attack by the hierarchy of the Methodist Church. In particular, Holiness adherents complained that those who had obtained holiness in camp meetings and revivals were ill advised to join a Methodist congregation if, as was often the case, the pastor was opposed to holiness as the Holiness Movement understood it. Yet leaders of the movement recognized the necessity of church membership, lest the fruit of revival be lost. Until the 1880s the movement's policy had been to encourage people to join a congregation even if its pastor was inhospitable to Christian perfection. Suggestions that Holiness people should leave the Methodist Church were denounced. It is true that there were some "come-outers," such as Daniel Warner (founder of the Church of God [Anderson]), who believed that denominationalism was contrary to God's will and who encouraged people to leave churches. But this was a rare case and denominational loyalty prevailed through the 1870s. However, by the 1880s the points of contention had increased in
number and intensity. Increasingly, local camp-meeting associations began functioning as quasi-churches, with some practicing ordination. There were also frequent calls for the formation of a national Holiness church that would preserve the work of the camp meetings. Denominational loyalists within the movement managed to frustrate the formation of such a church; but the fact that there was interest in a national church at all was an index of the tension between the Holiness Movement and the Methodist Church.

In any event, the call for a national church went unheeded. Instead, local associations (some of which by now were functioning as churches and denominations) began uniting in federations. This development marks the beginning of the fourth phase of the Holiness Movement—the development of Holiness denominations. Over time, unions of Holiness groups took place, resulting in the formation of some Holiness denominations (such as the Church of the Nazarene) and the augmenting of others (such as the joining of the Pilgrim Holiness Church to the Wesleyan Methodist Church). Today there are numerous Holiness denominations and the movement exists largely in this denominational form. Predictably, the formation of Holiness denominations has required the development of full-service churches, so that Holiness denominations today find themselves in the same situation as the Methodist Church of the nineteenth century, with the need to elaborate theology, social reform, meaningful worship, and more.

The Doctrine of Holiness Today

How is holiness understood in Holiness denominations today? One thing to note is that there is far more acknowledged diversity of opinion in Holiness circles than ever before. Holiness theologians exhibit much less agreement on the understanding of the doctrine than did previous generations. There are several reasons for this.

First, the generation of theologians and scholars that received its theological education in the 1950s and 1960s imbibed the leading ideas of the Biblical Theology movement. While these ideas are not above correction, they encouraged Holiness scholars to ask whether the doctrine of holiness, in its by-now traditional formulation (the amalgamation of Wesley, Palmer, and Finney) had a sound biblical basis. A perusal of articles in the Wesleyan Theological Journal during the 1960s shows that this was a hotly debated subject. Generally speaking, scholars managed to find ways of justifying the doctrine biblically, but not without considerable effort. On two points,
however, the traditional understanding of the doctrine was found wanting when weighed in biblical scales: the use of the aorist tense in Greek to interpret certain biblical passages and the identification of entire sanctification with the baptism with the Holy Spirit.

For generations Holiness scholars had appealed to the fact that some New Testament passages bearing on holiness employed verbs in the aorist tense. From their understanding of this Greek tense, these scholars concluded that these passages supported the understanding of holiness as an instantaneous event. Today, it seems odd that anyone could ever have placed so much doctrinal weight on what turned out to be an utterly mistaken understanding of the Greek language. Yet, a review of Holiness literature in the 1960s and 1970s shows that this understanding died a hard but inevitable death as a new generation of scholars arose with better linguistic tools and fewer aberrant presuppositions.

The identification of entire sanctification with Pentecost was a more serious issue, for (as noted above) it not only defined holiness but also provided the Holiness Movement with the conviction that the movement was an eschatological act of God for the unification of all Christians in preparation for the return of Jesus. Toward the end of the 1970s debate took place (mainly within the Wesleyan Theological Society) as to the exegetical propriety of understanding holiness in terms of Spirit baptism. The sad news delivered by the scholars was that there was little warrant for this identification. For a generation that had striven to maintain impeccable evangelical credentials, the revelation that the most popular exposition of the movement's central doctrine had shaky biblical foundations was shocking.

A second reason for today's diversity of opinion is a large increase in historical knowledge. Specifically, Holiness theologians participated in the "back to Wesley" movement launched by Albert Outler in the 1960s. Once serious historical study of John Wesley's theology began to bear fruit, it became obvious that Wesley's understanding of holiness differed in significant respects from that of the Holiness Movement, shaped as it had been by Finney and Palmer. Neither did Wesley link entire sanctification with Pentecost nor would he have agreed with Palmer's "shorter way" into holiness. He put no special emphasis on consecration or on the duty of testifying to one's experience of holiness. In general, he had a more balanced view of holiness as an obtainable state in relation to holiness as a pursuit.

It was a difficult matter in those days to explain to denominational offi-
cials and pastors the fact that the Holiness Movement's doctrine was at variance from that of John Wesley. This variance put people in the awkward position of having to choose one stream of the Holiness tradition over another. What made this sort of thing emotionally and bureaucratically troubling was that the movement's understanding of the doctrine had come to be enshrined in denominational articles of faith. In other words, the Finney-Palmer view of holiness had official sanction. It was represented as the biblical doctrine of holiness. Pastors and theologians were expected to believe it and teach it. Now that the traditional understanding of holiness had been exposed as but one interpretation alongside others, it exhibited a degree of historical relativity that was, to put it mildly, uncomfortable. To add insult to injury, the next generation of theologians, having by now learned Wesley's theology comprehensively, collectively judged his version of holiness to be far superior to traditional Holiness theology.

Today, Holiness theologians are far more adjusted to theological diversity than were previous generations (although we should keep in mind that the amount of diversity in Holiness circles is pretty limited in comparison with the diversity found in some denominations). The widespread conviction that theological language uses models and metaphors has helped to blunt the trauma caused by theological diversity. Nonetheless, Holiness theology is in the strange situation of recognizing a plurality of understandings of holiness while Holiness denominations continue to espouse and sanction the doctrine in very traditional language.

Oddly, a third noteworthy factor stands in tension with this diversity. While theologians and scholars were fighting over the meaning and biblical status of the doctrine, Holiness denominations were diverting institutional energy in another direction. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, these denominations strove mightily to identify themselves with the burgeoning Evangelical movement. By the 1980s, Evangelicalism had embraced (or perhaps had been embraced by) the Church Growth movement. Perceiving that the holiness message had not achieved hoped-for gains in membership, Holiness denominations decided to join their evangelical comrades in the Church Growth movement. The theory was that church growth methods would stand alongside holiness doctrine. The problem was that Holiness denominations, having begun as a movement, still portrayed themselves as a movement. That is, in spite of necessary concessions made in becoming full-service churches, they retained (or wished to retain) the urgency and energy
associated with single-issue movements. With this heritage and mentality and with the perceived need to join the church-growth movement, it has become evident that the single issue that currently drives Holiness denominations is numerical increase and not the doctrine of holiness. This result is unexpected because of the fact that churches in the Holiness movement still officially regard the promulgation of holiness to be their raison d'être.

There have been several developments in the doctrine of holiness. One has been underway for several decades, namely, the discussion regarding the question of what entire sanctification does and does not accomplish. In the enthusiastic early years of denominational formation, Holiness writers made some fairly extravagant claims about what entire sanctification could do. Not only was holiness thought to be the basis for solving social problems and energizing social reform, it was also thought to be the solution to virtually every spiritual and psychological problem. Sometime in the 1950s Holiness writers began moderating their claims, understanding that, while holiness may mean the cessation of a worldly attitude and worldly behaviors, it was not a panacea for every sort of disorder into which the human psyche may fall. In some ways this understanding was simply a reversion to John Wesley's observation that those who had obtained Christian perfection were still subject to a host of human weaknesses and limitations that are not matters of sin. But in other ways this new understanding was the product of a more sophisticated knowledge of developments in psychology. While Holiness denominations were busy spreading the message of holiness, they also devoted themselves to creating liberal-arts colleges. As these institutions began to mature and to measure themselves according to the standards of the academic world, departments in those institutions began to assimilate and appreciate theories that were accepted outside the world of Holiness denominations. As a result, writers informed by developments in psychology and other disciplines soon saw that the extensive claims made for holiness in earlier generations needed softening. Accordingly, in recent decades, Holiness theology has developed considerable sensitivity to the limitations of entire sanctification. There is a much greater recognition of the extent to which deeply ingrained habits and prejudices are not susceptible to the instantaneous character of entire sanctification. Likewise, theologians have come to acknowledge that, in general, holiness does not change the contours of one's personality, however much we may wish for it. However, it should be noted that this moderating of earlier
claims for holiness has not achieved universal support among Holiness proponents. There is some anxiety in Holiness circles that the qualifications introduced by two generations of psychologists and theologians have emaciated the doctrine of holiness to the point that the idea of entire sanctification is vaporous and undefined.

Another important development in holiness, beginning in the 1970s, concerns the language and conceptual framework with which holiness is expounded. Until the 1970s there was a consensus on these matters. Entire sanctification was identified with the baptism with the Holy Spirit. It meant the eradication of "depravity" (the term that holiness writers used for original sin), the cleansing of the heart, and complete devotion to God. Above all, sanctification was represented as taking place in a single instant. Consequently, the term progressive sanctification had no meaning. Justification brought one into a saving relationship with God, but sanctification was a distinct and instantaneous work of God’s grace subsequent to justification.

In the 1970s a group of theologians, notably Mildred Wynkoop, proposed an alternative understanding of holiness. Drawing upon the philosophy of Martin Buber, Wynkoop and others argued two points. First, they claimed that the traditional and popular modes of expounding holiness, with their metaphors of eradication and cleansing, wrongly implied that depravity is some thing that holiness removes. This argument rested on the assertion that these modes of exposition reflected an outmoded metaphysics that saw reality primarily in terms of "substances" or "things." Second, they proposed a different metaphysics for explicating holiness—one that would see reality primarily in terms of relationships. In this rendering, holiness was represented as a change in our relationship with God. In particular, it was portrayed as our coming to love God and neighbor in a complete (though not flawless) way.

This proposal gained some adherents in Holiness theological circles but did not convince everyone. The chief problem for objectors was that this approach made it difficult to sustain the central tenet of the Holiness movement, namely, that entire sanctification as a second, distinct work of grace following justification is instantaneous. In Wynkoop’s scheme, it made much more sense to represent holiness as a process occurring over time as one’s relationship to God advanced by degrees. But this sort of talk induced much anxiety, for the Holiness movement had always been grounded in the fear that if holiness were a process and were attained gradually, then it would be
easy to argue (as most Christian churches did) that it had no termination in this earthly life. In other words, if holiness were progressive, then it would be difficult to sustain the conviction that there is a second, definite, and instantaneous work of God by which we are made completely holy.

Today, there is residual but decreasing support for the traditional understanding of holiness among Holiness theologians and scholars. Variations on Wynkoop's proposal are popular but not universally accepted. In other words, Holiness theology today is in a state of flux (if it is even accurate to speak of Holiness theology as something fixed and definable). The days are probably gone when theologians within the Holiness Movement are driven by a clear-sighted vision of the central importance of holiness. Over the past thirty years many of these theologians have come to regard the traditional understanding of holiness doctrine as a quaint and at points incomprehensible set of convictions espoused by a movement that lost sight of its origin in John Wesley's theology and other vital contributors to the Christian tradition. At the same time, the growing sophistication of biblical scholars and church historians in Holiness colleges has added great depth to the movement's understanding of holiness. Gone are the days of embarrassingly bad exegesis and facile assumptions about the biblical character of popular expositions of holiness. Gone as well is ignorance about the historical development of the doctrine of holiness and the diverse and incompatible streams flowing into it. Likewise, Holiness theologians today have a far greater acquaintance with developments in the larger theological world, so that nowadays it is common to see Holiness theologians engaging Liberation Theology, feminist theologies, Radical Orthodoxy, and so on.

Conclusion

What will be the enduring contribution of the Holiness Movement? It cannot be denied that the Holiness Movement has in its history exhibited all the virtues and vices of single-issue movements. On the side of vice, at times it has been too inwardly focused, manifesting an intolerant and unsympathetic attitude toward other branches on the Christian tree. It has fostered and celebrated eccentric behavior and then used that behavior as a yardstick to measure and then pummel those outside the movement who failed to measure up. On the side of virtue, the Holiness Movement has stood resolutely for the idea that the human heart can be cleansed of sin and selfishness. Additionally, it has promulgated the conviction that this
idea is not merely an ideal but is capable of realization. It upheld an almost unbridled optimism about the capacity of God's grace to redeem us from sin and transform us into the image of Jesus Christ. The movement has also kept alive the memory of social activism that both anticipated the Social Gospel and provided an evangelically oriented variation on the Social Gospel. Finally, it has continuously witnessed to the importance of resisting sin by a close attention to behavior.

In many ways, the Holiness Movement has been a modern version of early Christian thought and character like that of Tertullian. He was a moral rigorist and perfectionist and more than a bit censorious, impatient, and intolerant. It is difficult to imagine wanting someone like Tertullian as your pastor or next-door neighbor. Yet Tertullian was driven by a passion for the church's well-being and for the Christian's separation from the world. We may judge that the Tertullians of the world go too far in their demands on ordinary Christians and that they concede too little to the enduring power of sin. But it will surely always be important for the church to have among its members people who with single-minded concentration call attention to the power of God's grace and to the church's need to separate from the world.

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Endnotes

1. American Rescue Workers; The Association of Evangelical Churches; The Association of Independent Methodists; Bible Holiness Movement; Brethren in Christ Church; Churches of Christ in Christian Union; The Church of God (Anderson); The Congregational Methodist Church; Evangelical Christian Church; Evangelical Church of North America; Evangelical Friends Alliance (Eastern Region); Evangelical Methodist Church; Free Methodist Church of North America; Japan Immanuel General Mission; Missionary Church (North Central District); The Church of the Nazarene; Primitive Methodist Church; The Salvation Army (USA); The Salvation Army of Canada & Bermuda; and The Wesleyan Church.


5. Timothy L. Smith, Revivalism and Social Reform In Mid-Nineteenth Century America (New York: Abingdon, 1957), 129-34.


7. Dieter, Holiness Revival, 236-95, and Jones, Perfectionist Persuasion, 90-105.


The Arts of Holy Living: Holiness and the Means of Grace

REBEKAH MILES

John Wesley often preached a sermon in which he asked his listeners to imagine an alien visiting earth and observing its human occupants. This "intelligent being, entirely a stranger to the state of this world and its inhabitants," observes human activity, looking for clues about the goal of human life. Based on simple observation, "he would surely conclude," wrote Wesley, "that these creatures were designed to be busied about many things." "How surprised" our alien would be, then, to learn that the true goal of human life—the one thing needful—was not any of the things with which they were busying themselves. The one thing needful was the very thing they seemed to be neglecting—holiness of life and heart.¹

Like Wesley's eighteenth-century earthlings, we too are "busied about many things." Our churches and even our pulpits are filled with people who come to Sunday worship with minds so busy and distracted that it is hard to be fully present to the presence of Christ or to remember, much less grow in, holiness of life and heart. This is surely an ancient problem; but we have pushed it further than most generations before us. On average we work more hours than people in earlier generations and often at a faster pace. We are less likely to have the same abiding ties to home, nature, and community to anchor our lives. We rarely have the same connections to the rhythms of time—especially the rhythm of work and Sabbath rest—that were common to Christians before us.² And many of us have grown accustomed to media that offer quick changes and high stimulation, making it difficult to match the movement of our minds to the slow, timeless pace of prayer.

For many Christians in our day, a chief obstacle to holiness may be not the ugly lure of the sins of the flesh or of pride but the seemingly harmless (and thus more insidious) temptation to focus on the next items on our to-do list. How do we offer the means of grace in a distracted culture, where we and the other Christians around us find it hard to make time for the
means, much less remember the end, of holiness—a life saturated with love of God and neighbor?

For many Christians in our day, another key obstacle is not simply that we are busy but that we are busy making things happen. In our churches and the larger culture, we value hard work, success, and the ability to manage and control difficult situations. These are great values that have nourished the vibrancy of many parts of our churches and our culture. Even so, when it comes to the means of grace, where we place ourselves in faith before God, ready to receive God’s grace and blessing, we impede the flow of grace if we try too hard to control the situation. How do we offer the means of grace in a culture of control, where we and other Christians find it hard to let go of our own agendas long enough to see, much less make room for, God’s agenda?

A Wesleyan Remedy

To shape an effective and faithful approach to the means of grace in a culture of distraction and control, United Methodists need to look back to our Wesleyan heritage. Along with many other Christians, we believe that God’s grace is present everywhere and available to every person and that God can use any opportunity to make that grace known. At the same time, United Methodists also believe that God has given special channels for receiving that grace. By approaching these means of grace such as worship, acts of kindness, or the Lord’s Supper with a responsive heart, we open ourselves to receive special blessings from God that can nourish a life of holiness infused by love.

John Wesley saw the means of grace as one part of the dynamic interaction between God’s gift of grace and a person’s response to that gift. To describe this divine–human interaction and the transformation it fosters, Wesley often used the language of healing. The therapy for healing human souls, like the therapy for some chronic illnesses of the body, often calls for repeated doses of medicine, many hours of therapy, and the mutual effort of healer and patient leading toward a gradual but significant healing over time. The “great medicine” in this healing is love, “the never-failing remedy for all the evils of a disordered world; for all the miseries and vices of men.” The means of grace are a part of the medical remedy in two ways. First, they are channels by which God offers medicine for healing. Second, they are therapeutic opportunities for humans to respond to the grace
already given. In other words, they can be pure gifts from God to humans and, at the same time, health-giving, strengthening exercises that humans do in cooperation with God.  

What are these means of grace so rich in benefits for human life? Wesley described the means of grace as "outward signs, words, or actions, ordained of God, and appointed for this end, to be the ordinary channels whereby he might convey to men, preventing, justifying, or sanctifying grace." Wesley's lists of the specific means of grace varied over time, in part because the needs and practices of his Methodist societies varied. The lists always include some of the means of grace "instituted" by Christ in Scripture, such as prayer, worship, the Lord's Supper, fasting, meditating on Scripture, and sometimes Christian conference. At times, Wesley also included a wider array of practices, some of which are specified in Scripture. According to Wesley, the means of grace can include singing; listening to sermons; doing good for others; being baptized; participating in an array of worship services such as covenant renewal services and love feasts; visiting the sick; reading devotional books; suffering; denying the self; "cheerfully bear[ing] your cross"; "set[ting] God always before you"; and exercising "the presence of God." Wesley referred to many of these things as "prudential means of grace," or means that a Christian would be prudent or wise to use. Under the prudential means, Wesley and early Methodists also included other disciplines that could help members or leaders of Methodist societies in body or soul—attending small-group meetings (bands and classes); practicing the "arts of Holy living"; watching "against the world, the devil, yourselves, your besetting sin"; and "deny[ing] yourself every useless pleasure of sense, imagination, honor." 

Wesley's means of grace even included practices thought to be good for the body, such as avoiding meat at supper; not eating too much or too late in the evening; drinking only the kind and amount of beverages that are good for "body and soul"; and drinking plenty of water. Christians could also benefit from this catchall list of means of grace for healthy living—being temperate or moderate "in all things." At the end of one long and rather quirky list of prudential means of grace, Wesley concluded, "Never can you use these means but a blessing will ensue. And the more you use them, the more will you grow in grace." Whatever we think of Wesley's dietary advice, the point is that healthy living, including healthy eating and drinking, can be means of grace.
Wesley and the early Methodists did not limit the means of grace to the "works of piety" or to the activities good for the body of the individual Christian. They also insisted that works of mercy—compassionate activities benefiting the bodies and souls of others—were means of grace. "Works of mercy" included an array of activities, such as "the feeding the hungry, the clothing the naked, the entertaining or assisting the stranger, the visiting those that are sick or in prison, the comforting the afflicted, the instructing the ignorant, the reproving the wicked, [and] the exhorting and encouraging the well-doer." Indeed, works of mercy include "everything which we give, or speak, or do, whereby our neighbour may be profited; whereby another [person] may receive any advantage, either in his body or soul." The means of grace, then, are limited only by our resourcefulness in doing good. Note that these works are good not only for the recipient but also for the giver, who may grow in love.

Wesley explained the relative place of these works of mercy and the other means of grace in the Christian life by describing a series of concentric circles. The center of the circle is love, "the sum and the perfection of religion." The other rings around the circle are good insofar as they relate to and drive toward the center of the circle. Although all the rings are necessary in the Christian life, the rings have greater "comparative value" as one moves closer to the center of the circle. In the outer ring is the church, to which Christians should be loyal and for which they should pray. As much as Christians care for the church, they should be even more zealous about the means of grace. The next circle inward consists of one branch of the means of grace—the works of piety that are "ordinances of the Christ," such as Scripture reading, the Lord's Supper, and fasting. As much as Christians care about these instituted works of piety, they should be even more zealous for the next circle inward—works of mercy, another part of the means of grace. Wesley writes that the Christian should "show his zeal for works of piety; but much more for works of mercy.... Whenever, therefore, one interferes with the other, works of mercy are to be preferred." The zeal of Christians for works of mercy should be surpassed, however, by their zeal for the next inner circle—the fruits of the Spirit. Works of mercy and piety help the Christian grow in virtue—in the fruits of the Spirit, such as patience, gentleness, and self-control. When Christians engage with loving hearts in works of mercy, they exercise these Christian virtues and thereby improve them. So, as much as we value good works.
we should still be more zealous ... for planting and promoting, both in our own souls, and in all we have any intercourse with" these fruits of the Spirit. At the center of this series of concentric circles is the foremost fruit of the Spirit—love of God and neighbor. All of the other rings of the circle—the church, works of piety ordained by Christ, works of mercy, and the other fruits of the Spirit—"are inferior to this [inner circle] and rise in value only as they approach nearer and nearer to it." Love, then, is not only at the heart of Christian life but also the goal of the other parts of Christian life and the standard by which they are assessed.

Thus, Wesley and other Methodists cherished the means of grace not as ends in themselves but to the extent to which they nourished the fruits of the Spirit, especially love. They must be done, as Wesley put it, with a "single eye." The means of grace nourish love, but they must be approached with an open, responsive heart. They are not magical, Wesley insisted, and have no power in themselves. They only become true means of grace as humans cooperate responsively with God.

Although Wesley ranked these concentric circles, they are not in competition with one another. The point of Wesley's model was not to discourage Christians from attending to the outer circles. The point was that if one stopped with the outer circles—valuing them only for themselves—then one would distort the Christian life. A Christian should use all the circles and all the means of grace that could be included within the middle circles—the works of piety and mercy. Wesley's "sure and general rule" is that "whenever opportunity serves, use all the means which God has ordained; for who knows in which God will meet thee with the grace that bringeth salvation?"

All of these circles are not only necessary but also interrelated, building on one another. For example, the means of grace come out of the life of the Christian in the community of the church and are exercises that strengthen the Christian virtues, especially love. Also, a work of charity may take precedence over a work of piety in a specific moment; but Christians who repeatedly turned away from the works of piety, even if they were giving themselves fully in works of charity, would soon find their own charity, their passionate love for God and neighbor, depleted. Both works of piety and works of mercy are necessary, and both are subordinate to the higher goal of love.

Not all of the means are mentioned in Scripture. Wesley included activities and structures, such as band meetings and covenant services, that
were popular in his time and that appeared to nourish the fruits of the Spirit. He was pragmatic and flexible in his approach to the means of grace.

In this summary of Wesley’s teaching on the means of grace, we see also that the means of grace are holistic. His lists cross over divisions we normally draw. They include both private and public acts. The means of grace are not limited to acts done by individuals but include those done within the body of Christ. Moreover, even the individual, private acts of piety have systemic effects. For example, a person who, through the grace offered in private prayer, finds his heart filled with love, will, out of that love, affect the people and institutions around him. The means of grace are holistic also in that they include practices that are good for an individual Christian’s body or soul as well as those practices that benefit the bodies or souls of others. Wesley avoided the familiar division between works of piety and works of mercy. Both are necessary means of grace. For example, private prayer has a benefit and purpose similar to almsgiving; both should aim toward and nourish love of God and neighbor.

Christians fail to use the means of grace at their peril. When, out of love, Christians care for the church, use the means of grace, and nourish the holy tempers—especially love—they receive special blessings of grace. If they fail to attend to these things, their faith suffers. Emphasizing the necessity of works of mercy, Wesley writes, “Those that neglect them, do not receive the grace which otherwise they might. Yea, and they lose, by a continual neglect, the grace which they had received. Is it not hence, that many who were once strong in faith are now weak and feeble-minded?”

Wesley insisted that all could benefit from the use of the means of grace and be harmed by their neglect. Everyone needs the means of grace, both those lacking in faith and those advanced in faith. This was a key point for Wesley, because it was a disputed point in his time. For example, some Moravians (the group so important to Wesley’s Aldersgate experience) claimed, to Wesley’s horror, that a person who had not yet experienced the peace that comes from God’s grace and did not yet have faith could do nothing but wait for that gift of grace. Not only were the means of grace in these cases not really means of grace at all (because they were ineffectual for a person without faith); they might actually harm the person. These were fighting words for Wesley, who insisted that people who desire but do not have faith should be all the more eager to use the
means by which that gift is offered. To discourage these people from using the means of grace was to imperil their souls.

Wesley also criticized those who claimed that Christians advanced in faith no longer needed the means of grace. Wesley thought this was a dangerous teaching, because it could encourage a holy person to neglect precisely the thing she needed—the nourishment necessary for continued holiness. To discourage a person, even a holy person, from using the means of grace was to endanger, over time, her holiness and salvation.

Thus, Wesley was opposing those who dismissed the means of grace as unnecessary or even harmful at some stages of Christian life. He was also fighting with those who made too much of the means of grace, mistakenly thinking that doing the means of grace could somehow merit salvation. Further, he worried about the tendency of some people to think that using the means of grace was the sum total of religion while disregarding the growth of the fruits of the Spirit, especially love.

They mistakenly confused means and ends. This false idea is particularly dangerous, Wesley insisted, because it could lead a person to a false complacency, believing he was righteous, when, in fact, his soul was in danger.

United Methodists and the Means of Grace Today

Some problems of our time are similar to those of Wesley’s. United Methodist churches today include members who believe that some or all of the means of grace, even the instituted ones, are unnecessary. Even more so than in Wesley’s time, people regularly insist on or act as if corporate worship is not so important. Faith, they say, is a matter of the heart, and one does not need to go to church or to participate in other forms or rituals of the church to be a good Christian. This line of reasoning makes no sense within a Wesleyan framework. The church and its practices are crucial not because laity and the clergy who make up the church are wonderful or righteous (anybody who has spent much time in the church knows that they are not). Rather, the church and its practices are important in part because God has given these forms to us as a means to a higher end. Christians neglect them at their peril and the peril of those around them who might benefit from their holiness and be harmed by their sin.

Many other United Methodists see the value of the means of grace but live as if they do not. Valuing the means of grace without actually using them is pointless; and yet this is the condition of many laity and clergy.
(including me) who shortchange the means of grace because they are too busy. I am convinced that, for many people, the busy and distracted character of our culture is one of the biggest hindrances to the use of the means of grace. Because average American workers spend much more time than previous generations working, commuting, shopping, and using media such as television and the Internet, they simply do not have the time, energy, and focused attention to use the means of grace as often or as effectively as they might. In the rush of all the things that need to be done and the distractions of a fast-paced, consumer-driven culture, many United Methodists tend to not so much thumb their noses at the means of grace as simply to ignore them. And many of those who do use the means of grace are so inattentive and distracted by the rush of events, images, and words in the environment that they are in effect ignoring the grace, even as they are using the means.

Others overvalue the means of grace by remembering the form but forgetting the substance of religion. Many United Methodists today are especially susceptible to this tendency not because they value the form or the means of grace so much but because the church has talked about the end or the substance of religion so little. It is hard to put the means of grace in proper perspective without understanding their role in nourishing the virtues or the fruits of the Spirit and in leading the Christian toward greater holiness and sanctification. Many United Methodists have given over the language of virtue, holiness, perfection, and the radical transformation of the soul to more conservative Christians. This is a distortion of our Wesleyan heritage. How can we expect people to remember the substance of religion—sanctification and holiness of life and heart—if our leaders do not continually preach and teach it? Too often, our churches encourage members to use the means of grace without explaining the reason or goal for using these means; namely, to open oneself to divine grace that can nourish the fruits of the Spirit, especially love, and over time can lead to increasing holiness or sanctification. Many Christians are left with a vague sense of guilt that they are supposed to pray, go to church, and use other means of grace. But they forget or are never taught that these means are channels of tremendous blessing and joy and the well-spring of the fruits of the Spirit and a life of holiness. In other words, we not only tend to ignore the means of grace; many of us are also ignorant of their end or goal in the path of holiness.

Many Christians today are less likely than previous generations to be
practiced in the means of grace. As a church we face a steep learning curve. We need not only to teach and preach about the means of grace (and their goal of holiness) but also to encourage people (including ourselves) to develop the regular habit of using them.

Many United Methodists have taken on other values of our culture—hard work, a willingness to strive for success, and the ability to control and manage things around us for the sake of this success. These values may be effective in places of employment, the political sphere, and some of the work of the church; but when it comes to the means of grace, they are ineffective, even counterproductive. The appropriate human response in prayer, worship, or any other means of grace is not striving, controlling, or managing but letting go and opening oneself to God.

What, Then, Shall We Do?

Given both the typical problems of our time and the Wesleyan view of the means of grace summarized here, what are some appropriate responses for churches and church leaders? Church leaders would do well to remember that the means of grace and their effects are substantial, holistic, and systemic. Wesley expected that when people used the means of grace with responsive, loving hearts, their whole lives and the lives of the people and institutions around them would benefit. There is substantial evidence to support the idea that religious practices such as worship attendance and prayer are good in a holistic sense. People who regularly participate in religious communities and activities tend to be happier and healthier (both in body and in spirit). People with regular worship attendance are more likely to take care of their bodies and even more likely to eat broccoli and green, leafy vegetables. Recent studies suggest that as good as religion is for adults, it is even better for adolescents. Adolescents who are active in religious communities are much less likely to smoke, get drunk, commit suicide, use or sell illegal drugs, get in fights, or have sex early and with multiple partners. At the same time, they are much more likely to volunteer in their communities, take care of their bodies, do well in school, handle difficulties more smoothly, and even wear seat belts and brush their teeth!

The effects of religious practice (for Christians this amounts to using the means of grace) are not limited to the individual but can affect others and even the whole system. For example, when the parents of religious adolescents are also religious, these adolescents are even less likely to get...
in trouble and more likely to do the right thing than those whose parents are not religious. Moreover, family religious activities have been linked with a healthier family system. A nationwide study revealed that when families did some religious activity (such as a prayer at mealtime or bedtime) five to seven days a week, their 12–14-year-old children were much more likely to report that their families engaged in an array of other healthy family behaviors that tend to nourish more loving, respectful relationships and interactions among family members and better mental, physical, and moral health as well.23

These studies point to the substantial and holistic impact of religion. Religious faith and religious activity are linked with positive behaviors in many other parts of an individual’s life and the life of the community in which that individual lives.

Remembering that the means of grace and their effects are substantial, holistic, and systemic, church leaders would do well to act accordingly. Given these beneficial effects, those church leaders who are timid about reaching out to people without a religious community or faith have yet another reason to take a new look at evangelism. For example, as we have seen, young people who regularly participate in religious life are less likely to commit suicide or become addicts. Their odds get even better if their parents are religiously involved. Given the clear benefits to young people and others, we need to invite them to worship with us and to give them an enthusiastic welcome if they accept.24 We can reach out to people without falling into Christian arrogance.

These benefits give added support not only for outreach to nonreligious people but also for discipleship among those who are already church members. In light of these benefits, we owe it to the young people of our churches as well as to all other members, whether new or lifelong Christians, to teach them about the means of grace and to encourage them to get in the habit of using the means not simply because they should but because the means of grace are means to better, more joyful lives and relationships. Our denomination’s stated mission—to make disciples of Jesus Christ—includes outreach to the nonreligious and discipleship for Christians at all stages.

What means of grace should the church today offer? Although Wesley had a long list of the means of grace, he gave special attention to the means instituted by Christ, such as meditating on Scripture, praying, worshiping,
fasting, and taking Communion. He was adamant that these special works of piety, along with works of mercy and care for others, were essential to the Christian life of discipleship. Church leaders today have the duty and joy of using these means and encouraging others to use them. They can also offer opportunities for learning more about different forms of the means of grace. For example, some churches have opportunities for prayerful reading of Scripture in groups (known as lectio divina) and for different kinds of prayers such as centering prayer.

Wesley’s flexible and pragmatic approach to the prudential means of grace can give church leaders a model for making a similar list of means that could be fruitful for Christians today. Given our needs and the trends of our time, what might church leaders today add to the list of prudential means of grace? The fast pace and the many distractions of our culture may call for spiritual practices that help people slow down and pay attention. Christians are turning to silent or quiet spiritual retreats, meditative practices such as walking a labyrinth or doing centering prayer, and quiet music like that offered by the Taize community. They have found these to be effective means of grace in a loud and driven culture. Some Christians may be more interested now in spiritual direction, the exercise of spiritual discernment, and many other ancient spiritual practices, because they need extra help to slow down and pay attention to the way God is moving in the rush of details of their daily lives. At the same time, because many have grown accustomed to the faster pace of our culture, including the quick changes and high stimulation of the senses of hearing and sight in popular media, church leaders would be wise to think about means of grace that will meet this need for high stimulation. In our time, projecting fast images on a screen and offering high stimulation music can be means of grace.

Many people today live far away from their extended families and are much less likely than previous generations to belong to community organizations. Thus, the social networks of the church, such as Sunday school classes, Emmaus groups, or long-term study/covenant groups (for example, Disciple Bible Study and Companions in Christ) are invaluable.25 A recent interdisciplinary report found that adolescents today are in crisis because their biological needs for connection to other people and to “spiritual and moral meaning” are not being met.26 Younger children and adults share some of these same basic needs. When churches draw youth and others into full participation in the body of Christ through an array of small groups
and activities, they offer a means of grace badly needed for our time.

That many neighborhoods and communities are segregated by class and race makes it important for churches to offer opportunities for people to interact with others who are different. For example, when middle-class and wealthy people have no contact with poor people, opportunities for coming to know poor people and offering them assistance can serve as a means of grace for the prosperous. Similarly, given the current epidemic of materialism and greed of all kinds, many wealthy and middle-class people desperately need to give away a big chunk of their money and possessions. Sacrificial giving is not just a means of survival for the poor but also a means of grace for the financially prosperous.

Given both the Wesleyan holistic concern for health and the prevalence today of unhealthy practices, a list of Wesleyan prudential means of grace for today would have to include activities that are good for the body, such as good diets, exercise, and other healthy habits. Moreover, because a good Wesleyan cares not only for the health of his own body but also for the health of other bodies, the list could hardly be Wesleyan without including means of grace that benefit the bodies of others, such as feeding the hungry, helping people get access to medical care (for both physical and mental health), and working to see that young people have healthy food options in their school cafeterias, vending machines, and fast-food restaurants. If, as Wesley insisted, the means of grace can include "everything which we give, or speak, or do, whereby . . . another [person] may receive any advantage, either in . . . body or soul," then our list of prudential means of grace is constrained only by the limits of our imagination and compassion as we respond to the needs of our time.

For Wesleyans, both works of piety and works of mercy are essential means of grace, making the current temptation to separate these two kinds of works un-Wesleyan. Recently, Wesleyans have been divided along un-Wesleyan lines, with those who value works of mercy to the neglect of works of piety, on the one side, and those who reverse the error, on the other. Any good Wesleyan list of the means of grace and any consistent Wesleyan life must include both works of mercy and works of piety.

The problem with these long lists of works of piety and works of mercy is that Christians can become as thoughtlessly busy and distracted with the means of grace as with any of the other items on their to-do lists. It is all too easy to focus on getting through the form of the means of grace and
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forgetting about the goal. It makes an ugly situation uglier when church leaders cheer on busy people to use the means of grace without continually emphasizing that the means of grace themselves are not the point. Prayer is not the point. Good works—even really, really good works—are not the point. The point is growth in love. We can call it by the name of holiness or sanctification or renewal in the image of God or Christian perfection or Christian maturity or anything else we want, as long as we are talking about the same thing—growth in the love of God and neighbor.

Many of us face another temptation when we approach the means of grace, namely, to control and manage. Some of us live as if we believe that our holiness depends on getting things right and on trying harder. It is difficult not to be formed by the pervasive message in our culture that the best way to succeed and to get something done in this world is to push harder than the next guy and to give it everything you’ve got. United Methodists are not unaffected by this dominant cultural message. Indeed, we have a well-deserved reputation for working harder and longer at our church meetings and conferences than members of many other denominations. Anyone skeptical of this claim need spend only one—very long—day observing United Methodist General Conference delegates in action.

In a culture and a church where people like to make things happen and take pride in relying on their own strength, ingenuity, and hard work to shape the world, it can be tough to get the means of grace right—precisely because when it comes to grace, trying too hard to get it right is a sure way to get it wrong. Trying too hard often amounts to little more than a futile attempt to control both the means and the grace. And grace will not be controlled.

When, in approaching the means of grace, we try to control God and to manage grace, our efforts can become means not of grace but of diminishment, not of healing but of enfeeblement. This sounds like bad news, but it is not. When we see the futility of our dimwitted, strong-willed attempts to slog our way toward God, we may find ourselves, either through despair or simple, childlike openness, able to let go and to trust in God and God’s powerful work within us.

In their better moments, hard-working United Methodists know that ultimately we rely not on our own efforts and power but on God’s. Wesley understood grace not simply as God’s mercy given to us but also as God’s loving power at work within us. God’s grace is, Wesley writes, “the power of God, the Holy Ghost, which worketh in us both to will and to do of his SUMMER 2005
good pleasure." When Wesley talked about holiness as growth in love, he was not simply talking about the increase of our love for God and neighbor but also about the increase and flourishing of God's powerful love within us. The means of grace are the ordinary channels to continually receive within us and nourish this power of God.

Wesleyans insist, though, that it is not only by God's grace or power that the means of grace become effective. The human response is also necessary. But if straining, controlling, and trying too hard are of limited help, what is the proper human response? I have found that in prayer and other acts of worship, I can be most responsive to God's grace when I willingly let go of my impulse to control and, instead, intentionally welcome God's power, which is a power not of coercion but of love. God takes us not by force but only by our openness and invitation. Likewise, we cannot take God by force but only by our openness and even our surrender.

Many people today are nervous about a word like surrender. In thinking about surrender, it helps to use not military images, where the defeated surrender to the victorious, but domestic images. Many nursing mothers will testify that the intimate connection between the mother and the baby at her breast, especially in the loving union that sometimes comes as the milk lets down, is a kind of mutual surrender. When lovers surrender their bodies to each other, it is an act not of defeat but of mutual openness and embrace, leading even to ecstatic union. At its best, this surrender is mutual and healthy.

Someone might object that surrender in a good marriage is more mutual than in the divine-human relationship, in which only one party—the human—surrenders and gives over self and control while the other party—the divine—is by nature all powerful. But that is not the way our Christian story goes. The mutual surrendering may be unequally weighted, but surely the balance tips far to the other side. God, the all-powerful creator and sustainer of the universe, willingly came into the world in the most vulnerable and dependent way—in the form of a baby (see Phil. 2:6-8). God poured out Godself in the manger and on the Cross. God's self-surrender did not stop there but goes on as God, in every moment, dwells within each person, continually giving of Godself and God's loving power. God surrenders fully to us and asks for our surrender in return.

As in our surrender we open up to the working of God's power within us, we receive power greater than anything we could imagine. It is not our
power but God's power working within us that is “able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine” (Eph. 3:20), allowing us to use the means of grace responsively and to grow in holiness of life and heart. The Christian life, Wesley insisted, is not about waiting in quiet openness for God's gifts of grace. Through God's power of grace within us, we have been given the power to move toward God, in part by going to the places that are known channels of God's love and power—the means of grace. God's power does not undercut human agency but makes it possible. We are able to "work out [our] own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in [us], enabling [us] to will and to work for his good pleasure" (Phil. 2:12b-13). As God surrenders and pours Godself out into us, God gives us the power and mandate to surrender to God and to pour ourselves out into the world. By the power of God's grace, our efforts become not futile but holy. By this power we are able, in the face of the struggles of life, to strive faithfully.

In my family, we like to quote John Buchan, the Scottish writer and Calvinist preacher's son, who wrote, "It's a great life, if you don't weaken."

But surely, when it comes to grace, it is a great life if you know how to weaken at the right moments—at the Lord's table and the family dinner table; during times of worship and times of confession in a small group of Christians; and within the sacred borders of the marriage bed and our own places of private prayer. It is precisely in our weakness that God's power within us grows strong, for God's "power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor. 12:9).

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Endnotes


2. See my "That's All a Mule Can Do: The Ethics of Balancing Work at Home and on the Job," Maguire Center Occasional Papers (Maguire Center for Ethics: Dallas, 2003).

6. These lists are found throughout his work. See, for example, Wesley, Sermon 92, “On Zeal”; Sermon 16, "The Means of Grace"; Sermons 26-28, “Upon Our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount,” Discourses 6, 7, and 8; Sermon 98, "On Visiting the Sick," VII. Minutes of Some Late Conversations between the Rev. Mr. Wesley and Others," Question 48, VIII; and Sermon 85, "On Working Out Our Own Salvation," all in Works (Jackson).
7. Baptism is called a means of grace instituted by Christ in "A Treatise on Baptism,"§2.1, in Works (Jackson), 10:225.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid., §2.4.9, 8:379.
15. Wesley, Sermon 98, "On Visiting the Sick," §1, in Works (Jackson), 7:139.
17. Wesley, Sermon 98, "On Visiting the Sick," §1, in Works (Jackson), 7:139.
18. See, for example, Wesley, "An Answer to the Reverend Mr. Church’s Remarks on the Reverend Mr. John Wesley’s Last Journal, In a Letter to that Gentleman" (February 2, 1743), in Works (Jackson), 8:442-85.


How America Got the Holy Ghost:
The Uniqueness of the African-American Experience of Holiness

LOVE HENRY WHELCHEL, JR.

Our African-American ancestors were brought to the United States with the Holy Ghost fire shut up in their bones. They arrived on this continent with an insatiable hunger for the spiritual world. From West and Central Africa they brought a strong belief that the personal and communal had a continuous involvement in the spirit-world in the practical affairs of daily life. They believed that the whole earth was full of God’s glory and that there was no rigid demarcation between the sacred and the profane, the natural and the supernatural.¹ The spirituality of our African ancestors can best be expressed in a quote from Thomas à Kempis’s *Imitation of Christ*: “It is better to feel the [Holy Ghost], than to be able to define it.”² In short, Africans did not arrive in the United States as spiritual and cultural destitutes. They came with a rich religious and cultural heritage that is rooted in the Bible and in the origin of the universe itself. In contrast to European immigrants, whose religious tradition survived and prospered, the religious beliefs and practices of African Americans were denied and systematically suppressed.³

It is seldom recognized and acknowledged that the religious instruction in Christianity offered to African Americans by white denominations contributed to the suppression of their indigenous holiness and pietism, rooted in traditional African religion and culture. European Americans regarded African beliefs and practices—such as spirit possessions, religious dancing, shouting, honoring ancestors, and drumming—not only as expressions of the kind of paganism they claimed to deplore but also as vestiges of identity they felt they needed to destroy in order to enhance their control over their slaves. Nevertheless, African Americans clung tenaciously to some of their beliefs and often practiced them—although in secret—and adapted them in creative ways for whenever their captors tried to share Christianity with them or impose it upon them.⁴ It was not until the Great
Awakening of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that a significant number of African Americans embraced Protestant Christianity. It may have been providential that the pietism and holiness that European Americans had suppressed and rejected for more than a century sparked a transcontinental spiritual revival in both Europe and America. But even prior to the conversion of Europe and America to pietism, African Americans practiced a clandestine holiness while at the same time worshiping publicly in white churches under the approval and supervision of their white slave masters. The religious services and teachings were conducted by white preachers, who emphasized a heavenly reward for good slaves who were obedient to their masters. More important for the slaves, however, was the "invisible institution" in which the practices of holy dancing, shouting, spirit possession, testimonies, and exhortations were practiced in secret, away from the prying eyes of slave masters. Despite the threats and severe punishments, African Americans persisted in holding secret praise services, often at night, under the bush harbors in the thickets or down by the riverside, "where you couldn't hear nobody pray."

In this article, I delineate African Americans' beliefs in and practices of holiness in light of their unique history and religious experiences. I focus on the African-American experience of holiness and pietism as it relates to the conversion experience and the spreading of scriptural holiness.

The Conversion Experience

In the aftermath of John Wesley's heartwarming experience at Aldersgate, he made the amazing discovery that salvation was simple and available for everyone, including for African Americans. For the early African-American Methodists, the conversion experience gave them their first opportunity to speak in public and to become literate. The Methodist "love feasts," prayer meetings, and class meetings played vital roles in providing a platform for African Americans and women, both black and white, to express themselves in public. All believers at these testimonial gatherings were expected to tell their stories by including the following elements in their testimonies:

(1) After singing a verse of a hymn, the person speaks of expressing
   1. love for everybody
   2. joy at being present
   3. determination to stay on the battlefield to the end;

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(2) After singing, the person gives the right hand of fellowship; and
(3) The person recalls his or her conversion experience by telling how and when he or she came through.6

Many early Methodists benefited from these prayer meetings and love feasts, including Richard Allen, Harry Hosier, Jarena Lee, and Amanda Berry Smith. After Richard Allen received his personalized Aldersgate conversion experience on his master's plantation in Delaware, he purchased his freedom and moved to Philadelphia. Here Allen united with St. George's Church and became active as a class leader of the African-American members and convened them for 5:00 A.M. prayer meetings and love feasts. These gatherings provided Allen and his members with the opportunity to sing, pray, and testify. Allen was so pleased with the opportunity to exhort and exercise his spiritual gifts that he wrote the following in his autobiography:

I would not be anything but a Methodist. I was born and awakened under them. The Methodists were the first people to bring glad tidings to the colored people. I feel thankful that I have ever heard a Methodist Preacher All the other denominations preach so high flown that we were not able to comprehend their doctrine. I am of the opinion that reading sermons will never prove so beneficial to colored people as extempore preaching7

Another pioneering African-American preacher who benefited from these testimonial meetings was Harry Hosier. He was a contemporary of Richard Allen, and they were the only two African Americans present at the 1784 organizing General Conference at the Lovely Lane Church in Baltimore. Hosier accompanied Freeborn Garrettson on his travels up and down the Eastern Seaboard to summon the Methodists to assemble for the famous Christmas Conference. On another occasion, Hosier traveled with Bishop Francis Asbury to Northern Virginia in 1787. In his journal, Asbury noted that Hosier preached to the African-American audience, admonishing them to live holy lives.8 Harry Hosier was an amazing fire-baptized and Holy Ghost-filled Methodist preacher. Due to his fame and notoriety throughout colonial America, he was considered the first African-American celebrity. A product of his times, he never learned to read or write; but he was gifted with a phenomenal memory. When he heard the Scriptures

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read, he remembered and could quote those passages. His ministry was validated by the Holy Spirit as his guide and teacher. Benjamin Rush, a member of the Continental Congress and signer of the Declaration of Independence, paid Harry Hosier the ultimate compliment when he called him "the greatest orator in America" during colonial times.9

Jarena Lee had two strikes against her—race and gender—but she persevered and became the first female preacher in the African Methodist church. She nurtured and cultivated her spiritual gifts in prayer meetings and love feasts. She was called to preach while sitting in a prayer meeting. After she received the call to preach, she went to Richard Allen, who was the pastor of Bethel African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church and informed him of her call to preach. Allen refused to grant her a license to preach but did allow her to hold prayer meetings in her home. When people found out about these prayer and healing services, they quickly filled Lee's home. These prayer meetings gave Lee a platform to exercise her spiritual gifts of singing, praying, testifying, speaking in public, and giving spiritual exhortations. After Jarena Lee effectively manifested her spiritual gifts in these meetings in her home, she was invited to preach at Bethel AME Church. After hearing her sermon, Allen commented that "she was called to the work as any preachers who were present."10

Amanda Berry Smith was another early Methodist female preacher who was a strong advocate of holiness. She ascended from slavery in Maryland to become a washerwoman, wife, mother, evangelist, international missionary, and founder of an orphanage for black children. She became very popular with white Methodists, particularly the nineteenth-century Shouting Methodists. The Shouting Methodists earned their name from being a noisy bunch, shouting and responding to preaching with "Praise the Lord," "Hallelujah," and "Amen." Interestingly, one stanza of a popular Shouting Methodist revival song found its way onto the cornerstone of the historic Foundry Methodist Church in Washington, D.C.:

They are despised by Satan's train,  
Because they shout and  
Preach so plain.  
I'm bound to march to endless bliss  
And die a shouting Methodist.11

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In her autobiography, Smith recalls conducting a camp meeting in Maine, where black folks were (and still are) few and far between. An elderly white brother came to her camp meeting and was converted under her preaching. She described him as well-to-do and full of prejudice. He confessed that he would not have anything to do with Blacks when he could help it. The man admitted that he came to the meetings a number of times seeking a blessing, but found himself disappointed every time because there was Amanda Smith, a black woman, singing, praying, and testifying. In spite of his disappointment, this man, while attending the camp meetings and listening to the African-American evangelist, received direction from the Holy Spirit to refrain from using tobacco in his mouth. When he knelt before the Lord, the Spirit said to him, “Can you give up that tobacco?” Smith saw him dig a hole, remove the tobacco from his mouth and put it in the hole, cover the hole, and kneel over the hole. It was not long before the Lord poured in his heart a blessing of full salvation: “My, My! and how he shouted.”

Smith’s mantra was, “Without holiness, no one would see the Lord.” Like many African Americans, she believed in tarrying and waiting on the Lord. The expression “You can’t hurry God” is frequently heard in the Black church today. Worship in the African-American tradition represents eternity. Smith expressed that sentiment when she admonished her followers:

We colored people are not used to getting up off our knees quick, like white folks. When we went down on our knees to get something, we generally got it before we got up. We are very imitative people, so I find we have begun to imitate white people, even in that the Lord help us.

African-American religion was shaped on the anvil of struggle and adversity. For African Americans, religion has been an important survival mechanism. It is a citadel of hope for people on the brink of despair. In studying various liturgical styles of worship, it is important to take into account the different cultural and institutional situations that shape patterns and forms of individual and group expressions of the worship experience. At times, people practice maintenance worship, which is routine and normal. Maintenance worship is like a three-month or 3,000-mile oil change— it ensures the nuts and bolts are lubricated. At other times, they practice a more radical style of worship. A radical worship more nearly
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...resembles an "engine overhaul," because major damage has been done to the human spirit and psyche. The reign of terror during slavery and subsequent segregation, discrimination, and lynching called for a more radical worship response among the masses of African Americans. In times of terror, trepidation, and fear, people are inclined to engage in a more radical and serious worship encounter, as we all witnessed after the horrible tragedy of 9/11.

Spreading Scriptural Holiness

The pragmatist Booker T. Washington observed that from the very beginning African Americans and Methodists appeared to have had a natural affinity for one another. He attributed the appeal to the way Methodism got started in England—by visiting the prisons, feeding the hungry, and addressing the needs of the poor and disinherited. Methodism began in Britain as a response to the indifference of the Anglican Church in reaching out to the unchurched and to those in need of help. John Wesley believed that the gospel of Jesus Christ mandated that the church become involved in serving the needs of others. He observes, "For religion to retreat into a solitary religion is to destroy it." In his sermons and writings, Wesley consistently admonished his followers to relate to world and society as the "salt of the earth" and the "light of the world."

Richard Allen, founder of the first independent African-American Methodist church, applied John Wesley's social teaching to his ministry. In 1793, a calamitous outbreak of yellow fever in Philadelphia took the lives of hundreds of people of both races. The people who contracted the dreaded disease would have a chill, accompanied by a headache and severe joint and back pains. Patients usually suffered from seven to ten days and would suddenly die, just as they appeared to be improving. Some of the victims lost their minds and became enraged with fury. Others jumped out of windows while yet others would vomit blood and scream for help.

When the mayor of Philadelphia appealed to the churches to step forward to care for the sick and to bury the dead, Richard Allen and his fledgling congregation responded. European Americans were allegedly considered more susceptible to the sickness than African Americans. Therefore, Allen and his followers took the leadership in caring for the sick and burying the dead. They put their health and their lives in jeopardy to spread the beauty of social holiness by addressing the needs of the people...
in their community. Also, Allen solicited freewill offerings to assist with medical costs and burial expenses. He kept meticulous records of receipts and expenditures, demonstrating his administrative and business acumen.19

Before and after the Civil War, African Americans expressed pride in holiness and moral superiority over their slaveholders as well as whites who mistreated them. For example, a freed slave named Charlie, who met his former slave master after the Civil War, had been unmercifully beaten by his master and bore lacerations on his back as evidence of the abuse. When asked by his former master if he had forgiven him, Charlie revealed that he indeed had forgiven him: "For the God I serve is a God of love and I can't go to his kingdom with hate in my heart. When a man has been killed dead and made alive in Christ Jesus, he no longer feels like he did when he was a servant of the devil."20

After the emancipation, African-American leaders in the North and South worked ardently to prepare their people for responsible citizenship by emphasizing that nothing was more important than building good character through honesty, chastity, thriftiness, hard work, and charity. The Black leadership realized that the practice of these virtues would serve as a powerful weapon to combat the charges of African Americans being inferior to white people and unqualified to assimilate in civilized society.

Another African American who championed spreading scriptural holiness near the end of the nineteenth century was J. W. E. Bowen. Bowen was the first African American to earn a Ph.D. from Boston University's School of Theology. The erudite Bowen launched a national crusade to inject high moral character into the Black community by preaching a series of four sermons from his Asbury Methodist Church in Washington, D.C. These sermons were published in 1892 under the title "What Shall the Harvest Be?: A National Sermon or Series to the Colored People of America on Their Problem. In the preface, Bowen recognized the fact that the Black church was the largest public institution in the African-American community, with awesome potential for building character and spreading social holiness. He wrote:

I hold that the Christian pulpit whose pastor is president of the largest university among us, the university of the masses, ought to address itself faithfully to these living questions of civic and moral importance and ultimately steer the whole people in the direction of a higher life.21
Bowen used Deut. 28:9, "The Lord shall establish thee a Holy people," in two of his sermons in order to compare the mission and unique history of African Americans with those of the Israelites. Bowen believed that God had chosen to deliver the Israelites and the African Americans from bondage for a special mission. At the time Bowen preached these sermons, African Americans were fewer than thirty years removed from slavery, and he compared their plight with the Israelites' wandering in the wilderness for forty years. In both cases, Bowen maintained, the wilderness experiences were necessary schools of adversity to prepare them for the full blessing of the promised land. Also, he extrapolated from this text that God would not fulfill his promise for the Israelites or for the African Americans until they became an obedient, holy, and righteous people.

Like many African Americans in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Bowen admonished Blacks to take pride in their rich heritage and challenged them to regain their pristine superiority in arts, sciences, literature, architecture, and music. He exhorted African Americans to look upon Africa not as the Dark Continent but as the place where the world first saw the light. More important, Bowen appropriated the names of African people and places recorded in the Bible in order to affirm their special calling to spread scriptural holiness.

In addition to advocating a cultural piety and holiness, Bowen addressed what he called the Negro problem and the "manhood problem." In his view, the legacy of slavery had its greatest adverse effect on the masculinity of the Black male. He believed there was a correlation between the emasculation of the Black male and the Negro problem. He claimed further that addressing the manhood problem should take precedence over the struggle for political equality. At the time Bowen delivered his series of sermons in 1892, all the talk was about the "Negro problem" and little was being said about the continuation of segregation, discrimination, economic exploitation, and lynching of African Americans after their emancipation. These issues were not addressed until Gunnar Myrdal's 1944 classic study, *American Dilemma*, altered the race problem from the older "Negro problem" to a "White problem." The study concluded that it was the moral failing of white Americans rather than a problem of Black deficiency that was responsible for the lingering racial disparity and degradation in the United States. In short, Bowen's prescription for this malady was for the Black churches across the United States to help Black men achieve
Christian character and spiritual holiness.

Before concluding this article, let us look at Charles Albert Tindley, who, at the beginning of the twentieth century, promoted scriptural holiness and exerted considerable influence on all Methodists, both black and white. He was born a Methodist on Maryland’s eastern shore. During the colonial revivals, the region had been popular for evangelistic crusades for the Methodists and various other denominations. Tindley was the product of a Holy Ghost-filled and enthusiastic style of worship from his youth.

When he moved to Philadelphia, he brought this demonstrative style of worship with him, which was very popular and appealing to a large number of people. Tindley used his gifts and talents to build one of the greatest churches in all of Methodism. His congregation soon outgrew the 3,500 seating capacity of his church; so great were the weekly crowds that often as many as 1,500 more had to stand throughout the worship services.

Tindley’s approach to praise and worship included a variety of liturgical and cultural forms. All of the elements of the worship experience, including the hymns, anthems, responses, creeds, prayers, and confessions, were performed with high spiritual fervor. The congregation would respond as enthusiastically to Handel’s Messiah as they would to Tindley’s own gospel song “We’ll Understand It Better By and By.” The same folks who could enjoy Rossini’s Inflammatus on Sunday morning would return later for all-night tarrying and healing services. In the true spirit of Methodism, Tindley demonstrated that worship can retain its dignity and life without being dead and sterile.

Still another manifestation of Wesleyan influence on Tindley was his insistence that the quest for personal salvation must never be divorced from the work of social transformation. Tindley refused to confine his ministry within the safe walls of the church. He was frequently seen walking up and down the streets of the neighborhood in which the church was located, meeting and greeting the people on their level and talking and preaching to people of all classes and conditions. Reverend Henry Nichols once said that what impressed him about Tindley was how “he made his church a sort of vessel into which people were welcome to bring all their traditions. He believed that the spiritual needs of the community could not be addressed without taking into consideration the practical and material needs for food, housing, and clothing.” Tindley was known and loved by his congregation as much for his willingness to help them find employ
ment or raise money for a down payment on a house as for his masterful preaching and skillful orchestration of Sunday worship.28

Tindley's sense of inclusion and balance between religion of the head, heart, and hands is characteristic of Methodist holiness and were the defining attributes of Richard Allen and John Wesley. Historically, the African-American church has been the face of the Black community; and church membership was not a prerequisite for receiving benevolence to pay rent or find a place for a respectable burial and funeral. A notable preacher once echoed this holistic approach to religion with ungrammatical profundity when he remarked, 'If your religion don't make you feel somethin', think somethin', and do somethin', you can be sure you ain't got nothing.'29

Today's African-American worship takes a page from Charles Tindley's style of worship as it attempts to be inclusive to meet the spiritual needs of all congregants in worship. The music and liturgy are diverse in order to appeal to youth and adults, the masses and the classes, the lettered and unlettered, the demonstrative and the undemonstrative. Holiness allows for unity in diversity and respects individuality and differences. The African-American traditions of "call and response" between the pulpit and the pew, vocal praise, liturgical dance, and spirit possessions are very evident in today's African-American worship experiences.30

The largest and fastest-growing churches in the Methodist tradition are congregations that appropriate the Bible-based, Holy Ghost-filled, and fire-baptized worship experience. Today, in urban areas across the United States, the Pentecostal holiness and urban Methodist style, once popular in the rural South and sanctified churches in the North, have moved onto college campuses and into middle-class traditional churches. Many (though, of course, not all) African-American churches in mainline denominations have rekindled a holy fire of Pentecost by incorporating such gifts as speaking in tongues, spirit possessions, shouting, holy dancing, and laying on of hands. The emotionalism that has traditionally been associated with anti-intellectualism is becoming more and more fashionable. Emboldened by the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, African Americans are more comfortable with their own identity. More and more of them are no longer impressed with whatever it means to be white.

Currently, African Americans are flocking to churches engaged in holistic ministry. Many Black preachers have changed their preaching style to address the needs of this generation. Particularly, youth and young
adults are looking for ministers to do more teaching from the Bible, book-by-book, chapter-by-chapter, and verse-by-verse, rather than ministers who follow the old preaching style of delivering sermons. More and more, African Americans are demanding relevant sermons that address their everyday needs such as finance, relationships, physical fitness, alternative medicines, AIDS awareness, and gender concerns. A growing number of African-American churches are like spiritual shopping malls, offering scholarships, programs for community or economic development, books, tutoring, libraries, physical fitness centers, and computer labs. The trend toward these holistic types of ministries is not new to the African-American religious experience. Historically, the Black church has been the cultural womb of the African-American community. For example, the African-American church gave birth to the first schools, banks, insurance companies, literary clubs, orphanages, drama clubs, and publishing companies. In short, spreading scriptural holiness, making the world one’s parish, and applying God’s Word to contemporary problems—whether spiritual or temporal—are inherent in the African-American religious experience and culture.

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Endnotes

5. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
19. Ibid., 48-65.
21. J. W. E. Bowen, "What Shall the Harvest Be?": *A National Sermon or Series to the Colored People of America on Their Problem* (Washington, D.C.: Asbury Methodist Episcopal Church, 1892), 3. These sermons can be found in Special Collections in the Emory University Woodruff Library.
22. Ibid., 5.
23. Ibid., 6.
27. Pollard and Whelchel, "How Long This Road." 222.
28. Ibid.
29. Ibid., 214.
30. Ibid.
31. Ibid., 226.
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Bruce Robbins’s A World Parish? offers a challenging and thought-provoking primer on the global nature of United Methodism. However, the book does not have clarity about the nature of connectionalism as it extends to a central concept of United Methodism in ministerial credentialing. Robbins cites examples and sources from our ecclesiological history that expose the fact that we are not indeed a global church. While it is true that there are United Methodists in Africa, Europe, and the Philippines, the Methodist family has largely gone the route of autonomy. United Methodism does not extend to all four corners of the globe. What we are left with, according to Robbins, is a church that is more international than global—an "extended-national confessional" church, a descriptor Robbins borrows from Janice Love. United Methodism is primarily a U.S. church that has overseas franchises loosely held together by a common polity.

Certainly Robbins’s book is a good introduction to tensions in the connection. It proposes new ways to combat U.S. paternalism and the power of its financial largesse. Robbins’s notion that we should address inequities in pension, bishops’ salaries, and the fact that non-U.S. conferences do not pay any monies into the general church’s apportioned funds (except a sliding-scale amount for the Episcopal fund) is a superb idea.
However, the real issue of "self-headedness" (Robbins's term for autonomy) is more about effective disciple-making than about structure. In all structural issues form should follow function. Thus, the question is this: "Do our structures (forms) undergird our stated function of making disciples of Jesus Christ?" The answer to this question will help us reach Robbins's goal of both self-headedness and interdependence.

Robbins provides an admirable history of past studies and plans about United Methodist structure, including assessments of why they were not adopted, and he seems to support a version of the Connectional Process Team (CPT) report. He also offers snapshots of other churches' polities and gives principles by which we as a denomination might release different regions of the church from a strict understanding of the United Methodist Discipline. Ultimately, Robbins is suggesting that we move toward a stronger, more effective World Methodist Council in which the worldwide Wesleyan family would resemble the Anglican Communion.

To this end, Robbins identifies not United Methodism's Book of Discipline but its polity as the common link across international lines. He cites ¶543.7, which states that central conferences have the power to make such changes and adaptations to the Book of Discipline as the special conditions and the mission of the church in the area require, especially concerning the organization and administration of the work on local church, district, and annual conference levels; provided that no action shall be taken that is contrary to the Constitution and the General Rules of The United Methodist Church; and provided that the spirit of connectional relationship is kept between the local and the general church.

Robbins uses this Disciplinary paragraph to highlight his whole case about the overall disconnect between United Methodists within and outside the United States. He concludes that the flexibility granted to central conferences to make certain adaptations to the Discipline is the crux of United Methodism's lack of ecclesiological clarity. This seems to be the main presupposition in his argument for an understanding of United Methodism that promotes self-headedness in the midst of interdependence. In other words, Robbins seems to say that if a means already exists for non-U.S. conferences to provide for their own governance, then how are we a global church anyway?
Robbins expresses the concern of many when he wonders whether central conference delegates should vote at General Conference on issues they are allowed to adapt and modify in their respective regions. He uses the hot-button issue of homosexuality as a case in point for expanding autonomy and adaptation of the Discipline to every region of the church, including U.S. jurisdictions. About homosexuality, Robbins states, "[S]ome Central Conferences exercise their right to change the Book of Discipline on this controversial issue. Should that be a possibility for jurisdictions as well?" (23) This implies that each jurisdiction, like the central conferences, would be able to adapt and expand the Discipline as they determine.

At this point I question Robbins's facts and his understanding of United Methodist polity and ecclesiology. At issue is our very identity as United Methodists. My critique of Robbins's assumptive endorsement of autonomy for both the U.S. and the central conferences begins with the fact that our Constitution clearly states, "The United Methodist Church is a part of the church universal, which is one Body in Christ" (Article IV, ¶4). Robbins has been a champion of ecumenical relationships; yet his ideas seem to propose a United Methodism even more fragmented than it is at present and less able to embrace the unity of the body of Christ. From recent events, we know that the model for the Anglican Communion is as tenuous as holding together the remnants of the British Commonwealth. Holding together the divergent tensions of self-headedness and interdependence is against our polity, except where mission is concerned. Regional adaptations of the Book of Discipline for missional purposes are necessary and important, unless they come at the expense of the whole.

I agree with Robbins that we need to applaud the permissive language in the Book of Discipline that allows both U.S. and non-U.S. conferences to structure themselves in ways that are best suited for their unique situations. This resembles John Wesley's use of every strain of Christendom to reform the Anglican Church. He borrowed from the Pietists, the Roman Catholics, the Reformed, the Anglicans, and the Evangelical Revival strands of Christian mission to further his efforts at making disciples. Thus, adaptability is a part not only of our heritage but also of our ecclesiology and our polity. We do not believe in a one-size-fits-all ministry. We do believe in doing whatever works in whatever situation to spread the gospel.

That said, we cannot surrender another tenet of Wesley's, namely, uniformity. He may have tried to use all of the means that he could in
disciple-making, but in some of the essentials, he was exacting. After all, this is why we are called “Methodists.” Particularly, Wesley was exacting in his understanding of ministerial credentialing. Since the earliest days, our episcopal polity has been an example of our desire to bring legitimacy to the Methodist movement. The third Restrictive Rule in our Constitution (¶19) protects the episcopacy, underscoring the fact that our polity is weighted toward clergy. Although we are a church that touts the ministry of all Christians, the Book of Discipline describes “charges” as pastoral charges; and the number of lay delegates at every level of conferencing in our system is disproportionately based on the number of clergy. Therefore, although I embrace Robbins’s encouragement for local autonomy, there are limits, especially around ministerial credentialing. If connectionalism is one of the primary ways that United Methodists do mission and employ clergy, any self-headedness that we support, whether within the U.S. or outside, must retain certain commonalities.

Specifically, with regard to ministerial credentialing, central conferences are not permitted to change the Discipline in any way that violates the Constitution. Paragraph 16 of the Constitution states, “The General Conference shall have full legislative power over all matters distinctively connectional...” One of these distinctively connectional duties is “[t]o define and fix the powers and duties of elders, deacons, supply preachers, local preachers, exhorters, and deaconesses” (¶16.2). In point of fact, the Judicial Council has consistently upheld General Conference’s prerogative over central conference adaptations in the matter of ministerial credentialing. Several of these judicial decisions illustrate the limits of autonomy within United Methodist polity. In Decision No. 155, the case digest states,

A Central Conference may not change General Conference legislation regarding the granting of full clergy rights for women. A Central Conference may not refuse to accept a woman who has been given full clergy rights by an Annual Conference. A bishop has the power to transfer a woman ministerial member of an Annual Conference to any other Annual Conference provided he has the consent of the bishop of the receiving Conference, and provided the ministerial member agrees to said transfer.1

This decision underscores the fact that a central conference cannot usurp General Conference’s oversight of clergy credentialing and deployment.
For example, where would clergywomen be if the church resorted to locally driven sexist bigotry?

Similarly, Decision No. 313 states,

The general power conferred by the General Conference on a Central Conference to make changes and adaptations regarding the ministry and other subjects does not authorize a Central Conference or its Annual Conferences to add to or subtract from the basic ministerial obligations established and preempted by act of the General Conference.²

The full text of this decision is very clear in its argument that itinerating clergy from one annual conference or central conference to another must abide by the same Disciplinary qualifications. Because ours is an episcopal polity and we share clergy, self-headedness and interdependence must yield to connectionalism’s insistence on basic ministerial standards. Without uniform standards for credentialing, we lose our connectional polity. Robbins’s book overlooks this challenge.

In conclusion, our primary commitment as United Methodists is to mission. That commitment should not be restricted by national boundaries or issues of nepotistic colonialism. I know from personal experience that the global church adds richness to United Methodism. As we embrace the pluralities of our world, we embrace Christ. Bruce Robbins admirably asks us to find more effective ways to understand who we are and who we can be. As his ideas are tested, I sincerely hope that we do not resort to sectionalism or regionalism as means to a perceived autonomy. United Methodism without clear connectionalism is not who we are, historically or ecclesiologically.

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Endnotes

2. Ibid.
Robbins's book is the legacy of someone who has served for twelve years as general secretary of the Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns. Yet it is a candid, strong voice in the cultivation of the discussion on the global dimension of The United Methodist Church.

In his analysis of the current circumstances within which the denomination finds itself, Robbins notes that General Conference has repeatedly considered proposals about the "global nature of the church." These proposals all failed before they even were discussed, he states quite frankly, because the people are simply not equipped to understand the complexity of the issues. Robbins opens the reader's eyes to the many facets of the challenge to truly becoming a "global church."

As a bishop in one of the central conferences outside the United States, I have a different view of the global configuration of The United Methodist Church. Taking up Robbins's invitation for different points of view, I offer the following perspective as a member of a United Methodist minority in Europe.

Structure. I fully support Robbins's claim that "our current infrastructure is unable to carry the weight of a truly just and sustainable global church... Now is the time to create a structure for a global church" (15). The greatest weakness of the existing structure is that there is no place where the U.S. branch of the family can discuss U.S. issues together. The major themes of General Conference would be less political and more missional if the church in the United States would clean its own house first. This would allow us to focus more clearly and in a truly international way on our shared calling, namely, to preach Christ to a broken world. In its quadrennial meetings, the Central Conference of Central and Southern Europe is able to deliberate fully over the many issues facing the region, which includes Methodist minorities in fourteen nations, organized in seven annual conferences.

Finances. Robbins is correct when he observes that central conferences do not contribute to the connectional system through paying of apportionments. This leads him to speak about the "elephant" of huge financial disparity. On the one hand, this issue has to do with global financial disparity and the division of the world into poor and rich. On the other hand, though, of the seven annual conferences in my episcopal area, two contribute fully to
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the Episcopal Fund, covering all the costs and not relying at all on the General Conference budget. In collaboration with the central conference in Germany, we are providing full support for the theological seminary in Reutlingen, which we share. But for the two annual conferences (Switzerland-France and Austria), our paying the full apportionment to the General Conference budget and fully participating in the distribution of the funds might result in our receiving support we did not anticipate.

The other five annual conferences in my episcopal area (in post-Communist countries) are still fully dependent on support through connectational channels. Their contribution to the Episcopal Fund is minimal. One of the problems is that the U.S. members of the denominational family are often setting their priorities of support unilaterally and do not really understand the situation and the needs of the vulnerable and the poor in our midst. For example, in the 2000–2004 quadrennium, the General Conference provided almost $4 million in support of theological education in post-Communist countries in Europe. In 2004, General Conference changed its priorities for the ensuing quadrennium, leaving no budget for theological education in post-Communist Europe. This sort of behavior threatens to turn the global connection into a lottery.

The Book of Discipline in the Global Church. Central conferences have the authority to edit and publish a central conference edition of the Discipline. In addition to the Constitution, this Discipline contains revised, adapted, or new sections in accordance with the powers given to central conferences by the General Conference. Most delegates to General Conference do not understand the role of the central conferences. Such lack of awareness results in General Conference making ad hoc decisions based on inadequate or wrong information.

Let me illustrate General Conference's incompetence in regard to global issues with two examples. The Methodist Church in the Ivory Coast (West Africa) wanted a more formal relationship with The United Methodist Church. However, the process that was used to incorporate the African denomination left a lot to be desired. There already exists a central conference in the area—the West Africa Central Conference. The appropriate process would have required that the proposal for formal admission be submitted to General Conference through the West Africa Central Conference and the General Board of Global Ministries. Instead, General Conference failed to respect the regional structures, acting as if there were
no West Africa Central Conference. Incidentally, the West Africa Central Conference has yet to meet—for financial, not structural, reasons.

One of the categories of relationship with other members of the Methodist family is the concordat churches. Concordats are presented to General Conference on the recommendation of the Council of Bishops. In 2004, the Methodist Church of Puerto Rico was accepted as a concordat church. Among central conference members the joy about the new relationship with our Methodist brothers and sisters was troubled by the fact that this special concordat is conferring more rights to this concordat church than the Book of Discipline awards to central conferences, which are full members in the connection.

These examples support Robbins's assessment of the present circumstance that "our current infrastructure is unable to carry the weight of a truly just and sustainable 'global church.'" In addition, the reader may sense the uneasiness of one central conference member within the church family.

Robbins introduces the term United Methodist citizenship to remind us of other dimensions of membership: local, global, United Methodist, Pan-Methodist, American Methodist, etc. His discussion broadens our understanding of belonging to the Methodist confessional family. However, in Europe we would paint the picture in different colors. We are collaborating on a permanent basis with the larger Methodist family through the structure of the European Methodist Council. Recently, the Church of the Nazarene was admitted to the council as an observer. Perhaps it is the reality of living in a minority position in the European context that binds the many autonomous Methodists, United Methodists, Nazarenes, and others together. Even the British and Irish Methodists have become a minority in the secular society of Europe.

The summary about the historic journey toward a global church has many aspects. I highlight two: the history of overseas mission (often by migration) and the formation of the central conferences and the history of church unions. In a recent issue of Quarterly Review, Patrick Streiff, a United Methodist church historian from Switzerland, wrote an account that parallels Robbins's reflections. It is fascinating that the perspective from outside the U.S. has another focus. In his article, Streiff juxtaposes the period during the 1960s, when the overseas churches were virtually forced to go into autonomy, with the predilection in the 1980s and 1990s to integrate minorities into a more global connection.
Robbins is leading us into possible directions for the future. He quotes the Council of Bishops: "If [The United Methodist Church] does not take this step of becoming a global church, it will most likely face the danger of becoming fragmented into autonomous churches in various nations of the world, with the American segment becoming merely that—an American fragment of the once future of the global United Methodist Church." Familiar themes manifest themselves once more: voices debating independence versus connection; Christian unity and uniting churches; attempts at structural change and structural visions; the disparity between the rich and the poor regions, etc.

The selection of case studies by a U.S. partner (Philippines, Kenya, South Africa, Ivory Coast, Russia, and Puerto Rico) is a mirror—unintentional but nevertheless power driven and money driven—for the condition of being dominant. The boards and the partner churches in the U.S. are carrying the banner of the global vision. They are selecting the partners and the projects overseas. They are setting the priorities for new initiatives and holistic strategies.

Finally, Robbins moves from assessment to learnings and principles for change. The next time I read the book I will start with Robbins’s “seven principles for change.” These include the spiritual dimension and the theological view that unity in Christ is always a given from where we can start afresh. If the global nature of The United Methodist Church is reflecting the unity in Christ, it will find the appropriate structure, the spirit of sharing resources, and the openness for the poor and the vulnerable in this world.

My son collects maps. Interestingly, the nation where the map is printed also influences the sector of the global map that dominates the map. The map of The United Methodist Church too often appears to be "printed" in North America on behalf of all of us. This is always a signal for how “center” and “margins” get defined. We have to overcome the mapping of our mission from the geographic, economic, and political centers and start by looking at the map from the margins.

In a time when our local churches tend to become more congregationally focused and the global aspects are becoming increasingly delicate and complicated and when the leadership role of the U.S. in the world is jeopardized, we need Robbins’s candid and strong voice in cultivating the discussion on the global dimension of The United Methodist Church. I hope that many will respond to Robbins’s provocative statement of the issues.
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Endnotes


RÜDIGER MINOR

Bruce Robbins’s book is a contribution to an ongoing conversation in The United Methodist Church concerning its mission and self-understanding. As former general secretary of the General Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns, Robbins is not only well equipped for this task but also has been an active part of such conversations and has participated in enabling such dialogues and shaping their content. As one would expect in a book written for a broad audience, for the most part Robbins presents the main ideas, aims, directions, and even controversies in a noncontroversial way, focusing on information over partisanship. Robbins retells the story of (United) Methodist world relationships, beginning with the foundation of an annual conference in Liberia in 1832; the introduction and growing role of central conferences; and the search over the past four decades for a world structure for United Methodism. Robbins dislikes the term global to express these relationships and structures, a feeling I support wholeheartedly. While conceding the weakness of the term international as a substitute, Robbins seems to have no better word. Growing up in German Methodism, I got used to the expression "worldwide Methodist Church." This phrase recommends itself in that it does not bear the imperial or political connotations of the other two.

In his attempt to understand United Methodism’s peculiar mission and structure, Robbins makes productive use of his profound knowledge of other churches’ polities and the ecumenical scene and discussion. He places the worldwide United Methodist relational connection in a larger
context, consisting of a multiplicity of national settings within an ecumenical network. Stressing the importance of an ecumenical commitment is important. However, Robbins seems to note a contradiction between United Methodism's ecumenical commitment and the way the church currently structures itself. According to Robbins, the current structure of a strong connection between the jurisdictional conferences in the U.S. and the worldwide central conferences competes with an ecumenical understanding of global Christianity. Therefore, Robbins's sympathy, if not bias, is for proposals that would strengthen autonomous structures. His own model is that of a covenanted communion of "self-headed, regional" Methodist communities that, he hopes, would be open to other Methodist bodies and that, together, would seek closer links to the ecumenical community. Since models like these have yet to be implemented in United Methodism, Robbins diagnoses "a tradition of failure to change within United Methodism" (112).

As a United Methodist living and working in a central conference, I look at United Methodism from a different angle of experience and service. Below, I recommend a different approach and, in the process, I point out weaknesses in Robbins's argument.

Overemphasis on geography and numbers. Robbins follows a typology that was developed by Janice Love, who categorized The United Methodist Church as belonging to the "extended-national confessional model," similar to other U.S. denominations and some Orthodox churches. If we look first of all at the geographic distribution, such a categorization gives secular categories precedence over theological ones. (It should be noticed that Love developed this typology in dealing with the effect of "globalization" on churches.) However, Robbins should be aware that, in Wesley's thought, "world" (alluded to in the title of Robbins's book) has almost nothing to do with geographic extension. Rather, it refers to an obligation to all persons in all places. Thus, designating The United Methodist Church as a "world church" recalls the church's mission; it is not a statement about the many countries and places in which United Methodism has a presence.

Another problematic criterion is statistics. Robbins is right in pointing to the uneven distribution of United Methodists in the world and the relatively small total numbers. However, he dwells too much on the fact that United Methodists are a "tiny part of the body of Christians worldwide"
In a graph on the same page, United Methodism is represented by a tiny dot in concentric circles of different bodies. This seems to affirm Robbins's thesis, but the graph is misleading. If one applies the basic rules of geometry to the graph, the circle for "All Christians" is more than 6,000 times larger than the "United Methodist" dot. Yet, according to the accompanying figures, the real difference is 210. However, a more important question has to do with just what these statistical figures truly represent.

"Membership" numbers claimed by "(former) national" and "traditional" churches (usually representing a history of identification of church and nation) are incommensurable with the "committed membership" (a term from the conversations on church union in France in the 1930s) of "free churches." Therefore, statistics that count regular communicants or worship attendance give a more accurate picture of the reality in Christianity. For example, it has been shown that, on an average Sunday in Russia, more people attend Protestant worship services than attend services of the Russian Orthodox Church, notwithstanding the latter's much larger official membership.

Obsession with finances. Robbins calls finances the elephant in the room. He describes the central conferences as a financial burden to the church and its agencies and laments the "huge financial disparity" and dependency in United Methodism. Finances and control over them are indeed crucial matters and not only for the relationship between central conferences and U.S. church. Given the gravity of these issues, it is important for Robbins not to perpetuate imprecise information and vague fears but to present exact facts. I cite two examples of where Robbins gets it wrong. His portrayal of the proposed Central Conference Pension Fund (22) makes it appear as if U.S. pension funds would be diverted to this new fund at the expense of U.S. pensioners. Instead, a brief look at the materials produced by the task force reveals that great pains were taken to distinguish clearly between the new fund and U.S. funds. To be sure, U.S. annual conferences are invited to contribute a share of their receipts from The United Methodist Publishing House, which is earmarked for pension. Moreover, the annual reports of the General Council on Finance and Administration show the real relationship between episcopal salaries in the U.S. and those in the central conferences to be far from "nearly equivalent" (92).

The more important issue concerns equitable sharing of the financial burdens in the connection. I am grateful to Robbins for stating that
"funding goes in one direction from the US to the Central Conferences" (89), while central conferences "pay nothing" (91) into the "apportioned" funds, except for the Episcopal Fund. Twenty-five years of involvement in connectional matters has taught me that apportionment is a volatile issue, but less so for the central conferences. Apportionments are a small, albeit important, part of the denomination’s overall funding. However, except for what is designed as "mission support" by the General Board of Global Ministries, only a small part of apportionment money is used for central conference purposes. Given the growing involvement of central conferences in the general church, this portion has been growing over the past few quadrennia. Therefore, the issue of central conference contributions to apportioned funds deserves discussion. (The newly established Connectional Table, which has strong central conference representation, might be the proper place for such conversations.)

The issue of apportionments is too narrow a basis for a fair assessment of giving in The United Methodist Church. Considering economic situations and income structures, one can argue that per capita giving in the central conferences is higher than that in the U.S. church. It is true that the central conferences receive substantial financial contributions from the United States. However, these contributions do not come from apportionments; instead, most of the funds are voluntary gifts raised through other avenues, predominantly through the "Advance for Christ and His Church." Does this practice add to the "patterns of dependency" Robbins diagnoses as "part of the actual infrastructure of the UMC" (21)? As with any donor-recipient relationship, the danger of dependency is always near. In my experience of more than a decade of service "at the receiving end" of this benevolence, the United Methodist connectional system, especially given the growing influence of persons from central conferences in denominational decision making processes, provides for the possibility of sharing of resources that avoids such dependency.

Borrowing of structural models from other traditions to the neglect of genuine Methodist polity. Robbins helpfully uses many examples, quotations, and stories to present the polity of various churches and confessions. However, the reader has to wade through a third of the book before encountering the keyword for United Methodist polity: connectional (40). Even when Robbins does discuss the term (70 ff.), he fails fully to appreciate the fundamental point that, in United Methodism, connection is...
SYMPOSIUM ON BRUCE W. ROBBINS. A WORLD PARISH

Synonymous with church. That is, for United Methodists, "connectional system" describes a peculiar way of interdependence of persons, congregations, conferences, and agencies on a variety of levels. It is characterized by a high degree of mutual commitment and support, as well as flexibility and adaptability to various and changing situations. We cherish the experience of the universality of the church over differences of nations and countries as an important means to further mission and ministry. In this way, it provides a much higher degree of commitment and coherence than the understanding of "connexion" in the British Methodist tradition (27, 31) or "acts of covenant," as recommended by Robbins (114).

Some of the motives for autonomy ("self-headedness") that Robbins cites (68-69)—"national political pressure"; "more effective mission"; "organic union"—have been elements that showed the strength of the connectional system. Methodism in Europe would not have overcome the onslaught of Nationalism and Communism without being part of a worldwide connectional church. The new "Mission Initiatives" of the General Board of Global Ministries, formed in the 1990s in the pattern of the "Russia Initiative," provide a model of grassroots involvement in mission combined with institutional accountability that is linking Christians and churches in many countries. On the other hand, in most cases, Methodist churches that choose to leave the connection and enter into organic unions lose their typical thrust and energy, to be replaced with mainline Presbyterian/Reformed attitudes.

One reason why the central conference model has "prevailed" (63) might very well be because it has been a genuine expression of the United Methodist connectional system. Robbins celebrates the proposals in the 1960s by the "Committee on the Structure of Methodism Overseas" (COSMOS) to do away with the organic unity of the then Methodist Church as a "high water mark of the move to a new structure that favored autonomous bodies worldwide" (57). For me, these proposals represent probably the lowest point of an understanding of the worldwide connection. General Conference chose a system that has been proved in practice.

Alongside Robbins's chronicle of "failure to change" we need a report about the successes of the connectional system, including the central conference system. One of Methodism's statesmen in the twentieth century, Bishop John L. Nuelsen (1867-1946, bishop 1908-1940) may serve as a witness. As leader of Methodism on both sides of the Atlantic,
Nuelsen steered the European Methodist communities through the difficult times of nationalism and fascism and initiated a noble attempt of mission and relief in Russia, which was aching under the burden of civil war and societal strive. His characterization of the central conference system, given at the Central European Central Conference in 1925, still captures the vision and goal for further development of that institution:

Central Conferences are a link between Annual Conferences, with their local duties, and the General Conference, with its worldwide tasks. They are an expression of the structural principle that areas outside the U.S. are not mere colonies of the American church but fully qualified parts of the church that design their own rules according to their conditions of life, however, within the framework of the common constitution. . . . While English Methodism looks upon national autonomy in the different countries and, therefore, renounces organic union, for its part, American Methodism seeks to build up the idea of federation, more and more granting responsibility of self-administration to the church in various continents and countries but maintaining the organic union of the worldwide Methodist Episcopal Church. Central Conferences are an important step on this way.

Rudiger Minor, now retired, was bishop of the Euro-Asia Episcopal Area of The United Methodist Church.

Endnotes


I am grateful for the careful attention that the three reviewers have given to my book. I sought to bring to public attention issues facing The United Methodist Church in regard to its structure, especially in settings beyond the United States. Tim McClendon contends that the question of ministerial credentialing lies at the heart of how we hold together the "connection" within United Methodism. Bishops Minor and Bolleter speak from a perspective very different from the United States perspective I bring to the issues. Both of them represent minority Methodist communities in Europe and beyond. Minor has been the bishop of Eurasia, based in Moscow; and Bolleter continues as bishop of many conferences in Europe, and even extending to North Africa. Bishop Bolleter recognizes the lack of information and knowledge by United States leaders, especially at the place where it matters most—General Conference. Bishop Minor acknowledges the emphasis I place upon the importance of geography, numbers, and statistics but believes I overemphasize those areas in the book.

I do stand guilty of overemphasizes in some respects. I do dramatize the differences between the "global church" we call ourselves and the body that may be the only truly global church, namely, the Roman Catholic Church (with a membership difference of 10 million to 1 billion). I do call attention to the fact that General Conference makes polity and structure decisions without awareness of the financial implications of their actions. (Some compromises were added to the actions to address financial and structural issues, but the vast majority of delegates seeking to make informed decisions were unaware of these.) I do emphasize questions and issues that have received minimal attention in United Methodist circles. To this day, I know of no other publication that begins to discuss the web of relationships and issues that comprise our reality as a "global church," even when those relationships have a large impact upon the day-to-day lives of United Methodists. As Bishop Bolleter points out, General Conference is making "ad hoc decisions based on inadequate or wrong information." As examples, he cites the decisions taken by General Conference in 2004 on the Methodist Church in Ivory Coast and the Methodist Church of Puerto Rico. My hope in writing the book was to start a conversation about these weighty matters; and I appreciate the opportunity offered by Quarterly Review to engage the discussion in its pages.
Both Minor and McClendon challenge my understanding of "connectionalism." Minor suggests that United Methodism offers a cohesion and sense of mutual commitment and support that I do not fully appreciate. McClendon fears that my proposal lacks faithfulness to a basic tenet of Wesley's vision for disciple-making, namely, "uniformity." Both challenges deserve careful response.

Connectionalism and Commitment

Minor is concerned that I have neglected "genuine Methodist polity." He believes that I have missed the point that "connectionalism" is synonymous with "church." My argument is that, while connectionalism is important within United Methodism, an appropriate ecclesiology must distinguish between "our" connection and that which binds Christians everywhere. Otherwise, we might confuse United Methodism with the universal church. United Methodism represents less than 1 percent of the global Christian community. We are called to celebrate the way that God has worked within other Christian churches as well. Consider Pentecostalism, which is growing rapidly worldwide. In important respects, Pentecostalism has deep roots in the Wesleyan tradition, spread by Methodists from the United States and Britain. This makes many of our Pentecostal friends our cousins, part of our family.

By separating out three voices that call to us—Self-Headedness, Interdependence and Connection, and Christian Unity—I have emphasized the need for a sense of ecclesial self that is rooted locally, in the connection in Methodist tradition, and in the gift of unity within the body of Christ, to which we are called by Scripture. (British Methodists have defined "connexion" more narrowly, meaning by the term only those issues specifically associated with the British Methodist Conference.) Bishop Minor concludes his review by demonstrating ways in which the structural relationship with the United States has helped small Methodist communities to keep a foothold in the face of Communism and nationalism. I accept that it was helpful in such contexts. But the situation of the vast majority of United Methodists in central conferences is very different. In Africa and the Philippines, United Methodism's "connection" has been caught up in the secular issues of neocolonialism and financial dependency/globalization. These forces exert huge influence and pressure upon the structure.

Bishop Minor concludes his review with an excerpt from Bishop
Nuelson, one of the bishops serving in Germany from 1908 through 1940. Bishop Nuelson had hoped that General Conference would grant more and more "responsibility of self-administration" to central conferences while maintaining the "organic union" through the Methodist Episcopal Church. Beginning in 1928, important changes got underway at General Conference, such as "granting" central conferences the right to elect their own bishops rather than having them sent from the United States. The problem, which became apparent then and remains so today, is that it is General Conference that does the granting. In those early years of the deconstruction of the colonial system, many Methodists wanted greater autonomy and not be dependent upon the largesse of General Conference. Two of the earliest national Methodist groups to appeal for self-headedness were Brazil and Korea. Would anyone today argue that those churches should have remained as central conferences?

**Connectionalism and Ministerial Credentialing**

Tim McClendon believed that my proposals ignored an essential piece, or commonality, necessary for an authentic connectionalism, namely, uniformity in ministerial credentialing. I appreciate this critique. He quite appropriately points to an assumption that I was making about the breadth of possibility of central conferences to edit and amend the Book of Discipline. Although not saying so specifically, I do imply that central conferences may be able to change the language in the Discipline that relates to homosexuality (23). McClendon argues that, in regard to ministerial credentialing, the central conferences are bound by the specifics in the Book of Discipline. Citing two recent Judicial Council decisions that upheld the responsibility of General Conference to establish "basic ministerial obligations," McClendon claims that central conferences are prohibited from changing the language of sections dealing with matters of ordination or ministerial order. He further argues that "self-headedness and interdependence must yield to connectionalism's insistence on basic ministerial standards." He believes that without those standards we will lose our connectional polity.

Several points are in order. Prior to the creation of The United Methodist Church in 1968, the Constitution of the Methodist Church called for General Conference to "define and fix the qualifications and duties of elders, deacons ..." 1 After 1968, the language in the Constitution
was changed, calling for the General Conference to "define and fix the powers and duties of elders, deacons..." Judicial Council Decision No. 313 held that an annual conference (Norway) could not add an additional requirement (for abstinence) for candidates to ministry because the General Conference has responsibilities for all things "distinctively connectional." I am convinced that today there is much less certainty on this issue. Recent Judicial Council decisions (for example, Decision 536) have held that annual conferences are able to set standards for ministry higher than those set by General Conference. Decision 313 was overturned.

I do not think that ministerial standards can be the basis of our connectional polity. Yet McClendon is correct when he says that our primary commitment must be to mission. A passion for proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ based upon the unique gifts and vision of John and Charles Wesley can hold us together. But who is being held together? I think the only answer to that question must include those who emerged from the Wesleyan tradition—be they British Methodists, Wesleyans, or United Methodists. Let us configure ourselves in the different places of the world where we can live together in mission with other Wesleyans, not competing with one another but proclaiming the gospel to a broken world: governing ourselves regionally, supporting ourselves within our church structures, and cooperating in spreading the message.

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Endnotes
3. See Doctrines and Discipline, ¶ 8; cf. Book of Discipline, ¶ 15.
The Church In Review

What is the key to renewal in The United Methodist Church in the twenty-first century?

ELAINE STANOFSKY

The United Methodist Church is suffering from the dry rot of distrust—not everywhere, not all the time, but often enough to threaten its integrity and credibility as an agency capable of bearing the gospel. Members don't trust leaders. Leaders don't trust one another. People who give money don't trust decision-makers who spend money. There are rifts based upon geography, theology, and culture and faults running between and within the general agencies. Within the church we have grown so distrustful of one another that we are losing faith and our ability to serve God's mission effectively in the world. Dominance, suspicion, and protectionism mark the culture of distrust. Humility, curiosity, and generosity of spirit are the marks of trust that are missing.

The key to renewal in our church is for our leaders and our people to return to God and turn to one another in faith. Only then will we be able to engage the world with a gospel message of hope.

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RONALD K. CRANDALL

John Wesley noted that no great movement of God's Spirit and the extension of the gospel seemed to last for more than a season. Thus, he wrote:

I am not afraid that the people called Methodists should ever cease to exist either in Europe or America. But I am afraid lest they should only exist as a dead sect, having the form of religion without the power. And this undoubtedly will be the case, unless they hold fast both to the doctrine, spirit, and discipline with which they first set out.

For me, renewal in The United Methodist Church will happen in three modes—as doctrine, as spirit, and as discipline. Let me explain.

For Wesley, doctrine was not so much a matter of theological ideas to be debated as it was the wonderful reality of God's threefold amazing grace.

First, salvation brought to the

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In a period of extraordinary global insecurity, the Christian church offers faith in one God, whose Kingdom is secure beyond all threat of attack. Yet, just when the world desperately needs such a faith, the church shows signs of functional agnosticism. We are losing confidence that God is truly one and able to unify our conflicted church and world. One symptom of this unease is that Christians can be heard to speak of God in competition with many gods. Another symptom is growing intolerance of differences, both within the church and throughout the human family. The church will be renewed only as we, the people and leaders of the church, deepen our faith that God continues to cradle human history with mercy and power to heal.

Monotheism was hard won in the history of ideas. In early biblical times, many cultures existed side by side, each worshiping its own gods. Cultures clashed; gods did battle with one another. Who can forget that fiery scene on Mount Carmel when the followers of Baal and the followers of Yahweh put their gods on trial to see which would prevail? A winnowing occurred and some gods fell out of use. Over time a biblical consensus emerged that there is only one God, who engages with the world, but from a place beyond the exigencies of time and culture, tribe, and language. This one God has power to save, presides over heaven and earth, and is the one God for all the people of the earth.

The notion of one God allows us a certain civility about the variety of ways of being human in the world. Since one God rules over heaven and earth, we need not insist upon uniformity in humankind. People who are different need not be enemies, divided by allegiance to competing gods. They can be brothers and sisters, united by one God, despite cultural differences. Monotheism allows us to chalk the variety of human beings up to perspective: we all perceive the one God from a variety of perspectives in a variety of cultural contexts and through the clay vessels of our physical bodies and our historically shaped lives. Those different perspectives lead to different religious interpretations and social structures.

Some might call this view relativism. However, I am not claiming that God changes with time and place but rather that human perceptions and interpretations of the one God vary with time and place.

Recently, some Christians have reverted to talking as if the one God were one among many gods. Consider these examples. Soon after 9/11,
some civic and religious leaders went on radio to decry the tragic loss of life and security and to call people to religious understanding and civility. As a Muslim leader spoke about the teachings of compassion and peace in the Qur'an, a man interrupted, shouting, "Your god is not my God!" More recently, I received a statement by a self-proclaimed evangelical in the United Methodist Church, claiming that the "god" heard by some in the church is not the "One revealed in the Holy Bible." Even Bishop William Willimon, in a recent article, struggled with the profound differences between Christian and Muslim expressions of faith. "True, both faiths talk about 'love,' 'peace,' 'justice,' but . . . we have remarkably different ways of defining or obtaining love, peace, and justice—so different that, well, it's almost as if we were worshiping a different God."

I am alarmed when I hear Christian people suggesting out loud that God is not one but rather that many gods are competing to influence human affairs. As a Christian, if I allow the possibility that different people worship different gods, then God is no longer secure on the throne of heaven and thus is stripped of the power to reconcile the world. My mission ceases to be to introduce people to Jesus Christ—as salvatore mundi, "savior of the world." I become just another partisan, arguing that my god is better than other gods in a marketplace of competing deities. Rather than being the incarnation of the one God, Jesus becomes no more than the name brand for my sectarian god. Without the reality of one God with the power to reconcile, the human community fragments into competing tribes, loyal to a multiplicity of gods and lacking unifying hope for the human family.

If we truly believe that there is only one God and that this God has the power to reconcile our differences and draw us together in faith, then we will turn to one another in humility and work to live and grow in peace with one another within the church and throughout the world. In a recent work, Margaret Wheatley, a spiritual guru of the organizational world, admonishes the secular world to "turn to one another." In this time of polarization, why has the church not led the way toward conversational reengagement? Is it because we do not know the way? Throughout the church, we need to learn to know one another through holy conversation.

After General Conference adopted the Unity Resolution in Pittsburgh last year, a colleague with whom I had struggled mightily, approached me with outstretched hand, saying, "I look forward to our working together."
replied, "It will be hard work for us to learn to be church together." I was making a confession with that statement: I don't know if I have the heart for bridging the divides that separate us. Setting distrust aside and choosing to trust in spite of all the evidence will be so hard that we can't do it alone. We will need the transformative power of the one God to rebuild the fabric of trust within the church.

Before The United Methodist Church can engage the world in a renewed and renewing way, we will have to become a community of faith in God and trust in one another. To accomplish this, I hope that we will dedicate time, energy, and creativity to "turning to one another." What if every annual conference session included class meetings where members could grow in connectional Christian fellowship? What if annual conferences invited ambassadors from other regions of the church to participate in their conference sessions? The Southeastern Jurisdiction opened this door by inviting participants from the Western Jurisdiction to an event last quadrennium. What if we prepared for General Conference 2008 by sending visitation teams of one delegate from each of the jurisdictions and central conferences to each jurisdiction and central conference to sample the rich variety of ministry and mission across our church? Could the one God whom we all serve draw us together in a single family of faith, even as we experience the breadth and depth of our diversity?

Returning to God and turning to one another in trust will restore the integrity of The United Methodist Church and set us free to minister to the world. Herein lies the hope for solving our doctrinal differences, reconciling our variant interpretations of Scripture, and coming to a consensus about the character of our mission and ministry. God calls us to this work and empowers us to do it. Is our faith strong enough to risk turning to one another in confidence? Let us preach this faith until we have it.

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Endnotes
world through Jesus Christ is profoundly active and creative, always moving toward us to awaken our souls to the kingdom of God far before we know of its arrival. This wooing and inviting work of God on behalf of all persons and peoples is prevenient, or preparing, grace.

Second, this active movement of God's grace toward us becomes transforming grace in us when we, in response to the good news of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, by faith turn away from sin's deception and "trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation," thereby experiencing life eternal—"knowing the only true God, and Jesus Christ" (John 17:3). This new birth of divine life within us is justifying, or restoring, grace and allows us to know the cleansing and liberating love of God that "surpasses knowledge" (Eph. 3:19). No one is beyond the reach of God's grace, and all may find this restorative reality.

Third, this grace of God in us is a profound mystery, described in Scripture and experienced by Christians as the indwelling Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:15-17) or Christ in us (Col. 1:27), "the hope of glory." This permeating presence of Christlikeness, or holiness, is intended to change us "from one degree of glory to another" (2 Cor. 3:17-18), until we are "filled with all the fullness of God" (Eph. 3:19) and have the mind of Christ (Phil. 2:1-11). This is sanctifying, or transforming, grace.

This core of Methodist "doctrine" is our understanding of God's work in us to empower and equip us for joyful obedience to the great commandment (Mark 12:29-35) and the Great Commission (Matt. 28:16-20). The work of being living witnesses to this gospel is what John Wesley described as God's design for raising up Methodists: "Not to form any new sect; but to reform the nation, particularly the Church; and to spread scriptural holiness over the land." This "medicine of life" for all peoples is always at the heart of renewal. Wherever it is forgotten or forsaken, decline and decay result.

We also need renewal as spirit. Spirit is life. The spirit of any creature, person, or movement is its power. We all longed for Smarty Jones to win the Triple Crown because that less-than-mighty horse reminded us that "inspiration" is what makes something ordinary into something extraordinary. Human beings are created by and for the ultimate spirit, God's Spirit.

Our power as witnesses to the gospel of Jesus Christ is the Spirit's power (Acts 1:8). The power of the gospel is always the power of self-sacrificial love. True Christian leadership is always more about spirit and servant-
hood than about votes and rhetoric. It claims little for itself and all for Christ. Do our leaders and congregations recite Wesley’s Covenant Renewal with true surrender or merely as a quaint relic of history?

Lord, make me what you will. I put myself fully into your hands; put me to doing, put me to suffering, let me be employed for you, or laid aside for you, let me be full, let me be empty, let me have all things, let me have nothing. I freely and with a willing heart give it all to your pleasure and disposal.⁅

Spirit is contagious. Methodism’s power has always been a “high expectation” gospel, full of spirit and directed to the world as our parish. Early Methodism was often referred to as “more caught than taught.” If we longed for this spirit to be our spirit, then God’s Spirit would lead us to a great new day of contagious witness.

Last, we need renewal as discipline. Discipline was how “Methodists” got their name. Even before Aldersgate, Methodists were deeply committed to doing God’s will, not just discussing it. The Great Commission reminds us that our task is to “make disciples” and teach them to obey. The obedience that honors and glorifies God emerges out of the life described above as doctrine and spirit. Discipline that renews can never merely be organizational rules in a book or even practicing the means of grace. These are only means, not the end itself. The end is “You will be my witnesses” (Acts 1:8).

We are often an undisciplined church. Questions asked at ordination services sometimes seem to generate more humor than radical commitment. District superintendents and boards of ordained ministry are constantly dealing with congregations and spiritual leaders that have little or no manifestation of the Holy Spirit’s fruit of “self-control” and often not much “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, and gentleness” (Gal. 5:22) either.

How are these qualities of Christian character produced? They emerge out of (1) “abiding” as branches in the true vine, Jesus, and submitting to God’s “pruning” (John 15); (2) practicing disciplined accountability and loving nurture in small groups (Acts 2:43-47); and (3) investing heart and
treasure in God's mission to reach the lost and call for "justice and mercy and faith" (Matt. 23:23).

Either we are a company of the committed or we are a losing enterprise. We cannot any longer believe that counting members or even easy professions of faith is of the utmost importance. Our task is to make disciples who follow the real Jesus and are ready to become Spirit-led workers in the Kingdom. Without disciplined and skilled leaders who are in love with their Master and his gospel and are willing to respond with their whole lives, The United Methodist Church will more than likely simply fulfill John Wesley's fear and not his legacy.

I pray that we will continue to be encouraged by every sign of hope, exhort and train young and old alike to fulfill their high calling as children of God and followers of Jesus, and reclaim our rich heritage of personal and social holiness through the transforming power of the Holy Spirit so that the neighbor, the stranger, the lonely, and the lost, whether nearby or halfway around the world, may come to know him who is life and hope and love. In the last analysis, God's agenda is not the renewal of United Methodism but Jesus and the Kingdom. To the degree that this is our agenda, God's Spirit will use and renew us so that we might be blessed to be a blessing.

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**Endnotes**


For the first half of the twentieth century, on a downtown street in my city, stood a Jewish temple and a Christian church, separated by a single-family residence. The resident family’s name was Pigg. To this day, one of the rabbis associated with this heritage is fond of saying about this early history that “the only thing separating the Jews and the Christians were the Piggs.”

Humor aside, after the atrocities against Jews during the 1930s and early 1940s, these two neighboring congregations determined to do something about the divide. In 1947, they committed to an annual Brotherhood Banquet as a ritual to further friendship and understanding.

The congregations have long since moved from the downtown area, but the tradition of the annual banquet is alive and well and has expanded to include four other congregations: the church I serve; a historic and predominately African-American church; a large Catholic parish; and (as of 2002) a network of Muslims. Ending the male monopoly in the late 1960s, the event has become The Annual Brotherhood-Sisterhood Interfaith Dinner.

Leaders of the six faith groups always have good intentions of doing more together; but, at the very least, we share an annual feast, welcome one another into the other’s space, and renew our resolve that faith will bring us closer together rather than push us farther apart. And since 9/11, we have realized this tradition is needed more than ever.

How things have changed in our land across a century! Now many of the neighborhoods of my city include not just churches but synagogues, mosques, and temples of historically Eastern religions. Often they share the same street. The vast majority of our citizens hail this development as a tribute to the openness of our society and a much-improved climate of diversity and tolerance.

But do not our times call faith communities to share more than geographic proximity and a general spirit of acceptance? If religion and
faith have anything to do with the well-being of humanity, now is the time for the positives to come to the surface—if we know what the positives are.

We are living in one of those hinge periods of history when an old order is crumbling and the emerging order is still unclear. The global village that is being knit together through ubiquitous telecommunications and interlocking economies is simultaneously and paradoxically being torn by intolerance, exclusivism, and hatred. Post-9/11, we are plagued with global tension between Muslims and Christians in what geopolitical scholar Samuel Huntington cites as one example of "the clash of civilizations." And then there is the weird coalition between the American religious Right, motivated by the delusions of millennialism, and the state of Israel allied against Palestinians! We are also witnessing the resurgence of the arrogant and idolatrous ideology of Christian supremacy—an ideology akin to white supremacy.

What do Jesus Christ and Christian faith have to do with such a world? Does our life with the risen Lord serve only the purpose of advancing our beliefs over others' or does Christ release hope, healing, reconciliation, and the redemption of the human experience? Does Christ divide us or bring us together? And do we Christians even know what we believe, what distinguishes us, and what contribution our faith can make to the whole? What is the core Christian virtue and life-practice that manifests transformation? Does faith tap into a deeper wisdom reflective of the One who created all of us and who is our common destiny?

What these concerns have to do with our texts from Matthew for the next three weeks should become apparent. (We will deal with the text for All Saints' Sunday separately.) A few general comments about what seems to be Matthew's context and message might help connect his world and ours.

Several features of Matthew's Gospel suggest that the author was living in a time and a situation of pronounced tension, if not hostility, between his community of Jesus people, believing that Jesus is Messiah, and a more dominant community of Jewish faithful, insisting that Messiah was yet to come. It seems that Matthew is writing at a time when the Jesus people are being forced to understand themselves as distinct from the prevailing expression of Judaism of his day yet fully within God's covenant intentions through Israel and Messiah.

Matthew clues us to his main message in the marquee introduction to his Gospel: "An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham" (1:1). This first sentence charts a course for Matthew—
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demonstrating continuity of God's purposes from Abraham, through Moses, David, and to Jesus. Sixteen times Matthew uses the title Messiah in reference to Jesus, more than any of his Synoptic companions. Matthew goes to great lengths to demonstrate how Jesus fulfilled the Abrahamic covenant, Mosaic teaching, and prophetic vision, culminating in the messianic hopes of the Hebrew Scriptures. "This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the prophet" is Matthew's formula phrase. Fifteen times he uses a form of the word fulfill, compared with Mark, who uses it only twice. In our second lesson of this series, Matthew has Jesus explicitly raise the question of the Messiah with his adversaries: "What do you think of the Messiah?" (22:42).

Matthew's Gospel also reflects an emphasis on the teachings of Jesus and on Jesus as teacher. With the importance Judaism places on teaching and following Torah, it was incumbent upon Matthew to show Jesus not only as a teacher and practitioner par excellence of the Mosaic tradition but also as one who embodies it, lives it, and breathes it. For Matthew, Jesus lived and taught a higher righteousness than that prescribed even by the Pharisees, a sect of strict obedience, regarded as a model for first-century Judaism. There is yet another interesting way in which Matthew draws a distinction between his community's embrace of Jesus as Messiah and the way the prevailing Jewish community viewed Jesus, namely, as only a "teacher."

A word search of Matthew's Gospel reveals that teacher is used as a form of personal address toward Jesus only by those persons and groups who are not open to him: scribes (8:19; 12:38), Pharisees (12:38; 22:36), a rich young man (19:16), and Sadducees (22:24). By contrast, Jesus' disciples and others who are favorable toward him refer to him exclusively as "Lord" (twenty-one times, including repeated examples in chapters 8 and 20). Therefore, it is clear that Matthew intends to set Jesus apart as a teacher of a higher order. As Messiah he is not just "Teacher" or "Rabbi" but also "Lord."

Matthew seems to be highlighting a parallel between "what happened" between Jesus and his adversaries and the author's own religious context of conflict with a more dominant Jewish majority. Most commentators sum up these and other observations about Matthew's Gospel by proposing that the author and his faith community were living in the period after the fall of Jerusalem in 70 C.E., when Judaism was trying to regroup. With Jerusalem and the Temple destroyed, with no geographic or sacred center, Jews were rallying around all that was left—tradition, memory, togetherness, and Torah. For purposes of self-understanding and survival, the Jewish faithful of
Matthew's environment had shifted the emphasis toward an aggressive teaching of and obedience to sacred law, modeled by scribes and Pharisees. Christians were being pushed out of synagogue worship because they were perceived as heretics and a threat to true Jewish faith. Thus, Matthew is keen to defend how followers of Jesus as Messiah embody God's righteousness and God's true intentions to "make disciples" of all people.

Ironically, in this tense situation, the Jesus people were having to decide what they really believed. They were having to sharpen their understanding of and conviction for their affirmation that Jesus is Messiah, Lord, and Savior.

To hear the nuances of Matthew in his situation for his people, let us place ourselves in the text as we have it, not in some imagined moment of "what actually happened." After all, the Gospel evangelists are proclaiming not so much the Jesus of the past—the "historical Jesus"—as they are the Jesus who is the Risen Lord with the church now. Matthew gives us a template for how the church can hear and experience Jesus as Messiah and Lord.

Our three texts from Matthew 22-23 are set in the larger context of the growing conflict between the reign of God that has come near in Jesus and the reign of earthly powers, including the state and the Jewish establishment. Beginning at 12:22, the conflict between divided "kingdoms" builds and intensifies once Jesus is in Jerusalem (ch. 21). More specifically, our texts are a part of Jesus' Temple teaching during his last week. Matthew turns to the general question of "authority." By whose authority can Jesus do the things he does and be worthy of the acclaim of Messiah?

October 16, 2005—Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost

Matt. 22:15-22; Exod. 33:12-23; Ps. 99; 1 Thess. 1:1-10

On first reading, we notice that Matthew resets the stage of the growing conflict between Jesus and sectarian groups: "Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said" (v. 15). Matthew's community would have identified with Jesus as the target of opposition, because they were experiencing the same thing from the hyper-pious Jewish majority.

In the textual scene, the Pharisees are desirous of additional pretexts against Jesus to further justify their prior decision to destroy him (12:14). So the Pharisees are not interested in genuine dialogue; they fain sincerity. They simply want to build a stronger case against Jesus.

The second notation is that the Pharisees have allied themselves with the
Herodians, a sect loyal to the Jewish royal family during Jesus' time and loosely allied with Rome as an act of accommodation. In positing this alliance Matthew might have been suggesting that in practical terms there was not much difference between the self-interests of pietists and royalists. These two disparate groups try to force Jesus' hand in the politics and piety of false choice. The case study they cite to entrap him regards the dilemma any loyal Jew would face in whether to deal in pagan currency and pay the annual Roman census tax, thus avoiding harassment by the foreign occupiers, or to refuse to pay the tax as an act of piety and protest, thus risking harsh retaliation. "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" they inquire (v. 17).

The Pharisees, positing themselves as the embodiment of absolute virtue in all matters religious, denounced the payment of the tax on the grounds that such might be a tacit acknowledgment of the emperor's self-proclaimed divine status. The Herodians, on the other hand, being more concerned with the royal family's national interests than with morality, counseled payment of the tax on the grounds that accommodation to and cooperation with the Roman occupiers were better in the long run.

The Pharisees thought they could force Jesus publicly to choose between the "lesser of two evils" and thus open himself to the ire of either the nationalistic appeasers (not to mention the Zealot rebels) or the doctrine-and-discipline purists of their own ilk. And we notice the Pharisees' use of "Teacher" as a veiled putdown of Jesus.

The Pharisees and Herodians are engaging in the classic tactic of the politics of false choice. This strategy pretends honest debate when in fact the choices are functionally false and serve primarily as diversions from real solutions. Present-day parallels are astounding: moral absolutism or moral relativism; fideism or secular humanism; doctrinal discipline or theological ambiguity; preemptive wars or homeland insecurity; big-government health security for all or free-market boutique medicine as a consumer commodity; privatization of Social Security or letting it go broke.

Jesus' answer to the question of the religious lawfulness of paying the tax seems at first to sidestep the dilemma. "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's" (v. 21). The surface implication is that paying taxes to the state is not a moral problem as long as one does not compromise giving to God what God is due. While bearing some truth, this meaning would provide a convenient resolution to any tension in the church-state polarity.
But such a reading does not do justice to the subtlety and power of Jesus' engagement with the Pharisees. The key to his ingenious diffusion of his opponents lies in his directive: “Show me the coin used for the tax” (v. 19). If the coin in play were typical of Roman currency at the time, it bore an image of the emperor and the inscription “Tiberius Caesar, august son of the divine Augustus, high priest.” For a faithful Jew, dealing in such currency would be a hard pill to swallow.

Notice, however, who did and who did not have the coins. Jesus, though not necessarily advocating rebellion against the state, apparently did not deal in Roman currency on a day-to-day basis. His opponents did, thus exposing their hypocrisy. By such possession, they had already made their decision to play both sides: talk the talk of pious abstention from anything that smacks of selling out to a secular and heathen culture but walk the walk of accommodation. “You hypocrites!” Case closed.

At a deeper level, Jesus is saying that regardless of the accommodations one has to make in the real world of harsh political and economic realities, one cannot compromise giving all of one's life to the sovereignty of God. God gives everything, and everything belongs to God. Whether we give what we have to the state or to the Temple, we are not off the hook of responsibility for what is done with God's provisions—all of them.

What belongs to God? Any parsing with regard to the answer already betrays our compartmentalized faith. The faithful answer is that everything we are and have belongs to God. If life's choices present too great a tension between our faithfulness to God and loyalty to country, then we have a problem. The question of whether to pay taxes to the emperor misses the point. A "yes" or a "no" presents the politics of false choice. The real issue is whether one's fidelity to God is inclusive of one's heart, soul, mind, material resources, and neighbor-care. All other allegiances are secondary.

October 23, 2005—Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost
Matt. 22:34-46; Deut. 34:1-12; Ps. 90:1-6, 13-17; 1 Thess. 2:1-8
The Pharisees take another turn at Jesus, gleeful that he had "silenced" another of their competitors—the Sadducees—in the previous passage. This time a specialist in sacred behavior and spiritual discipline comes forward from the Pharisaic group to test Jesus. Again, Matthew has the questioner use the title Teacher as a way to neutralize the exceptional nature of Jesus'
teaching: "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" (v. 36).

The specialists in matters of splitting spiritual hairs and moral behavior must have stayed busy trying to sort out some commandments of God in Torah. Trying to classify and rank this many "dos and don'ts" could be a never-ending wrangle. And whose classification and ranking should one trust? If it were admitted that no human being could absolutely obey every commandment all the time, then are some more important than others?

Jesus diffused this kind of nitpicking by asserting that all God's teachings and commandments boiled down to one core disposition and self-understanding: love. Love God with all your heart, soul, and mind. Matthew eliminates Mark's inclusion of the beginning lines of the Shema (12:29), "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is One," and deletes the reference to loving God with all one's strength. But what is significant about Jesus' inclusion of Lev. 19:18, "Love your neighbor as yourself," is Matthew's insertion of the words "and a second is like it" (v. 39, italics added). Matthew seems to draw the two great commandments even closer together, as though one reflected the other. And Matthew has Jesus make an even more comprehensive compression of God's expectations by asserting that on these two commandments "hang all the law and the prophets" (v. 40, italics added).

According to Matthew's Jesus, loving encompasses all of God's expectations; and loving relativizes all other expectations. If we take seriously the supremacy of love, then we are left with ethical ambiguity. Ethical ambiguity throws us back to loving; we don't have the convenience of determining ethical and faithful behavior by a list of "dos" and "don'ts." Determining how to act lovingly requires nothing less than faith in God—faith that one's heartfelt desire to live and love as God does will be enabled by God. The God who is faithful and loving will enable one to do more than follow disciplines and doctrines; God will enable the reciprocity of neighbor-love.

Jesus seems to change the subject at v. 42 by asking his adversaries, "What do you think of the Messiah?" At first, the question seems to have nothing to do with the foregoing matter of loving God and neighbor. But if Messiah is supposed to manifest the fullness of God and if God is love, then wouldn't Messiah be primarily about loving? Jesus is challenging his adversaries as to whether they are really serious about the hopes embodied in Messiah or whether they are more interested in navel-gazing about the "who" and "when" of Messiah. If they claim to be in the lineage
of Father David, then act as David did: defer to the Lordship of God, for whom Messiah is but an instrument. Matthew seems to be underscoring that it is more important to practice what Messiah is about—the love of God and neighbor—than to wrangle about who is and who is not Messiah. Matthew has already offered abundant witness that Jesus meets all the messianic qualifications as far as lineage is concerned—Abraham and David. And he underscores that Jesus also fulfills the Mosaic and prophetic heritage. But in this exchange Jesus presses the ontology of Messiah beyond matters of heredity and heritage. Quoting Ps. 110:1 and modifying Mark slightly, Matthew has Jesus make the point that Father David deferred to a higher Father, so why shouldn't they? If the scribes and Pharisees were more concerned about living in God's image, then they would not be trying to trap Jesus in matters of doctrine and discipline.

October 30, 2005—Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

Matt. 23:1-12; Josh. 3:7-17; Ps. 107:1-7, 33-37; 1 Thess. 2:9-13

In ch. 23, Matthew has Jesus turn from fending off the "testing" from adversaries to teaching the crowds and his disciples. Yet he picks up where the testing left off: with the well-intentioned scribes and Pharisees. Jesus uses them as a backdrop for sharpening the distinctions between their righteousness and what he expects of his disciples. Jesus acknowledges that what they teach should be adhered to, especially when they "sit on Moses' seat" (v. 2) and claim to be speaking ex cathedra or in the form of a "pastoral letter." Jesus advises his followers to respect what the scribes and Pharisees teach, but emulating their behavior is another matter.

My high-school friend's father, who was embarrassed about some of his own behaviors, would often say to his children, "Do as I say, not as I do." At least he was honest. He was advising his children from the experience of his own fallibility. Jesus is saying to his "children" about the behavior of the Jewish teachers, "Do as they say, not as they do." Jesus accuses those who posture as the keepers of truth and righteousness, discipline and doctrine of a double hypocrisy: they don't practice what they preach and are not honest about it either. (Witness the Roman coins in their purses.)

Jesus' counsel to his disciples as to their authentic and faithful behavior sounds like what John Wesley would teach seventeen centuries later: "first
do no harm.” Jesus is counseling his disciples to “do no harm” to others by admonishing behavior one is unwilling to practice, burdening others with unrealistic expectations one has no intention of shouldering oneself, and posturing authority and integrity that is empty and vain. Sometimes people who “do harm” parade around under the cloak of titles like Rabbi or, in a contemporary mode, Reverend and Doctor. Jesus is saying, “Don’t do harm by acting this way or being concerned about these things” (cf. 23:1-7).

By contrast, his followers are to be concerned about things more important than titles and rank. One overriding relationship matters here: the teacher–student relationship between God/Messiah and the person. This insight harkens back to 22:42-46. All human behavior must defer to God. Even media, like “sacred laws” and “messiah,” are not the main message but the medium for the main message, which is God. Only that toward which the medium points and what is conveyed into the present through the media is ultimately important. Any human relationship to God must keep moving through and beyond all the historical media, such as culturally and religiously conditioned symbols of God. Once the presumptive, self-authorized truths and human behavior have been neutralized, one is ready humbly to discern and emulate the behavior of Messiah as an emissary of God (vv. 8-10).

Jesus then turns to the kind of behaviors characteristic of true faithfulness to God and neighbor and representative of his own way of life. This move prefigures Wesley’s turn to “do all the good you can.” Jesus says that the disposition of a faithful child of God and true disciple of his is one of being a humble servant of God and neighbor (vv. 11-12).

Matthew seems to be saying to his Jewish “orthodox” neighbors: We are practicing messianic righteousness because we have opened ourselves in radical faith and obedience to the grace of God and the gift of servant love. You talk about being right and true, but we actually live it. We live it by grace through faith, not by the intent or power of our own righteousness.

... The three passages in Matthew 22 and 23 deal with showing how the sectarian groups who posture as purveyors of “the true faith” do not go far enough; they stop at the medium (Torah, rabbinic interpretation, and certain conceptions of Messiah) rather than constantly trying to go deeper to the Source (God). Furthermore, the rabbinic Jews do not practice what they preach. Humble service motivated by the love of God and for God is the
only true practice. Grace is the key to practicing humble service. Fidelity depends not on propositions and theological arguments but on faithful, humble service to the other for the other’s sake. Thus, the quality of loving is the difference between those who posture faith and those who practice it.

In some ways we have come full circle: Christians and congregations often act like the synagogues of Matthew’s context. But before any of us critique others, we would do well to put servant-love into practice until we learned its wise lessons of God’s grace. Practicing servant-love with the outsiders—persons who are poor, sick, of another faith or no faith—might open us to God’s righteousness and salvation.

In this regard, a conversation between Christian theologian Thomas Long and a colleague and friend who is a rabbi raises troubling questions. The rabbi shared his concern about a series of interfaith dialogue sessions occurring between members of his congregation and members of a neighboring church. Ironically, the rabbi’s concern was not about the possibility of conflict between the two groups but about the inability of either his Jewish members or the Christians to speak intelligently about their faith. In fact, the Christians kept reassuring the rabbi that they had no intentions of talking about Jesus! The rabbi then unveiled a disturbing analysis:

I went to the first meeting, and there wasn’t enough faith there to “inter.” The Jews didn’t know their religion and the Christians didn’t know theirs. I have too much respect for Christian theology to let them get away with that. The world needs good Jews and the world needs good Christians. I’m making a rule: no more interfaith dialogue in my synagogue until the Jews talk intelligently about Torah and the Christians talk intelligently about Jesus.

This was precisely Matthew’s purpose, and more—to help disciples of Jesus know what they believe and to practice it.

**November 6, 2005—All Saints’ Sunday**

*Math. 5:1-12; Rev. 7:9-17; Ps. 34:1-10, 22; 1 John 3:1-3*

The “beatitudes” form one of the traditional lessons for All Saints’ Sunday. All Saints, an adaptation of the Catholic high day, is the time many Protestant congregations memorialize those members who have died during the previous year. All Saints’ Sunday gives a congregation an oppor-
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The opportunity to minister to the families of the deceased in their ongoing grief. All Saints' Sunday also affords another time to celebrate Resurrection theology and Easter faith. Typically, preachers will use the Beatitudes to stress that faithful living will be rewarded by God in the afterlife. Those who through faith tried to live God's righteousness in this life are rewarded by God's grace in the next. And for the contemporary community of the bereaved, the Beatitudes convey God's blessings to those who deeply feel life's losses and its vulnerability to suffering and death. The Beatitudes offer comfort to the bereaved that God keeps (Ps. 121) and honors our beloved as God's beloved, especially those who opened themselves in humility to God and to mercy and peacemaking to neighbor.

In the context of Matthew's Gospel, chapter 5 takes on a larger role and comes in a line of continuity from God's promises and purposes through Abraham (1:1) to Jesus and to "all nations" to the end of the age (28:19-20). God's intentions through Abraham were always instrumental and global: "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen. 12:2-3). The first hearers of Matthew's narrative would have instantly connected Jesus' words and deeds with God's promises for Abraham and Sarah. And they would have immediately recognized the parallel between the Joseph who was sold into Egypt and ended up feeding a world dying of starvation (Gen. 37-50) and the Joseph who took a newborn son to refuge in Egypt and who would save a world dying of sin (Matt. 2:13-15). Moses and the Israelites are recalled in Joseph's bringing the child Jesus "out of Egypt." And when Jesus emerges from the waters of the Jordan at the hands of John's baptism, the reader of the narrative learns that Jesus is the "son" of God in a more direct way than any of the descendents of Abraham. His sonship is not mediated through biology and heritage; it comes straight from God (ch. 3). The children of Israel are remembered in Jesus' temptations in the wilderness. But unlike Jesus' forebears in their wilderness temptation, he did not grumble, complain, disobey, or "test" God; he lived ultimately by the "word" of God, did not try to manipulate God for self-serving reasons, and made God the uncompromised center of his being (ch. 4).

Matthew gathers all these "memories" as he begins to make the case that Jesus is the fulfillment of God's promise for the whole world. Jesus is the promise of God's blessing, the gift of God's teaching, the power of God's
lectionary study

liberation, and the faithfulness of God's deliverance—all wrapped into one. All of this would have been conjured in Matthew's first hearers/readers when he says that Jesus "went up the mountain" and "began to speak" (5:1, 2).

Unlike the heavy burden of a self-disciplined righteousness admonished by the scribes and Pharisees, these behaviors are not so much virtues of spiritual discipline as they are signs of God's gracious inbreaking. They are results of God's coming near, of God with us. And when the receiver responds to God's nearness in these ways, God has a further opening to pour out more blessings—blessing upon blessing, grace upon grace. The virtuous attitudes of those with ears to hear and eyes to see are not prerequisites for God's blessings or a quid pro quo; rather, they are the result of what God makes possible. Once thus empowered by God's blessing, the believer can practice the virtues as means of grace. Their practice opens the way for greater blessings, which engender more faithful practice. The grace (blessing) of God that attends the practice of the virtues makes their faithful practice possible. Otherwise they become "works of righteousness."

In Jesus of Nazareth, God's promised blessings for the world are being fulfilled. The blessings and their attending behavior are the "for-instances" of God's reign, as theologian Leander Keck would say. The nearness of God's reign is glimpsed in the "for-instances" of acknowledging that we are poor in spirit, in mourning the spiritual impoverishment of the world, hungering and thirsting for God's righteousness, acting mercifully and with purity of heart, and making peace. Jesus is the quintessential manifestation of the joining of God's righteousness (beatitudes) and the nearness of God's reign in the historical actions of a person.

The good news for the hearers of Jesus and Matthew is that both the behaviors of God's reign and the rewards of God's righteousness can happen now. "Blessed are . . ." conveys the present tense of God's action. This good news is why huge crowds came to hear Jesus and received his word. They were not being lectured on patience for awaiting something in the distant future. Yet Jesus' blessings came with the "not-yet" quality of their future fulfillment. Faithfulness in receiving and practicing these blessings will be rewarded in full in God's time.

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The past few decades have seen a remarkable resurgence in philosophy of religion, as well as in Christian philosophy generally. This is well known to practitioners in philosophy (and unwelcome to some of them) but may well remain "off the radar screen" for many pastors and even some theologians. It is perhaps somewhat ironic that this resurgence has taken place largely within the branch of philosophy known broadly as "analytic philosophy." Some will think of analytic philosophy primarily in terms of logical positivism, an approach about as hostile to Christian conviction as any view could be. (According to the positivists, not only were theologians not saying what was true, but they also were not even saying anything false. Their utterances were pseudo-statements that lacked even the dignity of being wrong!) But the positivists have long ago been vanquished, and the techniques of philosophical analysis have proved themselves useful in clarifying a large number of issues that are important for Christian faith. To be sure, some of this work is technical in nature and not readily accessible to those not trained in philosophy. However, in recent years there has been a concern to present the results obtained in the philosophy of religion in a way that is broadly accessible to pastors and interested laypersons. In this article, I mention some of the main options on a few key topics, as well as some resources that are available.

Religious Diversity and Pluralism

It is news to no one that there is a great deal of interest in religious diversity among both students and ordinary churchmen and churchwomen. Classes in world religions fill up quickly; and pastors feel compelled to address the topic even if they feel themselves ill prepared to do so. Philosophers also have gotten into the act. Probably the greatest interest has been focused on John Hick's version of religious pluralism. According to this model, the ultimately Real—unknowable, and indescribable in itself—
is the "noumenal" reality that stands behind the religious "phenomena," namely, the gods and absolutes of the various religions. (Hick's view on this is largely inspired by the philosophy of Immanuel Kant.) Responses have varied; but it is fair to say that the predominant verdict has been unfavorable. One difficulty is that, in affirming the equal validity of all religions, Hick is in effect reinterpreting their doctrines in ways most actual adherents would reject. (Another way of putting his view is to say that all religions are false but can bring one to salvation anyway.)

There are other versions of religious pluralism that need to be evaluated on their own merits. A word on terminology is in order here. Most people are familiar with the triad—exclusivism (salvation can be found only in the "true" religion), inclusivism (one religion embodies the "full truth," but salvation is possible also for adherents of other faiths), and pluralism (all religions are equally valid and provide equal access to salvation). John Sanders has proposed "restrictivism" as a name for the view that only those who have explicit faith in Christ during this life can be saved. (Exclusivism, as defined above, can allow for the possibility of post-mortem evangelization.) Among philosophers, however, exclusivism is sometimes understood in a purely cognitive sense, meaning that one religion provides access to the ultimate truth and other faiths are in error insofar as they conflict with this, but without addressing the issue of access to salvation. Generally speaking, the tendency among more conservative thinkers has been toward some variety of inclusivism, while liberals gravitate toward pluralism.

Souls and Brains

Recent years have seen extremely rapid progress in brain research, as well as increased frequency and confidence in pronouncements from both scientists and philosophers that the jobs traditionally ascribed to the soul have been taken over by the brain. As one popular article puts it, "The mind is what the brain does for a living." The most important evidence for this conclusion is found in the extremely close dependence of various types of mental functioning on the condition and functioning of the brain. This situation constitutes a crisis for the traditional belief in an immaterial soul, one that theology needs to respond to or risk being dismissed as irrelevant.

One response, popular among Christian psychologists as well as philosophers, is to welcome the new findings and affirm that the Christian faith can do nicely without a soul in the traditional sense. Instead, a "non-
reductive physicalism" is claimed to be closer to the "unity of the person" found in biblical thought than is the mind-body dualism traditional theology inherited from Plato. In place of the doctrine of the soul's immortality, emphasis is placed on the resurrection of the body, with resurrection understood in a way that has no need for a separate soul.3

Other philosophers pull back from this revisionism. They argue that, despite the bandwagon mentality favoring materialism, existing materialist theories have not shown themselves to be adequate in accounting for the phenomena of the mental life. They contend that some varieties of dualism not only are consistent with scientific knowledge but also harmonize with that knowledge as well as does physicalism. Furthermore, materialistic accounts of resurrection are inadequate because, while God could undoubtedly create a physical replica of someone who has died, no adequate account has been given of personal identity. How is it that the "re-created" person is the same individual who formerly lived, rather than a mere duplicate? The discussion continues; and at present no consensus has emerged, except for agreement that Christians need to pay attention to the issue.6

**Evil and Suffering**

Evil and suffering offer a challenge to the Christian faith on many different levels. One insight that has emerged is that there is a difference between the pastoral problem of evil—how to bring peace and healing to those who are suffering—and the evidential problem of evil—the challenge posed by suffering and evil to the rationality of belief in a loving and powerful God. Of course, these issues are not wholly distinct. After all, a personal encounter with suffering can lead a person to question the reasonableness of her faith. Still, the problems are different, and so may be the responses called for. Sometimes, it may be helpful to exhort a sufferer simply to have faith in the goodness of God in spite of the suffering. However, such a response accomplishes little when the focus is philosophical. On the other hand, some of the things that are rightly said in response to the evidential problem of evil may not be especially helpful for one struggling with personal grief.

Philosophy, as one might expect, has focused its attention on the evidential problem of evil, though not without some concern also for the pastoral problem. It is now generally agreed (though a few holdouts remain) that the fact of evil and suffering in the world is not logically inconsistent with the existence of a loving God. But do the facts about suffering consi-
tute a compelling reason (if not a logical proof) to doubt the existence and/or the goodness of God? On this question, opinions are deeply divided, and the argument has become too complex to be usefully summarized here. Of course, Process theists claim evil and theodicy as an important area of advantage for their view by limiting God's power to act in the world, the problem posed by evil and suffering for belief in God is greatly diminished. Whether this claim is correct is itself a matter of dispute. 7

Meanwhile, what about theodicy, the attempt to explain the reasons (at least, the possible reasons) for which God permits evil? On the whole, this has not been a favorable time for theodicy. Analytic theists have preferred arguing that evil is not compelling evidence against God to undertaking the (as some would think) over-ambitious task of theodicy. But there are at least two slightly older works in this vein—John Hick's *Evil and the God of Love* and Austin Farrer's *Love Almighty and Ills Unlimited*—that still merit attention. More recently, Marilyn Adams's *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God* introduces new themes and emphases that could have a profound effect on the discussion of this problem. 8

**God's Action in the World**

Any coherent Christian view of things must include an account of divine action. A minimalist account of such action may be found in Process theology's assertion that God provides the "initial aim" for each "occasion of experience." In effect, this is God's "ideal will" for what should happen at that juncture; but after that, God exercises no control over what actually happens. Another minimalist account proposes that God influences the "random events" on the microphysical level posited by quantum mechanics, thus modifying the course of affairs without interfering with the universal reign of physical law. However, one insight that has emerged is that the widely accepted ban on supernatural divine intervention—that is, on miracles in the traditional sense—is remarkably lacking in intellectual support. David Hume's celebrated argument against miracles, long held by many to be decisive, has been exposed as a tissue of fallacies. 9 Accordingly, many analytic theists subscribe to divine omnipotence in the traditional sense, namely, that God can do anything that is neither self-contradictory nor contrary to God's own moral perfection.

Given this much, two further questions are critical: What sort of freedom has God granted to rational creatures? And what sort of advance
knowledge does God have of their responses in various situations? The view of theological determinism affirms that human beings have compatibilist free will. Roughly, this means that we are free (in many situations) to do what we most want to do; but our desires are themselves predetermined by prior circumstances. This enables God, by arranging those circumstances, to exercise absolute control over events; everything that happens accords precisely with God’s will for creation. Theological determinism has rather limited currency at present, primarily among some of the stricter disciples of Thomas Aquinas and John Calvin.¹⁰

Most Christian philosophers, however, affirm libertarian free will, meaning that, when we make a decision, it is sometimes genuinely within our power to do any of two or more different things. In giving us this sort of freedom, God necessarily gives up a part of God’s control over the course of events. An interesting perspective on this is given by Molinism, so called from the sixteenth-century Jesuit theologian Luis de Molina. According to Molina, God possesses “middle knowledge” of propositions, which tell God, concerning each of his free creatures, what that creature would freely choose to do under various possible circumstances. This means that God can grant freedom to the creature and yet be absolutely certain of the creature’s use of that freedom, thus guaranteeing that God’s plan for the creation is carried out without the slightest deviation. The majority view among philosophers is that middle knowledge is impossible, because the truths God is alleged to know do not exist to be known. However, the theory has staunch and capable defenders.¹¹

If both Calvinism and Molinism are rejected, the most plausible alternative appears to be Open theism, sometimes referred to as “the openness of God.” According to Open theism, God is temporal rather than timelessly eternal; and, concerning the future free actions of creatures, God possesses only probabilistic knowledge. Truths about what creatures will freely choose to do are not available to be known prior to the actual decisions. This leads to an understanding of the ongoing, dynamic interaction between God and creation that some find unsettling and others find inspiring and liberating.¹² While the term Open theism is relatively new, the view in question has been in circulation for quite some time. It is characteristic of theologians such as Jürgen Moltmann and Keith Ward, as well as noted philosophers like Richard Swinburne and J. R. Lucas. Note also that Open theism remains quite distinct from Process theism, in that it retains
the traditional doctrines of divine omnipotence and creation ex nihilo, both of which are jettisoned by Process thinkers.

Some General Resources

The topics mentioned above are only a sampling of those that could be brought forward, but the hospitality of the editor has its limits! So I will mention here some general resources that give the reader a more complete picture of the help offered by philosophy of religion. A textbook such as *Reason and Religious Belief*, by Michael Peterson, et. al., gives a good overview of the relevant topics explained in an accessible manner. Peterson's edited volume *Contemporary Debates in Philosophy of Religion* offers concise, well-argued essays on both sides of the issues canvassed here and on many others as well. Perhaps of special interest to the readers of this essay is James Beilby's edited volume, *For Faith and Clarity: Philosophical Contributions to Theology.* This volume consists of articles that survey, in a readable fashion, a number of areas in which philosophy can serve as a help for theology and ministry.

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Endnotes

4. See, for example, Peter Byrne, *Prolegomena to Religious Pluralism: Reference and Realism in Religion* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1995).
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10. For a clear recent statement, see Paul Helm, The Providence of God (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity, 1994).


Practicing Passion: Youth and the Quest for a Passionate Church, by Kenda Creasy Dean (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004)

In 1998, Kenda Creasy Dean and Ron Foster wrote the groundbreaking book The Godbearing Life: The Art of Soul Tending in Youth Ministry. The book took youth ministry "back to the future" by stressing the importance of introducing and engaging youth in the ancient Christian practices of the church. Grounded in ministry, The Godbearing Life pointed readers to the realization that youth desire a deeper relationship with God, shared through adults who see the need for God in their lives. Solid and theologically grounded, this book spoke volumes about what we really need to be attending to: the privileged and holy claim of Christ on the souls of the young.

Practicing Passion offers an even more urgent and compelling vision for effective youth ministry—realizing and embracing the passion of youth by a passionate church. Far from "cuddly sentimentalism," claims Dean, "passion devastates. It is 'to die for'... which is precisely why it leads us to God. Most of us spend our lives looking for ways to rekindle the passion of youth: the burning desire to be engulfed by love, to be ignited by a purpose, to radiate light because the love of another shines within us" (xiv).

As with The Godbearing Life, the uniqueness of Practicing Passion lies in Dean's insistence that youth ministry be placed squarely in the realm of practical theology rather than in educational theory or sociological-psycho­logical development. Recognizing that adolescence can be readily characterized by "passion," Dean develops three themes: "shared passion," "dimensions of passion," and "practicing passion."

Writing in the spirit of an academic dissertation (the book grew out of her doctoral thesis), Dean uses vignettes, statistics, and expositions to demonstrate youth's search for fidelity, transcendence, and communion. She pays special attention to how the distortion associated with fidelity, transcendence, and communion has affected youth's ability to acquire a coherent identity. "Young people," says Dean, "reveal society's fault lines, including violence, despair, technological dependence, and poverty, precisely because
they are so sensitive to the tremors of culture” (11). At the same time, Dean continues, they are beautifully poised to understand, be challenged by, and respond to the whole gospel with its many manifestations and ramifications.

With profound understanding, Dean describes the deep passions of youth experience, which are due in part to the biological shifting going on with their brain functions and bodies and the impact of the culture in which they live; and also as an outgrowth of their spirituality and deep need for interpersonal relationships. This understanding raises the question, “Does the church practice the passion it preaches?” As Dean points out, without passion the Christian faith fails, and youth know it.

This important book speaks deeply to us about creating a ministry predicated on passion—the Passion of Christ and the passion of youth—and realizing the passionate faith that results when these come together. Practicing Passion is a must-read for persons desiring to create authentic, passionate ministry, not only with youth but also with the church.

Reviewed by Susan H. Hay. Hay is Director of Ministries with Youth at the General Board of Discipleship in Nashville, Tennessee.


Having grown up in a denominational offshoot of Methodism, I was familiar with John and Charles Wesley. I knew the story of faith, sang many of the great hymns of the church, was trained in its theology, and experienced God’s grace for myself. Not until I attended Metropolitan Avenue United Methodist Church in Kansas City, however, was I introduced to the liturgical riches of the church. That first Sunday became for me a spiritual homecoming for which I continue to give thanks twenty years later. Enough time has passed to make me painfully aware that there are United Methodist churches that do not appreciate their spiritual heritage. Still, United Methodism’s unique blend of liturgical evangelicalism remains a gift we can, and should, offer to the larger church.

Nurtured in the womb of United Methodism, Ken Carter, pastor of Providence United Methodist Church in Charlotte, North Carolina, has written about six practices he believes are essential to the Christian faith: searching the Scriptures; generosity with the poor; testimony; singing; Holy
A WAY OF LIFE IN THE WORLD: SPIRITUAL PRACTICES FOR UNITED METHODISTS

Communion; and life together. Foundational for the book is his belief that what make us distinctively human are our practices. Whether laying brick or writing poetry or hitting a baseball, the only way to excel at our craft is to practice it. Practices therefore lead to habits, and habits become lives. Carter is at his best as he leads his readers, step by step, from practices to spiritual practices to Christian spiritual practices to United Methodist practices. His conclusion is nothing short of a vocational call: we have little hope for ecclesial renewal apart from the submission of the time of our lives to the God whom Jesus Christ reveals.

Three additional chapters explore the theological implications that these six practices have on the way we experience God's grace. Finally, three appendices describe resources for renewal in United Methodism, reprint Wesley's General Rules, and provide a copy of Wesley's Covenant Renewal Service.

A Way of Life in the World is a nice primer for small group discussions that will open the eyes of church folk for whom ecclesial practice is little more than "going to church" and "doing devotions." Carter rightly alerts readers that much more is expected of those whose lives are apprenticed to Jesus. However, persons who have already implemented these practices in their lives will discover the book falters in its attempt to provide theologically nuanced descriptions of the practices. Carter never quite integrates these practices into a cohesive whole; in the end, they remain strangely discrete.

For instance, the chapter on Holy Communion never gets around to calling United Methodist Christians to observe this practice weekly. Similarly, I was saddened that the chapter on searching the Scriptures did not include a clear call to reinstitute the communal practice of Morning Prayer, if not the complete daily office.

Despite these and other disappointments, Carter has pointed us in the right direction. For that we can be thankful. Now it is up to other seasoned pastors to help us continue this journey toward ecclesial renewal.

Reviewed by Von W. Unruh. Unruh is Editor, Adult Bible Studies, at The United Methodist Publishing House in Nashville, Tennessee.

Here is a book that would be well used in ethics courses, Sunday school classes, and book discussion groups. It provides facts, insights, and stories that help open up meaningful discussion in a society in which revenge and grudges have become acceptable responses to wrongs inflicted. “Forgiveness,” “reconciliation,” and “confession” are key concepts, not only for Christians but also for persons of other faiths. They are basic to reconciliation with God and with fellow human beings. Cose asserts that “forgiveness is the key to inner peace.” The past matters and when that past includes wrongs inflicted by individuals, groups, or nations, these wrongs shape the present and future. Clearly, the situations in Iraq and the Holy Land, which demand our attention and raise great concern, remind us of how the past influences both present and future.

“Sacred duty” demands that religious leaders and their followers who believe in forgiveness and mercy seek ways to teach and nurture them. In Bone to Pick, Cose has collected “parables of forgiveness and reconciliation” from across the world. These stories tell of persons, groups, and nations who have every right to hate those who have traumatized them and yet who have found a way to move to recovery and renewal. As such, these narratives can help us understand, teach, and nurture others toward more healthy responses to inflicted wrongs.

Cose does not trivialize the complexity of what happens when one has every cause to be angry with or seek revenge on another. He confronts this complexity by raising pertinent questions and relating stories that challenge the reader to acknowledge how easy the demand for forgiveness and reconciliation can be and how hard the actual transformations can be. He notes that, while the perpetrator’s confession and the victim's absolution can occur independently, reconciliation requires the participation of both victim and victimizer.

Although Cose includes the Christian focus on forgiveness, this is not a theological discussion of the issues. It focuses more on the sociological implications and on the impact of forgiveness, or lack thereof, on human relationships. People who work with victims and the traumatized will gain insight and guidance from the various stories Cose lays out in how to understand and respond to persons they would help. Those who seek
BONE TO PICK OF FORGIVENESS, RECONCILIATION, REPARATION, AND REVENGE

better to understand and express the theology of confession, forgiveness, and reconciliation will find grist for their thought mills.

This well-researched and well-written book has one deficit: the title. Bone to Pick neither attracts the readers who would benefit from this work nor reflects the depth and thoughtfulness with which the issues are addressed and reflected upon.

Bone to Pick wrestles with the meaning of such terms as forgiveness, reconciliation, and confession and raises an important question: Who is justified in offering forgiveness and of whom can the guilty expect to receive it? Cose presents this question in a context that helps those willing to do so to ask how forgiveness among individuals, groups, and nations can be a catalyst for addressing the conflicts in our world and for moving the global community a little further along the road to peace.

Reviewed by Youngba Hardman-Cromwell. Hardman-Cromwell is Director of the Office of Practice in Ministry and Mission at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C.
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