Special Issue: Professional Ministry

Ministry as Vocation and Profession
  James C. Logan

Professing the Call to Serve
  David Love Watson

Toward a Revised Diaconate
  Jeffrey P. Mickle

Doubt and Faith
  Wilfred M. Bailey

Plus homiletical studies by Virgil P. Howard
Quarterly Review (ISSN 0270-9287) provides continuing education resources for professional ministers in The United Methodist Church and other churches. A scholarly journal for reflection on ministry. Quarterly Review seeks to encourage discussion and debate on matters critical to the practice of ministry.

Falling within the purview of the journal are articles and reviews on biblical, theological, ethical, and ecclesiastical questions; homiletics, pastoral counseling, church education, sacred music, worship, evangelism, mission, and church management; ecumenical issues; cultural and social issues where their salience to the practice of ministry can be demonstrated; and the general ministry of Christians, as part of the church's understanding of its nature and mission.

Articles for consideration are welcome from lay and professional ministers, United Methodists, and others, and should be mailed to the Editor, Quarterly Review, Box 871, Nashville, Tennessee 37202. Manuscripts should be approximately twelve to twenty-five pages in length and should be in English and typed double spaced, and the original and one duplicate should be submitted. No sermons, poems, or devotional material are accepted. Queries are welcome. A style sheet is available on request. Payment is by fee, depending on edited length.

Quarterly Review is published four times a year, in March, June, September, and December, by the United Methodist Board of Higher Education and Ministry and The United Methodist Publishing House. Editorial offices are at Box 871, Nashville, TN 37202. Circulation and business offices are at 201 Eighth Avenue South, Nashville, TN 37202. Second-class postage paid at Nashville, Tennessee. Quarterly Review is available at the following rates: $10 a year for members of United Methodist annual conferences subscribing through the all-conference plan; $15 a year for members of United Methodist annual conferences subscribing through the conference leadership plan; institutions and libraries, $15 a year; and individual subscriptions, $20 a year. Subscriptions may be obtained by sending a money order or check to Quarterly Review, Business Manager, 201 Eighth Avenue South, Nashville, TN 37202.

Postmaster: Address changes should be sent to United Methodist Publishing House, 201 Eighth Avenue South, Nashville, TN 37202.

Quarterly Review: A Scholarly Journal for Reflection on Ministry

Spring, 1982

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Special Issue: The Professional Ministry

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We have now completed the first full year in the life of the new \textit{Quarterly Review}, a Scholarly Journal for Reflection on Ministry. It is a good time for the publisher to ask, “Are we accomplishing our purposes?” From a publisher’s point of view, I think the answer is yes.

The numbers look good. While that is not the most important question, it must be admitted that no matter how excellent the editorial product, if no one reads QR it is a failure. We are pleased to report that \textit{Quarterly Review} achieved its two-year circulation goal before the first edition was off the press. Circulation is double that of its predecessor, \textit{Religion in Life}, and we are operating in the black.

Since \textit{Quarterly Review} is a joint effort of the Board of Higher Education and Ministry and The United Methodist Publishing House, it appears appropriate to review some of the goals set forth in the first issue by Higher Education General Secretary F. Thomas Trotter.

Trotter wrote, “QR intends to be a central element in the continuing education of the ministry of the church.” Although one cannot say with assurance that we have achieved that goal, I think we are moving in the right direction. More and more annual conference boards of ministry are making \textit{Quarterly Review} available to all ministers in training and ministers on appointment.

Trotter also wrote, “It is our hope that QR will provide a wider community of discourse on issues such as ministry, ecumenism, interfaith dialogue, evangelism, and ministerial disciplines.”

One has only to review the contents of the first four issues of QR to be assured that Editor Charles E. Cole and his colleagues
on the editorial board are accomplishing that goal. Scholarly articles have ranged widely across many subjects essential to continuing education for the ministry, including the issues addressed in this special issue on professional ministry.

Trotter stated, "Reordering the life of the ministry of the church is a goal of QR." Those in ministry will be the best judges of our success in reaching that goal. Are we providing enough food in the pages of QR to enhance the quality of your ministry through resources on preaching, pastoral care, administration, and the sacramental life? We hope so.

The first four seasons of our new Quarterly Review have been gratifying to me for at least two reasons:

1. In an age of electronic communication, it is gratifying for a publisher of the printed word to see a new periodical succeed.
2. More important, the success of a quality journal, designed for serious scholars, is a positive reflection on the intellect and professionalism of our United Methodist clergy.

JOHN E. PROCTOR
MINISTRY AS VOCATION AND PROFESSION

JAMES C. LOGAN

More than sixty years ago the British theologian Peter Taylor Forsyth remarked, "The ecclesiastical question of the hour is not that of the laity (as at the Reformation) but that of the ministry." These words ring with a familiar sound. During the past two decades a spate of books and articles has chronicled the problematic position of the ordained ministry in the modern world. "Ministry in crisis" has become a common catch-phrase. "Crisis" is probably exaggerated rhetoric, however. In the midst of the currents of change surging through society and church alike, countless clergy have, nevertheless, faithfully proclaimed the Word, celebrated the sacraments, cared for the hurts of people, fulfilled their institutional responsibilities, and involved themselves prophetically in societal issues. At the same time they have witnessed confusion of identity within their ranks and have watched an increasing number of their colleagues make the transition to "ex-pastors." No sensitive observer can doubt that if not crisis there is certainly "ferment in the ministry." In the midst of this ferment is an issue hardly anticipated in Forsyth's day: Are we to think of the ordained ministry primarily as vocation with the emphasis upon divine calling, or is the ordained ministry to be understood primarily as a profession with the emphasis upon the acquisition of skills and competence commensurate with the professions of medicine, law, and education? Perhaps the two questions are not exclusive, and the single question becomes: What is the proper relationship between vocation and profession?

To leap prematurely to this question is to court the criticism of being simplistic. A multitude of forces, social, spiritual, and intellectual, has converged on the ordained ministry in recent

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decades to make this question imperative today. It is hardly hyperbole to employ the word *revolution* to describe the power of these forces. If for no other reason, because the church is in the world and because on virtually every side the world is in revolution, the church's own existence has not been a placid one. The revolutions of the world are not simply pressures outside the church. The revolutions surge within the church as well. The venerable Webster defines a revolution as "the rotation of a celestial body upon its axis," and even though we may be tempted to think of the church as a "celestial body," we cannot avoid noting the considerable turning within the "body" of the church as well. One of the specific consequences of the pervasive revolution is "uncertain servants in seminary and ministry."3

Certainly one such force has been the social and cultural phenomenon of secularization in the Western world. The process has as many definitions as there are social analysts. Yet whatever else secularization may mean, sociologically it is a historical process whereby previous monolithic, sacral understandings of society break down. Once the church's spires rose from the center of the medieval cities or crowned the north of the New England common or shared an equal place of prominence with the courthouse in the southern county-seat town, but today the hub of power and integration in society is to be found more and more in the technological centers of production. Where in the sacral societies of Europe and America the Roman and Protestant clerics were raised above daily rhythms to perform their traditional duties under the rubrics of prophet, priest, and king, in the secular, technological society the celebrating priest is more often the technocrat. The clergy find themselves frequently ministering on the periphery of that society, ministering to people where they sleep rather than where they make the fundamental decisions governing their livelihood, ministering to their individual and private needs.4 Though Protestants have never looked upon the ordained minister as a *sacred person* possessing an indelible character by virtue of ordination, they have nevertheless viewed the ordained minister as "set apart" for a special ministry of primary, even essential, importance in human life. With the increasing specialization and specification of roles and responsibilities in the modern technological society the historic understanding of
ordained ministry appears to be subjected to a transition not of its own making from the position of primary, necessary social importance to one of secondary, optional social significance.

In Protestant terms the traditional image of the pastor as the one who is always on the “giving end” with the congregation on the “receiving end” is eroding. As this erosion takes place the ordained minister is caught in a conflict: traditional roles no longer function as they once did, and confusion reigns over what the emerging role should be. Certainly the traditional functions of kerygma (proclamation), diakonia (service), and maturia (witness) are constant in the church’s ministry. Functions, however, are not static. Their shapes and dynamics change and fluctuate. The current discussion in The United Methodist Church regarding a permanent diaconate is but one illustration of the change and fluctuation.

Another aspect of the revolutionary world impinges with equal force upon the traditional church and its understanding of ordained ministry. The rules of the game in church and society have been subject to constant revision during the past two decades. The ferment of the racial, economic, and feminine revolutions in the larger society is macrocosmically reflected in the ferment in the church. The quest for a genuinely racially inclusive church with a genuinely open itineracy calls into question some of the unstated images of clergy and the clerical system within The United Methodist Church. The image of the white, male minister is of necessity undergoing change. Many of the inherited images of the ordained minister are giving way without a clear vision of new of new images on the horizon.

These currents of change within the church are accompanied with theological problems of considerable magnitude. The breakup of nominally Christian and sacral understandings of society and the concomitant pluralism of religious and secular varieties have called the church to reassess its traditional understandings of its placement and role in the wider social arena. The theological rhetoric of an “exodus society,” a “pilgrim people,” a “servant church,” and a “servant ministry” indicates the need for renewed ecclesiological grappling. When such language is taken seriously, theological and structural implications for the church and its ministry are immediately apparent. As illustration, note that the older “come-structure”
of the church to which pastors and congregations have historically become habituated is increasingly ineffective in a more fluid society. Simply witness the struggle in most Protestant denominations within the past decade to find an effective means of evangelization. If the church is to be a "pilgrim people" and "sojourners" in "a strange and alien land," then a contemporary form of the ancient "go-structure" of the early church will be necessary. This is both a theological and structural task yet to be accomplished for most of the contemporary church.

The ordained minister's role identity is made all the more uncertain by developments in the recent attempts to emphasize the ministry of the laity and to undergird this ministry with a "theology of the laity." No Protestant needs to be reminded that the "priesthood of all believers" is a fundamental legacy of the church's heritage. Yet if all Christians by virtue of their baptism are "priests" or "ministers," what is the meaning and purpose of ordination in the historic sense of the term? How often seminarians and pastors ponder the question, What does the ordained minister do that the layperson cannot do? The question may be wrongly phrased, but the fact that it arises with frequency is indicative of the dilemma. Unintentionally Hendrik Kraemer's *Theology of the Laity* has encouraged a certain skepticism about the ordained ministry. In the meantime the institutional church has proceeded as a "split-level" church where the laity often functions as a subcultural "parachurch" while the ordained clergy carries out its functions in the more public "official" church. This informal arrangement is not a solution but rather a description of the problem. We have not yet in reflection or practice resolved the issue left us by the Reformation of the relationship between clergy and laity who possess a common baptism into a ministry of reconciliation and yet perform an extraordinary ordination of the clergy "set apart" ministry.

The matter is even more complex when we see that the broader sea on which these two theological problems surface is itself a deeply troubled one. The philosophical worldviews of the past which supported and made credible our theological affirmations and spirituality have lost plausibility and persuasiveness. This in itself is no new discovery. Out of the wreckage of the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries the revelational
theology of Barth and the existential theology of Bultmann have expressed valiant efforts to be responsible either to God (Barth) or to modernity (Bultmann). Theological time, however, runs fast, and theology is much more diverse today.

The problem, however, goes deeper than the development of trends in theological thought. Many laity and clergy experienced in the 1960s what James Ward Smith has called "the loss of confidence in the cosmic sense." On the level of praxis "the loss of confidence" resulted in the loss of a spirituality which for another era undergirded theological beliefs in God, providence, prayer, and calling to ministry. To be sure, the loss of confidence was not absolute. For many it was and continues to be a gnawing sense of "unease." The attempts of the 1960s to develop a "secular spirituality" were as one-sided as attempts to develop "ecclesiastical spirituality" at the expense of the world. The "secular spirituality" becomes weary and anemic.

The dilemma of a vital spirituality inevitably forces clergy to focus on the sense of a divine calling. The ordained ministry is rooted in the will and calling of God. A compelling sense of such a calling to ministry is not usually antecedent to a living spirituality, but the two go inescapably hand in hand. Whatever else may be said, and more needs to be said, ministry is vocation, a divine calling to a particular responsibility within the people of God. Any reckoning with the issue of ministerial identity that fails to take into account the dynamics of calling will be doomed from the beginning.

In the midst of the revolutions from without and within, the identity of clergy is further complicated by the church’s historical practice. We have operated not from one single image of the ministry but rather from at least three images arranged roughly in chronological order in the minister’s development. "We tend," writes James Glasse, "to recruit ministers through one kind of image, train them in light of another kind, and then require them to practice in terms of yet another." Recruitment has tended to operate from what can be termed "the call model." Seminary education to a great degree has operated from the "professional model." Upon leaving the seminary and entering the broader life of the church these same ministers are saddled with the responsibilities of "institutional maintenance" or an "institutional model." Glasse rightly concludes that "the stages
of the process tend to cancel each other out and not to be cumulative in their effect."

This mixed and confused situation has given rise to a quest for contemporary models which can effectively guide clergy through the "identification crisis." There can be no question that we need workable models. The real question is the proper beginning point for the development of such models. Within the past two decades at least five such models have been prominent in discussion of the ordained ministry.

The monumental three-volume study of theological education in the United States and Canada begun in 1954 and concluded in 1957 under the general direction of H. Richard Niebuhr, Daniel D. Williams, and James M. Gustafson had unparalleled significance for the study of ministry on the North American continent. While theologically defining ministry as the furtherance of the love of God and neighbor, Niebuhr surveyed the church's physical plant and inquired into the various activities carried out in this setting. He posited the "pastoral director" as the most appropriate description of what appeared to be emerging and gaining ground in thought as well as practice of ministry.

Under the impact of the "Theology of the laity" and the concerns for church renewal in the early 1960s, some advocated the "equipping model." "The clergyman's (sic) chief task," wrote Robert Raines, "is to equip his people for their ministry... What is the New Testament dimension of the lay ministry? Hendrik Kraemer has suggested a theological grounding for this and now the need is to spell out just what this means in the life of the local church." At approximately the same time Charles L. Taylor, writing for seminarians, suggested that the ordained ministry is similar to the army commissariat in supplying nourishment to the "lay" troops of the "front line."

While the "equipping model" focused upon the pastor's responsibilities within the church and to the laity as they performed their apostolate in the world of work, a more outward-focused model appeared shortly afterward. Taking selective cues from Bonhoeffer's prison papers, writers such as Harvey Cox and Gibson Winter sought to define the church and its ministry in terms of "servanthood." "The servant Church," Winter wrote, "is the community who confirm mankind in its
freedom to fashion its future, protesting the pretensions to ultimacy in any human structures and suffering with men in the struggle against the powers of evil." Cox called the church to be "God's Avant-garde." The *locus classicus* for this model was found in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's statement:

The Church is the Church only when it exists for others. To make a start, it should give away all its property to those in need. The clergy must live solely on the free-will offerings of their congregations, or possibly engage in some secular calling. The Church must share in the secular problems of ordinary human life, not dominating, but helping and serving.

Many engaged in the social outreach ministries, or what were then called "special ministries," found the servant model to be highly appropriate for their endeavors. While the language of "servant" and "for others" appeared frequently in church publications, only here and there was it significantly translated into structural reality.

Confronting the identity crisis of the parish clergy, James Glasse in 1968 called for still another model. Of the clergyman he wrote, "The critical issue is not his ecclesiastical identity in the church, but his *occupational identity* in the world of work." The primary problem was neither the vertical, theological one nor the outreach, missional one. Rather, the primary problem was the lateral one, the ministry in relation to the other professions. The conclusion reached was that what is needed is the discovery and practice of ministry as profession. To give organizational substance to his proposal, Glasse announced the formation of the American Academy of Parish Clergy.

Finally, Henri Nouwen's *Creative Ministry* appeared in 1971 and was interestingly subtitled "Beyond Professionalism in Teaching, Preaching, Counseling, Organizing, and Celebrating." A year later Nouwen followed with a book that was widely read, *The Wounded Healer.* Sensitive to pastors "who are questioning their own relevance and effectiveness," Nouwen offered a model of ministry which effectively contained insights from pastoral care and the quest for a new spirituality to undergird ministry. The times had changed. In contrast to the confident human autonomy of the 1960s, Nouwen presented the condition of a suffering world, a suffering generation, the
suffering human being, and the suffering minister. Constructively, he sought to show that “the wound, which causes us to suffer now, will be revealed to us later as the place where God intimates his new creation.” Only a “wounded” pastor could be a healing pastor.

The recital of these models is not to offer a detailed analysis but to point to one fundamental characteristic which all five have in common. While all more or less give theological consideration in the formulation of models (particularly in the cases of Niebuhr and Nouwen), they nevertheless tend to describe contemporary practice. This in no way invalidates the enterprises on which these authors were engaged. They were responding in part to what may be called the sociological accidents of ministry. Most of them were not unaware of the theological essence of ministry. Ministry, however, is defined and shaped both by the cultural and social accidents of the times and by the theological constant which lies at the roots of ministry. Across history, Christian ministry has taken many different shapes and forms. Indeed that is the case in the New Testament church itself. Changing shapes and forms do not necessarily imply a change in essence or substance of ministry. If ministry is a calling from God, it is always service in a world which is not static. An adequate discussion of ministry needs to discern, in Hans Küng’s words, both the “constants and variables” defining and affecting ministry.

Though ministry may assume varying forms because of social and cultural conditions, these constitute the variables, not the constant element of ministry. An adequate concept of ministry will need to do justice to three points generating the tension within which the church lives: the demands and witness germane to the gospel itself, the history of the Christian community’s attempts to live and witness to the gospel, and the needs of the present situation. John Wesley saw the theological task as the dialectical interaction of Scripture, tradition, experience, and reason. The above three points illustrate the creative tension between the gospel as communicated through Scripture, the church’s tradition, and contemporary experience. To begin with contemporary experience and to permit that to become normative can lead us to indulge in a cultural mimicry.
which is already painfully evident in many dimensions of the church's life. The changing variables are not the grounds for a definition of ministry. They are the occasions for renewed grappling with the issue. The demand of the gospel itself is constant or normative. The task before us is therefore fundamentally a theological one.

The understanding of ministry as set forth in The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church reflects a growing ecumenical consensus in ecclesiology regarding ministry. The consensus can be summarized in three propositions. One, ministry is defined in terms of the normative ministry of Jesus Christ. Second, this normative ministry of Jesus Christ is given to the church and constitutes the church's very esse. The church does not first of all possess a ministry, but the church is only as it participates in the ministry of God as seen in the reconciling ministry of Jesus Christ. Finally, a proper understanding of ordained ministry can be gained only from within the context of the general ministry of the whole people of God. Properly, then, The Book of Discipline speaks of the general ministry of reconciliation which is the responsibility of all baptized Christians and the "representative ministry," i.e., ordained ministry, as representative of the one essential and normative ministry of Jesus Christ as this ministry has been given to the church.

We employ the biblical images, such as "the people of God," "the body of Christ," or "the community of the Spirit." But what is common to all these expressions is that the church is the community of those who have been called (people of God), incorporated into (body of Christ), and empowered by the Spirit (community of the Spirit) for the purpose of witness to and service of the one Lord Jesus Christ. The church, as T. W. Manson expressed it, is the communal continuation of the messianic ministry of Jesus.

"The ministry of Jesus Christ" includes the public ministry of word and deed, although not exclusively. This phrase means, rather, the New Testament's witness to the inclusive event of incarnate birth, life, death, and resurrection/exaltation of Jesus Christ. The whole event of Jesus Christ, as presented by the New Testament writers, is heralded as God's decisive eschatological, saving action for humankind. One can properly say that
the event of Jesus Christ is the concrete expression of the divine ministry for the sake of the world.

Priority is therefore given to the missio dei as concretely expressed in Jesus Christ. Christian ministry, either the "general ministry" or the "representative ministry," does not originate from within the church. Rather, Christian ministry has its origination in the initiative of God as this is revealed in the incarnate life of Jesus, his reconciling death, and the cosmic victory of the Resurrection. All this is God's doing; all this is God's ministry for a creation that is "groaning in travail" (Rom. 8:22 RSV). Paul underscores the divine initiative by expressly speaking of God as a "sending" God. "When the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son" (Gal. 4:4 KJV). John the evangelist speaks of this as the event of identification: "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14 RSV). While humankind in all generations has quested for God, in Jesus we see the reversal of this order. In Jesus we see God in search of humankind. The divine action of "sending" and "identifying with" constitutes the first aspect of a definition of ministry. Ministry belongs first to God. The ministry of Jesus Christ consisted in his being sent as the One Minister to find the last and the lost. The church, therefore, does not constitute its own ministry, but it has a ministry given to it which is the continuation of that one ministry which God initiated in Israel and brought to consummation in Jesus Christ.

The purpose of the divine ministry in Jesus Christ is reconciliation. Paul's expression is the classic statement of the divine purpose, "God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself" (II Cor. 5:19 KJV). Paul, however, is not the definer but the witness to the definition as this was consummately expressed in the cross. Because the cross is the focused expression of God's reconciling purpose, the Gospels take the form of extended Passion commentaries. The Crucifixion defines the life and purpose of Jesus Christ. In other words, the life and ministry of Jesus and the Crucifixion form a coherent, whole gospel. For this reason we are not allowed by the Gospel writers to view the ministry of Jesus in isolation from the divine act of Crucifixion and Resurrection. What Jesus said, did, and
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was—these were all aspects of one reality, namely, the divine reconciliation of the world.

The ministry of Jesus Christ inaugurated a new age. The startling words announcing the opening of the Galilean ministry are, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand" (Mark 1:15). Jesus' message of the kingdom over human affairs was imminently near. The words of proclamation cannot be separated from the proclaimer, for he is the embodiment of the new age. The divine sovereignty is nothing less than the righteousness of God. Too long we have separated Jesus and Paul in this regard—kingdom and righteousness (or justification) seem to have been two unrelated realities. Ernst Käsemann has recently established that Paul's idea of the righteousness of God belongs fundamentally within the same horizon of expectation as Jesus' preaching of the kingdom.23 Carl Braaten describes this graphically: "God's righteousness is his power in relation to men who are not in the right, who do not do what is right, who violate the rights of others in self-righteous aggression, who rob God of his rights, his due, by putting him down in their pride."24 In other words, the ministry of Jesus is the ministry of the eschatological kingdom of God. The church and its ministry participate in the proleptical presence of the new age and follow the eschatological Christ into the new future of divine righteousness in the consummated kingdom. In this respect the church has no option but to reveal in its life and ministry the radically "ex-centric" nature of God and God's ministry for "the least of these," the so-called "marginals" of society, "the poor and them that mourn."

The reconciling, eschatological ministry of Jesus is given its definitive shape in the servant character of Jesus' relationship with people. The early church saw that Jesus in his whole ministry represented the "ideal" or "pure" Israel, the prophetic "remnant," "the servant of God." Whether and to what extent Jesus actually identified himself consciously with certain christological titles is a matter of open debate in contemporary New Testament scholarship. For purposes here we do not have to decide the issue, because in actuality this was the shape of the ministry of Jesus whether he appropriated messianic or
christological titles or not. The title given to the ministry is not as important as the ministry's actual character. In the servanthood of Jesus' ministry we see the primary character of the church's general ministry and the ordained ministry. The spirit and the manner of this servanthood are given by both precept and example in Jesus:

You know that those who are supposed to rule over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:42-45 RSV).

As instructions to the disciples these words would have carried little authority had it not been for the incarnation of the words in the very person and ministry of Jesus himself. The faithful "remnant" saves by service and self-sacrifice, not by claiming special titles and positions of status. By precept and example Jesus prepared the path of discipleship which the community of believers was to follow. The early christological hymn, with all of its interpretive problems, nevertheless clearly summarizes what was so evident in the ministry of Jesus:

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross (Phil. 2:5-8).

In the concrete life of reconciliation, divine righteousness, and servanthood we see not only the essence of the ministry of Jesus, but we see the essence of Christian ministry. The single valid place for a theology of ministry to begin is with the reconciling servant ministry of Christ himself. This is the ministry which is given to the church, and upon which and from which all ministries, whether the ministry of the whole people of God or the particular ordained ministry, are derived.

The dependent character of the church's ministry and the priority given to the ministry of Jesus is clearly seen in the
Pentecost accounts in Acts. The apostles are interpreted to be the continuation of the ministry of Jesus Christ who had taken the form of a servant in their midst and had emptied himself even unto death. The gift of the Spirit is not the beginning of their ministry. The gift of the Spirit is the fulfillment of the promise of Christ's presence with them in their ministry. Both the apostles and the Spirit are sent by Christ. Ministry, therefore, has this inescapable christological grounding.

To the church composed of baptized Christians is given this one essential ministry of Jesus Christ, and this ministry is both the church's rationale and sustenance. Ministry is definitely given in the reconciling action of God's righteousness in God's Servant and has its continuation in and through the general ministry of the church.

Baptism marks the entry of all Christians into the general ministry of the church, whose responsibility is to manifest the redemptive power of God's grace in relationship with all people. The Book of Discipline correctly holds that in the sacrament of baptism "the Church claims God's promise, 'the seal of the Spirit' " (Eph. 1:13; par. 105, 1980 Discipline). The general ministry of reconciliation, righteousness, and servanthood takes many shapes and forms depending upon the various gifts of the individual members. These various gifts of the Spirit are held in a common bond of unity that is the body of Christ in both its inward life of koinonia and its outward thrust of diakonia for the sake of the world. In the upbuilding of the body of Christ in its inner vitality and outward mission, the church in general ministry fulfills its purpose to be the continuation of the messianic ministry of Jesus Christ.

In speaking of the church as the continuation of Christ's ministry, we should be clear that the reconciling ministry of God's righteousness in the form of servanthood is uniquely the ministry of Christ. The church continues this ministry only as it embodies this one unparalleled ministry. In one sense the ministry of Jesus Christ is distinct from the ministry of the church in that his ministry is that which is done for us and which we ourselves cannot originate. This same ministry, however, has continuity with the ministry of the whole in that Christ
reveals the true nature of ministry—what ministry in his name really entails—and grants that ministry to the church.

The general ministry of the church is fulfilled in its embodying the pattern of the incarnation or the self-giving of God in Christ in all relationships which Christians experience in the whole gamut of life. Baptized Christians perform this ministry not so much as an individual and corporate imitatio Christi but in the eschatological style of following Christ or, as Eduard Schweizer puts it, "walking behind Christ" into the new future of the yet-to-be consummated kingdom. The general ministry is, therefore, not a subtopic of the doctrine of the church. Ministry like mission is derived not from ecclesiology but from the Christian doctrine of God. The church, therefore, does not constitute ministry, but rather ministry constitutes the church. Seen in this manner, the servant ministry of outreach and service in the world is not an option for members of the church. Rather, the church is truly what it is in Christ when it is in ministry precisely to those to whom Christ ministered and for whom he gave his life.

As church and general ministry cannot be separated, neither can the distinctive ordained ministry be simply absorbed into the general ministry. Commonality and distinctiveness inhere in the two expressions of ministry. To ignore the commonality of the two results in a sacerdotalism of the ordained ministry. Failure to account for the distinctiveness of each simply collapses one into the other. The ordained ministry, like all ministries of the church, is derived from and dependent upon the one normative ministry of Jesus Christ. Herein lies the commonality of the two expressions of ministry. On the other hand, the ordained ministry is properly called a "representative ministry." It is representative of the ministry of Jesus Christ given to the whole church, and therefore the ordained ministry re-presents before the general ministry the calling of all Christians to ministry. The summarizing and re-presenting of Christ's ministry to the general ministry is basic to the distinctiveness of ordained ministry.

Historically, the people called Methodists have understood this distinctiveness to relate to the threefold responsibility for Word, sacrament, and church order. While these are distinct
functions, they cannot be isolated from the various forms and functions of the general ministry. As proclaimer of the Word, the ordained minister tells the story of faith in order to facilitate the faithful witness to that same Word by the general ministry in the life of the world. As celebrant of the Word in sacrament, the ordained minister through baptism and Eucharist reminds the whole people of God of their ministry to be poured out and broken for the sake of the world. As responsible for church order, the ordained minister seeks to provide a climate for growth in discipleship for the whole church. In other words, the purpose of the representative ministry is to serve as the constant reminder to the whole people of God of their commission through baptism to be engaged in the ministry of reconciliation and service. In this manner the two forms of ministry, lay and ordained, are held in inseparable linkage to the missional life of the church in the world. Forsyth put it succinctly when he stated, "The ministry (ordained) is sacramental to the Church as the Church itself is sacramental to the world."26

Care should be exercised in such a delineation of the functions lest the ordained ministry be understood to be exclusively within the domain of the institution, while the responsibilities for the general ministry lie outside the domain. Such a division of labor will not serve either church or world responsibly, nor can such bifurcation of function be defended theologically. The ordained minister is also a baptized Christian and in this sense is never removed from the responsibilities of the general ministry. If the ordained ministry is to be valid representationally, it must participate in the actual life of the general ministry in the world. The distinctiveness of the ordained ministry lies in the responsibility of the representative ministry to summarize and dramatize in parabolic form, particularly in Word and sacrament, the ministry to which all Christians are called.

It could be argued that this interpretation is a theological rationale for ordained ministry as it presently exists, but is such really historically the case? If the norm of ministry is the Word of God incarnated in Jesus Christ, then ministry can and has historically taken many different forms. The fundamental problem faced by the early church was how the Christian community could remain apostolic after the apostles had passed
from the scene. The ancient question is still the modern question. The early church's response, as Braaten has chroni­
cled, was to safeguard the church's apostolicity with the principles of canonicity of Scripture, credal development (such as baptismal and ordinational confessions), and the liturgical structuring of the cult (such as baptism, Eucharist, and proclamation). In Braaten's words, the church sought to assure its apostolic continuity through canon, creed, and cult. In this manner the church sought to be faithful to its source and origin, namely, Jesus Christ. To the present, canon, creed, and cult have functioned to secure this continuity.

This, however, says little about ordination. Or does it? Could the church simply have retained certain functional distinctions, i.e., charismatic ministries, without focusing more specifically upon a certain ordering of ministry? The response to such a question greatly depends upon the tradition in which one has been nurtured. Obviously, most branches of the Society of Friends would answer the question affirmatively, whereas Anglo-Catholics would vigorously object.

United Methodists and their antecedent bodies historically have not traced the office of ordained ministry back to a particular practice in the ministry of Jesus. Wesley was not lacking in appreciation for church order and a concern for proper ordination by proper persons. He could and did, however, offer justification for a functional understanding of apostolicity rather than historical succession. The followers of Wesley have, therefore, held that the test of apostolicity does not lie in historical succession but rather in faithfulness to the gospel of Jesus Christ. The situations which Wesley confronted in his revival and which the early Methodists faced in this country were not totally unlike the situation faced by the early church. The continuity with apostolic ministry could not be sustained through canon, creed, and cult without leaders whose special responsibilities related specifically to the maintenance of these important functions. The situation has not radically changed to the present. To ordain persons for these responsibilities is not to create a "super class" or sacerdotal system within the church. So long as the integral relationship between the general and representative ministries of the church is organized, there is
nothing authoritarian nor elitist in setting certain persons not so much “alongside” but “within” the general ministry to have specific responsibility for Word, sacrament, and order.

Of course, this cuts against the grain in some quarters where the recent tendency has been to equate baptism and ordination. Baptism and ordination do say similar things about the common ministry of the church, but they do not have identical emphases. In his fair and balanced presentation of ministry, Robert Paul has cogently argued that baptism sets the individual within the context of the common ministry of the church. In this sense, baptism is “incorporation.” Ordination, on the other hand, approaches the matter from a different direction. It is not from individual to church, but rather, from church to individual. Baptism recognizes our commonality before God and thereby our common ministry. Ordination, on the other hand, recognizes that while there are no distinctions in status and rank, there are nevertheless differences of gift, call, and equipping. It is not sufficient simply to set the two forms of ministry alongside each other. The general ministry and the representative ministry are actually coterminous. Each is essential to the other.

This in no way indicates that the church creates its own representative ministry. While the church ordains, the church does this as a recognition of the call of Christ and the gift of the Spirit. While the call to the representative ministry comes in and through the church, the call is of divine origin. One aspect of the historic witness of those traditions making up The United Methodist Church is the recognition that ordained ministry is initially constituted by divine call. The church recognizes the call and certifies preparedness for ministry. “The part of ecclesiastical authority in the ordering of the ministry is that of recognizing and accepting the gift of Christ to his Church.”

To this point we have been concerned with a theological grounding of ministry. Yet any doctrine of the church which ignores the empirical, sociological reality of the institution is vulnerable to a replication of the ancient christological heresy of docetism, i.e., the denial of the bodily humanity of Jesus Christ. A theology of ministry which likewise ignores the increasing
The study of ordained ministry is at a significant juncture. Never before have we had such a volume of psychological and sociological contributions to the practice of ministry. At the same time at least three highly significant developments can be seen in the church. The 1980 General Conference mandate for a holistic study of ministry may have profound long-range import for the church. At least ministry will be a priority item on the church's agenda in this quadrennium in a way unlike recent quadrennia. Further, the movement toward establishing standards of competence and excellence in the practice of ministry, coupled with the deployment of tools and procedures of evaluation, offer new experiences for the clergy as well as the church in general. Concomitant with the latter development is the emphatic stress upon the importance, if not necessity, of serious continuing education.

Church historians could argue that while these factors describe the occasion in which we find ourselves, the cause for this renewed grappling with equipping for and evaluation of ministry lies at the roots of our tradition as United Methodists. During the Wesleyan revival Charles Wesley penned his famous hymn on the ministry and etched upon our tradition the oft-quoted line, "Unite the pair so long disjoined, knowledge and vital piety." To be sure, Charles hardly possessed the prophetic powers to foresee that in 1982 "knowledge" could be translated as "professional competence," but it is undeniable that a stress upon "a competent share of knowledge" in ministry was a pivotal concern of John Wesley. Simply peruse the subjects which Wesley advocated as essential for his preachers: scriptural exegesis, original languages, world history, "some knowledge" of science, logic including metaphysics, and natural philosophy—all prefaced with Wesley's insistence upon the ability to understand "the various states of those under [the
preacher's] care." In typical fashion Wesley commented further for emphasis that

some of these branches of knowledge are not so indispensably necessary as the rest; and therefore no thinking man will condemn the Fathers of the Church, for having, in all ages and nations appointed some to the ministry, who, suppose they had the capacity, yet had not the opportunity of attaining them. But what excuse is this for one who has the opportunity, and makes no use of it? . . . he is inexcusable before God and man.33

The debate whether ordained ministry is a vocation or a profession is really a misplaced debate. How often "calling" has been misused to camouflage or rationalize incompetence. On the other hand, professional competence without personal commitment in fulfilling a vocation results in an institutionally mechanical and lifeless performance. There is indeed something of an analogy between concern of our ancestors of the eighteenth century to "conjoin knowledge and vital piety" and our twentieth-century task to put together rightly "profession" and "vocation."

The crucial term is "rightly." The theological model of ministry is normative because it is rooted in the church's self-understanding in the light of its confession of faith. Therefore, ministry as willed, initiated, and summoned by God is primary. Vocation is the root understanding of ministry. While the competent practice of ministry may vary according to circumstances and conditions, nevertheless competence is an inescapable factor in the very integrity of ministry itself. Hence, the understanding of ministry as profession cannot be eschewed as an accidental intrusion or passing fad. The professional standards are instrumental to ministry as the vocational standard is normative for the same ministry. Because the professional standards are instrumental to ministry, they cannot be set in a hard and fast manner. They can never become law and hence a legalistic test for determining when and where Christian ministry is validly practiced.

If profession is defined as "a type of work performed in a social setting which requires particular education, entrance, and relationship to one's peers and to the public,"34 one can discern
both similarities and differences between ministry as profession and ministry as vocation. Ministry does not seem to fit neatly and unambiguously into any of the operating definitions of profession. Professions such as medicine, education, and law are not under the radical and often relativizing scrutiny that ministry is today. No one seems to doubt the continued necessity of medical service, education, and legal counsel. The point is how to do these better. Ministers, on the other hand, are frequently caught in doubt regarding not just the relevance of what they do but the necessity of it at all. A professional definition of ministry will not answer the question of the necessity of ministry. Only a theological definition can do that. In fact, the understanding of ministry exclusively as profession can contribute to an erosion of confidence in the necessity of ministry.

A more fundamental difference lies in the fact that in other professions the relationship between personal faith and public practice does not appear to be as integrally tied together as in ministry. The minister is not primarily engaged in communicating autobiography but rather the story of faith. Nevertheless, the authenticity of the Story is lacking without personal story. In comparison with other professions this difference is a matter of degree. The degree, however, in this case is striking.

If to be a professional is to be equipped with skills which are desired by the public, and this is certainly one factor in most definitions of profession, the minister is in tough straits. The gospel which the minister is to proclaim is hardly a baptism and confirmation of the dominant values of contemporary society. In fact, the gospel of the cross is a scandalon. Prophetic ministry hardly has a chance if it is to be molded and shaped by public demand. Simply examine the profile of lay and clergy expectations of the ordained ministry in a recent study, Ministry in America.35 What emerges from this study is a profile of expectations which is certainly the profile of a profession. The dominant picture is an interpersonal style of ministry influenced greatly by the disciplines of psychology, social science, and therapeutic practice. The skills demanded are unquestionably professional skills. Here is a profile of a profession. Yet the responsibility to utter the prophetic Word, "thus saith the
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Lord," to live and call others to a cruciform existence in the name of the crucified, and to walk in the ranks of God's coming kingdom of righteousness—all these do not rest comfortably within the definition of a profession.

This is not to say that the Word which judges and heals does not require competence, indeed professional competence, but the Word nevertheless transcends the professional demands or it is not the Word of God. Yet this is not the final truth. No valid purpose is served by confusing, intentionally or unintentionally, profession with "professionalism." Whatever the profession, be it law, medicine, or education, its purpose is not fulfilled when its identity is reduced to a simple tally of functions. The professional is at the same time a person, not a collection of functions. Conversely in relation to ministry, no valid purpose is served when the rigorous demands of professional expertise in service to others are jettisoned in favor of a mediocrity masquerading under the guise of the gospel. The case of ministry is not an either/or, either profession or vocation; nor is it a matter of "scissors and paste," simply attaching one definition to the other.

What is required is a recognition of the differences in linguistic discourse. Ministry as vocation is theological discourse defining the source, character, and goal of ministry. Ministry as profession is sociological discourse describing and enabling effective practice of ministry. Definition is not description, nor is description definition. For full discourse we need both. For a more fruitful practice of ministry we need both. The comment of a seminary president places the matter properly, "I believe that while the professional image should be an informing image in our theology of ministry, it cannot be the transforming reality out of which we function." There really is not a conflict or stalemate if we get on with properly unifying the two so long disjoined—vocation and profession.

NOTES

There is wide ecumenical consensus at this point. As early as 1957 Yves Congar in Lay People in the Church (Westminster, Md.: Newman Press, 1957) argued that a theology of ministry had to be done within the context of an inclusive ecclesiology. This was in marked contrast to earlier approaches to a theology of ministry. The discussions within the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches have exemplified the same methodological approach by considering the theology of the whole people of God as prerequisite for a theology of ordained ministry. See One Baptism, One Eucharist and a Mutually Recognized Ministry (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1978). The 1980 COCU resolution on ministry follows the same order. See In Quest of a Church of Christ Uniting: An Emerging Theological Consensus (Princeton, N.J.: Consultation on Church Union, 1980), chap. VII, reprinted in QR 1 (Spring 1981): 68-85.


26. Church and Sacraments, p. 133.
28. The careful New Testament research of Gerhard Krodel, "Forms and Functions of Ministries in the New Testament," Dialog 9 (Summer 1969): 191-202, seems to lend support to this assumption with a slight qualification toward the end of his argument: "The legitimacy or illegitimacy of this development depends entirely on how his superior rank is understood and where the basis of his authority lies."
31. Manson, Church's Ministry, p. 108.
32. Book of Hymns, No. 344.

26
It is an exacting task nowadays to complete letters of recommendation for candidates seeking admission to annual conferences in The United Methodist Church. The information requested has become increasingly specific, and while there is an evident concern in most instances for an evaluation of the candidate's calling, the emphasis is much more on personal characteristics. One is asked to assess these in considerable detail, and as the 1980 Book of Discipline makes clear, there is the option of recommending a psychological test to supplement the reference (par. 414.4). It is as if boards of ordained ministry were undecided over the relative importance of vocation and professional aptitude, as in the following question from a recent conference letter, which could well have been a summary of the entire document: "Do you frankly think this person has chosen the right vocation?" The semantics were interesting. Not too long ago, the candidate might have chosen to accept or reject a call to the ministry, or chosen to enter the ministry, but could not have chosen to be called.

The issue is weighty and is not of course peculiar to the ordained ministry. Professionals in many fields, including other areas of ministry, recognize and identify with the tension it implies. It touches the ordained ministry, however, at a point of particular sensitivity. The church rightly insists on the competence of its full-time leadership when millions of people are under its care week by week in worship, education, counseling, and many other areas. Indeed, not to insist on a degree of expertise would be patently irresponsible. It would also be a denial of the incarnational nature of ministry and an

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alienation from the world in which Christians live, witness, and serve. Yet the church is called first and foremost to proclaim to the world a message of eternal hope and eschatological urgency and must guard against the assimilation of criteria and objectives which might enervate the pursuit of its mission.

The Discipline makes clear that the tension of this twofold task is inescapable, not least for those in the ordained ministry. The “Historic Examination” and the statements concerning ordination stipulate that candidates must affirm not only their faith in Christ and their striving for Christian perfection, but also their commitment to the doctrines, disciplines, and polity of The United Methodist Church (par. 425). Furthermore, while it is acknowledged that ordinands are “persons within the Church community whose gifts, graces, and promises of future usefulness are observable to the community, who respond to God’s call and offer themselves in leadership as ordained ministers,” it is expected that they shall also be competent in the disciplines of Scripture, theology, church history, and church polity, as well as in the understanding and practice of the art of communication and human relations (pars. 429.1, 431.8). In short, it is the duty of the church to authenticate the call of its ministers.

Consider the course of two hypothetical though representative approaches to the ministerial office. On the one hand, there are those who perceive their call as a direct commission from God. It may come as a consequence of conversion and discipleship; it may be a subsequent critical point in their lives; but it springs essentially from a deep intuitive conviction that this is God’s will. The church presents such persons with a series of checks and testings, beginning with their professional training and continuing throughout their ministry. If they have known the Bible as a source of authority and revelation, for example, being confronted with the disciplines of scriptural study will be a difficult and searching process. If they have known the guidance of God through prayer and supportive fellowship, they may be disoriented to find that, in the exigencies of the pastorate, inspiration must be filtered through the realities of personal growth and faith development. If they have entered the ministry with a strong sense of mission, they
may be disconcerted to find that an objective study of the world and the Christian tradition often means an adjustment in their visions and their hopes. Such testings and searching are necessary for ministry in a world on which Marx, Freud, and Einstein have left their mark. We cannot unlearn what we now know about human history and the human psyche, nor yet ignore what it means to be relative in time and space. If ministry is to be tensile rather than brittle, seasoned rather than euphoric, the direct and intuitive call must be subjected to criteria of professional competence. In this way the call is confirmed and strengthened, and saving discipleship through Jesus Christ is offered with integrity and discernment.

On the other hand, there are those for whom the call comes as a growing conviction. It may emerge through an upbringing in the life and work of the church, with the prospect of serving it in full-time ministry evolving as a professional option. It may come as the result of a new awareness of the Christian faith and of personal skills and aptitudes; but it will ultimately be perceived as a commitment rather than a commission. Those who enter the ministry in this way are nonetheless called by God. They are just as inspired by the vision of their work and are just as convinced of its missional significance. Their vocation, however, is more likely to develop as they acquire their professional skills.

Testings for such persons come from the challenge of the gospel to which they make their professional commitment. If, for example, they have grown into a knowledge of God throughout their lives, it will be a difficult and searching task for them to present the gospel to those who have never heard it, especially if the response is that of conversion and a personal experience of salvation in Christ. If they have approached the counseling of people as essentially a therapeutic process, it may be disturbing to find that pastoral care in the context of the gospel can be an encounter with a dynamic God. And it will be disconcerting to find that, in matters of death and eternal life, people look to a minister for words of authority, not explanation.

Yet such testings and discoveries are necessary if ministry is to be pastoral leadership and not mere consultation. It is difficult to
surround oneself with ecclesiastical support systems and at the same time serve the risen Christ. Juan Luis Segundo's general rule of pastoral prudence is a piercing reminder of what can happen when a commitment to the ministry is blandly professional. The gospel becomes "the absolute minimum in obligation in order to keep the maximum number of people." We cannot forget what we now know about global sin and suffering, nor yet can we ignore the continuing imprisonment and murder of Christians as the price of their discipleship. If ministry is to be apostolic rather than institutional, motivating rather than palliative, the deductive and professional commitment must be subjected to the imperatives of the gospel.

It is not easy for the church to hold two such approaches in a creative tension, particularly when personal proclivities tend to confirm one or the other. Those who perceive their call intuitively will often resist professional accountability as a challenge to the certainty of their vocation. By the same token, those who arrive at their commitment deductively will often reject the demands of the gospel which seem to question their professional expertise. Yet there is a pressing need for a recognition of these perceptions as complementary, not least because an exclusively vocational or professional approach evades the real challenge facing the church today.

It is ironic that there should be any question of a conceptual dichotomy between the two, because a profession was originally the declaration or vow made by one who had entered a religious order. The word was applied to the practice of divinity, law, and medicine, in which "professed" knowledge was required. Secularization has rightly extended its use in contemporary society, but has also, and perhaps inevitably, led to a degree of secularism in which vocation and profession alike have lost much if not all of their theological significance. It is quite exceptional in our time to find persons, Christians included, who regard their occupation as a calling which has come from God. United Methodists, for example, who renew their covenant each year in words of total commitment, probably leave a safe margin for personal initiative and achievement, to say nothing of choice.

Herein lies the challenge. Self-sufficiency, the ground of all sin, has become the accepted criterion for personal and
professional accomplishment. Vocation is viewed, not as a response to God’s creative purpose, but as self-fulfillment through self-understanding and self-assertiveness. People become professionals in that at which they can excel, rather than by asking how they might use their gifts and skills to attest to the grace of God and to serve other human beings.

This devotion to self-sufficiency leads inevitably to the worship of action and success—idols, as Jürgen Moltmann has so aptly described them. They confront Christians in their daily living at almost every turn and present a constant threat to their integrity. Nor are ministers of the church excused the challenge, for they are threatened by the same idols. It is never easy to maintain the distinctive role of Christian ministry in the context of human knowledge and endeavor, but it is especially difficult when the context is that of discovery. And today there is a proliferating expertise in precisely the area of knowledge most congruent with pastoral ministry: the field of human relations. While it is wholly appropriate to draw on these new disciplines as pastoral resources—group dynamics, for example—there is always the risk of distorted priorities.

All of which renders faithfulness to the tradition of the gospel of paramount importance. The problem is that keeping the tradition, or the receiving and handing over of truth and knowledge, is a human activity by no means limited to the Christian faith. As K. E. Skydsgaard has observed, tradition participates in the ambiguities of human nature. Humans wish to control what they receive and hand on, and tradition thereby becomes a defense of their desire to exist in their own way. Christian tradition, on the other hand, confronts the quest for human self-authentication with “a living historical person as we know him through the faithful remembrance of the first generation, the witness of the Apostles. . . . This biblical-historical Jesus . . . is the renewer and fulfiller of tradition. This flaming center alone is the core of tradition.” For the people of this distinctive tradition there must therefore be clarity of identity and purpose, both in the church and in its ministerial office.

A writer who helps considerably in this regard is the French sociologist and lay theologian, Jacques Ellul, whose work in
recent decades has been a valuable if controversial interpreta-
tion of the role of the church in a technological age. His Presence of the Kingdom in 1948 was a prophetic warning that technology, if underestimated or uncontrolled, would present a profound threat to human society. He has argued consistently since then that this is exactly what has happened. His sustained conviction is that human self-understanding is now governed by technol-
gy, and that the only motivating and changing force in society has become technique, best translated from the French as technics.8 Whereas primitive humans understood the threat of opposing forces in terms of a divine personification of nature, and whereas the biblical story depicts humans as desacralizing nature by seeing themselves in terms of a God-given destiny, modern self-understanding has been that of an eschatological history. It has been a short step to embracing technique as the means by which to achieve this, but in so doing there has been a fundamental misunderstanding of the autonomous nature of technology. It is not “an inert, weightless object that can be used in any manner, any direction by a sovereign mankind. Technology has in itself a certain number of consequences, it represents a certain structure, certain demands, and it brings certain modifications of man and society, which force them-

selves upon us whether we like it or not.” The effect on human society and existence is twofold: the elimination of anything that is not “technicizable”; and the reconstitution of the whole of society on the basis of technological totalization.9

With technology as the ultimate reality and purpose of human existence, argues Ellul, the human race has no place to go, no hope to nurture. Everything in society, including religion, is caught up in the process, and “with the final integration of the instinctive and the spiritual by means of these human techniques, the edifice of the technical society will be completed. . . . It will not seem insane, for everything will be ordered, and the stains of human passion will be lost amid the chromium gleam. . . . The supreme luxury of the society of technical necessity will be to grant the bonus of useless revolt and of an acquiescent smile.”10 The human hopes of an historical eschatology have ended, discreetly and silently, “an open vein in a warm bath.”11
Ellul’s theological response to these analyses is to draw a firm
Barthian distinction between the Word of God and the world,
and to identify the Christian as divinely elected. Christians have
not been created to be separate from the world but at the same
time are most certainly not of it. Christian thought, life, and
heart are neither dependent upon nor controlled by the world,
but belong to the One who has sent disciples into the world to
practice discipleship in spite of the world. Christians are not to
act in the same way as everyone else. They are not to look at the
various movements which human beings have started, for
example, choose those which seem “good,” and then support
them. Christians are not to give their blessing to any particular
human enterprise but are charged with a mission of which the
natural person can have no idea—yet which in reality is decisive
for the world.

It is a revolutionary role, not because of what Christians do,
but because of who they are: ambassadors of another state. They
are the salt of the earth, exegeted by Ellul as the sign of the new
covenant which God has made with the world in Jesus Christ. They
are the light of the world, giving to the world through
Christ the true measure of goodness and the true meaning of
history. They are also sheep in the midst of wolves, witnessing
to the suffering of Christ, and accepting in their lives the
domination of other people for the sake of Christ.

In an age of pluralism, secularization, and future shock, when
it is important for Christians to know who they are, this is a
powerful affirmation. Christians are the elect, the people of
God. They are who they are, and are placed where they are,
because God has called them and sent them into the world. It is
an identity which is grounded in their justification in Christ,
coram Deo, and it reminds them that they are, above all else, a
sign to the world of God’s saving work. This identity is not only
affirming, but liberating, in that it frees Christians from the
burden, so often and so unnecessarily self-imposed, of feeling
responsible for the saving work which is Christ’s and Christ’s
alone. Christians are not the means of God’s salvation: they are
the sign.

Vocationalism must not, however, become passive and
inward. It is also incumbent upon Christians to evince a concern
for service to the world. When vocation is defined as election, as scripturally it must be, a common Christian mistake is to become possessive of the gospel and to achieve an identity at the expense of the rest of the human race. It then becomes difficult to avoid an attitude of exclusiveness or even disdain toward the world; and on a planet which we have now seen from outer space to be delicate and fragile, this is a dangerous perversion of the gospel. Fortunately there is much in the Methodist tradition to guard against such a parochialism.

If we turn to Wesley, we find a catholicity which defines election as being chosen by God for a particular work. His view of Methodists is well known: he looked upon them as those "raised up to reform the nation, more particularly the Church; [and] to spread scriptural holiness over the land." The key to Christian identity is particular election for universal service. Christians are not only ambassadors: they are announcers, heralds of a new age, the basileia which Jesus himself announced so often and so compellingly. The new age is in the world, but it is also of eternity, and it offers new life to all. There are many who work for it, who suffer for righteousness' sake; and for all such, as one would expect of a God of justice, there is divine approval. Christians are not exempt from this struggle, but neither are they the major protagonists. They must work along with everyone else as colaborers, sharing in the hope of that which is to come. But they are also called to a special discipleship. Put simply, they are the ones who know what is happening. This particular privilege requires of Christians that they be on call for special assignments, ready to proclaim in word and deed what they know. Their discipleship depends on a direct relationship with the risen Christ, which renders their task unpredictable and even self-contradictory in the eyes of the world. There are times when their mission is clear, exciting, and responsive to evident needs. At other times it makes no sense, has no ostensible purpose, and offers little encouragement. At times it calls to the forefront of the struggle for the basileia. At others, it calls back from the fray to apparent disempowerment and inactivity. Such is the role of Christian discipleship, and it is the particular identity of the church in an age of social and religious technics.
To accept this identity, however, is to risk another common Christian error: the confusion of the basileia with the church itself. When this happens, instead of a healthy tension between hope and reality, a constant conflict impedes a positive and practical discipleship. The criteria of that which God will ultimately accomplish for the world cannot be applied to that which God is effecting here and now in the world. To do so is to judge the church along with the world and inevitably to find it wanting. It is also to deny its significance as the eschatological community—the presence as well as the sign of that which is to come. Whether the basileia is viewed as the consummation or the supersession of the church, it is imperative to acknowledge God’s salvation to be present as well as future. The risen Christ makes it so.

The point is argued with profound theological insight in Wesley’s short essay, Thoughts upon God’s Sovereignty. God is revealed, suggests Wesley, under a twofold character: as Creator and as Governor. As Creator, he has acted in all things according to his own sovereign will, making all things in every conceivable aspect according to his own good pleasure. He has determined the time and place for nations, the weakness or strength of individual persons, and with this sovereign will, justice has not and cannot have anything to do. It is beyond justice. Yet as Governor, God does not and cannot act according to his sovereign will, but according to the invariable rules of justice and mercy. Since he rewards and punishes according to these rules, the free agency of people can be presupposed, and “the Judge of all the earth will do right. . . . Let then these two ideas of God the Creator, the sovereign Creator, and God the Governor, the just Governor, be always kept apart. Let us distinguish them from each other, with the utmost care. So shall we give God the full glory of his sovereign grace, without impeaching his inviolable justice.”

This was published in 1777, at the height of the Calvinist controversies, but the implications are far greater than a mere refutation of irresistible grace. What we have here is a high theology in tension with a high anthropology. God’s sovereignty will ultimately prevail, but what God has created in the meantime is also justifiable. Divine justice implies a human
accountability, but also a human acceptance of the world. The "not-yetness" of the new age cannot be allowed to relegate the present world to insignificance, nor yet to condemnation, because the "not-yetness" is also of God. While pressing toward the basileia, we are still in God's world. Our hope is that of eternity, but we are accountable for much of what happens now. And in the midst of our struggle against the forces of evil in the world, there is much for which we can be grateful.

This Wesleyan distinction has, of course, a lengthy Christian pedigree. Applying it to the contemporary church and its ministerial office, however, has some significant implications. It serves as a helpful corrective to the sort of Protestant ecclesiology which persistently regards as peripheral the tradition of the church. The taproot of this has been the gathered church, which stresses the vocation of justified Christians into covenant communities as a manifestation of the true, invisible church. Paradoxically, this conception has rarely permitted Protestants to be happy with their church, which never seems to measure up to the collective ideal of its justified members. And, as a result, Protestant ministers have rarely known the full authority of their ministerial office. Yet if we accept the complementarity and distinction of God's sovereign will and governing justice, the tradition of ecclesial order becomes justifiable as a part of this world, quite apart from any other ecclesiological considerations.

Similarly, as we can perceive with the aid of sociology, the church embodies an elemental characteristic of human society: that people live for the most part in a dialectic of spirit and structure—what Victor Turner has described as the wisdom of social institution and spontaneous communitas.19 This was implicit in Wesley's arguments against a Methodist separation from the visible Church of England. He regarded the United Societies with their classes and bands as ecclesiæ in ecclesia, free for vocational discipleship precisely because he himself provided them with the order and tradition of the established church. To accept such a complementarity of spirit and structure is to obviate much of the conflict which stems from a narrow vocationalism or a defensive professionalism. An ecclesiæ which rejects the ecclesia must perforce provide its own. An
ecclesia which rejects its ecclesiolae finds itself divided.

The Wesleyan distinction is of further assistance in confirming vocation and professional competence as complementary gifts and graces in ministry. The call can be ascribed to the creative power of God at work, unpredictably and unaccountably, while the governing power of God at work through the church authenticates the call and equips for worldly service. In the same way, vocational inspirations of ministry are responsive to the directives of a creating God, while professional skills are accountable to the order of a governing God. The significance of the distinctions is not that they divide our idea of God, nor yet that they present conflicting priorities for ministry, but rather that vocation and profession thereby acquire their necessary complementarity. The call to serve an active God is correlated with an accountability to professed knowledge in the context of human experience and human endeavor—factors no less attributable to God.

It is important, for example, that ministers should have the assurance of their call through justification by faith in Christ and should manifest the growth in grace which necessarily follows from this; it is also important that they should be theologically accountable as those who profess the teachings of the church in the context of accumulated human wisdom. It is important for them to appropriate the faith of the church as those who are called to a knowledge of God’s saving righteousness; but they should also be accountable as those who profess the tradition of the church in the context of human history. It is important that they should discern the call of the Holy Spirit to an illumined understanding of the Scriptures; but they should also be accountable as those who profess the authority of a written text which has emerged from the teachings of a religious community. It is important for them to affirm the supreme goodness of a God who calls them to proclaim the advent of the basileia; but they should also be accountable as those who profess a distinctive ethic of love in the context of human social behavior.

Not that these complementarities are easily maintained. Indeed, the continuing development of practical theology into pastoral disciplines serves to focus even more sharply on the two problems we have identified: how to be faithful to the
gospel in the midst of proliferating technics in human relations; and the longstanding Protestant dilemma of how to correlate pastoral vocation and competence alike with the tradition of church order. This last issue is particularly acute for Methodists because of the ambivalence with which Wesley himself handed on the ecclesial tradition. He constantly affirmed the order of the established church in England; yet those who became his assistants and helpers were for the most part not ordained, and much of the leadership of early Methodism was drawn from laymen and laywomen whose credentials were in no way sanctioned by the church. That Wesley never resolved this tension is an important question for Protestant ecclesiology as a whole, and for Methodism it is pivotal to an understanding of the ministerial office.

The early Methodist preachers, described by Wesley as his “sons in the gospel,” emerged as proclaimers of the gospel by virtue of their gifts and graces. They were “tried” by Wesley and were subject at all times to his personal authority and discipline, but their call was acknowledged to be directly from God. They were “moved thereto by the Holy Ghost.” In the personal sacrifices it exacted and in the nature of the task it demanded, it was an occupation very much in contrast with the structured security afforded many of the Anglican clergy in the eighteenth century, for whom the church was often a professional option. The commission of these early Methodists, on the other hand, was nothing less than to reach out—to the tinniers in Cornwall, the keelmen at Newcastle, the colliers at Kingswood, the drunkards, the swearers, the Sabbath-breakers of Moorfield, and the harlots of Drury Lane. By the same token, the circuit riders of early American Methodism exemplified the call to preach as a direct commission, a divine imperative to reach out to those who had not heard the gospel. Even though the development of connectionalism on this side of the Atlantic subsequently moved to parish rather than circuit ministry, field preaching and camp meetings have remained a conscious heritage.

This has proved at once an advantage and a handicap. The call to preach as a fundamental criterion for ordination has given American Methodism the advantage of a rich history in frontier
evangelism and folk Christianity. The handicap has been a marked discomfort with an ecclesial identity, partly because of the missional nature of the call to preach, and partly because, until quite recently, the ministerial office has been associated predominantly with such a call. It is at this point that an understanding of Wesley’s legacy becomes so important. He affirmed his assistants and helpers as preachers of the gospel, but his own churchmanship and his concern to avoid a fractious separation from the Church of England led him to qualify their role as that of “extraordinary messengers.” Since they were not ordained, he refused to permit them to administer the sacraments, and as late as 1789, the ordinations of 1784 notwithstanding, his sermon “The Ministerial Office” maintained this policy for the United Societies by distinguishing between a prophetic and priestly order of ministry.

Henry Moore, one of his biographers, touched the nerve of the dilemma when he commented that Wesley’s love for the church, “from which he never deviated unnecessarily, had, in this instance, led him a little too far.” Inexorably the authentication of the extraordinary call had led to the ordinations of 1784. But the progression had been a reluctant one for Wesley, and to such an extent that the Methodist ministerial office acquired its identity in the first instance from its preaching rather than from its ecclesial authentication.

An outstanding example of this distance from ecclesiastical source is the infrequency with which it is acknowledged that, next to the Church of England, the Methodist Episcopal Church is the parent church of Methodism. The United Societies in Britain, not least because of Wesley’s continued resistance to official separation, did not appropriate an identity as a church until well into the nineteenth century. The Methodist Episcopal Church, on the other hand, was established at the Christmas Conference, consolidated during the years immediately following, and from an early date adopted ecclesial order and episcopal governance. Yet the circumstances of these developments, and the misunderstanding which they occasioned with Wesley himself, engendered a hesitancy in the Methodist ecclesial tradition which is with us to this day.
These considerations do not address the issues of the 1784 ordinations nor of apostolicity—in itself a fundamental question for Methodist ecclesiology. But they suggest that the absence of a sure ecclesial identity has led to a concept of ministry which has pursued means of authentication other than the tradition of church order. As Albert Outler has noted, American Methodism has been sociologically established but ecclesiologically "detradditioned," organization and activity tending to dominate its consciousness with a sense of obligation: "when someone speaks incisively about the church in essential action, even the most overinstitutionalized Methodist in 'the connexion' snaps to attention—and feels at least a fleeting impulse to report for duty.”

The corollary has been a concept of ministry in which authentication has been sought in professional activity and, more recently, in the acquisition if not accumulation of appropriate pastoral skills. This is not far from Ellul's prognosis of technique, and it is only because the risen Christ has ineluctably remained the flaming center of Methodist tradition no less than elsewhere in the church that there has been resistance to such a pastoral technocracy. In the absence of a sure ecclesial identity, however, the outcome of the resistance has for the most part been the dichotomized view we noted at the outset: vocationalism and professionalism perceived as alternative and even conflicting priorities. Yet the ministerial office in the fullest tradition of the church has always been a symbiosis of the two: a calling at once enigmatic and extraordinary to a professional service for which pastoral technics cannot and must not substitute. When the call is authenticated by the traditional order of the church, it becomes unconditionally open to the directives of a righteous and saving God. Only then does the divine imperative transcend personal intuition. Only then does the missional urgency of the gospel subsume professional competence.

All of which is not without its implications. For those who are called to the ordained ministry, there must be an appropriation of the Christian tradition in its fulness—an awareness that the authority to preach and to minister has been handed on to them through the order of the church. If this tradition is not accepted,
the call and the commitment can quickly become a quest for self-authentication through manifold churchly activities, spiritual or structural.

For those who test the calling of such persons, there must be an openness to the initiatives of a God who summons to ministerial service with grace and power. The authentication of the call cannot be determined by personal aptitudes alone, for the gifts and graces of ministry are evidenced as often as not in spite of pastoral competence. The signs of an authentic vocation are supremely a commitment to the mission of the church and the assurance of what Wesley knew as the "inner witness." Although these signs do not obviate the need for professional skills, there is little question that they are the distinctive mark of the call to serve. If they are not given their due, missional urgency can quickly be lost in the exigencies of ecclesiastical self-maintenance.

Those who train ministers in their theological and pastoral skills must be aware that such skills are essentially the means to an end. It is important to affirm that the church must account theologically for the faithfulness of its teaching; but it is no less important to acknowledge that theological disciplines are ultimately accountable to the spiritual priorities of the church. If not, the Christian mission can quickly be rendered subordinate to the religious academy, which is only one of its components.

And in the local congregation, where pre-eminently the ordained ministry is authenticated, there must be a sure sense of purpose. Here the preaching of the gospel is heard or disregarded, the sacraments duly administered or neglected, the spiritual authority of the minister honored or denied. In the local congregation the mission of the church is given its shape. Only to the extent that the laos, the people of God, acknowledge their calling and their identity is the minister free to be their leader and servant, free to profess the call to serve. Only when pastor and people are united in the desire to take God's message of salvation into the world is their identity sure. For the church is the sign community of Jesus Christ, commissioned to announce the new age of God's salvation, and supremely privileged to taste its firstfruits.
NOTES


7. Skydsgaard, p. 21.


13. Presence of the Kingdom, pp. 10, 11.


20. Works, 8:325.


TOWARD A REVISED DIACONATE

JEFFREY P. MICKLE

The General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, under a mandate from the 1980 General Conference, is charged with the conduct of a study of diaconal ministry. Such an undertaking raises significant questions about the nature of ordained ministry. In this article, I intend to explore some of these questions, particularly as they focus on the diaconate. I will rely on the norms of theological and missional soundness, since any discussion of revising the orders of ministry must be founded upon those criteria.

NEW TESTAMENT GUIDANCE

The New Testament yields little definitive guidance for those who would seek a single pattern for ordering ministry. Modern biblical scholarship has affirmed John Wesley's judgment that the New Testament does not demand a particular type of polity for all times and places as essential for the existence of the church. The communities of the New Testament seem to have ordered their leadership in service to the overriding goal of extending the ministry of Jesus Christ. The offices of ministry functioned according to the best available understanding of how to fulfill the church's mission. To fulfill that mission, certain persons were recognized as recipients of God-given, Spirit-enlivened gifts which would contribute to the upbuilding of the community and would enhance the communal ministry. These persons were officially commissioned by the laying on of hands and became responsible for performing certain functions;
church order and mission went hand in hand. Issues of ministerial orders, therefore, should be viewed in their proper New Testament perspective as being of the bene esse (well-being) rather than of the esse (essence) of the church. The singular esse of the church is, of course, the ministry of Jesus Christ. Any consideration of the church’s orders of ministry should be made only in relation to its function as extender of the ministry of its Lord.

A DISTINCTIVE DIACONATE

Assuming the validity of this New Testament interpretation, let us now turn our attention specifically to the diaconate as a distinct group within the church. Perhaps the earliest trace of what may later have evolved as the diaconate is the allusions to “helpers,” “fellow workers,” and so on of those who worked with the apostles. These working companions to the apostles may have emerged later as the assistants of bishops as the number of local churches grew (see 1 Tim. 3:8-13, where “deacons” seems to refer to a specific group within the church’s structure). Acts 6 indicates something of the duties of these folk: helping in the daily distribution and serving tables (see also John 13; Mark 8:19). Acts 7 portrays at least one of these deacons, Stephen, as proclaiming the gospel. These early records point to a twofold function of deacons as servants and proclaimers. Certainly these tasks were recognized as being exemplified in Jesus Christ himself (Mark 10:45 and other “servant” passages) and as being commanded by his teaching (Matt. 20:26-28, for example). All in all, the New Testament offers us modest, yet significant, evidence on the origins of deacons in the church.

More formalization of these nascent New Testament patterns occurred in the second century, with a threefold ordering of bishop, elder, and deacon discernible by the time of the Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus. This document dates from the church at Rome in the early part of the third century. In this rite, deacons are “not ordained for a priesthood, but for the service of the bishop that he may do the things commanded by him.” Unlike the collegial pattern of the presbyterate, deacons were related directly to the bishop, as assistants. Deacons were considered to
be clergy on account of their liturgical ministry, which included the New Testament functions of distributing and serving.\(^4\)

Over the next millennium of the church’s history, one can trace an evolution toward more and more formalization. The hierarchy of ordained ministry became a hierarchy of mediation of grace; with advancement in orders came more mediatorial powers. Bishops moved from the local congregation to dioceses. Priests presided at the Eucharist in local churches. For deacons, the changes meant a shift from bishops’ assistants to priests’ assistants. The bishops’ assistants became archdeacons. Functionally, bishops mediated all of the sacraments; priests could not confirm or ordain; and deacons could assist at the Eucharist and read the Gospel. Among the ordained, only deacons had no mediatorial powers. Deacons came to be those persons who were in transition between laity and priesthood, and since the Middle Ages that has been their normal status in the churches which maintain the threefold ordering.\(^5\) Interestingly, Vatican II made provision for restoration of the diaconate “as a proper and permanent rank of the hierarchy . . . to be appointed for the care of souls.”\(^6\)

In the ordinals of the Church of England, deacons maintained the station inherited from medieval Catholicism. The Anglican-Episcopalian tradition has ordained deacons to assist the Priest in Divine Service, and specially when he ministereth the Holy Communion, and to help him in the distribution thereof; and to read Holy Scriptures and Homilies in the Church; and to instruct the youth in the Catechism; in the absence of the Priest to baptize infants; and to preach, if he be admitted thereto by the Bishop. And, furthermore, it is his Office, where provision is so made, to search for the sick, poor, and impotent people of the Parish, that they may be relieved with the alms of the Parishioners, or others.

The final prayer over the newly ordained deacons asks that they “may so well behave themselves in this inferior Office, that they may be found worthy to be called unto the higher Ministries in thy Church.”\(^7\) There is a remarkable change of direction in the new Book of Common Prayer in the Episcopal Church. The new rite clearly states that the deacon is called to a “special ministry of servanthood directly under your bishop. In the name of Jesus
Christ, you are to serve all people, particularly the poor, the weak, the sick, and the lonely.” The new rite lists the diaconal duties:

As a deacon in the Church, you are to study the Holy Scriptures, to seek nourishment from them, and to model your life upon them. You are to make Christ and his redemptive love known, by your word and example, to those among whom you live, and work, and worship. You are to interpret to the Church the needs, concerns, and hopes of the world. You are to assist the bishop and priests in public worship and in the ministration of God's Word and Sacraments, and you are to carry out other duties assigned to you from time to time. At all times, your life and teaching are to show Christ's people that in serving the helpless they are serving Christ himself.

In addition, no references to the diaconate as an “inferior office” or as aspiring to a “higher ministry” are made. Here it should be noted that two of the major communions that have maintained the threefold ministry have recently made significant revisions in their understanding of the diaconate (Roman Catholic and Episcopalian). Evidence of how this revised understanding has shaped practice is not available to me at this time.

DEACONS IN METHODISM

Wesley, of course, was the inheritor of the older Anglican ritual and its concomitant practice. The continuity with that tradition shapes the Wesleyan ordinals extensively. Yet there are some significant differences between Wesley and the Anglican tradition of ordination. Albert Outler notes three “changes of any substantive importance.” Wesley changed the title of “bishop” to “superintendent”; he eliminated all references to the civil establishment of English government; and, significantly for our purposes, he “disengaged the office of deacon from its restricted locus in a single parish and made it part of the itinerant ministry.” This latter change is extremely important in our understanding of the order of deacons in United Methodism. In effect, Wesley has shifted the focus from being in the order of deacons (with prescribed responsibilities and prerogatives inherent to that order) to being under the
orders of the conference in the itinerant ministry. This shift sows the seed for future changes in the diaconate which would allow deacons to administer the sacraments in their episcopally authorized appointments, rooted in the annual conference. Here, the mission of the church defines its polity even if that means revision of inherited forms.

The inseparable Wesleyan relationship between the conference system and the mission of the church takes priority over the tendency to carry on inherited forms or orders regardless of their relation to mission. To use the traditional terminology, in United Methodism the *potestas jurisdictionis* supercedes the *potestas ordinis*. The "power of orders" is meaningless apart from its implementation in the "power of jurisdiction" for mission. Thus for United Methodism, conference membership ascends to a level that equals, if it does not surpass, the induction into orders. The conference, in turn, is the arena for defining and implementing mission (witness the traditional questions: what to teach, how to teach, and what to do). Deacons, then, are servants of the entire church (represented in the conference). They are no longer assistants of bishops or priests in a local parish. They themselves are the pastors in local parishes. This is no small innovation. Related to it is the change in the Methodist ordinal of 1916. At that time, the reference in the final prayer to the diaconate as an "inferior" office is deleted and another reference is added describing the office as "this holy ministry," suggesting that deacons "share in the fullness of ministerial order." The aspiration of a "higher ministry" is maintained. These observations suggest that Methodism has had a diaconate which allows for a less subordinate and more permanent order (e.g., associate members) than that existing in the other communions examined. Furthermore, these changes in our order of deacons have been related to the perceived need for extending the church's ministry.

**CONTEMPORARY DISCUSSION**

Let us now turn to an examination of the contemporary discussion on the diaconate, focusing on what is probably the most representative document in recent years in the context of
ecumenicity, the Consultation on Church Union's chapter on ministry, particularly paragraphs 56-65 on "The Ministry of Deacons." These paragraphs envision a diaconate quite different from the present order of deacons in the United Methodist Church. The proposed ministry of deacons would no longer be "an initial stage in the preparation of presbyters, even though some who have been ordained as deacons may later be ordained as presbyters." Instead, the ministry of deacons would be distinctive. They would no longer be ordained with a view toward fulfilling their office in the ministry of Word, sacrament, and order (1980 Discipline, par. 430.1). Rather they would be "ordained to represent to this people [the church] its identity in Christ as servant in the midst of the world." This proposed representative ministry of service is quite distinct from COCU's "Ministry of Presbyters," in which ministers are ordained "to serve among the people as ministers of Word and sacraments."

The major point of distinction seems to be the context of service. For deacons, the context would be in struggling "with the myriad needs of societies and persons—economic, political, scientific, educational, cultural, moral—in Christ's name." Deacons, therefore, would look beyond the life of the parish in order to exemplify the mission of Christ, through the church, in the world. For presbyters or elders, the context remains within the life of the congregation; they are responsible for preaching, teaching, celebrating the sacraments, and maintaining church discipline. As "leaders in mission," the presbyters "enlist, renew, equip, and accompany God's people as they go out into the local community, the nation, and the world." The focus here is on enabling the congregation for mission. Deacons, on the other hand, would be "leaders in mission" with responsibility "for the development of mission both within and beyond parishes and congregations." Their focus would go beyond enablement to "exemplify the interdependence of worship and mission in the life of the church." Thus deacons would participate as leaders of worship whose major function would be to represent Christ's work through mission in the world. Presbyters, on the other hand, would be leaders in mission, whose major function would be to represent Christ's work
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through proclaiming the Word, celebrating the sacraments, and ordering the life of the body.

Although the COCU chapter on ministry is certainly suggestive and provocative, it is not definitive. Particularly in the section on deacons, the statement lacks the specificity and clarity which attend most of its other sections. This should not surprise us since the proposals for revising the diaconate are still relatively new. Nevertheless, certain elements have emerged from this ecumenical endeavor with enough clarity and import to command our attention in considering the diaconate in United Methodism. First, there is a break from the traditional pattern of deacons as "junior elders," something we have noted above as nascent in earlier Methodist developments. Second, the statement proposes an ordained office to represent to the church its identity as servant in mission. Third, the holders of this office would find their work primarily in the midst of the "world," struggling with the many needs of societies and persons. Finally, this office is envisioned in terms of people who are marked for long-term commitment to the ministry of mission in the "world," the so-called "permanent diaconate."

UNITED METHODIST ORDINALS

Having briefly taken notice of the present ecumenical discussion concerning the diaconate, let us now focus more sharply on the current understanding of this office in The United Methodist Church. If we compare the ordinals of 1964 and 1980, we find some significant shifts, reflecting the more recent trends cited above. In the 1964 ordinal, the functions of the deacon are delineated as "to conduct divine worship and to assist the elder in the administration of the Holy Communion, to read and expound the Holy Scriptures, to instruct the youth, and to baptize." (Note that the authority to baptize is not among those specifically authorized in the 1980 Discipline, par. 434.) The diaconal duties of the 1964 ordinal conclude: "And, furthermore, it is his office to search for the needy, that they may be visited and relieved." This last reference is the only distinguishing feature of the office of deacon, compared to that of elder (unless one wants to include "instruct the youth,"
which presumably would fall within the responsibility of eldership). In terms of the ministry of Word, sacrament, and order, the 1964 ordinal authorizes the deacon to exercise fully the ministry of Word and partially the ministry of sacrament and order; the elder receives full authorization for all three functions. When a deacon becomes an elder according to the 1964 ordinals, the functions of deacon as such are swallowed up. No longer does the deacon “assist the elder”; the deacon now is the elder. In a sense, then, ordination to the presbyterate absorbs (perhaps, nullifies) the functions of the deacon, save for the distinctive diaconal task of caring for the needy. Furthermore, the 1964 ordinal for deacons clearly assumes that it is simply the first step toward “the higher ministry in thy Church,” which is elder’s orders.

The 1980 ordinal, approved by the 1980 General Conference for “official alternative use,” introduces several variations and innovations in its description of the office of deacon. These shifts bring it into closer harmony with the principles of the COCU paragraphs. In this most recent ordinal, the deacons are addressed by the bishop as follows:

My sisters and brothers, every Christian is called to follow Jesus Christ in a ministry of service to the world for the glory of God and the redemption of the human family, in the power of the Holy Spirit. God has called you to a special ministry that will exemplify this servanthood in the Church and in the world. In the name of Jesus Christ, you are to serve all people, particularly the poor, the weak, the sick, and the lonely. You are to represent to the Church the ministry of servanthood in the world to which all Christians are called in baptism. You are to interpret to the Church the needs, concerns, and hopes of the world. At all times, by your life and teaching you are to show Christ’s people that in serving the helpless they are serving Christ.

The repeated reference to the “ministry of service” signals a marked shift in emphasis from the 1964 ordinal. As the examination of the deacons proceeds in the 1980 rite, this emphasis gains further notice. Many of the questions in the new rite cover the same material as in the older one, as should be appropriately expected (conviction of inner call, belief in the Scriptures, willingness to study and expound the same).

There is, however, this additional question in the new rite:
"Will you, in the exercise of your ministry, represent to the people of God their own responsibility to serve others by an active concern for peace, justice, and freedom for all people?"

The duties of the deacon are enumerated as follows: "The ministry of a deacon is to participate with the elders in leading the worship of the people and in preaching the Word of God, to assist the elders at baptism and the Lord’s Supper; to serve the needs of the poor, the sick, and the oppressed." So far, these duties are not markedly different from the 1964 list, except that the 1980 ordinal is adjusted to comply with the *Discipline* at this point and to enumerate various types of people who are simply referred to as "needy" in the earlier rite. The list in the 1980 ordinal continues with: "to fulfill such other responsibilities in church and society as are appropriate to a ministry of service; and to represent to the church the role of servanthood in the world that properly belongs to all God’s people." The rite continues with additional references to the deacon’s "ministry of service," ending with the episcopal charge: "Faithfully exercise the authority given you by God and the Church to proclaim God’s Word and to serve God’s people." This should be compared to the 1964 charge: "Take thou authority to read the Holy Scriptures in the Church of God, and to preach the Word."

Clearly the 1980 order for the ordination of deacons has added a new dimension, or, at least, has enunciated a selected aspect of the former rite by focusing on the "ministry of service" as the distinctive diaconal task. This ministry is not absorbed in the new rite for elders, nor is there any anticipation of further ordination in the new ordinal for deacons. In short, the 1980 ordinal allows for ordination of a deacon whose ministry is not to seek fulfillment in elder’s orders.

**ISSUES AND PROBLEMS**

The warrant for this shift is to be found in the *Discipline* only by taking significant interpretive liberties. Par. 109 states, "The ordained ministers are called to specialized ministries of Word, Sacrament, and Order." Could the "ministry of service" in the 1980 ordinal be understood in terms of the disciplinary ministry...
of order? Perhaps. Par. 109 goes on to state of ordained ministers:

They do this through careful study of the Scripture and its faithful interpretation, through effective proclamation of the gospel and responsible administration of the Sacraments, through diligent pastoral leadership of their congregations for fruitful discipleship, and by following the guidance of the Holy Spirit in witnessing beyond the congregation in the local community and to the ends of the earth.

This last clause may be sufficient warrant for the 1980 ordinal’s emphasis.

It seems to me, however, that the disciplinary source for the “ministry of service” is to be found in the paragraphs dealing with the diaconal ministry. (This type of minister is not ordained, but consecrated. “Diaconal ministers” are not the same thing as “deacons,” although they share a common historical rootage in the diakonia). In these paragraphs we read, “The diaconal ministers are called to specialized ministries of service, justice, and love within local congregations and in the wider world” (par. 108). And in par. 302:

Those who are called to this representative ministry of service in the Church and world may be set apart to the office of diaconal minister. This ministry exemplifies the servanthood every Christian is called to live in both Church and world. Participating with the elder in the leadership of worship, working in a serving-profession in the Church, and serving the needs of the poor, the sick, or oppressed, the diaconal minister embodies the unity of the congregation’s worship with its life in the world.

For any who have eyes to see, it is clear that the 1980 ordinal for deacons has adopted the disciplinary provisions for diaconal ministry and has added them to the traditional functions of deacons. It is also evident that The United Methodist Church already had disciplinary provisions in its diaconal ministry for much of what COCU talks about in its “Ministry of Deacons.”

What remains unclear at this point, however, is how diaconal ministry relates to the order of deacons in The United Methodist Church. It also remains unclear which understanding of deacons is to prevail in The United Methodist Church: the 1964
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ordinal's delineations, the 1980 ordinal's delineations, or the Discipline's specifications. As we have seen, these three sources are not in complete agreement. Surely for the sake of doctrinal integrity and missional clarity, these discrepancies must be resolved. Precisely at this juncture significant discussion is taking place in regard to the nature of the diaconate and possible revisions to it in The United Methodist Church's order and practice.

With this statement of the problematic involved in the present discussion of the diaconate in United Methodism, let us proceed to examine more systematically some of the issues at stake. Any discussion of diaconal orders must take account of two relational implications. First, we must attend to the relationship between ordained deacons and the ministry of all Christians. Second, we need to consider the relationship between the order of deacons and the order of elders.

DEACONS AND THE LAITY

In regard to the relationship between deacons and the laity, the most important question is why we need an order of deacons. Do deacons serve in any particular ministry that sets them apart from the general ministry of all Christians? We have already noted that the deacons in the early church functioned as assistants to the bishops in worship services, as designated carers for the poor and needy, and as proclaimers of the gospel. We have also seen how these functions lost their distinctiveness in time as deacons became the part of the hierarchy which was in transition between laity and priesthood or eldership; in short, they were "junior elders." The current proposed revisions to the diaconate, as represented either by COCU, the 1980 United Methodist ordinal, or the creation of diaconal ministry in United Methodism, recover the distinctive character of the diaconate by lifting up the "ministry of service" as a representative ministry alongside the traditional representative ministries of Word, sacrament, and order. Thus, the revisionists respond to our initial question by asserting that an order of deacons fulfills the need for an ordained ministry to function as a conscious representative of Christ's ministry of service. The advocates of
the long-standing scheme for ordering deacons as a first step to
eldership appear to have less convincing responses to the
question about the need for a separate order of deacons.

If we accept the appeal of the revisionist argument, then we
are left with the crux of the matter concerning the relations
between diaconal and lay ministries—is there any warrant for an
intentionally representative ministry of service? This question
may be given two distinct, though interdependent, levels of
response. Such a ministry has to be both theologically defensible
and missionally responsible. The theological concern can be
stated simply: Is this ministry truly an extension of the ministry
of Jesus Christ? Few would argue with the phrases in the 1980
ordinal’s prayer of ordination for deacons when it refers to Jesus
Christ as being sent “to take the form of a servant, and to be
humbled as a servant,” through whom we have been taught
“that whoever would be great among us must be servant of all.”
Thus it is appropriate for the prayer to end with this petition for
the ordinands: “Give them a share in the ministry of Jesus, who
came not to be served but to serve.” The biblical witness to Jesus
as servant is strong; the affirmation of this testimony in the
tradition is frequent; and the personal experience of countless
Christians attests to its reality. That a ministry of service is an
extension of the ministry of Jesus Christ cannot be denied.
Indeed, such a ministry is necessary if the church is to be faithful
to its Lord.

Whether or not this diakonia should be embodied in an
ordained ministry that intentionally represents the servant
seems to be a matter of missional interpretation. (This is
particularly true where polity is devised in service to mission, as
in the United Methodist heritage.) Would the church’s mission
be advanced by a revised diaconal order? I think that it would, if
such an order is founded upon the principle that it is not
intended to be a substitute for the diakonia of all Christians but
rather is to be a representative of that diakonia, officially
personifying Christ’s ministry of service (“officially” meaning
with the authorization of the church). This, in turn, would
“intensify and make more effective the self-understanding of
the whole people of God as servants in Christ’s name” (Discipline, par. 108). I am not arguing that this revised diaconate
is necessary (of the esse) for the church's being, but rather that it would extend the focus of the ministry of all Christians by expanding the church's mission in witness and service (of the bene esse). This seems to be the only appropriate ground for discussing such an issue. Gerald F. Moede summarizes the representative character of diaconal ministry:

the diaconate can be seen as a focusing of the duty incumbent upon every Christian, and upon the entire Christian community, of love of the neighbor expressed as service to the neighbor. It is a means of making explicit the diakonia, the ministry of service, which the entire Christian community must show both within itself and in its dealings with the world. It does not in this way absolve the rest of the Christian community from this loving service.¹⁴

Returning to the more explicitly theological concerns, one can argue that the church has always had a representative ministry of Word and sacrament, embodying the unity of the two within the life of the church. The proposed revision to the diaconate would lift up a representative ministry of Word and deed (or service), embodying the unity of the two within the mission of the church. Both representative ministries find their object of representation in Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh; and both find the locus of their representation in his church, one focusing upon his work in upbuilding the body and the other focusing upon his work in loving service to God and neighbor.

DEACONS AND ELDERS

These observations turn our attention to the relationship between the ministry of deacons and the ministry of elders. In the past, this relationship has been hierarchical: deacons have been subordinate to elders, seeking "full" ordination in the "higher" order. The proposed revision in the diaconate would change this relationship. Each order would have its own distinctive functions, making complementary contributions to the total ministry of the church. The relationship, therefore, would be defined by distinctive functions instead of by an inferior-to-superior or incomplete-to-fulfilled model. To be ordained as a deacon would be to have full responsibility and
authorization as a representative minister of Word and service. No advancement in that ministry would be possible as far as its ordering is concerned. Likewise, an elder would be ordained only once as a representative minister of Word and sacrament. No preliminary laying on of hands would occur for that ministry. In short, the service of ordination would mark the church’s full authorization of the ordinands for their assigned tasks, and those tasks would be distinct rather than redundant.

In terms of the individual ordained person, this scheme would mean one of two things: persons could be ordained once, either as a deacon or as an elder, or they could be ordained twice, as both a deacon and an elder. A pastor, for example, could operate under the auspices of either a single ordination as elder or a double ordination as deacon and elder. The former route would recover the practice of the Evangelical United Brethren Church, which seemed to operate well on this basis. The latter pattern would maintain the current practice of United Methodism, but with a revised understanding. Instead of being deacon in transition to eldership (where full ordination is given), each pastor would be a deacon and an elder, representing both ministries as a single person. Good arguments can be advanced in favor of both alternatives. The single-ordination pattern would eliminate any confusion over the distinctiveness of the two orders. In every instance, an ordained person would be either a deacon or an elder. The double ordination option would integrate the church’s representative ministries in the pastor of each congregation, obviating the potential for isolating the representative ministry of Word and service in a small cadre of people. Both possibilities are acceptable theologically and traditionally; however, I think that the double ordination route better reflects the pastoral realities of the contemporary church.

Who in practice usually functions as the representative minister of Word and service, if not the pastor? In the person of the pastor, the functions of Word, sacrament, order, and service are all combined. It makes good sense, therefore, to ordain pastors as both deacons and elders, since they are engaged in both types of representative ministries. In addition to pastors, however, a distinctive diaconate would allow for a group of persons who are ordained only as deacons. They would
function only as representative ministers of Word and service. The order of deacon would thereby include all pastors as well as some persons who are ordained only to the representative ministry of Word and service. The order's distinctiveness would lie in its function as representing Word and service, a function that would include both persons who are solely deacons and persons who are both deacons and elders. As a distinct order based on the function of representing Word and service, the diaconate clearly would have an integrity of its own. The prevailing notion about the relationship of deacons as subsumed to elders, therefore, is clearly antithetical to a distinctive diaconate.

QUESTIONS OF CONFERENCE RELATIONSHIPS

We have not yet considered an essential ingredient for any discussion of a revised diaconate in United Methodism: the question of how such a revision would affect the relationship of the ordained ministry to the annual conference.

Clearly an ordering of the diaconate along the lines of the 1980 ordinal would have certain implications for conference membership. Recognition of deacons as representative ministers of Word and service, fully authorized for such functions, without need for an added "fulfillment" as elders, would imply a congruent recognition as annual conference members. The traditional equation between probationary membership and deacons on the one hand and full membership and elders on the other would break down, for such a structure smacks of the subordinationism which is contrary to the existence of a distinctive diaconate. At the very least, there would have to be some provision for deacons as full members of an annual conference, were a distinctive diaconate to be adopted. More in keeping with the thrust of my argument to this point would be a pattern of conference membership that provided for probationary members as both deacons and elders as well as a full membership for both deacons and elders. Strictly speaking, it would make sense to have seminary graduates entering the parish ordained as elders, since they are then functioning as such. Yet there is no reason to assume that they should forego an
applicable period of probation. Perhaps a “normal” course of entry into the United Methodist parish ministry would begin with ordination as deacon and entrance into probationary membership during seminary and then proceed to ordination as elder upon assuming responsibilities for Word and sacrament, only later to be taken into full membership as deacon and elder in the annual conference. Of course, there have always been provisions for exceptions to the norm for good reasons of missional responsibility in United Methodism and there would be no need for these provisions to disappear. Nevertheless, a distinctive diaconate would need a corresponding recognition of its status as a distinct order in terms of annual conference membership.

Membership in the annual conference as a deacon or elder would entail entry into the traditional covenantal relationship, including willingness to serve in the itinerant system under the appointment of the bishop, and responsibility for maintaining certain ministerial standards as well as deriving certain rights and privileges appropriate to the degree of conference membership. (It would be incomprehensible to have a person as a full member of the conference as a deacon and then to expect her or him to serve as a probationary member for elder’s orders, unless a completely separate apparatus of conference membership were to be established for the two orders—a burdensome arrangement indeed.) Each annual conference could provide for salary and housing supports. The appointment of a deacon to a full-time ministry of Word and service would be arranged in a local church or in a structure beyond the local church.

WOULD IT WORK?

Flexibility for adaptation seems indispensable if a revised diaconate is to function fully as a representative ministry of Word and service in and to the diverse and particular needs of the world. Yet flexibility should not degenerate into irresponsible license. Clear strictures are necessary if the distinctive diaconate is to maintain its distinction. As a “representative ministry of Word and Service,” every word of that phrase must receive due recognition. The work of a deacon must clearly be
done as a representation of the ministry of Jesus Christ through his church. Furthermore, that work must integrate the coimplicates of Word and service—neither is dispensable. This implies that service performed as a deacon should clearly recognize its rootage in the Word—explicitly! The office of the diaconal minister (service alone) does not meet the twofold criteria which give weight to the ministry of Word as well as service. The most likely way for an explicit recognition of rootage in the Word to take place is for the deacon to work in a ministry that is unmistakably related to and authorized by the church, in which work there would be adequate opportunity for explicit communication of the Word. Conversely, the relationship of Word and service, as coimplicates of each other, means that a deacon's work must include service that is recognized by the church as being faithfully obedient to God in deed as well as in Word; evangelism alone does not fulfill the criteria of Word and service. In short, a deacon's work would be a healthy combination of Word and service, such that the Word is lived out and the service gives witness to its empowering Source. If these strictures seem somewhat limiting, so be it. The diaconate needs clearly understood and articulated limits so that it may maintain its definition and integrity as representative, ministry of Word and of service.

Several questions still press themselves upon us. What would the appointments of deacons actually look like? Is it really feasible to have two distinct orders of clergy, doing two distinct functions, representing in two distinct manners the ministry of Jesus Christ? Could an independent diaconate truly advance the church's mission? Would it do so? If these questions are to receive an affirmative reply, we must first be clear on what we mean by the revised diaconate. I think that it could work, provided a shared understanding of definitive parameters is established.

If the revised diaconate is to be instituted, it should be done as a means of church renewal. Simply put, there is an infinity of opportunities for service to neighbor in joyful obedience to God, constituting a missional calling. A revised diaconate likely would be a significant means of fulfilling that mission, not only by creating an order of clergy but by opening new opportunities.
through that order for service by the laity and, thus, of the whole church. If clear theological and missional criteria are established and substantial enthusiasm and conviction are aroused around the possibilities for this revised diaconate, then the church will have taken a significant step toward an integrated approach to missional service.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The United Methodist Church is now operating with a rather ambiguous understanding of the diaconate. The ambiguity is a consequence of a series of different understandings: the Discipline provides for "diaconal ministers" as well as "deacons," the latter being understood as those who are still progressing in preparation for full ministry;¹⁵ the rites of ordination offer two different emphases, with the older one (1964) following the basic pattern of the Discipline and the newer one (1980) showing definite tendencies of revision in the traditional model. Clearly we need some clarification and presiding definition. Discussions among a few representatives are being held under the auspices of the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, under mandate of the General Conference. This issue, however, seems to be important enough to merit a more broad-based airing. And final decision should be made for the right reasons: theological and missional. The revised diaconate described here meets these criteria, I believe, and also offers hope for renewal of the church's mission of service. Thus, it merits serious consideration.

NOTES

1. The 1980 Book of Discipline notwithstanding (p. 644), I shall use the word diaconate to refer to the order of deacons as an ordained ministry in this article.
3. See Acts 13:5, 19:22; Rom. 16:21; II Cor. 1:1, 2:13, 8:23; Phil. 2:25; Col. 1:7, 4:7; 1 Thess. 3:2; Philem. 1.
TOWARD A REVISED DIACONATE


15. Associate members of the annual conference constitute a notable exception to this generalization; an exception based on missional needs defining church polity.
Exegesis and Exposition of John 20:19-31

Whether chapter 20 is, as the majority of critical scholars holds, the original conclusion of John's Gospel or not, it is clear from a thematic point of view that the Gospel does culminate with the events recounted in this section. Following the two stories associated with the empty tomb, the one centering around Mary Magdalene (vss. 1-2 and 11-18 RSV), the other involving Peter and "the other disciple" (vss. 3-10), the author places two more accounts of appearances of the risen Christ to "the disciples," first without Thomas (vss. 19-23) and later with him (vss. 26-29, introduced by vss. 24-25). The author's statement of the selective nature of his work and its fundamental purpose (vss. 30-31) sounds very much like a conclusion to everything he has written up to that point. It is clear that the evangelist has combined and reworked several originally independent resurrection traditions in chapter 20, and this applies to all three portions of our pericope as well.

Verses 19-23. Rudolf Bultmann and others have pointed out that the account in vss. 19-23 seems to betray no awareness of what has preceded it, i.e., no mention of the fact that two of the disciples had seen the empty tomb and at least one of them...
“believed” (vs. 8), nor is the appearance of Jesus to Mary in any way acknowledged. Moreover, the message given to Mary by the risen One for the disciples was simply the announcement that Jesus was “ascending” to the Father (vs. 17), hardly an ideal preparation for what follows. More important, however, are the striking similarities between John 20:19-23 on the one hand and Luke 24:36-49 and, to a lesser degree, Matthew 28:16-20 on the other. Luke and John agree against Matthew in locating the appearances in Jerusalem rather than Galilee. The similarities appear to point toward a common pre-Gospel tradition behind all three accounts. It is pointless to speculate about which of the three texts represents the more primitive form of such tradition, since each of the canonical texts has been thoroughly shaped by the theological concerns of its author. Thus a more promising approach to understanding the texts would be to inquire about those distinctive theological concerns.

Inquiry into the distinctively Johannine theological concerns must take into account the by now well-known fact that for John the exaltation of Jesus, his glorification and return to the Father, has been accomplished in his death. The “hour” of Jesus is both the hour of his death and his glorification (2:4 and other references throughout John). Jesus will be “lifted up” in the typically Johannine double sense of Crucifixion and exaltation (3:13-14 passim). All of this is then included in the final sovereign announcement of Jesus at the moment of his death: “It is accomplished” (19:30). Thus, as R. H. Lightfoot states, “it should not surprise us that the Evangelist is not concerned in ch. 20 to dwell upon the Lord’s resurrection as forming primarily a reversal of the passion.” The Resurrection is neither exaltation nor the occasion for Jesus’ assumption of absolute authority. Rather, the emphasis in the Johannine narrative rests much more heavily upon the relationship of the risen one with his disciples, and although this theme is clearly present in the other Gospels, it constitutes for John the decisive significance of the Resurrection. Jesus resumes “personal relations and intercourse with those who had followed Him during the ministry,” as Lightfoot puts it.

However, the resumption of relations with his disciples does not merely continue what had begun during the ministry of...
Jesus. There is a distinctively new dimension to the relationship, signalled by two things. First, while the account makes clear that the Jesus who appears to the disciples on the evening of "that day" is really identical with the crucified one (because of the display of wounds), it is now the exalted Lord who comes and speaks to them. John is primarily interested in portraying not the actions of a resuscitated body, but rather those of the exalted Lord. That is clear from the unexplained presence of Jesus in a room secured by locked doors and also by the gift of the Spirit, possible only after the glorification-exaltation of Jesus. It is true that the Johannine resurrection accounts place a heavy emphasis on the bodily nature of Jesus' appearance. Only in Luke 24 is there a comparable stress on the physical nature of the resurrected one. This is in marked contrast to the traditions in I Cor. 15, Mark 16:1-8, and Matt. 28. The peculiar emphasis in John and Luke makes sense as polemic against views of the resurrection which threatened to dissolve the identity of the risen one with Jesus of Nazareth. The Johannine accounts sufficiently stress other aspects of the Resurrection to make clear that, prominent as the physical signs are, they are subservient to other and primary concerns, e.g., here the presence of the exalted Christ with his own. So Lightfoot: "He is indeed the same Lord as of old; but His followers have now to learn to know Him in a new way."

Second, the appearance of the now-exalted Lord brings also the fulfillment of promises made during the ministry of Jesus. "The whole episode is narrated as the fulfillment of teaching previously given to the disciples. Words are now accomplished in deeds," E. C. Hoskyns states. Thus on the evening of "that (very) day" (vs. 19), the disciples huddle behind closed doors out of fear of the Jews and Jesus "came" and stood in their midst—as he said he would (14:18 passim). The words of greeting, "Peace to you," are obviously more than polite greeting, as is clear already from the fact that they are spoken twice (vss. 19 and 21). It is not an ordinary greeting, nor a wish, but "a statement of fact" (Raymond Brown) and the fulfillment of Jesus' promise of an unworldly peace (14:27; 16:33). The sight of Jesus produces joy in the disciples as Jesus had promised (16:20-24). Jesus "breathes" on them and formally announces, "Receive the Holy Spirit"
He "sends" the disciples as the Father has sent him (17:18-19). The commission of the disciples is associated with the forgiveness and retention of sin and may recall the promised activity of the Spirit to "convince the world of sin and of righteousness and of judgment" (16:8). The heart of resurrection faith is, then, the realization of the eschatological fulfillment of the promises of Jesus in the life of the community of faith, represented here by the (unnamed and unnumbered) disciples! Such resurrection faith is not adequately described by the word Easter, but includes Pentecost and Parousia as well.

Verses 24-29. It seems unlikely that the story of the appearance of Jesus for the sake of Thomas ever existed apart from its present connection with vss. 19-23. We have noted that the idea of doubt on the part of the disciples is common to both Matthew and Luke (see note 4) and may originally have had its place in John as well, probably just prior to vs. 20. It is difficult to disagree with Brown, who concludes "that the Thomas story . . . has been created by the Evangelist who has taken and dramatized a theme of doubt that originally appeared in the narrative of the appearance to the disciples."

The bridge from vss. 19-23 to the Thomas story is provided in vss. 24-25. There we learn for the first time that Thomas had not been present a week earlier "when Jesus came" to the disciples. He is rather formally introduced to the reader as "one of the twelve, called the Twin." There is not enough information about Thomas in the fourth Gospel to justify speculation about a special predilection to doubt. To the announcement of the other disciples that they had seen the Lord, Thomas responds by demanding to see for himself what the others had seen. This point needs to be stressed since some commentators press the language of "touch" to mean that Thomas was "asking more than was offered to the other disciples." Such a view fails to take account of John's constant equation of "touching" and "seeing" (vss. 25 and 27). Moreover, it misses the concern of the evangelist to address the needs, expectations, and doubts of the church of his own day, which centered not on the question of having more than the original disciples, but the possibility of repeating that original experience. And finally, if the demand of Thomas does, in fact, go beyond what was granted the disciples
on "that day," one is obliged to explain why, when given the chance to satisfy that demand by actually touching Jesus, he does not do it (vss. 27-28), and the reply of Jesus (v. 29) speaks only of "seeing." Thomas demands in a vivid and sensual way only the same privilege as that granted to those present "that day."

Eight days later, i.e., again on Sunday, which, by the time the evangelist wrote, was "the Lord's day," Thomas's demand is fulfilled when Jesus again "came" to his own, stood in their midst and pronounced the eschatological blessing. Offering Thomas the "proof" he had demanded, Jesus calls him from unfaith to faith. What that means becomes clear in the response of Thomas: "My Lord and my God!" In the context of the narrative itself the phrase signals Thomas's own move from unfaith to faith and specifies the appropriate expression of faith. In the context of the Gospel as a whole the phrase serves as a "final christological pronouncement" gathering into itself the Old Testament (LXX) use of the combination of kurios and theos, and the evangelist's own earlier indications of the identity of Jesus (1:1 passim). And finally, in the context of the community for which John is writing, the phrase echoes its own liturgical origins.14

Although the response of Jesus to the confession of Thomas need not be taken as a rebuke (it is a question), it nevertheless carries a critical tone (compare the similar statement to the official at Capernaum in 4:48). The beatitude is reserved for those who, unlike Thomas and the others, have not seen (signs) and nevertheless believe. There can be little question that the evangelist has his contemporaries in view, those who are called to faith solely on the basis of the testimony of the witnesses (vs. 25). Thus, as Bultmann concludes,

there is embedded in the narrative of Thomas also a peculiar critique concerning the value of the Easter stories: they can claim only a relative worth. And if this critical saying of Jesus forms the conclusion of the Easter narratives, the hearer or reader is warned not to take them to be more than they can be: neither as narration of events that he himself could wish or hope to experience, nor as a substitute for such experiences of his own, as if the experience of others could, as it were,
Verses 30-31. Most commentators remark on the use of "signs" in vs. 30. Whether the substance of 30-31 originally formed the conclusion to a "Sign Source" or referred to other resurrection traditions, it is clear that the evangelist intends it to refer to everything which has been written about Jesus in this Gospel. That the author understands his presentation as proclamation is made clear by his statement of intent, namely to occasion faith—whether new or deepened—in the readers that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. To believe this is to have life as the evangelist repeatedly emphasizes (1:12 passim).

TOWARD THE SERMON

The compactness and richness of the text, particularly in vss. 19-23, confront the preacher with a multitude of sermonic possibilities among which one must choose for a particular sermon. It will be well for the preacher to have clearly in mind the fact that a sermon which takes seriously the Johannine interpretation of Easter may run counter to many listener expectations about what an Easter text ought to "mean." Such things as the resuscitation of the corpse or the exaltation of Jesus to glory, although assumed in the text, do not yet touch the heart of John's understanding of the Easter event. Nor is he primarily concerned with portraying the Resurrection of Jesus as the pattern for the believer's own resurrection, legitimate as this issue may be in connection with other biblical texts (see 14:19). Rather, he recounts the coming of the risen Christ to his disciples in such a way as to make clear that the heart of the Easter event is the realization on the part of the earliest witness of the eschatological, i.e., eternal, significance of Jesus for the world. That is the "word" which the events are intended to proclaim and which is given to the church to proclaim (Bultmann), and it is precisely that word which the sermon must seek to embody for contemporary hearers.

For John the Crucifixion of Jesus is a final and dramatic expression of the world's resignation and commitment to death
Death has various forms—darkness, blindness, ignorance, sin, disbelief. Jesus is the expression of God's protest against death in all its forms and against the resignation and commitment of the world to it. Jesus is light, sight, goodness, truth, faith, in sum—life (true, abundant, eternal).

The apostolic witness, “We have seen the Lord,” is the dramatic announcement that Jesus and not death is the truth about human existence in the world.

Unfortunately it is not difficult to observe the world's continuing resignation and commitment to death in its manifold forms: a renewed dependence on bombs and chemicals to maintain a balance of terror among nations; continued patience with structures of economic, ethnic, and sexual oppression; acceptance of the apparent inevitability of starvation for millions of people "somewhere" in the world; the thoughtless plundering of the natural resources of the planet; the old treatment of criminals and the criminal treatment of the old; the despair expressed in fascination with violence, living only for the present moment, cynicism, alcohol and drug abuse, suicide rates, and religion which focuses on the question of personal immorality. In these and countless other ways the world continues to affirm death as the final truth about itself. And it is precisely in the midst of this death-affirming world in which we live and which lives in us that we are called to hear the witness of the apostles that “we have seen the Lord” as the real truth about ourselves and our world. Precisely in the midst of our participation in the various forms of death we are confronted with God's protest against death, not merely or even primarily in terms of physical survival of our own personal death, but in terms of the entirety of our human existence in this world. Stated positively: We are confronted by God's commitment to life and the invitation to participate in that commitment.

Prof. Irving Greenberg, discussing the possibility of Jewish and Christian faith following the horrors of the Holocaust, says (in almost Johannine language) that “extraordinary catastrophes are not mastered by routine treatment or evasion. Only extraordinary outbursts of life or creativity can overcome them. To overwhelming death one must respond with overwhelming
"We have seen the Lord" is the Johannine proclamation of "overwhelming life."

Overwhelming life is shalom in its full Old and New Testament sense of human "well-being." "We have seen the Lord" is the proclamation that in Jesus shalom is not only possibility but reality waiting to be decided for and participated in as the only true basis of human life in its personal and social dimensions. Because it is God's gift, the world cannot give it, but we can embody it for each other, we can live from it and measure our personal and social life by it. Because it is God's gift, the world cannot finally take it away, but we can ignore it, suppress it, idealize it, reduce it to "peace of mind" or to a guarantee of personal or social security. The origin of shalom in God and its expression of God's will for human beings is also affirmed in the Old Testament lection for the day (see Isa. 26:3) as well as in other New Testament writings (Rom. 5:1; Phil. 4:7). Pastors who daily struggle alongside people living on the brink of despair will know ways to translate shalom without degrading it into mental games and techniques.

Overwhelming life is joy, and "We have seen the Lord" is the proclamation that the joy which Jesus promises and makes possible is something far greater than the enjoyment or happiness we are too often content to manufacture and consume as ways of disguising our profound despair. It is the Easter laugh at death, the decision to look beyond "sorrow" (16:20-22) to the possibility of life and the feeling of gladness that we do exist.

SUNDAY, APRIL 25

Lectures


Exegesis and Exposition of Luke 24:35-49

In the preceding discussion of John 20:19-31 we noted a series of similarities between that account of the appearance(s) of the risen Lord and the account found in Luke 24:36-49. The similarities are significant enough to indicate a pre-Gospel
tradition which has been adapted by each of the evangelists for inclusion in their respective Gospels. The author of the fourth Gospel has combined in chapter 20 what appear to have been originally independent units of tradition about the resurrection of Jesus: (a) Mary Magdalene (women?) at the tomb (vss. 1-2, 11-18); (b) the primacy of Peter as a Resurrection witness, now embedded in the story of Peter and “the other disciple” (vss. 3-10); and (c) the appearance to “the disciples” (vss. 19-23). Luke has followed a similar procedure in chapter 24, combining and reworking: (a) the tradition of the women at the tomb (24:1-11); (b) a tradition about an appearance to two disciples on the way to and in Emmaus (24:13-35); (c) an appearance of Jesus to a larger group of disciples (24:36-53). The tradition of Peter’s special role as a witness to the Resurrection is retained only in the obscure notice in vs. 34.

Luke 24:36-59 consists of two parts (verse 35 may also be part of this pericope), a demonstration of the corporeal nature of Jesus’ resurrection body (36-43) and the instruction and commission of the disciples by the risen Lord (44-49).

Verses (35)36-43. It is possible that the pre-Lucan Emmaus tradition ended with vs. 31 and that the evangelist composed vss. 32-36a as the link between that story and the story of Jesus’ appearance to the larger group in vss. 36-49. In 24:22-24 he has provided a similar detailed link between the story of the women at the tomb and the Emmaus story. The care with which the traditions are joined is a good example of the declared method and intent of the author (1:1-4). This is to be, after all, an “orderly account.”

Even as the pair from Emmaus are still describing what happened on the road and at table, “how he was known to them in the breaking of the bread,” Jesus himself (emphatic autos) stood in their midst. The reaction of the disciples (including the two from Emmaus?) to the sudden and unexplained appearance is one of shock and terror, for they think they are seeing a “spirit” or “ghost.” Luke’s choice of the word pneuma here instead of phantasma is consonant with the intention of the entire scene, which is to stress the “solidly corporeal nature” of the risen Christ. A pneuma does not have flesh (sarc) and bones (essential for resurrection in the Jewish view) as the resurrected one has,
cannot be “handled” as Jesus can be (vs. 39). By seeing and touching, the disciples can know that it is really Jesus himself (ego eimi autos does not here carry the sense of the divine ‘I am’). The shock and terror now allayed, the disciples are still overcome by a joyous but uncomprehending amazement. The joy will remain (one of Luke’s favorite motifs; see Luke 1:14 passim), but the lack of comprehension is equivalent to “disbelief” and cannot be allowed to stand. Thus Jesus requests something to eat and when he is given a piece of broiled fish, “he took it and ate it before them,” i.e., before their eyes. Luke does not explicitly indicate the reaction of the disciples to this final demonstration, but the following narrative seems to presuppose that the demonstration has been convincing.

As with John, so with Luke, the massive emphasis on the physical nature of Jesus’ resurrection appearance is clearly at odds with other New Testament traditions—Mark 16:1-8; Matt. 28:16-20; I Cor. 15—and cannot be swept under the theological and homiletical carpet. Was it “made inevitable by the development of appearance narratives?” A text such as Matt. 28:16-20 would indicate that there were other ways in which the tradition could develop. Was it the only way to make clear the identity of the risen Christ with the earthly Jesus? Again, there are alternative solutions to that problem offered in the New Testament—Matt. 28:16-20; Phil. 2:6-11; Rev. 5:6. In spite of its nebulousness, the most reasonable explanation remains that Luke was aware of some form of the docetic heresies which were emerging in the first century and, like John, felt compelled to employ traditions of the Resurrection which explicitly countered such distortions (see John 1:14; I John 2:22, e.g.).

Verses 44-49. His identity established, the risen Christ turns to the instruction and commission of “witnesses.” Bultmann is probably correct in judging the entire passage to be a literary production of Luke. It serves not only as a climax to chapter 24 but summarizes a major theme of Luke throughout his Gospel and, along with the following vss. 50-53, serves as a clear preparation for and transition to the Book of Acts.

Paul Schubert has shown how the three pre-Lucan elements in chapter 24—the story of the women at the tomb, the Emmaus experience, and the appearance to the larger group of
disciples—have been deliberately woven together by the evangelist by means of “the proof from prophecy” motif. The climax of the scene at the empty tomb is the word of the angels to the women to “remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, and be crucified, and on the third day rise” (vss. 6-7). Behind Jesus’ announcement of his own suffering and death stood the divine will as that will found expression in the Scriptures: “must”—dei—expresses God’s will; 9:44-45 (the passive construction “to be delivered” expresses divine purpose); 18:31-34 (the passive construction “be delivered” etc. is preceded by the explicit statement that this happens in order that “everything that is written of the Son of man by the prophets will be accomplished”). “It is apparent that for Luke Jesus’ own predictions of his suffering, death and resurrection, continuing, confirming and elaborating Scriptural prophecies, are regarded as the decisive proof that Jesus is the Christ, and that God has raised him from the dead.”

The Emmaus story is put into the service of the same theme. On the road, the risen Christ interprets for them “in all the scriptures the things concerning himself” (vss. 25-27). After they recognize Jesus, the two recall how their hearts burned within them on the road “while he opened to us the scriptures” (vs. 32). They return to Jerusalem that same evening and report “what had happened on the road,” i.e., their instruction in the Scriptures by the Christ himself.

Likewise in vss. 44-49 the emphasis is squarely upon the risen Christ opening the minds of the disciples “to understand the scriptures” (vs. 45). He begins by recalling what he had said to them during the earthly ministry (“while I was still with you”), namely that “everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms [i.e., the entire Scriptures] must be fulfilled.” Although Luke does not employ a “fulfillment” formula comparable to Matthew’s, he has nonetheless made clear in the Gospel how Scripture is fulfilled in the story of Jesus from the infancy narratives (chapters 1–2) through the ministry (4:14-32; 7:18-23) to the suffering and death and Resurrection (9:22; 44-45; 18:31-34; 24:6-7, 25-27, 44-49). The true content of the Scriptures according to the instruction of the risen
Christ consists in the following: (a) the suffering, death, and Resurrection of Christ; (b) the preaching in his name of repentance which issues in the forgiveness of sins; (c) going to all nations; (d) beginning from Jerusalem. If (a) has been described in the Gospel, the remaining points will be described in the Book of Acts.

The appropriateness of Micah 4:1-5 as the accompanying Old Testament lection deserves mention here. The content of Micah 4:1-4 is a promise of salvation to all nations. “In the latter days” points to an eschatological future in the sense that in the events which are announced, God brings history to its decisive goal. The house of the Lord, i.e., the temple in Jerusalem, is the focal point of God’s activity. From there instruction goes forth, the “word of the LORD from Jerusalem.” And the word of the Lord, the law, the way of God, is for the nations. Peace and unanimity will replace enmity and division. There will be no more military occupation, for God will be the judge among the nations.

There is no way to know whether Luke had the oracle of Micah 4:1-4 or its parallel in Isa. 2:2-4 in mind as he composed 24:44-49. He can on occasion quote directly from the prophets (4:18-19 and Acts 2:17-21 are dramatic examples). What is clear is that the crucial elements of the Micah oracle are present in vss. 44-49 and carry the same eschatological accent. Luke has made clear in his Gospel that with Jesus a new time begins, the time of fulfillment (see especially 4:18-21; 7:18-23; 10:18, 21-24; 16:16) of the Scriptures and hence of God’s plan in history. The decisive indication that the time of Jesus and his witness is the fulfilled time is, of course, the presence of the Spirit. The experience of the church narrated in Acts 2 and the interpretation of that experience by means of Joel 2:28-32 is a carefully constructed parallel to the experience of Jesus himself in Luke 4:16-30. The parallelism is prepared for in the instruction of Jesus to his disciples to remain in Jerusalem until they are “clothed with power from on high” (24:49). The preaching “in his name” of repentance which issues in the forgiveness of sins is the Christian formulation of the prophetic testimony to “the word of the Lord” which goes forth from Zion and teaches the peoples and the nations to “walk in his paths” (Micah 4:2). The city of Jerusalem is for Luke “the place of revelations” and hence the
place where the passion and Resurrection occur. All of the resurrection appearances in chapter 24 are located in and around Jerusalem. It is also the place from which the Christian mission begins (Acts 1–2). Luke's geography is an expression of his eschatology! And finally, the phrase “to all nations” qualifies the mission of the church as eschatological in nature. "In the latter days," i.e., in the time of fulfillment when the mountain of the Lord is established "peoples shall flow to it, and many nations shall come"; God will judge between "many peoples" and decide for "strong nations afar off" (Micah 4:2-3). As the ministry of Jesus overcame national and religious borders (Luke 4:16-30 passim), so the preaching of the church is for all the nations (Acts 1:8; 2:5-11).

It is to the fulfillment of Scripture and the divine will in all of these things that the disciples of Jesus and those with them are witnesses, in the double sense of having witnessed them and of bearing witness to them. The activity of witnessing is not a mere reporting, however. The witness of the church does not just point to events which have happened in the past, though it does this and cannot be Christian witness if it does not. The witness of the church does not just announce the fulfillment of Scripture and the divine will through those past events, though this is an essential element of its proclamation. The witness of the church is itself part of those eschatological events and is itself the fulfillment of the Scriptures and the divine will.

TOWARD THE SERMON

Luke's heavy stress on the physical nature of the Resurrection of Jesus ought not lead the preacher to make assent to that specific idea synonymous with faith that God has raised Jesus from the dead. Of course the text confronts us with the demand for clarity and honesty in our own thinking about what "really happened" and in our speaking about it. It is precisely in connection with eschatology in general and the notion of resurrection in particular that many of us resist such clarity and honesty in our thinking and speaking. For Luke and the community of faith represented in his writings, the body which could be seen and handled and observed eating was important as
a way of saying that Jesus was alive following his execution. The preacher’s own theological convictions and hermeneutical procedures will determine whether he or she can or must affirm the truth of such a way of talking or whether what was essential in the first century is no longer possible or appropriate in the twentieth. The point here is that however important that question is in its own right and however one is led to answer it for oneself, the fact remains that even for Luke it is not the physically resurrected body which is the object of faith, but the presence of the crucified One with his church. This is made clear by the way in which the appearance itself is seen as a necessary preparation for the instruction and commissioning of the disciples which follows. A sermon which aims to translate Luke’s major concern in this passage will need to focus more heavily on vss. 44-49 than anywhere else.

If the exegesis has uncovered the essential concern of Luke, namely that the proper response to the message of Jesus’ Resurrection is a community of witnesses in the world, then it would seem appropriate for the preacher to struggle with the question of what it means for the church in the final decades of the twentieth century to be that community of eschatological witness in and for the sake of the world. Although this question is frequently raised in biblical commentaries, homiletical literature, and even denominational study programs and propaganda, one has the feeling that it has still not found its way into the agenda of administrative board meetings and budget hearings, or into worship bulletins. Yet it is precisely questions about the existence and nature of the church which may be the most legitimate form of questions about the meaning of the Resurrection of Jesus. Granted that the specific and unique situation of the congregation will dictate the form of the question, the text does offer some help in making the question more concrete.

The concept of fulfillment is crucial for Luke and will need to be taken into account in the sermon. How can the sermon make clear that Lucan claim for the absolute centrality of the church in the realization of the divine will without consciously or unconsciously giving the impression that the church is itself the goal of the divine will? However one reads the Book of Acts, it should not be read as a charter for Christian imperialism or as a
blueprint just waiting for endorsement by Constantine and implementation by the U.S.A. The Christian mission in the world is not finally the creation and maintenance of the church. Priorities cannot be determined on the basis of institutional survival for its own sake. Church growth movements, life enrichment for members of the establishment, reinforcement of cultural norms—whatever the justification of those concerns, all are certainly open to question as high priority items for a church which understands itself as a community of witness in the Lucan sense.

At the same time, however, it is clear that the existence and life of the community of witness is not incidental. According to Luke it is an essential aspect of fulfilled time, and the community lives and works under the guidance of and empowered by God’s Spirit. It is not itself the fulfillment of God’s will in history but is commissioned to witness to the fulfillment which is taking place. What is the nature of this “fulfillment”? For Luke it is clear that “the Church traces its own understanding of scripture back to the Easter event.” This does not mean that Luke is interested in proving that the Scriptures are divinely inspired by demonstrating how this or that item of Old Testament prophecy has actually “happened” in the course of history. He lends no support to the still too common practice of reading the Old Testament prophecies as checklists or blueprints for the future. His understanding of fulfillment is much more profound than that. It is the testimony of Scripture in its totality which is realized in Jesus Christ. And this means that in Jesus Christ the will of God for the world (“all nations”), the will of God for the entire human community is realized.

The community which witnesses to the realization of God’s will in Jesus Christ and in the present moment of the world’s life will need to take seriously Luke’s emphasis upon repentance which issues in the forgiveness of sins (vs. 47). In its total life, in its preaching and worship, its life-style and programs, its buildings and budgets, it embodies a call to repentance and an announcement of the forgiveness of sins. In this sense the community is against the world, including the world which exists in its own common life and the lives of its individual members, representing a radical challenge to accepted values and goals, to popular notions of security and success, to “normal” forms of
injustice in its surrounding society and culture. Only by being against the world in this sense can the Christian community of witness be authentically for the world. Existing as it does in the tension between God to whom it bears witness and the world for whose sake it bears that witness, the church is profoundly committed to both realities. Preaching and worship, Christian education and pastoral care aim at enabling members of the community to understand themselves as persons who are called to live in that tension and thus participate in “salvation history.”

Such Christian existence against the world for the sake of the world is grounded finally “in his name.” As Jesus challenged the economic, religious, sexual, and national structures of his world for the sake of that very world, so the community which lives and acts and witnesses “in his name” must reckon with the possibility of challenging those and other structures in its own time and place. The difficulty of such challenging is increased by the fact that that community is so often part and parcel of such structures, is apparently so very dependent upon those structures for its own continued existence. To call the nations to repentance is first of all to call ourselves to repentance. To preach repentance “in his name” means constantly to remind ourselves of the one who defined his own preaching in prophetic terms (recall Luke 4:18-19) and to be open to the same Spirit. To preach repentance “in his name” means to remind ourselves of the one who made himself known to disciples who shared their bread with a stranger (24:28-31). To preach repentance “in his name” is to participate in Easter faith, i.e., the confidence that the “salvation history” testified to in Old and New Testaments continues to happen today.

SUNDAY, MAY 2

Lections
Ezekiel 34:1-10 I John 3:1-8 John 10:11-18
Exegesis and Exposition of John 10:11-18

John 10:11-18 is a fragment of the longer “shepherd discourse” contained in chapter 10. There are some obvious
advantages to limiting the liturgical reading to these verses. For one thing, one avoids calling attention to the separation of these verses from 10:1-6 caused by the intervention of vss. 7-10 and to the confusing combination of images contained in these intervening verses. Moreover, the proposed pericope does properly and forcefully focus the entire shepherd discourse in the "I am" pronouncement of Jesus. The pericope does have a literary and theological integrity of its own. And finally, the pericope, even taken by itself, is sufficiently clear and radical to prohibit the idealizing or romanticizing of the figure of Jesus on the basis of memories of biblical and childhood shepherd imagery. Nevertheless, to ignore the remainder of the shepherd discourse and its present position in the Gospel will encourage inattention to certain crucial dimensions of the Johannine Jesus' use of the title "good shepherd." Thus whether one decides to expand the liturgical reading to include at least 10:1-18 or to read only the suggested verses, the exegesis and interpretation of vss. 11-18 will of necessity have to take account of the larger context represented by major portions of chapter 10 and the position and function of chapter 10 as a whole. And it is precisely at this point that some of the most complex exegetical issues occur.

There are two interrelated sets of issues involved in the exegesis of chapter 10: (a) the question of the literary integrity of the chapter in its present form, and (b) the question of sources.

(a) Several features about the text have caused some scholars to conclude that the order of chapter 10 as we have it is not the original one. (i) The chapter opens with the typical Johannine formula, "Truly, truly, I say to you . . . ," a formula which is rarely used to open a discourse of Jesus, but usually serves to move the argument forward, sometimes to a decisive phase. (ii) Although the opening "parable" (vss. 1-5) concentrates on the figure of the true shepherd as contrasted with a thief, a robber, and a stranger, the "explanation" (vss. 7-10) has Jesus identify himself not as that true shepherd, but as the "door of the sheep." (iii) But even that identification is not consistent, for vss. 8 and 10 revert to the contrast between the true shepherd and the thieves and robbers. (iv) Beginning with vs. 11 the figure of the true shepherd is clearly the focal point and the
contrast is now between that figure and the "hireling" rather than thieves, robbers, or strangers. (v) Whereas vss. 1-5 spoke only of "the shepherd," vs. 16 refers to "other sheep, that are not of this fold." (vi) The words of Jesus produce a "schism" among "the Jews," some saying he has a demon and others arguing on the basis of his words and his healing of the blind man that he cannot possibly have a demon (vss. 19-21). Why this reference to the healing reported in 9:1-41?

(vii) After a considerable interval (weeks or even months) "the Jews" surround Jesus in the temple and demand of him a clear answer to the question whether he is the messiah (vss. 22-24). ("The Jews" in the following references is the evangelist's designation for the opponents of Jesus. The words and the negative image they convey function within the religious and theological framework of the fourth Gospel. Christian interpretation and proclamation can surely no longer speak of Jewish persons and Jewish faith in this way.) In the course of his reply (vss. 25-30) Jesus explains their failure to understand him by resorting again to the imagery of sheep and shepherd as though the discourse of vss. 1-18 were still fresh in the ears of his hearers. The chapter then concludes with "the Jews" deciding that Jesus is guilty of blasphemy and should be stoned (vs. 31) or at least arrested (vs. 39). He eludes them, crosses the Jordan, and remains there. Many people come to him there and believe in him, confirming the truth of what the Baptist has said about him (vss. 40-41).

Scholars who read these peculiarities of the text as evidence that the text is not in its original sequence assume that a more or less extensive rearrangement of the text is a prerequisite for interpreting it correctly. The most extensive rearrangement is that proposed by Bultmann, who holds that the evangelist has in chapter 10 reworked one of a collection of "revelation discourses" which "has its closest parallels in the Mandaean writings, the oldest strata of whose traditions go back to the time of primitive Christianity and to the region of Syrian Palestine." The arbitrariness of such a radical rearrangement and the difficulty of envisioning such a complex textual history have often been pointed out as weaknesses of Bultmann's proposal. Less radical rearrangements have been suggested.
The text itself demonstrates the validity of both methodologies. Bultmann's reconstruction does face up to peculiarities in the text which can only make sense if one assumes expansion and perhaps rearrangement of an original source. Nevertheless, the present arrangement is not as accidental and misguided as Bultmann implies. It is tied to chapter 9 and serves now as an extended comment on the reaction of the authorities. It does have its own literary and theological integrity. And it is, after all, the text we are called to interpret.

(b) The majority of scholars point to the wealth of shepherd imagery in the Old Testament as providing the major source for Jesus' discourse in chapter 10. Of particular importance is Ezekiel 34 (from which the Old Testament lection for the day is taken) where God denounces shepherds or rulers who have not cared for the flock, i.e., Israel, but have plundered and scattered it. God promises to become the shepherd and care for Israel and concludes: "And you are my sheep, the sheep of my pasture, and I am your God" (Ezek. 34:31). The distinctively Christian use of the shepherd imagery is reflected not merely in its application to Jesus but also in the absence of the ruler motif, the disciples as the flock, the shepherd going before the sheep, the death of the shepherd, and the gathering of the flock from the nations. Similar use of the imagery appears in the Synoptic tradition (Matt. 9:36, e.g.) as well as in other parts of the New Testament (I Pet. 2:25, e.g.).

While acknowledging the importance of the Old Testament and Palestinian background of the shepherd imagery, Bultmann and Schweizer insist that it is inadequate as the sole source of the Johannine imagery. In particular Bultmann points to the reciprocal relationship between the shepherd and the sheep which is described in terms of "knowing" (ginōskēn), a concept not found in the Old Testament of which a statement such as Ezek. 34:30 is characteristic: "And they shall know that I, the Lord their God, am with them..." Although the possibility of Gnostic elements in John's shepherd imagery cannot be ruled out, one must agree that the Old Testament and Palestinian background is much more decisive. However, neither Old Testament nor Gnostic imagery is sufficient to account for John's conception of Jesus the shepherd. Both have been incorporated
into a new and original figure and pressed into the service of a distinctive form of Christian proclamation, the heart of which is contained in 10:11-18.

The entire shepherd discourse has its focus in the solemn pronouncement of Jesus: “I am the good shepherd” (vs. 11, 14). The form is a familiar one in the fourth Gospel: the emphatic “I am” (ego eimi), followed by the definite article with a religious image or symbol and sometimes with a modifier which emphasizes uniqueness (in addition to 10:11, 14, see also 6:35, 41, 51; 8:12, 9:5; 10:7, 9; 11:25; 14:6; 15:1, 5). Each word in the pronouncement serves to stress the exclusiveness of Jesus and his claim. The personal pronoun ego is grammatically unnecessary and hence emphatic and has the sense of “I—and no other!” The verb “am” (eimi) is to be taken literally. Jesus does not say “I am like a good shepherd,” as though he were employing a religious image to interpret his being or activity. There is no “model” to which he understands himself to be measuring up, no ideal role which he views himself as filling. The statement is one of pure, exclusive, and literal identification: “we have a title and not a comparison.”

The definite article is crucial. Jesus does not claim to be a shepherd (or a light, or a bread, or a way, etc.), not even the greatest or best or final one, but rather claims to be the only one. The same thing is stressed by the adjective. Here kalos does not imply beauty or goodness as compared to less beautiful or less good shepherds. It is not a comparative at all, but has the sense of true, right, legitimate, in short, only shepherd, compared to whom all other claimants are not shepherds at all, but thieves, robbers, strangers, or, at best, hirelings. And finally, the image of “shepherd” itself must not be taken as an ideal which Jesus fulfills more perfectly than anyone else. While it is true that the image of the shepherd is common in the Old Testament, Judaism, Gnosticism, and Hellenistic religious vocabulary in general, none of these usages “defines” Jesus in John’s thought. The definition goes in precisely the opposite direction. It is Jesus who defines what the true shepherd is. Jesus—and no other—is the definition of the true shepherd.

Only when the radical exclusivity of the Johannine formulation is taken seriously does the radicality and offensiveness of the claim of Jesus become clear. In a remarkable comment Bultmann
appropriately speaks of the "intolerance of the revelation." The absoluteness and exclusiveness of the claim contained in the pronouncement of Jesus is reinforced by other elements of the discourse. Whether vss. 1-5 are in their original position or whether they originally followed vss. 11-13 as Bultmann supposes, the fundamental point remains the same. The legitimate shepherd in the parabolic language of these verses approaches the sheep as he ought to, i.e., through the gate. He is recognized by the gatekeeper, he calls and leads and goes before his sheep, and the sheep hear and know his voice and follow him. All others are thieves, robbers, and strangers. There is no need to identify such imposters as historical persons, e.g., the Pharisees of 9:40, or "the Jews" who oppose Jesus and the church of John's time, or the heretics of the Johannine epistles (see I John 2:18 ff., e.g.).

The continuation of vss. 1-5 in vs. 8 makes it unmistakably clear that "all who came before me are thieves and robbers." This does not refer simply to anyone who "came along." The verb "to come" (erxesthai) has for John a very specific meaning and refers to the coming of revelation into the world. The "I came" of vs. 10b is not a piece of chronological information but an eschatological announcement. Thus the polemic is directed against "all pretended revealers, all pretended saviors who have ever called men to them, who have ever been followed by men." Obviously such polemic has nothing to do with Old Testament figures, since the Scriptures bear witness to Jesus (5:39). The radical exclusiveness of the claim of Jesus is even further heightened when Jesus spells out the basis upon which he can make such a claim. The pronouncement, "I am the good [i.e., one, true] shepherd" is followed immediately by John's christological definition of the true shepherd as one who "lays down his life for the sheep" (vs. 11b). Nowhere is it clearer that Jesus is the definition of the true shepherd and not the reverse. A good and conscientious shepherd may risk his life for the sheep, but John does not say that the true shepherd, i.e., Jesus, risks his life for the sheep, but rather that he does what no other shepherd does, namely "lays down his life" (tên psuchein autou tithēsin), i.e., sacrifices it for the sake of the sheep. The same verb is used five
times in the section (11b, 15b, 17, 18 [twice]) and must have the same meaning in all cases. This shepherd is for his sheep in a way that goes far beyond that of normal shepherds as well as religious figures who appropriate the title for themselves.

"Precisely that which makes him unacceptable to 'the Jews' and with them all of humanity is the very basis of his 'I am.'"

Compared to this shepherd all others are, at best, hirelings who are willing to abandon the sheep in order to save their own lives (vss. 12-13). The fact that Jesus has the power to "take up" his life again (vss. 17-18) does not diminish the radicality of the sacrificial act. In fact, just the opposite is the case. The sacrifice is made by one who is in no way compelled to make it, who has the power to avoid it (vs. 18a). Thus the laying down of his life is grounded in the love of the Father and also reveals that love.

Following the repetition of the solemn pronouncement in vs. 14a Jesus explains further the basis for his claim to be the one true shepherd. The one who lays down his life knows and is known by the Father and, analogously, knows and is known by his own. "Knowledge" is a common Old Testament designation for the special and intimate relationship between God and Israel, but is also a favorite term in Gnosticism and Hellenistic mysticism generally. It seems likely that John has drawn on both Old Testament and Gnostic material. However, it is also clear that he stands firmly in the biblical tradition in rejecting any notion of mystical union between the believer and God; as C. K. Barrett states, "man is not deified but delivered." In any case it is the mutual knowledge which distinguishes the relationship between the true shepherd Jesus and his sheep from that of any "pretender" and the flock. Needless to say, this knowledge is not a rational or theoretical knowledge, the kind that a subject has of an object, but rather denotes a relationship "in which the knower's whole existence is determined by that which he knows," as Bultmann says. This shepherd calls his own sheep by name (vs. 3) and they "know his voice" and hence follow him (vs. 4). "The Jews" do not believe because they do not belong to this shepherd's sheep (vs. 26), i.e., Jesus does not "know" them (vs. 27). They have not been given to the shepherd by the Father (vs. 29). The unique "knowledge" which unites Jesus and his sheep is also the basis for the call to "other sheep, that are not of
this fold” (vs. 16), a possible (editorial) reference to the Gentile mission.

That Jesus is the one true shepherd means that he, in contrast to all other religious saviors, actually brings that for which human beings long, namely life (zoe) in the full sense (vs. 10). Compared to the life which the true shepherd brings that which all others bring is destruction (vs. 10a). The saying does not refer to the subjective intention of other “shepherds,” but only to the effects of their illegitimate calling of human beings who are seeking life. Jesus has not come to bring human beings this or that good thing, e.g., enlightenment, peace of mind, etc., but the very possibility of life itself or in Johannine terminology “eternal life” (vs. 28).

The shepherd discourse of chapter 10 is the last one addressed to the public. The discourse on the vine and branches in chapter 15 is directed to the disciples. Is there then, in any sense an appeal to the hearers, a call which should be answered? It could appear that there is some form of Gnostic determinism operating in Jesus’ speech. Those who do not believe cannot believe because they are not Jesus’ sheep (vs. 26). The sheep know (instinctively?) the true shepherd’s voice and they follow him (vss. 3-4). The “other sheep” will heed the voice of the shepherd as well (vs. 16). Why? Because they are his sheep! Thus there would seem to be a clear-cut distinction between those who hear and know and follow because they are the sheep of this shepherd and those who do not hear and know and follow because they are not the sheep of this shepherd. This would certainly fit a Gnostic anthropology. But is it an adequate statement of Johannine anthropology? Hardly.

Like all Johannine expressions of dualism (light/darkness, above/below, spirit/flesh, life/death) the dualism expressed in belonging/not-belonging to the flock of Jesus is a dualism based finally upon the decision of faith. To the announcement, “I am the good shepherd,” one can respond by requesting that Jesus speak “plainly” (vs. 24) and not in figures (vs. 6). That is, one can appeal for clear evidence, the kind of evidence which eliminates the risk of making a wrong decision, evidence which makes it unnecessary to decide for oneself, to believe. Or, one can respond by hearing in the claim of Jesus the voice of the true
shepherd, by 

hedging that voice, i.e., regarding it as the truth about oneself and one's relationship to the world and to God, and by following in faith the one who makes this claim, even though that means letting go of everyone or everything else which promises true, i.e., eternal, life. Those who do not hear and heed and follow place themselves outside the flock and demonstrate through un-faith the reality of their situation. Those who hear and heed and follow place themselves within the flock and prove through faith that they are members of the flock of Jesus. Faith, then, is the condition and confirmation that one belongs to the flock of the true shepherd. Thus the pronouncement "I am the true shepherd" is at the same time an appeal to hearers to give themselves through the act of faith to this shepherd and be one of his flock.

TOWARD THE SERMON

If the text does not presuppose an idealized picture of a good shepherd, e.g., a composite of passages such as Psalm 23 and Ezekiel 34, and then attempt to demonstrate how Jesus fulfills that ideal, then a sermon which aims to be faithful to the text will not take that approach either, even though this is precisely what many worshippers will anticipate the moment they hear the text read. The preacher thus has a golden opportunity to surprise and interest his or her hearers by going against such anticipation. Again, if the text does not intend to present Jesus as a "model" for anyone to imitate—and in view of the lengths to which the evangelist goes to make clear the absoluteness and exclusiveness of the claim of Jesus in this discourse, who could imitate him?—then the sermon will not do that either. And here again, this is precisely what some worshippers will expect to hear at some point in the sermon. Does Jesus not represent the "good pastor" or church leader who is willing to sacrifice himself or herself for the sake of the flock (= congregation)? The exegesis has made clear that however legitimate it may be to find in the shepherd imagery of Old and New Testaments (e.g., John 21:15-19) essential characteristics of the faithful pastor, this particular passage does not intend to call anyone to an imitation of Christ. Thus the opportunity to surprise and entice the
healers by allowing the text to address everyone is further enhanced. The task of the "good pastor" is to allow the voice of the one, true shepherd to be heard in all its absoluteness, exclusiveness and, if need be, offensiveness.

As is the case with most biblical texts, the shepherd discourse defies adequate treatment in a single sermon and the preacher will need to select certain focal points which are able to carry the major concern of the text. The fact that this is a sermon for Eastertide may aid us in that process of selection.

If the pronouncement of Jesus, "I am the good shepherd," represents the heart of the entire discourse, it seems reasonable to assume that it will play a key role in the sermon as well. It is the radicality of that claim of Jesus which must be heard, a radicality which has both a critical and a liberating function. Critical because of everything which is called into question by it. If Jesus—and no other—is the true shepherd, the sole legitimate source of abundant, true, eternal life, then every other source is profoundly qualified and opened to questioning. That sounds so right and so pious until one begins to engage seriously in identifying and questioning those other claimants. What are those other things and persons to whom I look to give real significance—not merely ornamentation—to my existence and what is their rightful role in my life if I take seriously the claim of shepherd Jesus? "I—and nothing else—am the true shepherd" is the christological form of the first commandment and is as intolerant as that unconditional prohibition of "helping gods."

What, then, is the role of my vocation and all the signs of success in it, of my accomplishments and the ensuing status they bring, of my standard of living, my education, psychological insights, self-realization techniques, yes, even of my personal piety and religious devotion? What role, then, for my church? Even more important, how am I to regard those persons whom I so deeply love and without whom my life could never be the same? And perhaps at an even deeper level, what happens to my sense of autonomy and independence as a human being? (The negative reaction of many hearers to being called "sheep" may, in fact, be a reaction against the implied status of a "dependent.")

But the radicality of the claim of shepherd Jesus can also have a liberating function. For if it happens that his claim opens
everything else in one's life to serious questioning, it may also happen that we discover the freedom to stop placing impossible burdens upon persons and things which are important to us. The frantic attempt to find our ultimate value and significance in things and persons around us becomes as unnecessary as it is inappropriate. There is no longer a compulsive need to make things and persons bear the burden of being our salvation. Persons can be cherished because they are persons and not because they are our only security or the guarantee of our ultimate significance as human beings. Vocation can become vocation, important and meaningful as such, without having to be our god.

The pastor-preacher will know which function—the critical or the liberating—will need to be emphasized in his or her particular context and which particular "claimants" need to be confronted by the radical claim of Jesus.

But by what right does Jesus confront us with such a radical claim? With what justification does he confront us as the one and only true shepherd? The text answers: because he lays down his life for the sheep! Jesus can call everything into question which promises us true life simply because he himself gave up everything, including life itself. The only promise of life lies in the One who gave up life. Surely we can sympathize with those who wished for clearer evidence, who implored Jesus to speak "plainly," for we to want to ask whether such an ambiguous and paradoxical thing as the cross is sufficient ground for hearing and heeding and following the call of shepherd Jesus. But John refuses to offer us any other, any clearer evidence. Those who hear in the voice of Jesus the voice of the One who knows God and is known by God, who knows us and calls us to know him, those who comprehend the decision to which they are called, those persons must be satisfied with the "figure" of the cross and be willing to hear in that "figure" the love of God. That is the Johannine understanding of faith.

Easter is the realization that it is precisely the crucified One who opens to us the possibility of abundant life, that is, life which has its source and orientation in God, life which is encompassed in and infused by the eternal. Easter is the confession that it is none other than the One who laid down his
life who makes our life possible and thus alone has the right to be our shepherd.

SUNDAY, MAY 9

Lectures
Exegesis and Exposition of John 15:1-8

As one might expect, the same kinds of questions which were raised by John 10:11-18 occur in connection with the present pericope as well, questions of literary structure and integrity, possible sources which the evangelist may have used, and the theological and christological concerns which have shaped the text and are now embodied in it. Moreover, the kinds of solutions proposed tend to fall into the same categories as those proposed in relation to 10:11-18.

There is almost unanimous agreement among scholars that 13:1 marks a decisive new phase in John’s story of Jesus. The so-called “Book of Signs” (1:19-12:50) recounts the public ministry of Jesus during which his words and deeds were addressed to a wide and varied audience and during which the emphasis was not only upon the decision to which persons are called in response to that ministry, but also upon what Jesus would do and mean for human beings once he was glorified. Chapter 13 opens the “Book of Glory” which describes the “hour” of Jesus, the time for his departure from the world and return to the Father (13:1). The focus is narrowed to those who have believed in him, “his own.” The subject matter is now the Passion, Crucifixion, and Resurrection of Jesus. Following the washing of the disciples’ feet at supper and Jesus’ explanation of its significance (13:1-20) and the departure of Judas (13:21-30), Jesus announces, “Now is the Son of man glorified, and in him God is glorified.” Jesus is going where the disciples cannot follow him; what they now have is the “new commandment” to “love one another,” by which the world will recognize them as disciples of Jesus (13:31-35). A discussion of questions regarding Jesus’ departure ensues, brought to a close with Jesus’
command, "Rise, let us go hence" (13:36-14:31). Instead of a departure, however, there follows a long virtually uninterrupted discourse of Jesus to the disciples (15:1-16:33) and a final prayer of Jesus (17:1-26). Only then does the group move across the Kidron valley to the garden (18:1). It is, then, in the context of the "farewell discourses" at supper that Jesus speaks of the relationship between himself and the disciples using the imagery of the vine and its branches (15:1-17).

It has frequently been observed that the discourse of 15:1-7 would follow very nicely upon 13:35. The statement in 13:33, "Where I am going you cannot come," raises quite naturally the question of the form which the disciples' relationship to Jesus will take, a question that is addressed by the vine imagery in 15:1-8. The mention of the "new commandment" of mutual love in 13:34 prepares for the discussion of that commandment in 15:9-17, although the "commandments" of Jesus are also mentioned in 14:15, 21. Mutual love as the sign of discipleship in 13:35 is picked up in 15:16 in the image of bearing fruit. Thus it seems at least possible that at some point in the history of the text, 15:1-17 followed 13:35. This would also account for what now appears as a very abrupt beginning in 15:1 following the clear concluding words of 14:31. The opening of 15:1 is also uncharacteristic in that the "I am" pronouncement of Jesus stands as the very first words in the discourse, unlike all other such pronouncements. When the material now included in 13:36-14:31 was incorporated into the farewell discourses no new introduction was created for the "I am" pronouncement. Even if 15:1-17 was not originally connected to 13:35, it is nevertheless accurate to speak of it as "a commentary" on 13:34-35.  

Probably the association of 15:1-17 with the supper leads many commentators to see eucharistic imagery in the figure of the vine. The similarities between the bread discourse of chapter 6 and the vine discourse of chapter 15 are indeed striking. "He who abides in me, and I in him" (15:5) recalls the words, "He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him" (6:56). The crucial Johannine concept of abiding (menein) appears in both. The idea of life for the branches coming from union with the vine (15:1-6) recalls 6:57: "He who eats me will
live because of me." The laying down of one’s life for those one loves (15:13) may be an echo of 6:51: "The bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh." Thus Hoskyns concludes: "The close similarity between chapters vi and xv can be adequately explained only if it be recognized that both rest ultimately upon the double foundation of the tradition of the words and actions of Jesus at the Last Supper and the teaching associated with the Eucharist at the time when the gospel was composed." John 15 also has similarities in the designation of the contents of the cup at supper as "the fruit of the vine" (Mark 14:25; Matt. 26:29; Luke 22:18) and to the formula used in the eucharistic blessing in the Didache 9:2: "We thank you, our Father, for the holy vine of David your servant, which you revealed to us through Jesus your servant." Now, there is no question that the vine imagery in 15:1-17 could be read as eucharistic language. The question is whether the evangelist intended it to be read that way. Several things seem to make this unlikely. (a) Granted that there are some similarities between chapters 6 and 15, they are, however, not quite as close as they appear at first. The saying in 6:56 is a rather clear eucharistic reference. But it is a complete reference, that is, it includes both body and blood and cannot be read as John’s way of saying, "This is my body" while the vine imagery in chapter 15 says, "This is my blood." The "life" which comes from feeding on the body of Jesus in 6:57 is more comprehensive in scope and audience than the "union" with Christ which is the point of 15:1-17. (b) John’s avoidance of anything like words of institution in connection with the final meal is not taken with sufficient seriousness if one assumes that he has simply chosen a more symbolic and indirect way of expressing them, e.g., by means of the vine imagery. It is also curious that he would separate bread and cup words by years. (c) But most important is the fact that the main point of the vine imagery is not to emphasize any sort of mystical or eucharistic union of the believer and Jesus, but rather that unity which can only be described by the word love (agape). Thus, although the vine imagery may call to mind some important dimensions of the eucharistic relationship of the believer to Jesus, it seems more than doubtful that this was even a "secondary" concern of the evangelist.
15:1-8. That 15:1-17 is a literary unit is indicated by several things. (a) The imagery of the vine and the related idea of "bearing fruit" is maintained through vs. 16. Verse 17 sounds like a final summary statement for the entire vine discourse. (b) There is a clear change of subject at vs. 18. Whereas vss. 1-17 have dealt with the relationship between Jesus and the disciples and the disciples to each other, the subject matter taken up at vs. 18 and extending through 16:33 is the relationship of the disciples to the hostile world. (c) There is a clear thematic and theological unity to vss. 1-17. If one must divide the pericope, the point at which the lectionary makes the break, namely vss. 1-8 (with vss. 9-17 suggested as the text for the following Sunday), has some exegetical justification. However, an interpretation of vss. 1-8 cannot ignore vss. 9-17, since in the latter section the concrete meaning of "abiding in Jesus" is spelled out.

Most scholars divide the pericope into two subunits, vss. 1-8 and 9-17, although other divisions have also been proposed. Bultmann has characterized vss. 1-8 as an exhortation to constancy of faith in the language of "abiding in me" (meinate en emoi) and vss. 9-17 as defining the "in me" more closely as "in my love" (en te agape te eme). The two sections are carefully constructed to parallel each other.

The discourse begins abruptly with the seventh and final "I am" pronouncement of Jesus. Everything that was said in connection with John 10:11-18 applies here as well. Though the audience and situation have changed, the same tone of absoluteness and exclusiveness is present in the claim of Jesus. I (emphatic ego) and no other; am (eimi), i.e., literally and not allegorically or parabolically; the, not "a" or "like a" or "the greatest of all"; true (alēthine), i.e., authentic or legitimate or real in contrast to anything or anyone else who might make a similar claim; vine (ampelos). The fact that the "I am" pronouncement begins the discourse shows that John is not presenting an allegory or parable, in which case the ego eimi would need to come much later. If "vine" is not a title in the same sense as "shepherd" is, it is at least an image or symbol to which Jesus is claiming exclusive rights.
As in the case of the shepherd imagery of chapter 10, so here the origins of the vine imagery are far from clear. The symbol appears frequently in the Old Testament and rabbinical writings and also in the Synoptics. In spite of the frequency of the vine imagery in the Old Testament, there is, however, not a single text in which Yahweh is referred to as the vine, whereas in John 15 Jesus is the vine. And in contrast to the Synoptic material, the vine has nothing to do with the eschatological crisis occasioned by the ministry of Jesus, but describes the ongoing relationship between Jesus and his disciples.

Bultmann and Schweizer, although recognizing the importance of the Jewish material, find in the writings of the Mandaeans much closer parallels, both in form and in substance. Again, as in the case of the shepherd imagery of chapter 10, it seems clear that no single source suffices to account for all of the imagery which the evangelist employs. Moreover, all of the material has been transformed into what is now a unique Johannine conception.

Jesus' claim, “I am the true vine,” is reinforced by an additional image, that of the Father as the “vinedresser.” Such reinforcement of the primary image is infrequent in the Johannine “I am” sayings, the only other instance being the saying, “I am the living bread which came down from heaven (6:51; see also vs. 41). The idea of God as the one who cares for the vine or vineyard is at least implied in those Old Testament passages which speak of Israel as the vine/vineyard. It is not common in the Mandaean parallels cited by Schweizer. Verse 1 thus affirms what the evangelist has said in various ways all along, namely, that Jesus' relation to his own is grounded in his relationship to God who is the final source of everything.

The interweaving of literal statement and imagery continues in 15:2. The work of the vinedresser includes the clearing away of nonbearing branches and the pruning of fruitful ones. But the branches are even here not branches in general, but those belonging to Jesus (“every branch of mine”). The precise nature of the fruit is not yet spelled out. The point here is simply that there is no possibility of being a part of Jesus without sharing in and giving expression to the “vital signs” of Jesus himself. The pruning of those branches which do bear fruit refers not so much
to “discipline” as it does to the care which the Father shows for those who belong to Jesus. To “bear more fruit” is not to be understood in a simple quantitative sense. To bear more fruit is simply the evidence that a branch is a living one, fulfilling the function of a branch. The word for pruning is literally “to cleanse” (kathaireō) and in vs. 3 the evangelist abandons the vine imagery for a moment, but uses this very same word to explain how this cleansing happens to those who belong to Jesus, namely by means of “the word” which Jesus has (already) spoken to them. That word (logos, referring to the totality of Jesus’ message) is the form which the care of God takes for the believer.

In vs. 4 Jesus abandons all imagery and moves to the imperative: “Abide in me, and I in you.” The command here is not a call to heroic endurance, e.g., in the face of persecution, but a reminder and summons to the decision of faith. It is, as Bultmann says, “persistence in the life of faith . . . always allowing oneself to be encompassed . . . allowing oneself to receive” the life which one has in relationship to Jesus.40 The command is supported by a reversion to the vine imagery: as the branch cannot bear fruit, i.e., live, apart from the vine, so the disciple cannot bear fruit, i.e., live, apart from Jesus. Verse 5 repeats the absolute and exclusive claim of Jesus in the “I am” pronunciation and then repeats in essence vs. 4. The phrase “apart from me you can do nothing” is the negative statement of the preceding phrase concerning the one who “bears much fruit.” It is not a generalization about human life. There are many things which a person can do apart from Jesus. The one thing such a person cannot do is “bear fruit,” i.e., be alive in the radical Johannine sense. Verse 6 picks up the imagery of vs. 2 again, the passive construction (“he is cast forth”) being a circumlocution for God’s activity. The argument here may sound curious but it is typically Johannine. If one does not abide in Jesus, that is, places oneself apart from Jesus, that one is cast forth from Jesus. Like the other forms of dualism in John (light/darkness, life/death, etc.) so that of abiding/being cast forth is a dualism based on the decision for faith or unfaith, the one decision which is a matter of life or death.

The reciprocal and intimate relationship between Jesus and the believer is also of decisive importance in understanding vs. 7.
(Just as the "word" of Jesus [logos] is the form which God's care for the believer takes [vs. 3], so the "words" of Jesus [ta hrēmata mou] are the form which his presence with the believer takes.) If one "abides" in Jesus and Jesus "abides" in one, then that person can request anything of God in the assurance of receiving it. Prayer, then, is a sign of life, an evidence of the life-giving relationship between the vine and the branch, Jesus and the believer. And it is to be understood strictly within the relationship to Jesus. One is free to ask anything that is appropriate to that relationship. Prayer which has its source in the relationship to Jesus and is an expression of the depth and vitality of that relationship is prayer in the "name" of Jesus (compare 14:13-14; 16:24). That prayer is closely associated with bearing fruit is shown by the movement of thought to vs. 8. Jesus moves from the idea of prayer as a "vital sign" to the conclusion that the bearing of "much fruit" (a) glorifies the Father, and (b) proves that one is a disciple of Jesus. As the intimate relationship between Jesus and the believer means life for the believer, so it means glory for God.

Although vss. 9-17 are beyond the scope of our pericope, the latter cannot properly be understood apart from them. Bultmann has pointed out the parallelism of the two sections and the fact that the language of "abide in me" of vss. 1-8 changes to that of "abide in my love" in vss. 9-17. It is precisely the idea of mutual love which makes concrete all the images and manifestations of the union between Jesus and the believer which appear in 1-8: vine and branches, mutual "abiding," bearing fruit, prayer, the glorification of God, discipleship. This is true in a double sense. (a) Mutual love is the decisive description of the relationship between Jesus and the Father. Similarly, it is the decisive description of the relationship between Jesus and the believer. The fully adequate relationship between Jesus and the believer cannot be that of a mystical or sacramental or ecclesiastical or dogmatic union, but inheres solely in mutual love, i.e., love for one another. Love of believers for one another, then, is not something in addition to faith in Jesus, not a second step in some hierarchy, but is inseparable from that faith relationship. (b) Mutual love is also, however, the decisive definition of "bearing fruit," not in the sense of
something which may or may not be present in the life of the believer, but in the sense that without it there is no life of the believer. As the branch which does not bear fruit is, in reality, no longer a branch, no longer alive and part of the vine, so the one whose whole being is not determined by absolute commitment to other persons is no longer a believing person. The fruit which the one who abides in Christ is commanded to bear, then, is not to be thought of as this or that good work, nor as missionary activity in the world, but as love for the brother and sister. "The discourse as a whole, therefore, like both its parts, deals with faith and love as a unity, as Bultmann says."

TOWARD THE SERMON

"I am the vine, you are the branches." Whether the words are those of the departing Jesus to a group of intimate friends in Jerusalem or those of the risen Christ to his church in the first or the twentieth century, the shock is the same. And the shock comes first from the tense and the mood of the statement: present tense, indicative mood, a simple announcement of how things stand between Jesus and the person who would believe in him. The exclusiveness, the radicality, and the offensiveness are rooted as much in the unconditional tone and form of the statement as they are in the substance of it. No room here for discussion, clarification of options, qualifications, and conditions. The hearer is left with a decision to make: to say yes, to allow the pronouncement to be the final truth about his or her existence and to claim and be claimed by the life offered in the pronouncement; or to say no, to deny that this is the truth about his or her existence and miss the life offered in the pronouncement (in Johannine language: to die). There is no third option, and a sermon which offers another option, or plays down the life and death importance of the decision confronting the hearer of this text may be a good sermon, but will not be a sermon on this text. But before the decision and its seriousness can be made compelling, they must be made comprehensible. One way to achieve this might be to ask which important decisions about one's life are involved in saying yes to the pronouncement of Jesus. The text seems to speak about the
definition, the source and the content of the life of one who dares say yes to Jesus.

Is there really only one way to live a “fruitful” life? Of course not! Everyone knows there are many ways to “bear fruit,” the fruits of labor and study; school and home aim to produce “contributing members” of society and the political community. Is it not crass hyperbole to say that apart from Jesus, one can do nothing? Of course it is, for there are many things one can do apart from Jesus, in fact, many things one can do better apart from Jesus (and his representatives!). But the call of the gospel of life implies a judgment on all of the “other things” one can do, all of the other fruit one can produce apart from Jesus and calls the person who would follow Jesus to share that judgment of other definitions of life. The “life” offered in the gospel is the possibility of life itself, true life, life grounded in God. The life defined by the gospel is pure life in the sense in which S. Kierkegaard spoke of “purity of heart,” that is as the wish and search for one thing—God.

But to accept this definition of life is at the same time to acknowledge the one and only source of such life, namely in the relationship to the one who calls himself the vine, of which believers are branches. The pure life is not to be found here and there, by intellectual effort or religious discipline. It is not something we discover within ourselves through mystical contemplation but is offered to us from outside ourselves. To say yes to the claim of Jesus is to decide that it is in his life that my life is to be found; the source of his life is the source of my life; that which motivates and determines his life also motivates and determines my life. Apart from him there remains only the possibility of death, no matter how fulfilled and fruitful my life may be in countless other respects. Nor is the believer left to wonder about the means of relating to that source. It is not by means of some vague mystical relationship to Jesus, nor by means of a sacramental or ecclesiastical structure nor by means of repeating creedal or doctrinal statements about Jesus. We “abide” in this source by hearing the Word of Jesus, by allowing his words to dwell in us, i.e., determine our existence, by keeping the commandments of Jesus. And all of this in the only form in which these things are available to us today, namely in
the community's witness of faith. That means in the words of Scripture and the ever-new incarnation which those words assume in the history and life of the community of faith.

But the definition and source of true life also give it a very specific character and content. It is a life determined by the reality of mutual love. That life which receives its definition and source in God is the life centered on the well-being of the other person. To say yes to the claim of Jesus is to say yes to the commandment to "love one another," not, of course, in the popular and sentimental sense of "liking each other" or "being nice to each other" (although there is no law against these things, either!), but in the sense of being absolutely committed to each other. Easter faith, then, is the decision to say yes to the radically exclusive pronouncement of Jesus by affirming his definition of authentic life, by affirming him as the sole source of that life, and by affirming love for each other as the ultimate content and character of that life.

There are at least two subsidiary points in our pericope which could legitimately serve as a major focus for a sermon. The idea of "glory" (doxa) is not an incidental one in the fourth Gospel, and one might wish to reflect on the distinctive way that theme is touched on in vs. 8. The believer is called to abide in Jesus, for only by abiding in Jesus can one bear fruit, that is, be a living branch. It is precisely the attainment of life that glorifies God. The whole divine will for the creation is thus expressed in the call to abide in Jesus and live. The true, eternal life of the creature is the glory of God!

The other theme which receives a distinctive accent in the context of this pericope is that of prayer. It is much easier to say what Christian prayer is not and to point out how it is misunderstood and abused in popular piety than it is to say anything positive about it. Nor does John 15:7 say all there is to say about prayer. But to anchor prayer so firmly in the vine-branch imagery of Jesus' relationship to his own, is to make some rather significant statements about it. Prayer is not viewed as an activity one engages in as a result of experiencing needs and crises in life which seem insoluble by normal methods—as if one then turns to the deity for assistance. Rather prayer springs from the relationship of the branches to the vine; because they
are branches and receive life from the vine certain functions are possible and appropriate. Because the believer is a member of Jesus, prayer is a proper and essential "vital sign." Second, since prayer originates in the context of that relationship it is also governed by it. The believer may request anything, but that "anything" is nothing more and nothing less than the anything that a believer can request. "The prayer of a truly obedient Christian cannot fail, since he can ask nothing contrary to the will of God." The heart of Christian prayer, according to John, will be the request of the believer that Jesus abide in him or her and that he or she abide in Jesus.

NOTES

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2. For a defense of ch. 21 as the intended and appropriate conclusion of the Gospel see Hoskyns, Fourth Gospel, pp. 655-66.

3. The interpretation of 20:17 is notoriously difficult, especially in its relationship to 20:19-23. However one understands the prohibition ("do not touch" or "do not hang on to"), the reason Jesus gives is that he has not yet "ascended to the Father," a phrase which seems at odds with: (a) John's emphasis upon the cross as the moment of Jesus' return to the Father; (b) Jesus' appearance as the already exalted one in vs. 19-23; and (c) Jesus' offer to Thomas in vs. 27. It seems clear that variant traditions have been combined here, not entirely successfully. The alternative would be to understand that the ascension to the Father occurs sometime during the day, a notion that borders on the comical. See the discussion in Brown, John, pp. 992-94, 1011-17, and the suggestion of Marxsen, Resurrection, pp. 60-61.

4. They include (a) an appearance of the resurrected Jesus to his fearful disciples (Luke 24:36-37; John 20:19; Matt. 28:17f); a word of assurance from Jesus (Luke 24:38; John 20:19); the display of wounds (Luke 24:39; John 20:20); a reaction of joy on the part of the disciples (Luke 24:41; John 20:20); an element of doubt (Luke 24:41; Matt. 28:17); in John it has become a major motif and is developed in vs. 24-29); the eating of fish in the presence of the disciples (Luke 24:41-43; John 21:9-14); a commissioning of the disciples (Luke 24:47-49; Matt. 28:19-20; John 21:21) which in some way has to do with the forgiveness—and retention—of sins (Luke 24:37; Matt. 28:19 [baptism]; John 20:23) and is intimately associated with the Spirit (Luke 24:49; Matt. 28:19; John 20:22).
secondary ending of Mark (16:9-20) is so clearly a conglomeration based on the other three (and Acts) that it sheds no light on a possible pre-Gospel tradition.

7. P. 331. See also Bultmann, John, pp. 690-91.

10. Bultmann, John, p. 690, observes that “the commissioning of the disciples in vss. 21ff. is remarkably different from the manner in which the Evangelist had spoken of the charge given to the disciples in 15:8-16.1.” and explains it by attributing vss. 21ff. to the source which the author used.

11. Attempts to harmonize John’s Gospel with the account of Pentecost in Acts 2 by interpreting the Johannine account as a “promise” and the Acts account as the fulfillment (see Brown, John, pp. 1022ff.) are singularly unconvincing and fail to take seriously the theological integrity of the Gospel narratives. John simply understands the Spirit differently from Luke.


16. The former position is taken by Bultmann, John, pp. 697ff.; the latter by Hoskyns, Fourth Gospel, pp. 655ff. See the discussion in Brown, John, p. 1055.


20. The eating of the fish has become a separate story in John 21:9-14. The theme is picked up again in Acts 10:40-41. Some manuscripts add “and honey” in order to emphasize eucharistic overtones. The broiled fish may indicate an original Galilean setting for the story.

27. Summaries of Old Testament material in: Jeremias, TDNT VI, pp. 407-88;
The combining of Ezek. 34 and John 10:11-18 in the lectionary assumes that the Johannine shepherd discourse is aimed at the contemporary religious authorities who oppose Jesus and the church of John's time. This is true only in a qualified sense (see the discussion of vss. 11-18).

29. Bultmann, John, p. 364. Compare Schweizer, Ego Eimi, p. 124: "It is not Jesus who is in a non-literal, metaphorical sense the shepherd—he is the sole real and right one . . . everything which we call 'in reality' shepherd is such, when compared to him, only in a non-literal, metaphorical sense" (my translation).
31. However, the present context makes it clear that both John's opponents of Jesus do not recognize the validity of his claim, they are included in this judgment. Schweizer, Ego Eimi, p. 148: "The 'before me' is spoken from the perspective of faith. For the Evangelist the coming of Christ refers not only to the historic event, but equally to his ever new coming in the proclamation, so that an 'after me' is no longer possible. For the one who reads these words correctly, that is, in faith, all other claims can only have the character of 'before me.'"
33. Schweizer, Ego Eimi, p. 149.
35. John, p. 529.
38. John, p. 529.
41. John, pp. 539-40.
42. John, p. 546.
43. Barrett, St. John, p. 396.
THE ROLE OF DOUBT IN THE LIFE OF FAITH

WILFRED M. BAILEY

In the passion stories of the Gospels everyone can observe the Crucifixion—Jew and Gentile, nonbeliever as well as believer, persecutor as well as follower. In the resurrection narratives, however, only those who have the eyes of faith see the risen Christ. Found in the midst of this faith is doubt, and without this doubt the Easter faith cannot be understood.

In the Eastertide biblical exegesis presented elsewhere in this journal, Virgil Howard holds before us the role of doubt. He believes that these resurrection stories are primarily pastoral rather than theological and therefore came into being because of widespread doubt. Thomas, rather than being an unusual person who is of a doubting nature is actually a personification of the widespread doubt that was present. That the writings are a response to such doubt is made explicit in John 20:31—"but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name."

All of us have doubts about the physical world in which we live. We know that an endless number of failures can and do occur in our automobiles and yet we schedule our days in a way that assumes that the car will perform adequately. We can read in newspapers about the roof of a church falling in on the congregation, but this is seldom one of the reasons persons stay away from church. We are aware that food can be contaminated in the finest restaurants and even at home, but this is not an ordinary reason for fasting. These doubts are a way of life. They are healthy doubts because they call us to use our critical intelligence. We can make choices which weigh the risks of one option against another, as well as whether or not our doubts about safety or other considerations in certain physical activities, for example, are worth the recreational benefits we desire.

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In matters of faith, however, doubt is usually regarded as something negative if not an outright sin. It is often understood as the opposite of faith, and since everyone experiences it at some level it sometimes becomes a cause for guilt. But Paul Tillich maintained that the opposite of faith is despair, not doubt. An element of doubt is always present in the life of faith, and without the element of doubt our faith is dead.

Doubt usually comes rather quickly for the contemporary reader of the resurrection narratives. Most persons outside the church as well as those inside assume that the purpose of the writers is that of winning intellectual assent concerning the resuscitation of Jesus' body. To convince oneself mentally that an empty tomb existed on Sunday morning is considered by most to be the goal of Easter faith. And some doubt. This doubt can be the occasion of guilt, but it also can be the occasion of new insights into the proclamation of God's Word.

Any rational twentieth-century person runs into conflict with the prescientific world reflected in the Scriptures. Unfortunately, and even tragically, our doubts about the resurrection narratives, biblical "miracles," and other stories which seem set against our understanding of how the world functions are dealt with in three basic ways. We ignore them or repress them; we rationalize them; or we will to believe that which we find unbelievable.

Ignoring the Scriptures is the most common response. Few people are really interested in arguing against miracle stories in the Bible regardless of doubts. They simply set aside the stories as being inconsistent with the world in which they now live. The lack of interest in serious study of the Scriptures by most mainline church members and by persons outside the church indicates this low regard for the importance of the Bible in daily life.

In rationalizing biblical passages we attempt to rid ourselves of doubt. In the story of Jesus walking on the sea, for example, we might point out that the Greek preposition epi can mean "alongside of" or "beside" as well as "on," and explain to ourselves and other doubters that the story does not claim something that we need to doubt. Jesus is not described as walking on the sea but only alongside of the sea, we can say. The story now becomes acceptable to the modern reader.

The third approach, which arises out of our doubt about Scripture, is an attempt to will faith, to decide to believe something
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for which there is insufficient evidence. This is an impossible task. To call this approach “Christian faith” is a distortion of the term. This process is not faith in God but rather a will to accept intellectually what is told to us by religious authorities. And this exercise of believing is idolatrous.

Fortunately we are not forced to choose between these three approaches but can embrace the resurrection narratives as faith testimonies of persons whose lives have been turned upside down.

The resurrection narratives are the witness of those who “have seen the Lord.” (See Virgil Howard’s comments on this statement of the disciples in “Homiletical Studies.”) This is the witness of those who know themselves to have been raised from death into life. The miracle to which they bear witness is not an amazing incident concerning resuscitation of a body, but rather the presence of the living Christ among them. This is really the one miracle—God’s revelation of forgiveness. It is not a miracle to observe. It is a miracle when we participate in it. The disciples knew that God had indeed brought into being a new people for they were the new people.

How then can those in professional ministry help persons to deal with doubt, which is not always explicit? Doubt might not always be expressed but is almost universally present in church members and nonmembers alike.

Early in my ministry a young lawyer told me of his doubts. He had never been baptized and had rarely attended church. Now his wife and young children were participating in a congregation and he was finding increasing meaning to his life as he accompanied his family to church. He even considered joining the church but there were doubts. The doubts included the empty tomb, the virgin birth, and miracles. He couldn’t understand why he had to “check his intelligence at the door” in order to be a faithful follower of Christ.

These doubts, which are often embarrassing to a person or to the members of one’s family, are the stuff out of which one begins to move beneath the surface to that faith which the New Testament evangelists were fervent in announcing. With Nicodemus, doubters ask: “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?” And these doubters want to know how Jesus can offer living water for he has
"nothing to draw with, and the well is deep; where do you get that living water?"

Throughout John's Gospel and elsewhere persons are moved from a superficial look to the core of the faith through their expression of doubt. Although it might sound strange to many, the lack of doubt is blasphemous. Our understanding of God is a mixture which includes our own creaturely projections and conceptions that arise out of our prejudices, needs, and conditioning.

An Episcopal priest told of a person who came to him with great hostility "toward God." The priest suggested that they use an empty-chair technique, which called for the person to express his anger toward the empty chair as if God were in it. The counselee became very uneasy and explained that whether through superstition or whatever he could not talk like that to God. "Don't worry," said the priest, "the god you will be addressing is basically one you have created."

We creatures now see as in a mirror dimly. "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," says the Lord. How presumptuous to believe that the one whom we call God is not to be doubted. It is, in fact, God who brings these doubts. It is God whom we can thank for calling us to doubt and thereby enabling us to see how much we have been creating "God" to fit our own limited selves. God gives us doubts which set us free from our own distortions of God.

Frederick Buechner writes: "The pressure on the preacher, of course, is to speak just the answer. The answer is what people have come to hear and what he has also come to hear, preaching always as much to himself as to anybody, to keep his spirits up. He has to give an answer because everybody else is giving answers." These words, of course, are not restricted to "the preacher."

The laity has often made clear their need to hear a clergy which is without doubts, and the clergy has many times accepted this role. The same is true for other leaders. And yet experiences convince us that our own trust level can actually rise for those leaders who have doubts. Most of my referrals are to a psychiatrist who is quite open about her doubts and is not at all hesitant to call her pastor for help in personal and family crises. And I remember the response I received from one of the most respected and knowledgeable theologian-musicians in the church when several years ago I asked
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about the direction the church should take with the coming of new musical forms. His response was, "I don't know." He then offered me much which was very helpful but he did not hide his doubts.

Funeral services are one of the most common exposures of nonchurch persons to pastoral preaching and delightful surprise has sometimes come to nonmembers when some honest pastor has admitted an ignorance of what happens to us when we die. This admission is obviously on behalf of the church as well. Those outside the church are amazed to witness a strong, abiding faith in God at the time of death that does not shame them for their doubting about going off to a place in the sky. For the church no real problem is created by doubts about what happens to us when we die. The Christian's faith is centered in Who happens to us in death and affirms that this "Who" is the same One who meets us in each moment of life—the One who can be trusted infinitely with any future.

Often a great segment of our society has allowed certain groups to define faith with a definition that excludes doubts. Faith for many religious bodies is intellectual assent to certain statements. Some of these people not only lay claim to a doubt-free faith, but they also insist that everyone else must have the same.

Today I received a mailing which asked, "Do you know the facts and truths which support your Christian faith?" The words which followed bemoaned, "Absolutes are gone." But the sender promises help. "You'll discover [through the advertised workshop] how historical events are verified." The closing line is, "You must know and be ready always to give an answer." This is representative of much of what we hear on "religious" radio, see on "religious" television, and receive through the mail.

A great number in our society cannot accept the position of these whose anxieties bring about crusades, but these middle-of-the-middle-of-the-middle readers are nevertheless intimidated and find themselves longing for such certitude. Tragically many have said in what appears to be generous language, "I don't agree with the theology or method of that group, but I envy their certainty about their faith." One would think that Jonestown would have brought us beyond this.

A biblical professor, in an unpublished sermon preached in Eastertide to his seminary community, quoted from the newspaper a few lines from the Easter sermon of a prominent pastor. The lines included these words: "That Christ is risen is one of the best
attested facts in history if evidence means anything at all." The professor then said in his sermon:

I have heard this kind of talk all my life, and I have to say to you that I can't make any sense out of it. It isn't just that it is a tissue of non sequitur but none of the terms is defined. What does it mean to say either that the Resurrection did or did not really happen? What does "really happen" mean? If you say, "Christ rose from the grave" what do you mean? And what is a "fact in history"? And how are facts attested? And when may evidence be taken to "mean anything at all"? What are the rules for determining what may be admitted as evidence and for evaluating it? And without meaning to impugn the piety of Dr. --- or anyone else who talks this way, I must say that unless the minister submits himself to the discipline of wrestling with such questions, he is handling the scriptures irresponsibly, and he is not dealing fairly with his congregation.

In his conclusion were these words:

My own personal concern, so far as I can analyze it, is not, I think, shall I be raised from the dead after I die. This is God's affair, not mine. It is rather, Can we be raised from the death in which we now exist? Do you really think we can? Or do you think the world can in any important sense be redeemed? Do you believe in the resurrection of this flesh? If you don't, you don't believe in God.¹

Ultimately the doubt present in Christian faith is not that of questioning "facts of history" or such. It is rather the doubt that must come with risking one's total being that the proclamation of God in Jesus Christ is the truth about authentic life for me and for all human beings. Faith is the actual living, moment by moment, as an act of courage that the message of the cross is true—that we live only by dying.

Schubert Ogden wrote, "This, I hold, is the promise of faith: that, whatever else may befall us and however long or short may be the span of our lives, either here or hereafter, we are each embraced in every moment within God's boundless love and thereby have the ultimate destiny of endless life in and through him."²

The doubt which we express theologically is also a necessity for our relationships with each other. This includes that which exists between parents and children, between spouses, between friends, and in other relationships. The element of doubt must be present if that which binds us together is authentic. Nowhere are healthy and necessary doubts expressed more explicitly than in the adolescent's relationship with her or his parents.
As complimentary as the words may sound, we dehumanize another and impose an impossible burden on that person by the words "I have absolutely no doubts about you." In the epistle for the Third Sunday of Easter are the words, "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." We are not faithful when we regard anyone as other than human. To claim that we have no doubts about someone denies the humanity which we perceive from looking inside ourselves. Eventually this separates us from each other because of the false, defensive, and protective stance we seem forced to take.

Additionally, we cannot be without doubts concerning another person because we don’t have the infinite ability to know another completely. As we project many of our own needs and perceptions on God, we also see another person through our various needs and projections. But the surprise comes when we discover that our admission of doubts actually sets us free to take great risks in our trust of each other. Deep relationships are possible only as we can recognize and receive our doubts of someone else and see also what this insight means for the other's acceptance of us.

The constant element of doubt about our true knowledge of another honors that person as a creation of God and enables us to keep in process our unfolding discovery of the self that is there. This doubt also affirms that the other is always in the process of developing, whether this is a dramatic change or even an imperceptible change. Genuine relationships in which we trust another with our lives become a risk which we embrace in a new and healthy way when our doubts are acknowledged.

The desire and attempt to become free from doubts and to relate to that which is absolute is present in all of us. But we sometimes sacrifice our freedom in an attempt to lay hold of absolutes which always turn out not to be absolutes at all. Only God is absolute, and attempts to make absolute any thing, whether it is a political or an economic system, a religion, or any other creation, must end as idolatry and a forfeit of life.

The destructiveness of this illusion that we can live without doubts has implications that go beyond mere self-deception. The self-deception and blasphemous claims of absoluteness are divisive in our world. Religious groups are not always content to proclaim their views as the only right views, but the doubts which they suppress must be suppressed in the rest of us. They sometimes
demand that others share their views and use their language. Doubt enables Christians to risk their lives in the conviction that the Word became flesh in Jesus Christ; doubt enables us to proclaim this to everyone with the knowledge that our finite minds cannot know that which is known only by Almighty God. We therefore live in respect and affirmation of those who differ with us, those who stand over against us.

Doubt cannot be considered a virtue in itself. It can be destructive as well as creative. For some people doubt becomes a way of life that is encompassing. It becomes absolute, and it demands all of one's energy. The person cannot even "doubt his or her doubts." Our concern, however, has been with that doubt which is present within our Christian faith and which is essential to it.

Of faith and doubt the Roman Catholic theologian Hans Küng wrote:

My knowledge of faith is nevertheless everywhere followed by doubt as its shadow. . . . But I can also live by faith and then admittedly not be secure, yet wholly and entirely certain. The believer, like the lover, has no conclusive proofs to give him complete security. But the believer too, like the lover, can be completely certain of the Other by committing himself entirely to the Other. And this certainty is stronger than all the security established by proofs.4

NOTES

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