QUARTERLY REVIEW

A Journal of Scholarly Reflection for Ministry

John Wesley Against Aldersgate
Theodore W. Jennings

The Authority to Forgive Sins: Reclaiming Absolution for Pastoral Care
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QR SCRIPTURE STUDY FOR PREACHING

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As the various denominations that owe their origin to the work of John Wesley celebrate the two hundred and fiftieth anniversary of Aldersgate in 1988, it is important that those who have an interest in the historical and theological integrity of the Methodist movement attempt a reappraisal of the character and importance of this event.

Many of the references to Aldersgate in popular Methodist history and legend regard it as the founding event of Methodism. This view, as I have shown elsewhere, is untenable, at least from Wesley's own point of view. In the many histories of the Methodist movement published by Wesley there is never any mention made of Aldersgate. Instead the founding events referred to by Wesley include: the beginning of his commitment to holiness of life in 1725; the first group committed to this same end, which first met in Oxford in 1729 (the so-called Holy Club); the launchings of the first lay society in Savannah in 1736; and the beginning of the Fetter Lane society on May 1st 1738. From Wesley's own point of view, then, Aldersgate had no importance in the history of Methodism.

But if Aldersgate does not represent the origin of Methodism some may still wish to claim that it is the decisive turning point in Wesley's own faith journey, that it is the occasion for his "conversion." In order to clarify what is at stake here it will be necessary to engage in a rereading of Wesley's Journal, which...
is the source for this view. Does Wesley's Journal really support the claims made by those who regard Aldersgate as Wesley's conversion? This study will show that Wesley himself disclaims any such thing. Aldersgate was not Wesley's conversion. The attempt to maintain that it was rests upon a willful distortion of Wesley's own words and reflections.

The continued celebration of Aldersgate Sunday as well as the celebration of the two-hundred and fiftieth anniversary of Aldersgate is a product of historical bad faith and serves not to honor but to bury Wesley.

Because the view that Wesley was converted at Aldersgate has become so firmly entrenched in Methodist legend it will be necessary to proceed with this analysis in a careful, step-by-step analysis before turning to the question of what difference it makes. I will maintain that the "conversionism" which places such stress on Aldersgate as Wesley's conversion actually results in a fundamental distortion of Wesley's own theology. The continued celebration of Aldersgate Sunday as well as the celebration of the two-hundred and fiftieth anniversary of Aldersgate is a product of historical bad faith and serves not to honor but to bury Wesley.

INITIAL PROBLEMS

The notion that Aldersgate represents a decisive turning point in the emergence of Methodism and in the work and life of John Wesley is even superficially implausible. By 1738 Wesley had already been a priest of the Church of England for about thirteen years. Moreover, he had demonstrated throughout this time an extraordinary zeal for the life of complete dedication to God and church. This commitment had led him to undertake the dangerous journey to the New World with the intention of living among the indigenous peoples there in evangelical simplicity as a missionary. The basic disciplines of Methodism had long been practiced by Wesley and his friends at Oxford. He had already
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established a society based upon these same principles among
the settlers of Savannah when his original goal of being a
missionary to the native Americans was frustrated. The Fetter
Lane society, the parent society of Britain, was already
launched. Months before he hied himself to the meeting at
Aldersgate, he had embraced the doctrines of Peter Bohler
concerning justification, regeneration, and assurance—and had
so zealously proclaimed them that he was already excluded from
the pulpits of London. There is no change in his doctrine or
practice that is in any way associated with May, 1738. What then
is the importance of this event?

There is no change in his doctrine or practice that is in any
way associated with May, 1738. What then is the
importance of this event?

If no change in Wesley's commitments, doctrines or practices
can be traced to Aldersgate, then all the weight must fall on a
supposed inner transformation, an interior drama of "conver-
sion." In order to make the case for such an interpretation it has
become customary to refer to certain passages of Wesley's
Journal that are taken to provide a dramatic description of a
profound interior transformation in Wesley, a transformation in
self-consciousness which is on the order of a conversion. Let us
first rehearse some of these texts and then see whether Wesley's
Journal supports the view that what occurs at Aldersgate is such
a conversion.

THE APPEARANCE OF CONVERSION

The supposition that Aldersgate is Wesley's conversion
depends upon a dramatic transformation from Wesley's state
before to his state after the event. Only in this way is it possible to
speak of a conversion. Accordingly, the "before" description is
taken from one or another of Wesley's moments of self-criticism,
such as these concluding reflections in the first abstract from his
Journal (covering the period until his return from Georgia):
It is now two years and almost four months since I left my native country, in order to teach the Georgian Indians the nature of Christianity: But what have I learned myself in the meantime? Why, (what I the least of all suspected,) that I who went to America to convert others, was never myself converted to God. . . . This, then, have I learned in the ends of the earth—That I “am fallen short of the glory of God”: That my whole heart is “altogether corrupt and abominable”. . . . That “alienated” as I am from the life of God, I am “a child of wrath,” an heir of hell. . . . I have no hope, but that of being justified freely, “through the redemption that is in Jesus”: I have no hope, but that if I seek, I shall find Christ, and “be found in him not having my own righteousness, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith.” (Phil.iii.9) . . . The faith I want is, “a sure trust and confidence in God, that, through the merits of Christ, my sins are forgiven, and I am reconciled to the favour of God.” . . . I want that faith which none can have without knowing that he hath it; (though many imagine they have it, who have it not;) for whosoever hath it, is “freed from sin,” the whole “body of sin is destroyed” in him: he is freed from fear, “having peace with God through Christ and rejoicing in hope of the glory of God.” And he is freed from doubt, “having the love of God shed abroad in his heart, through the Holy Ghost which is given unto him”; which “spirit beareth witness with his spirit, that he is a child of God.” (Conclusion to the first abstract of the Journal appended to Feb. 1738. see also: Jan 13 and 24, 1738)

To some extracts from this passage (or one of its parallels) is then usually appended the description of the “Aldersgate experience”:

14. In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate-Street, where one was reading Luther’s preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation: And an assurance was given me, that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death. (May 24, 1738)

The moment of Wesley’s heart being “strangely warmed” is thus portrayed as a radical transformation, an irreversible change from the absence of faith to its triumphant presence, from anxiety to confidence, from despair to joy, from cold and formal religion to a heart inflamed with love for God and humanity.
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The plausibility of this description depends on the contrast between a dismal "before" and a luminous "after." But the impression of such a transformation depends on a selective and indeed dishonest reading of Wesley's own texts. In order to make this clear it is necessary only to reread the text of Wesley's Journal. We will consider first the description of Wesley's state prior to Aldersgate and then that of his state following Aldersgate. It will be clear from such a consideration that little if anything changes as a result of May 24th, that even on the restricted stage of Wesley's interior life, Aldersgate is largely a non-event.

WESLEY BEFORE ALDERSGATE

The plausibility of the conversionist reading of Aldersgate depends on the assumption that before May 24th Wesley did not have faith. Wesley himself seems to have imagined this to be true in the time under question. He was susceptible to the suggestion of some of the Germans that he was not yet a Christian. An illustration of this susceptibility we find in the early days of Wesley's presence in Savannah:

Mr. Oglethorpe returned from Savannah with Mr. Spangenberg, one of the Pastors of the Germans. I soon found what spirit he was of; and asked his advice with regard to my own conduct. He said, "My brother, I must first ask you one or two questions. Have you the witness within yourself? Does the Spirit of God bear witness with your spirit that you are a child of God?" I was surprised, and knew not what to answer. He observed it, and asked, "Do you know Jesus Christ?" I paused, and said, "I know he is the Savior of the world." "True," replied he; "but do you know he has saved you?" I answered, "I hope he has died to save me." He only added, "Do you know yourself?" I said, "I do." But I fear they were vain words. (Feb. 7, 1736)

It is this vulnerability to the suggestion that he was not a Christian in the full sense that leads Wesley to a rather credulous assessment of the cogency of the understanding of faith held by the Germans. (As we shall see, this vulnerability remains, even after Aldersgate.)
Thus Wesley makes certain assertions about his own spiritual condition that he later disavows. This disavowal is not hidden away in arcane texts. In spite of Wesley's normal reluctance to take issue directly with himself, he goes to the extraordinary lengths of inserting into the text of the Journal itself the disclaimers that rob the conversionist interpretation of much of its force. It may be helpful to illustrate this process. In the passage I have cited to show Wesley's condition prior to Aldersgate, there are four assertions that Wesley himself disputes in notes to that passage. The first is: "But what have I learned myself in the meantime? Why, (what I the least of all suspected,) that I who went to America to convert others, was never myself converted to God." This assertion is crucial to the conversionist reading since the problem is squarely put in terms of conversion. Wesley's note reads: "I am not sure of this." The tentative character of this negation is reduced in the next passage in which Wesley reviews his rigorous practice of righteousness only to conclude that it is worthless owing to his lack of faith: "Does all this give me a claim to the holy, heavenly, divine character of a Christian? By no means." But the note reads: "I had even then the faith of a servant, though not that of a son." The passage continues with Wesley roundly condemning himself: "This, then, have I learned in the ends of the earth—That I 'am fallen short of the glory of God': That my whole heart is 'altogether corrupt and abominable'. . . . That 'alienated' as I am from the life of God, I am 'a child of wrath'." Now Wesley must take the gloves off to contest this view. The note reads: "I believe not." Wesley then proceeds to describe the faith he lacks; a faith which he later describes (in a note to the same passage) as "the faith of a son."

What is the meaning of this debate between Wesley and Wesley? In his sermon "On Faith" written many years later Wesley writes:
Indeed, nearly fifty years ago, when the Preachers, commonly called Methodists, began to preach that grand scriptural doctrine, salvation by faith, they were not sufficiently apprized of the difference between a servant and a child of God. They did not clearly understand, that even one "who feareth God, and worketh righteousness, is accepted of him." In consequence of this they were apt to make sad the hearts of those whom God had not made sad. For they frequently asked those who feared God, "Do you know your sins are forgiven?" And upon their answering, "No," immediately replied, "Then you are a child of the devil." Nay, that does not follow. It might have been said, (and it is all that can be said with propriety,) "Hitherto you are only a servant, you are not a child of God. You have already great reason to praise God that he has called you to his honourable service. Fear not. Continue crying unto him, 'and you shall see greater things than these.'" (vol. VII, p. 199)

It is clear that the conversionist reading of Wesley's early Journal requires a systematic suppression of Wesley's fifty years of insight into the nature of faith, grace and the Christian life.

There are other illustrations of this same extraordinary attempt of Wesley to correct the conversionist reading of the Journal. In a passage which again demonstrates Wesley's susceptibility to the suspicion of the Germans, (this time the formidable Peter Bohler), he wrote:

I found my brother at Oxford, recovering from his pleurisy; and with him I met Peter Bohler; by whom (in the hand of the great God) I was on Sunday [March] the 5th, clearly convinced of unbelief, of the want of that faith whereby alone we are saved. (March 4, 1738)

Wesley was defenceless against the supposition that to have faith was to have perfection, in the sense of full dominion over inner and outer sin, the heart filled with the love of God, joy unspeakable, etc. He knew that he lacked this. He would know it still fifty years later.

Again Wesley qualifies this assertion of unbelief with a note that says that what he lacked was the faith which produces "the full
Christian salvation." Here it begins to be clear that what Wesley lacked was not faith, but what he was later to call "perfection." But, of course, this lack was never to be supplied. In this sense Wesley was never "converted." Wesley found that he wanted in 1738 what he had wanted since 1725: to realize Christian holiness. Bohler and the other Germans were telling him that this was an instantaneous work identical with conversion. Wesley was eventually to understand that, as thus formulated, the Moravian claim was false. Hence his later notion of a process of sanctification following regeneration. But in 1738 Wesley was defenceless against the supposition that to have faith was to have perfection, in the sense of full dominion over inner and outer sin, the heart filled with the love of God, joy unspeakable, etc. He knew that he lacked this. He would know it still fifty years later. But the utter confusion of justification, regeneration and perfection in 1738 produced an entirely artificial crisis in Wesley's self-understanding. That this confusion is what he began to preach in 1738 suggests that the London churches were not wholly unjustified in excluding Wesley from their pulpits!

Before turning to view the "effects" of Aldersgate it is well also to take note of the fact that on a variety of occasions prior to that event Wesley appears to have experienced a banishment of his doubts. It is important to see this so that Aldersgate is not artificially separated from this history of swings in self-consciousness. It is not the case that prior to Aldersgate Wesley was perennially in the grip of spiritual malaise, any more than it is true that afterwards he was exempt from this unhappy condition.

Here is established what will be a life-long pattern: Wesley's doubts are most effectively overcome not by interior experience but by the practice of preaching!

On the voyage to Georgia, Wesley was already brought up short against his unwillingness to die. According to his beloved book of Homilies this could be taken as evidence of a lack of faith:

A true Christian man is not afraid to die, who is the very member of Christ, the temple of the Holy Ghost, the son of God, and the very
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inheritor of the everlasting kingdom of heaven. But plainly contrary, he not only puts away the fear of death, but wishes, desires, and longs heartily for it. (from the "Homily Against the Fear of Death," cited in Wesley's Farther Appeal, vol. VIII, p. 75)

Thus Wesley was prone to reproach himself for any appearance of this fear. This occurs already on Nov. 23, 1735. But, still at sea, he

If the experience of this [inner] peace is to be called conversion then it is clear that Wesley was converted with some regularity.

takes heart two months later from the courage of the "Germans" and uses their example to exhort the English to courage. He then reports that "this was the most glorious day which I have seen hitherto" (Jan. 25, 1736). Here is established what will be a life-long pattern: Wesley's doubts are most effectively overcome not by interior experience but by the practice of preaching! Thus, nearing the end of the return voyage, Wesley determines again to preach to all on board (again following a severe storm at sea) and reports:

I no sooner executed this resolution than my spirit revived; so that from this day I had no more of that fearfulness and heaviness which before almost continually weighed me down. (Jan. 13, 1738)

Passages such as these make clear that Wesley was by no means in a state of unrelieved anxiety prior to Aldersgate. There were times of despondency and self-accusation to be sure. But there were as well times when Wesley found the peace he was looking for. If the experience of this peace is to be called conversion then it is clear that Wesley was converted with some regularity. But if this is so then the whole point of the conversionist reading of Wesley's Journal collapses.

THE AFTERMATH OF ALDERSGATE

We turn to a consideration of Wesley's inner life following Aldersgate. For the conversionist interpretation to maintain
even a shred of credibility given the swings of Wesley's mood before Aldersgate, then it must be possible to show that these swings ended on May 24th. Again, even a cursory reading of the Journal shows that this view is unsustainable.

In order to see this clearly we must first ask: in times of despondency, what was Wesley hoping for, what did he think faith would produce that he then felt he lacked? In a letter to a friend that appears in his Journal in May 22 and 23, 1738, Wesley maintains that the faith he lacks is characterized by these fruits: 'Do we already feel 'peace with God', and 'joy in the Holy Ghost'? Does 'his Spirit bear witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God'? Alas with mine he does not.' In general Wesley was expecting: (1) deliverance from inward and outward sin, (2) peace with God, (3) love of God, (4) joy. How does his experience square with this expectation?

Wesley remarks that all is not lost for there is still the fact that he is always a conqueror over sin. On Sunday the 28th he reassures himself that at least "I have freedom from sin;—not one unholy desire." Two days later even this is shattered . . .

Already in the description of Aldersgate there are signs of trouble. Immediately after speaking of his heart being strangely warmed Wesley notes:

But it was not long before the enemy suggested, "This cannot be faith; for where is the joy?" Then was I taught, that peace and victory over sin are essential to faith in the Captain of our salvation: But that, as to the transports of joy that usually attend the beginning of it, especially in those who have mourned deeply, God sometimes giveth, sometimes withholdeth them, according to the counsels of his own will.

Already the seeds of doubt are sown. The joy essential to the transformation Wesley had been expecting had failed to materialize. Other disappointments quickly follow:

After my return home I was much buffeted with temptations; but cried out, and they fled away. They returned again and again. I as often lifted up my eyes, and He "sent me help from his holy place." And herein I
found the difference between this and my former state chiefly consisted.
I was striving, yea, fighting with all my might under the law, as well as
under grace. But then I was sometimes, if not often, conquered; now, I
was always conqueror.

Wesley is already beginning to recognize that the expected
victory over temptation and doubt had not occurred. He still
dlung to the hope that he was going to be able always to
withstand temptation, however. The next day the uneasiness
grows:

Yet the enemy injected a fear, "If thou dost believe, why is there not a
more sensible change?" I answered, (yet not I,) "That I know not. But
this I know, I have 'now peace with God'. And I sin not today, and Jesus
my Master has forbid me to take thought for the morrow."

18. "But is not any sort of fear," continued the tempter, "a proof that
thou dost not believe?" I desired my Master to answer for me; and
opened his Book upon those words of St. Paul, "Without were fightings,
within were fears." Then, inferred I, well may fears be within me; but I
must go on, and tread them under my feet.

Thus far the effects of Aldersgate have been substantially
reduced from Wesley's earlier expectations. Already the
"conversion" fails to produce joy. Moreover the peace which is
incompatible with fear has failed to materialize. What then is
left? Wesley remarks that all is not lost for there is still the fact
that he is always a conqueror over sin. On Sunday the 28th he
reassures himself that at least "I have freedom from sin;—not
one unholy desire." Two days later even this is shattered:

Yet on Wednesday [two days later, but the next entry] did I grieve the
Spirit of God, not only by not watching unto prayer, but likewise by
speaking with sharpness instead of tender love, of one that was not
sound in the faith. Immediately God hid his face, and I was troubled;
and in this heaviness I continued until the next morning, June 1: When it
pleased God, while I was exhorting another, to give comfort to my
soul. . .

Just as before Aldersgate, Wesley is not always conqueror;
again, just as before, his equilibrium is restored by the expedient
of convincing someone else.
It is already clear that Wesley's inner world is not in dramatically better shape after Aldersgate. He still is telling himself that things have taken a turn for the better, but he is becoming increasingly aware that the expected change has not yet occurred. On Oct. 14th he writes:

But St. Paul tells us elsewhere, that "the fruit of the Spirit is love, peace, joy, long-suffering, gentleness, meekness, temperance." Now, although, by the grace of God, I find a measure of some of these in myself; namely, of peace, long-suffering, gentleness, meekness, temperance; yet others I find not. I cannot find in myself the love of God, or of Christ. Hence my deadness and wanderings in public prayer: Hence it is, that even in the holy communion I have no more than a cold attention.

Again: I have not had joy in the Holy Ghost; no settled, lasting joy. Nor have I such peace as excludes the possibility either of fear or doubt. When holy men have told me I had no faith, I have often doubted whether I had or no. And these doubts have made me very uneasy, till I was relieved by prayer and the Holy Scriptures.

Yet, upon the whole, although I have not yet that joy in the Holy Ghost, nor the full assurance of faith, much less am I, in the full sense of the words, "in Christ a new creature": I nevertheless trust that I have a measure of faith, and am "accepted in the beloved": I trust "the hand-writing that was against me is blotted out": and that I am "reconciled to God": through his son. (Oct. 14, 1738)

Bit by bit the "change" is eroding. For he believed that the transformation for which he had been hoping would produce not only joy but the love of God. The realization is growing that he does not have what the Moravians had led him to expect from "conversion," from the new dawn of authentic faith.

As a result, Wesley is once again vulnerable to the assault upon his confidence on the part of the Moravians. That assault is not long in coming:

Returning from preaching at the Castle, I met once more with my old companion in affliction, C.D.; who stayed with me till Monday. His last conversation with me was as follows:—

"In this you are better than you was at Savannah. You know that you was then quite wrong. But you are not right yet. You know that you was then blind. But you do not see now.

"I doubt not but God will bring you to the right foundation; but I have no hope for you, while you are on you represent foundation: It is as
different from the true, as the right hand from the left. You have to begin anew.

"I have observed all your words and actions; and I see you are of the same spirit still. You have a simplicity; but it is a simplicity of your own: it is not the simplicity of Christ. You think you do not trust in your own works: but you do trust in your own works. You do not believe in Christ.

"You have a present freedom from sin; but it is only a temporary suspension of it, not a deliverance form it. And you have a peace; but it is not a true peace: if death were to approach, you would find all your fears return.

"But I am forbid to say any more. My heart sinks in me like a stone."

I was troubled. I begged of God an answer of peace; and opened on those words, "As many as walk according to this rule, peace be on them, and mercy, and upon the Israel of God." I was asking, in the evening, that God would fulfill all his promises in my soul, when I opened my Testament on those words, "My hour is not yet come." (Nov. 23-7, 1738, pp. 164-5)

Thus the Moravian argument that persuaded Wesley in Georgia and subsequently in London, that he did not have faith, still has power over him. But Wesley has not given up hope. That "my hour is not yet come" means that Wesley is to still expect what he has been longing for since the trip to Georgia: true conversion. Conversion then is not something that has already come to pass in Aldersgate. Several months later Wesley still regards it as lying in his future.

In consequence, Wesley remains open to the frontal assault of self-doubt. In a thinly disguised self-description that exceeds in severity even those to which he was given in pre-Aldersgate days, Wesley writes:

One who had the form of godliness many years, wrote the following reflections:

"My friends affirm I am mad, because I said I was not a Christian a year ago. I affirm, I am not a Christian now. Indeed, what I might have been I know not, had I been faithful to the grace then given, when, expecting nothing less, I received such a sense of the forgiveness of my sins, as till then I never knew. But that I am not a Christian at this day, I as surely know, as that Jesus is the Christ.

"For a Christian is one who had the fruits of the Spirit of Christ, which (to mention no more) are love, peace, joy. But these I have not. I have not any love of God. I do not love either the Father or the Son. Do you ask, how do I know whether I love God, I answer by another question, 'How
do you know whether you love me? Why, as you know whether you are hot or cold. You feel this moment, that you do or do not love me. And I feel this moment that I do not love God; which therefore I know, because I feel it. There is no word. . . . . . Again, joy in the Holy Ghost I have not. I have now and then some starts of joy in God: But it is not that joy. For it is not abiding. . . .

"Yet again: I have not 'the peace of God'; that peace, peculiarly so-called. . . . "From hence I conclude, (and let all the saints of the world hear, that where insoever they boast, they may be found even as I,) though I have given, and do give, all my goods to feed the poor, I am not a Christian. Though I have endured hardship, though I have in all things denied myself and taken up my cross, I am not a Christian. My works are nothing, my sufferings are nothing; I have not the Spirit of Christ. Though I have constantly used all the means of grace for twenty years, I am not a Christian." (Jan. 4, 1739, pp. 170-2)

Wesley is back to thinking of himself as not a Christian! To be sure this too will pass. The point is not that Wesley is not a Christian after Aldersgate. Indeed, as he later recognized, he was one before. The point is that nothing has changed with Aldersgate. Both before and after Wesley was committed to entire holiness of life. Both before and after Wesley lacked "joy." Both before and after Wesley could doubt whether he had faith. Both before and after these doubts were resolved primarily through preaching. Both before and after Wesley sought but did not succeed in finding holiness proof against temptation, faith proof against doubt, peace proof against fear. Indeed, as the Journal makes clear, Wesley had hoped that the desired transformation was occurring on the fateful night in Aldersgate Street. But he unflinchingly records, and publishes to the world, the unravelling of this hope in the course of the next few weeks. The dishonesty shown by those who ignore Wesley's own description of his experience in order to claim that Wesley was converted at Aldersgate cannot be ascribed to Wesley himself.
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converted at Aldersgate cannot be ascribed to Wesley himself. Only with time, experience, and maturity would Wesley find the categories which would make sense of incomplete faith and the progress of growing in grace.

ASSESSMENT
The careful reading of Wesley’s own Journal demonstrates that Wesley was not “converted” at Aldersgate. Indeed the very use of the terminology of “conversion” is misleading in Wesley’s case. He himself very rarely uses the term. It is simply not especially congenial to his way of thinking.

But if we try to use terminology more familiar to Wesley the picture of the significance of Aldersgate is not changed. If we use Wesley’s view that prior to Aldersgate he had lacked the sort of faith which saves us “with the full Christian salvation” (Wesley’s note to the Journal entry of Mar. 4, 1738) then it is certain that this is what he would later call perfection. Not only does this not come at Aldersgate, Wesley never records receiving the gift for which he so much yearned all his life.

One of Wesley’s expressions for what he had been expecting is being “born of the Spirit.” More than a year after Aldersgate Wesley describes the fruit of a living faith:

The love of God shed abroad in the heart, the peace of God which passes all understanding, and joy in the Holy Ghost... These are some of those inward fruits of the Spirit, which must be felt wheresoever they are; and without them I cannot learn from Holy Writ that any man is ‘born of the Spirit.’ (letter in response to the author of “A Caution against Religious Delusion,” included in the Journal July 31, 1739).

This passage in the Journal, read in connection with Wesley’s
description of his own state following Aldersgate makes it clear that Wesley was certainly not "born of the Spirit" at Aldersgate. Indeed Wesley himself draws this same conclusion in an earlier letter to his brother Samuel, this time employing another of his favorite terms: the "witness of the Spirit."

Those who have not yet received joy in the Holy Ghost, the love of God, and the plerophory of faith, (any or all of which I take to be the witness of the Spirit with our spirits that we are the sons of God) I believe to be Christians in that imperfect sense wherein I may call myself such. (letter to Samuel; Oct. 30, 1738. Works, vol. XII, p. 23)

Regardless of the terminology we employ, the expected change had not occurred at Aldersgate. Whether we speak of perfect faith, of being born of the spirit, or of the witness of the spirit—whatever, the conclusion remains the same; Aldersgate was not what Wesley was looking for.

Neither before nor after [Aldersgate] did Wesley find it possible to "love" the God he so vigorously served. Yet serve he did, whether as servant or as son; and in the end that was all that mattered to him.

Many years later in the strength of Christian maturity Wesley, looking back over his own life, writes:

I do not remember to have heard or read anything like my own experience. Almost ever since I can remember, I have been led in a peculiar way. I go on in an even line, being very little raised at one time, or depressed at another. Count Zinzendorf observes, there are three different ways wherein it pleases God to lead his people. Some are guided almost in every instance by apposite texts of Scripture. Others see a clear and plain reason for everything they are to do. And yet others are led not so much by Scripture or reason, as by particular impressions. I am very rarely led by impressions, but generally by reason and by Scripture. I see abundantly more than I feel. I want to feel more love and zeal for God. (letter to Miss Ritchie; Feb. 24, 1786; vol. XIII, p. 66)

This is a sober and generally accurate assessment. Wesley's own life cannot serve as an illustration of the conversionist model of
JOHN WESLEY AGAINST ALDERSGATE

Christianity to which Wesley himself had been so strongly attracted. Despite the attempt to destroy Wesley's own experience perpetrated by the celebrators of Aldersgate, Wesley was not "converted" on May 24th, 1738. Aldersgate was one of many moments of reassurance which Wesley encountered both before and after that date. It was followed as well as preceded by times of doubt. Neither before nor after did Wesley find it possible to "love" the God he so vigorously served. Yet serve he did, whether as servant or as son; and in the end that was all that mattered to him. In his later years Wesley never spoke of Aldersgate. If he did want to speak of the decisive beginning of his mission and ministry it was not to 1738 that he referred but to 1725; the year he committed himself to entire holiness of life.

THE SUBVERSION OF WESLEYAN THEOLOGY

Careful attention to Wesley's own writings allows us to see that the focus upon Aldersgate as either the beginning of Methodism or as the basic turning point in Wesley's own faith journey has no support from Wesley himself. Despite the legends that have been assiduously cultivated, Aldersgate can in no sense be thought of as the, or even as a, conversion of Wesley. We have seen that the very texts cited to show that

Wesley was not converted at Aldersgate. Either one must say, with the later Wesley, that the decisive turning point in his own life of faith (his "conversion") came thirteen years earlier in 1725, or one must accept that we have no evidence that he was ever converted!

Wesley lacked faith prior to Aldersgate are explicitly contested by Wesley himself in a series of notes to those same passages. And we have also seen that after Aldersgate Wesley was still hoping for the dawn of faith in his heart. This, of course, can be attributed to Wesley's own confused understanding of faith at the time. But the very fact that this is the case makes the isolation
of Aldersgate, the privileging of this moment in Wesley's life, all the less excusable. Wesley was not converted at Aldersgate. Either one must say, with the later Wesley, that the decisive turning point in his own life of faith (his "conversion") came thirteen years earlier in 1725, or one must accept that we have no evidence that he was ever converted!

What this means is that the conversionist myth of Aldersgate is a lie. It is unsupported by Wesley's own writings and depends upon a systematic distortion of these texts. To celebrate Aldersgate as either the beginning of Methodism or as the conversion of Wesley is to perpetrate an historical fraud. While some may wish to argue that this sort of knowing distortion of the truth is justified by the results it may be imagined to have in encouraging others to be converted, Wesley knew better. For he often quoted as his motto the saying of St. Augustine: "I would not tell a willful lie, to save the souls of the whole world." (Letter to Bishop of Gloucester, 1762; vol. IX, p. 139).

But more is at stake here than historical accuracy or hermeneutical integrity. For the Aldersgate story as it is celebrated in Methodism is not only a myth in the pejorative sense of being factually false. It is also a myth in the phenomenological sense, that is, a narrative of origin that serves to vividly focus and promote a fundamental view of reality, in this case the reality of the Christian life. The view of Christian life focused by the myth of Aldersgate (or "Aldersgatism") is one which is fundamentally and systematically contrary to Wesley's own theology and practice.

To celebrate Aldersgate as either the beginning of Methodism or as the conversion of Wesley is to perpetrate an historical fraud.

Aldersgatism enshrines the notion that the moment of conversion or regeneration is the be all and end all of Christian existence. It frequently supposes that one must be able to date one's conversion and that nothing after this is really important. As early as 1740, in his preface to the book of Hymns, Wesley emphasizes what he calls "the gradual process of the work of God in the soul" (vol. XIV, p. 325).
Aldersgatism supposes that an explicit awareness of God’s pardoning love is essential to justification. Wesley writes “I have not for many years thought a consciousness of acceptance to be essential to justifying faith.” (letter to Dr. Rutherford, 1968; vol. XIV, p. 348.)

Aldersgatism regards faith as the aim of all preaching. Once this is accomplished, once someone believes, then the aim or object of God’s work in that life is accomplished. Wesley writes:

I would just add, that I regard even faith itself, not as an end, but as a means only. The end of the commandment is love, of every command, of the whole Christian dispensation. Let this love be attained, by whatever means, and I am content; I desire no more. All is well, if we love the Lord our God with all our heart and our neighbor as ourselves. (letter to Mr. John Smith, June 25, 1746; vol. XII, p. 78-9)

Aldersgatism maintains that before some dramatic conversion that removes all doubt a person, however much in other respects a committed Christian, is nonetheless a sinner on the road to Hell. Wesley, however, maintains:

Not that every one is a child of the devil, (as some have rashly asserted, who know not what they speak, nor whereof they affirm,) till he is, in this full sense, born of God. On the contrary, whoever he be, who hath a sure trust and confidence in God, that through the merits of Christ his sins are forgiven, and he reconciled to the favour of God; he is a child of God, and, if he abide in him, an heir of all the great and precious promises. Neither ought he in any wise to cast away his confidence, or to deny the faith he hath received, because it is weak, because hitherto it is only “as a grain of mustard-seed”; or because “it is tried with fire,” so that his soul is “in heaviness through manifold temptations.” (vol. XIV, p. 325-6)

Aldersgatism is not only a pious fraud, it is also the subversion of the fundamental insights of Wesley’s theology. It offers a form of pious individualism at odds with the social Christianity of John Wesley. It focuses upon interior and isolated moments instead of the life experience of lived Christianity. Instead of free grace, it offers cheap grace, a grace with no commitment to holiness, to the life of disciplined love, and to the benefit “of the least of these.” It knows, and can know, nothing of a preferential option for the poor for it thinks of interior consciousness instead of doing the will “of the Father.”
Today there are those who call themselves "evangelical" who preach this ersatz gospel. In Wesley's day they called themselves "gospel preachers." Wesley was not fooled. In a letter to Charles, he wrote:

If we duly join faith and works in all our preaching, we shall not fail of a blessing. But of all preaching, what is usually called Gospel preaching is the most useless, if not the most mischievous: a dull, yea, or lively, harangue on the sufferings of Christ, or salvation by faith, without strongly inculcating holiness. I see, more and more, that this naturally tends to drive holiness out of the world. (letter to Charles; Nov. 4, 1772; vol. XII, p. 140)

Wesley may be rightly said to be the mentor of evangelical Christianity. But he was not taken in by a phony evangelicalism that for all its talk of Christ, faith, and being born again, had no relation to that biblical faith that works by love to produce the holiness without which none shall see God.

Aldersgatism is not only a pious fraud, it is also the subversion of the fundamental insights of Wesley's theology. It offers a form of pious individualism at odds with the social Christianity of John Wesley.

The irony is that the pseudo-evangelicalism Wesley opposed has found a way to claim Wesley for its own. This occurs by way of the "myth of Aldersgate." This is by no means a harmless legend. It is a falsification of the facts of Methodist history, the distortion of Wesley's own texts, and the subversion of Wesley's most important theological insights. As the Methodist movement celebrates the 250th anniversary of Aldersgate, it is only celebrating its own willful distortion of its own history, its own apostasy from Wesleyan theology.

NOTES

1. The present essay is a revision of a paper presented to the 1987 meeting of the American Academy of religion entitled, "The Myth of Aldersgate."
2. The volume number refers to the widely available Jackson edition of Wesley's Works, in fourteen volumes.
When was the last time that you as a pastor pronounced an absolution of sins to an individual or family who reviewed and confessed their faults? Many of us assume that listening counts the most and that our personal acceptance of persons serves as the equivalent of a declaration of God's forgiveness. Some of us consider guilt feelings to be neurotic, rather than evidence of remorse for sins. If, indeed, this is the case, we understandably conclude that absolution would leave these feelings untouched. A few of us on a regular basis respond to persons' self-exploration and owning of fault with definite words of forgiveness, perhaps in a ritual form, however informal. On the whole, however, this kind of pastoral response is not commonplace. Is absolution appropriate only in limited circumstances in the pastoral care of individuals and families? Or is it not, rather, a valid aspect of ministry that is neglected and unexamined?

In the classic text Pastoral Care in Historical Perspective, Clebsch and Jaeckle bewail the loss of ritual in pastoral care. William Hulme argues that "to separate the church's means of grace from pastoral counseling would divorce pastoral counseling from its Christian context." I believe that God can give God's grace in any way God desires. Yet I believe that there are designated means of grace that have been effective in the life of God's people for ordinary use as we wait on God. To overlook these means of grace—such as prayer, scripture
and the sacraments—is not sensible in pastoral care ministry, I suggest. The ministry of absolution in the context of personal confession of sin is one particular means of grace that has been the center of theological disagreement. But to neglect it debilitates our Christian service as a ministry of reconciliation.

In the minds of many pastors, use of means of grace such as prayer or a ritual of confession and absolution is associated with being unauthentic, with hiding behind a professional role.

Confession is not neglected as an element in corporate services of worship, though the response in many liturgies is a general assurance of pardon rather than a definite proclamation of forgiveness in the form of direct address. The situation is different, however, in pastoral ministry with individuals and families. Rarely does a Protestant minister, at least, hear a confession and pronounce absolution. In pastoral ministry with individuals and families the emphasis has been on the personal authenticity and availability of the minister as person to other persons. Certainly this emphasis is sound! But there is a problem. In the minds of many pastors, use of means of grace such as prayer or a ritual of confession and absolution is associated with being unauthentic, with hiding behind a professional role. I believe that setting the means of grace over against personal authenticity in pastoral care and counseling ministry is a mistake. This misunderstanding, based on a popular misappropriation of insights from psychological disciplines and practice, has become a habit of mind among many pastors. It is a key reason for the neglect of a ministry of absolution in the context of personal confession of sin, reconciliation to God, and reconciliation to one another.

Since the Reformation the ritual of absolution has been a topic of controversy in the thought and practice of Christian churches. Luther himself, while he criticized many aspects of the theology and practice of the church, accepted absolution and the "authority of ministers to absolve from sin." He eliminated any prescription
of penance to make satisfaction for sin in favor of a call to live a life of faith. Protestants today differ on whether and how absolution is to be practiced in the church’s ministry. Nonetheless, though a

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host of theological and ministry issues remain unresolved, we are not stuck in the same spot of controversy. Currently there are fresh ecumenical developments in theological thought that can be put in conversation with contemporary psychological thinking in order to reconstruct and reassess our understanding of absolution as a means of grace.

It is common to hear psychiatrists and psychologists say that in their conversations with patients they must provide the secular equivalent of confession and absolution or refer patients to clergy who can offer this (although in fact they rarely make such referrals). That is, despite our cultural obsession with autonomy, our secular priests of autonomy are reporting that individual welfare often depends on a human transaction in which one person confesses fault to another, who in turn accepts and provides definite assurance of pardon. Martin Smith puts the matter this way: “The value of disclosing one’s innermost and perhaps painful secrets to another person became more intelligible to many after the rise of psychiatry and the counseling movement” (pp. 120,121).

Even though pastors generally realize the importance of listening to persons as they disclose their problems and faulizedness, pastors tend to assume that listening is sufficient, or that the way to proceed beyond empathy is to guide persons through a problem-solving process. The avoidance of a definite pronouncement of forgiveness to persons may derive from theological questions. It may also relate to uncertainty about the psychological soundness of such a response (e.g., does absolution short-circuit the healing process?) In light of
this situation I wish to argue that recent developments in both theological and psychological disciplines call for a reconstruction and reassessment of absolution in pastoral care.

DEVELOPMENTS IN THEOLOGY: ROMAN CATHOLIC

Absolution simply is “the pronouncement of remission to the penitent.” Since Vatican II there has been a decided shift of emphasis in the categories for interpreting the sacrament of confession and absolution, now called the rite of reconciliation.

First, this sacrament clearly is placed in the context of God’s reconciling activity. This means that, while a penitent spirit still is taken seriously, it is not a dominant or exclusive focus of the sacrament. It is God who takes initiative out of a loving desire for reconciliation. Consequently, in the new rite the priest is instructed to “welcome the penitent with fraternal charity, and... address him with friendly words.” Furthermore, the priest “urges the penitent to have confidence in God.” Thus a clear emphasis is placed on the divine desire for reconciliation and power to effect the same.

The guiding theme of reconciliation also places the rite of absolution in a social context. Because our common life bind us together in a transnatural solidarity, “penance always entails reconciliation with our brothers and sisters who are always harmed by our sins” (p. 344). Because of this social connectedness, the rite of reconciliation is the liturgy whereby “the Church renews itself” (p. 349). To fulfill its purpose in the lives of Christ’s faithful people, absolution “... must take root in their whole lives and move them to more fervent service of God and neighbor” (p. 347). Though absolution is a function of the office of ordained priest, its context is the ministry of the entire church: “The whole Church, as a priestly people, acts in different ways in the work of reconciliation which has been entrusted to it by our Lord” (p. 347).

Finally, the structure of this sacrament in the Roman Catholic tradition as now practiced is instructive for ecumenical reflection. Prayer by both penitent and priest is highlighted as essential to preparation and sounds the note of mutuality, which the contemporary church now emphasizes. Then comes
the priestly welcome to the person. Since contrition is vital to transformation of the whole person and since Scripture sheds light on divine mercy and human faultedness, reading the Word of God follows the welcome, or may be suggested as part of preparation for the sacrament. The person confesses sin as completely and openly as possible. In response the priest suggests an act of penance or satisfaction. This is not punishment for sin but honors the principle of justice by prescribing action which corresponds symbolically to the seriousness of the sin. Further, it provides an antidote for human weakness and launches one into new life in Christ. Its social significance is underscored: “This act of penance may suitably take the form of prayer, self-denial, and especially service of one’s neighbor and works of mercy. These will underline the fact that sin and its forgiveness have a social aspect” (p. 351). Finally, the priest provides absolution. This is done in these words:

God, the Father of mercies,  
through the death and resurrection of his Son  
has reconciled the world to himself  
and sent the Holy Spirit among us  
for the forgiveness of sins;  
through the ministry of the Church  
may God give you pardon and peace,  
and I absolve you from your sins  
in the name of the Father, and of the Son,  
and of the Holy Spirit. (pp. 362, 363)

Finally, praise is given to God and the person is dismissed. What is the significance of the structure of this ritual? I suggest that the context of relational reconciliation unifies the whole and gives all the parts an integral relation to one another. Consequently, following Jean Christine Lambert’s concept of “action,” I suggest that these elements are not series of actions but essential aspects of a single action. The Roman Catholic rite, then, depicts one interpretation of how we are being transformed into the image of Christ, as sons and daughters of God.

Today Roman Catholic theology and practice are in transition—in itself a process of transformation. Protestant
situations may be dated. It is time to pitch the sail and test the waters anew for direction in our time.

DEVELOPMENTS IN THEOLOGY: PROTESTANT

In general terms, the situation among Protestants looks like this. Most provide a corporate assurance of pardon after confession in public worship, but have no ritual for personal conferences of the person with a pastor. Those who have a practice of individual absolution as such, see it as a voluntary matter. How does theological tradition and contemporary theological developments shed light on current practice?

Catholic moral theology, among other things, provides guidance for identifying wrongs to be confessed. The Protestant perspective on human guilt, on the other hand, has eschewed attention to specifics in favor of a raised consciousness regarding the pervasive, underlying foundation of human faultedness—and how this sinfulness affects our relation with God. Profound as the Protestant approach may have been, it has washed ashore on the sands of diffuse, personal conscience. The human condition thus remains detached from particular behaviors and patterns of behaviors that give color and shape to our relation with God and neighbor. In fact, to the extent that Protestant pastoral care gives attention to specifics, it has done so by listening to modern psychologies, especially those that emphasize human dynamics and interactional patterns between people. If we Protestants are flexible enough to borrow from the psychological disciplines for some concreteness, perhaps we also can learn moral theology from our Catholic brothers and sisters.

The concreteness encouraged in confession, however, is not the heart of the matter. On the Catholic side we have a process of reenvisioning the meaning of the ritual. On the Protestant side, especially in the liturgical renewal movement, we witness—(Protestants are always witnessing)—a fresh emphasis on ritual. How can these two be integrated to make a reassessment of
absolution possible? Let us begin with a re-emphasis on the Word, and our recognition that the ministry of the Word is not at its core limited to preaching or prophecy.

In Scripture the Word has many meanings, from a particular saying of a prophet to wisdom sayings to the Word embodied and personified in Jesus Christ. The Word, then, is a particular kind of metaphor with many meanings and cannot be contained within a herald model of what ministry is. Accordingly, we can speak of ministry of the Word at a verbal level, where words of faith are voiced and heard; ministry of the Word at a dynamic level, where faith is communicated in the spirit and tone of interpersonal interaction more than in content; and finally, ministry of the Word at a symbolic level, where faith is communicated in symbolic acts, formal in the case of ritual and informal as well. Given this understanding, absolution is not an automatic, magical act, but a communication of the Word. To be effective, the meaning of the act must be clear and heard in depth. At the same time, the Word is conveyed in sign act as well as verbally. What is voiced is fully heard when it is embodied.

The priest or minister as a person has no power to give God to or keep God from anyone; but when personal spirit is congruent with word and act, the Word of God is present dynamically.

In the case of absolution, there is an order of worship even for a personal conference. The rite embodies the meaning of the words when, for example, the hand of the priest or minister is outstretched or placed on the person's head. It also works at a verbal level, giving the content of the gospel addressed to the penitent persons. But the person of the minister in relation to the parishioner is not thereby excluded. The priest or minister as a person has no power to give God to or keep God from anyone; but when personal spirit is congruent with word and act, the Word of God is present dynamically. This is why
Clinical Pastoral Education and related forms of theological education emphasize the genuine availability of the minister as a person to other persons. The authority of the word spoken is not that of one person over another, but the authority of the truth, the truth of God. The authority of the word dynamically conveyed in interpersonal spirit is the authority of genuineness as God's gift to us. The authority of the word embodied symbolically in ritual is the authority of a concrete form that evokes and shapes faith. All this can make absolution a powerful communication of the gospel of Jesus Christ, for when the Word is fully heard faith is born, and the Word creates and gives what it speaks about.

Many Protestants are rediscovering ritual in their corporate worship. This renewal is bound to disclose to us the meaning and power of ritual. As this liturgical renewal processes, it is being extended to pastoral care ministry beyond corporate worship. Modern pastoral care as it emerged in the form of Clinical Pastoral Education was itself a renewal movement in the life of the church. As another such movement, liturgical renewal is beginning to interact with and revitalize pastoral care. It is timely and vital, then, that we reconsider the ministry of absolution in the context of personal confession of sin.

Given this broad perspective on absolution in the Protestant movement and Roman Catholic tradition, let us examine briefly several particular traditions: Lutheran, Reformed, Anglican and Methodist.

**Lutheran and Reformed**

Lutheran use of absolution in the context of personal confession is so limited that it appears to be a practice reserved for exceptional cases. Their corporate ritual has two forms, one of which definitely pronounces absolution in contrast to general words of assurance. Luther himself continued to advocate absolution, both corporate and personal. The change he inaugurated with respect to this practice was one of interpretation. He affirmed both the priesthood of believers and the church's office of ordained minister as vehicles for such a
means of grace. For Luther, confession was not a matter of trying to recall every sin so that a list would be complete. Instead if a catalog of certain sins, confession was a concrete way of acknowledging that one is a sinner. Thus the Larger Catechism says, "... When I urge you to go to confession, I am simply urging you to be a Christian". Bonhoeffer believed that the confession of sin to God in the presence of another human being brings about "the public death of the sinner.""8

Luther had some conviction about the effectiveness of words of absolution. Thus he says:

If absolution is to be right and effective, it must flow from the command of Christ and must say this: I absolve you and your sins... In the name of Christ and by virtue of His command. He has commanded me to tell you that your sins are forgiven... And you are in duty bound to accept this absolution and firmly to believe it not as the word of man but as if you have heard it out of the very mouth of God himself."9

Luther set absolution in the context of justification by faith. As Walter Koehler claims, "... the practice of individual confession and absolution stands as one of the most clear and concrete pastoral applications of justification by grace" (p. 38). But what has happened? Koehler acknowledges that at the level of practice in Lutheranism today counseling has taken the place of confession, and on the other side, Holy Communion has taken the place of absolution (p. 57).

How does Calvin contribute to our understanding of the Protestant tradition on the question of absolution? He believed, of course, that the Roman Catholic doctrine of penance tortured the conscience, and he eschewed any understanding that repentance is the cause of divine forgiveness. On the other hand, he did enjoin public and private confession of sin before God. He believed that individuals are free to choose their confessor, but he gives the preference to pastors who should be the best qualified, stating, "... while the duty of mutual admonition and rebuke is entrusted to all Christians, it is especially enjoined upon ministers."10 Furthermore, he declared, "... it is no common or light solace to have present there the ambassador of Christ, armed with the mandate
of reconciliation, by whom it hears proclaimed its absolution” (p. 639). He believed that absolution publicly and privately “sealed” gospel grace in the hearts of believers (p. 639). Calvin did not believe that a priest forgives sins; rather the confessor “pronounces and declares” them forgiven (pp. 649, 650).

Anglican and Methodist

Anglicans are discovering a renewal of personal confession. The 1928 Prayer Book encouraged personal confession in the rite for Visitation with the Sick and in one of the Exhortations at Holy Communion. The present prayer book contains a separate liturgy for the reconciliation of the Penitent. It has two forms. The first follows the 1662 Prayer Book, using the words, “I absolve you.” The second implores Christ to forgive the penitent through the priest’s ministry. In the Anglican tradition this rite is voluntary and encouraged at particular times; namely, 1) during counseling, 2) when persons feel helpless in a cycle of guilt, 3) when persons are returning to church or reaffirming their baptismal vows, and 4) when persons, on their own initiative, desire deeper relationship with Jesus Christ. Clebsch and Jaeckle argued that we are in a time when one of the four classic functions of pastoral care, the function of reconciliation, is again coming to dominate pastoral ministry. This interpretation is supported by both Catholic and Anglican developments.

Just as preaching in the Methodist movement was not a substitute for Holy Communion, so for Wesley class meetings did not take the place of personal confession and absolution.

John Wesley did not write much on the topic of absolution, though he had much to say about means of grace, the witness of the spirit, and the assurance of faith. The reason is simply that Wesley assumed the validity of Anglican practice in his
day as reflected in the 1662 Book of Common Prayer. His later comments on the priestly office substantiate this. Just as preaching in the Methodist movement was not a substitute for Holy Communion, so for Wesley class meetings did not take the place of personal confession and absolution. Of course, departure from Wesley is not unknown in Methodist history. However, the neglect of absolution among Methodists has no theological basis in the writings or spirit of their founder.

In addition to a shift in Roman Catholic emphases, we must take note of a gap between tradition and practice for many Protestants. In this journey through selected Protestant groups and constructive perspective on an enlarged theology of the Word, I am arguing that most Protestants can and should reconsider the practice of the ministry of absolution. This does not mean that no serious differences will remain between Roman Catholic and Protestant interpretations. As the context for the practice, nonetheless, reconciliation has emerged as a dominant theme which speaks to Christians in various traditions. Furthermore, the liturgical renewal in Protestantism allows individual confession and absolution to serve as a primary ritual in the cure of souls tradition. But the question then arises: does pastoral counseling require confession and absolution in ritual form for its completion? To answer this question I want now to put some of these theological reflections in conversation with psychological understanding.

DEVELOPMENTS IN PSYCHOLOGY:
Object Relations Theory

In particular, the psychoanalytic tradition known as object relations theory can help us to understand what happens in the ministry of absolution—and thus can assist us in avoiding a dualism that sets means of grace in pastoral ministry over against personal authenticity.

Object relations theory focuses on primary human relationships in order to understand psychological functioning. It is believed that one's basic images of life emerge out of these relationships, such as the infant/mother relationship. Though
the term has different uses, for the most part object relations is a psychological term referring to mental, affect-charged images of self and others. These images are largely unconscious. The bedrock for the formation of these images is the internalized experiences of infants' interactions with the primary persons of their first years. Though object relations refers to mental representations of personal relationships, the term "object" was used by Freud because he conceived of the image as the target of psychic energy. Though the term "object" carries a connotation of otherness, the object relations under consideration may be a relation to one's own self-image.

Object relations theorists have given most attention to how a sense of other and a sense of self emerge in the early experience of the infant. Winnicott emphasizes a process he calls mirroring. In playful interaction with the infant the mother imitates the behaviors of the infant, and the infant, observing this imitating, first sees itself as reflected in the other person, the mother functioning as a kind of mirror. Out of this process the child develops a mental representation of the other (the mother) and of itself. Such representations mean that the child begins to think, and is now able to represent, or make present again what is absent. The mother is not always there, yet the child can remember the mother through the image of her. The child's sense of self and mother grows and other family members come more into the emotional and mental picture. During the second year the child creates many representations, including imaginary companions. Most important for our purposes, the child develops a representation of God, or a mental image of God, and this image is based solidly on the image of the primary parent. Rizzuto believes that all persons, in the Western world at least, have such a mental representation of God, however unconscious, in their mental framework. This representation of God, unfortunately, does not always harmonize with one's sense of self. Beyond infancy, as persons interact with culture, this mental image of God can and often does undergo significant change.

This perspective on psychological functioning provides an account of how symbolic thinking originates in the interactive
process of primary interpersonal relationships. The personal images have great power. The early images of self and parent are bigger than life. They are affect laden. They picture the self's basic ties and integrity. They lay the groundwork for all symbolic activity. Cultural symbols gain much of their power because they address these primitive, first images of self and other.

Now consider with me what happens in a pastoral ministry of the church such as absolution. Here another human person, a pastor or priest, is placed in a symbolic world to represent God and the community of faith. This is the world that is bigger than life, and on this stage is reenacted the divine-human relation. A parent-like figure voices and acts out divine forgiveness by using the words of absolution and the laying on of hands or another gesture. It is not just the conscious mind that is addressed or affected, but the underlying world of basic images through which the experience of self and other are known.

And what is presented in this rite? Not an understanding of God that is based entirely on infantile images of God, but an understanding of God that reflects divine disclosure in the history of God's people. God remains personal, yet transcends the limits of the persons through whom a sense of the personal first emerged into mental functioning. The God presented is not merely the invention of an idiosyncratic, infantile experience. The God of the gospel confronts the whole of our experience. Consequently, the God present and represented in the ministry can correct aspects of one's concept of God, confirm other aspects, and advance understanding of God. Presentation of the God of mercy is essential to the process and cannot be overemphasized. In fact, highlighting God's merciful goodness is the appropriate way to foster genuine penitence and desire for new life.

If we believe that God forgives sin through the proclamation of the gospel in the power of the Spirit, then such a psychological account of how a message and an image of God are received at both conscious and unconscious levels of mental functioning assists our modern understanding of this theological claim.
In her analysis of people's representations of God, Rizzuto claims that transformations in these representations are most likely to occur when people are in crisis or experience other kinds of transitional moments in their life journey. These are times when the old images no longer appear to be adequate, and the struggles of the human spirit open persons to new perceptions and thus to genuine change. An authentic hearing of the good news is possible. Penitence, then, is nothing but the spirit that is no longer holding onto its old ways but has begun to look to God for grace. Accordingly, I suggest that psychological observation supports the theological insight that penitence is a vital dimension of the transformation process.

The main point of this discussion of object relations is clear: from a psychological viewpoint the declaration of divine forgiveness in word and symbolic act has enormous power to impart the reality of which it speaks.

IMPLICATIONS

For the sake of reflection, let me refer to a few implications of the above for pastoral ministry.

First, we need the ritual of absolution. Though many of us Protestants have a ritual of confession of sin and absolution or assurance of pardon in our corporate worship, we make no use of such ritual in our pastoral work with persons.

Neglect of this ritual carries a price. Look at what happens without it. In my experience most Protestant ministers are overly eager to assure people of forgiveness. They jump to assure people before they have become concrete about the
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faultedness they want to confess. It is as though the pastor does not even want to hear a confession. This ritual precludes such impulsive avoidance and rejection of people.

While effective pastoral counseling from a dynamic point of view can virtually constitute confession, without a definite ritual that includes absolution, counseling often is little more than catharsis.

While effective pastoral counseling from a dynamic point of view can virtually constitute confession, without a definite ritual that includes absolution, counseling often is little more than catharsis. Hopefully, pastoral care and counseling help persons to distinguish neurotic guilt and habits of mind from genuine sin and appropriate guilt. And when this process is more that catharsis—when it entails "discovery," to use John Patton's term—"is it not wise to ground and consolidate this discovery in the ritual that enacts the whole process of forgiveness?

The ministry of absolution is not a task of rational persuasion, a moment to persuade people over against their own resistance to believe God. Though reason and persuasion can aid, they do not heal the breach that we experience in ourselves. Listen to Calvin: "It is harder for the heart to be furnished with assurance than for the mind to be endowed with thought." We have available to us not only the vehicle of influential words but the power of the Spirit, which communicates not only in our words, however important they may be, but also in symbolic acts, in the ritual. The ministry of absolution presents to the depth and breadth of the human spirit the whole act of God's transforming grace.

We do, however, have the task today of integrating the power of the ritual with congruent interpersonal dynamics. I say this because I believe that ministry is a matter of verbal,
dynamic, and symbolic communication. The relation of all these is of vital importance. God uses the office of ministry as well as the person entrusted with this office in communicating God's grace. So let us hope that our interpersonal relations help ready people for this rite of forgiveness, enliven the process of the rite itself, and sustain the newness of life in Christ given in this rite.

Still, as Daniel Day Williams reminds us, "the healing of the Soul comes from beyond the person and the counselor." This reminder counters two errors. The first I call the deist theory of absolution, the idea that God delegated all forgiveness to priests or ministers and henceforth has nothing to do with it. The second is the claim that the persons simply forgive themselves.

For us there is no way for human beings to satisfy the requirements of divine justice. Nevertheless, we do need to reconsider how the claims of justice are to be honored in confession and absolution.

I do not expect or advocate that we Protestants simply appropriate satisfaction for sins from Roman Catholic practice. For us there is no way for human beings to satisfy the requirements of divine justice. Nevertheless, we do need to reconsider how the claims of justice are to be honored in confession and absolution. It may well be that in addition to the call for individuals to go and live the Christian life, a dialogue with persons may help them to identify one or more symbolic or reconciling acts which communicate the grateful intent to honor justice on the basis of the mercies granted. Thus we can engage in actions with eschatological significance, acts which testify to God's promises. Just as pastoral counseling can help persons clarify what faults need to be confessed, so pastoral guidance can help persons make commitments which reflect the renewed grace in their lives.
Another task that enriches this ministry is the teaching office. We do well to teach God’s mercy, to tutor the imagination so that people have some understanding of what is at stake in such means of grace as absolution. Though the ministry of absolution is not primarily a rational process of persuasion, enlightening the mind and setting free the imagination can open the spirits of many to this means of God’s grace. People should be able to envision how the forgiven life bursts out like spring into the creatively ethical life.

We do the people of God a disservice when we divide the private and the public, the priestly and the prophetic—and when we practice corporate confession and absolution but neglect personal confession and absolution. The motivation for genuine change, the vision for a responsible life that is a freely undertaken, even joy in life itself derives from coming to terms with fault lines that cross both our personal existence and our social, political and cultural co-existence. We need corporate and personal confession and absolution.

Now, what about the psychological services today that informally seem to resemble elements of the church’s ministry? We know that people choose out others, whether formally or informally, as their spiritual guides. These relationships often carry with them definite elements of the primary relationships out of which the power of symbolic thought has emerged. In addition to personal choice, our culture provides helping guides, many of them in secular garb. I speak, of course, of our psychologists, social workers,
psychiatrists and other counselors. These people have not only professional training, but a symbolic authority not unlike that of the clergy. This is why they speak of the phenomenon of transference. This is why their powers often go beyond the powers of rational persuasion. Most concentrate on dynamic dimensions of interpersonal relations, but in that process they discover that basic aspects of self and other can be changed, and that their words have symbolic power far beyond what they may intend. Though they do not officially represent God, they emotionally represent parental figures who have so often formed our first images of God. I can only suggest that in order to account for such matters they not only resort to systems theory, but also attend to the rite of absolution for model of what takes place. In any case we can cooperate with and learn much from each other.

Ours is a ministry of reconciliation. Reconciliation in the context of personal confession of sin and absolution is a vital aspect of this ministry. Let us seek by the grace of God to fulfill that ministry.

NOTES

5. The Rites of the Catholic Church, as Revised by Decree of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council and Published by Authority of Pope Paul VI (New York: Pueblo, 1976), p. 350.
7. No doubt an examination of Eastern Orthodox thought and practice, which is beyond the scope of this study, would enrich understanding of theological developments.
9. Cited in Ibid., p. 43.
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A brief quotation from the pen of William Burt Pope (1822-1903) may introduce the meaning of the foundational documents in our Discipline for the life of our church. The Canadian-born Methodist theologian of the last century contended:

The subject [Methodist Doctrine] takes us back to the beginnings of the movement. There are two errors which we have at once to confront: that of assigning a doctrinal origin to the system, and that of making its origin entirely independent of doctrine.1

Pope's point is two-fold: that our emergence as a church was not forged in the fires of doctrinal strife and that doctrine was not unimportant to the spiritual ancestors of our United Methodist Church. As we consider the General Rules John Wesley published in 1743, the Twenty-Five Articles of religion adopted at the Christmas Conference in 1784, and the Evangelical United Brethren Confession of Faith of 1962 (the successor to earlier doctrinal statements held by the Evangelicals and the United Brethren) this double truth becomes all the clearer.2

Without rehearsing what the historic statement in the Discipline makes explicit, we need simply to state that Methodism and the early Evangelical United Brethren beginnings were, as Pope suggested, movements. They were societies preaching a gospel of redemption and new life in Christ, plus a sense of belonging in a disciplined and

K. James Stein is Jubilee Professor of Church History at Garrett-Evangelical Seminary. A past president of Evangelical Seminary in Naperville, Illinois, he is a member of the North Dakota Conference. His most recent publication is Philipp Jakob Spener: Pietist Patriarch (Covenant Press, 1986).
accountable way of life. It is churches that hold creedal subscription for membership demands; societies within (or between) churches seek only a declaration of purpose form those wishing to join. So Wesley wrote in his General Rules:

There is only one condition previously required of those who seek admission into these societies: a desire to flee from their sins.  

The essentially ethical nature of the General Rules connotes a societal mentality in which doctrine was less important than life and mission.

The second error Pope would have us avoid was that of seeing the origin of our denomination as entirely independent of doctrine. Those who created the Methodist, Evangelical, and United Brethren movements were by no means non-theological. After Wesley defended a stance of openness on opinions or “smaller points” that divided Christians and after he raised the necessity of Christians loving God through Christ in faith and their neighbors through good works, he made it very clear that a person of “Catholic Spirit” is not indifferent to all opinions regarding doctrine, worship, or denomination.  

The Christmas Conference thought it important to adopt Wesley’s twenty-four Articles of religion (and an additional one of their own) in 1784. The Evangelical Association liked these articles so well that in 1809 it adopted them in German translation with only several changes. Six years later the United Brethren in Christ, after much internal debate, adopted their first confession of faith. More astounding the Methodists in 1808, the Evangelicals in 1839, and the United Brethren in 1841 in their general conferences passed restrictive rules that forbade change or addition to these doctrinal symbols. The later denominational division among the United Brethren in 1889 over the acceptance by the majority of a new constitution and a new confession of
faith plus the adoption of a new Confession of Faith by the Evangelical United Brethren Church in 1962 add further importance to the doctrinal history. These sentiments, efforts, and confessional restrictions hardly describe a people disinterested in what they believed.

**USAGE OF THE FOUNDATIONAL DOCUMENTS**

As we reflect on the meaning of the foundational statements, we need to review ways in which they were considered in the past. We first note that the Articles of Religion and Confession of Faith were regarded as a link to the historic and universal church. In the 1798 *Methodist Episcopal Discipline* Bishops Coke and Asbury stated that they wished to see this volume in the house of every Methodist partially because it contained

> the articles of religion maintained, more or less, in part or in the whole, by every reformed church in the world.

H. M. DuBose, in his treatment eight decades ago of the Articles of Religion in the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, looked beyond Protestantism by viewing the Articles as a fixed standard by which the church’s theology could be measured and by which it could be made to conform to the essential truths of Christianity as defined by the catholic creeds. Actually, DuBose performed the useful service of drawing the distinction between creeds (those fixed statements of faith which express the catholicity of the church in terms of all the basic Christian beliefs, e.g., the Apostles' Creed) and confessions (those more Protestant expressions emerging in the sixteenth century, which were adopted in order to protest heresy or to justify a new denomination's existence) (p. 3). Interestingly, the new proposed statement on "Our Theological Task" says essentially the same thing in its paragraphs entitled "Our Common Heritage As Christians." It is important that the landmark documents around which we gather connect us with the broad stream of Christian faith reaching back to our Lord himself and to the apostolic witness to his life, death, and resurrection.

Second, our confessional statements were understood as being summations of Holy Scripture and guidelines for
interpreting the same. They were inferior to, dependent upon, and not antithetical to Scripture. Henry Wheeler, a Methodist Episcopal contemporary of DuBose, indicated that

Whatever is not plainly taught in Holy Scriptures, or provable thereby, is not to be considered necessary to salvation. The Church’s teaching must be founded upon God’s written Word. The traditions of the past, and the utterances of living men, uncorroborated by the written Word, must be set aside.  

Here one sees Protestantism’s centuries-long insistence that what has been engendered and taught in the oral tradition of the Christian community must be judged by the older and inspired written record known as Scripture.

It is important that the landmark documents around which we gather connect us with the broad stream of Christian faith reaching back to our Lord himself and to the apostolic witness to his life, death, and resurrection.

This argument, of course, led some denominations within Protestantism to refuse the use of creeds or confessions at all. If the Bible were “the only sufficient rule of faith and practice,” it would be not only unnecessary but also detrimental to summarize Christian teaching into a codified set of beliefs. Several voices out of our denominational heritage objected to this reasoning. United Brethren Bishop Jonathan Weaver noted that even those denominations who say that they have no creed because the Bible is their guide, actually have an oral one to which they cling tenaciously. Arguing for the superior value of committing such principles to writing, Weaver contended that creeds are not a substitute for Scripture, but a declaration “of what the Scriptures are believed to teach.” Albert Outler in our own time has sharpened the issue by viewing a confession of faith as a necessary tool by which to interpret Scripture. He wrote:

The Scriptures require interpretation, and interpretation requires principles and perspectives. It is this perspective of interpretation which our ‘standards’ can provide us . . .
The tension between our confessional statements and the Holy Scriptures does not seem to be a pronounced issue in our Church’s past.

A third perspective regarded the foundational documents as means of affirming denominational self-identity. DuBose contended that the Methodist Articles of Religion “more nearly represent the exact faith of the Church in the things of which they treat.” Jonathan Weaver argued that in “these days of speculation, research, and discovery” it was important that every denomination have a written confession setting forth clearly “all the fundamental doctrines” it believed and taught. Weaver was obviously appealing for subscription to the new and controversial “Confession of Faith of the Church of the United Brethren in Christ” of 1889. No less adamant, however, was Reuben Yeakel, historian and bishop, who lauded the General Conference legislation permanently fixing the Articles of Faith of his Evangelical Association. Wrote Yeakel:

The Articles of Faith contain all the unchangeable doctrines of Holy Scripture, consequently it is perfectly and logically just that they should be constitutionally unchangeable among us. If an edifice is to stand, then above all things, its foundation must be immovable . . . If in a Church the cardinal doctrines are left subject to change then how soon will various ‘winds of doctrine’ arise to toss the people to and fro and cause confusion.”

To be sure, the new proposed statement on “Our Theological Task” is justified in claiming that the distinctive United Methodist Theological emphases have been preserved not so much through formal doctrinal declarations as through the vital movement of faith and practice within the disciplined life of the church.

H. M. DuBose abruptly declared that “a confession which does not help the spiritual life of the people who hold it is a body of death.”

Such seems to be the position of many persons raised in the United Methodist Church or its antecedents. Still the preachers
in general conferences long ago acted to cast the General Rules and the basic doctrinal standards of the several predecessor denominations “in concrete.” Denominational identity seems to have been the motivation.

A fourth contention to be made about our foundation documents is that instead of being absolute doctrinal norms, they were considered to be buttresses of the spiritual life of the people. One sees here John Wesley’s emphasis on “practical divinity.” Varied are the expressions by which this sentiment manifests itself across the centuries. In the 1798 Discipline (p. 87) the venerable Bishops Coke and Asbury urged each Methodist circuit rider to “preach the law as well as the Gospel.”

... holiness must be his aim and antinomianism and every doctrine which opposes holiness, he must contend with, till he gain the victory or render his hearers utterly inexcusable.

Here doctrine was given a most pragmatic use. It was so to be taught that Christian holiness could best be enhanced among the Methodists in America. In fact, doctrine was measured by what it did for spiritual formation. H. M. DuBose abruptly declared that “a confession which does not help the spiritual life of the people who hold it is a body of death.” Positively put, doctrine was expected to inspire and edify. The central tenets of the Christian faith were to be preached and taught so as to stir up their auditors to faith and love. Sometimes it happened. George Miller recounted that when the Articles of Faith of the Evangelical Association appeared in print, the young denomination was so pleased that it not only paid the necessary publishing expenditures, but the people also received new courage and steadfastly retained their union with God and one another! The result was that a number of others joined the church.

Surely we acknowledge the reciprocal relationship between doctrine and piety. The assumed value of the doctrinal tenets held in the past was that, preached in simplicity, they would not lead to heterodoxy, but to deep piety, and solid belief. Therefore, persons who had gone on to live a holy life by the grace of God were much more inclined to hold to the essential Christian doctrines that the Articles of Religion so succinctly
summarized. Nineteenth-century Methodist historian Abel Stevens praised John Wesley for designing articles that were "the briefest and barest possible symbol of expedient doctrines." Of Wesley's theological understanding, Stevens noted:

... it was not his opinion that the orthodoxy of a Church can best guarantee its spiritual life, but rather that its spiritual life can best guarantee its orthodoxy.\textsuperscript{18}

So orthodoxy and piety go hand-in-hand. The preaching of orthodox doctrine will lead to Christian piety; Christian piety will confirm Christian orthodoxy—so the argument ran.

Fifth, we must note that the foundation documents have served as an ordination and disciplinary standard for the clergy. Bishops Coke and Asbury in the 1798 Discipline conceded that heretical doctrines were as dangerous to church members as was the immoral life of a preacher. In their commentary on the disciplinary provision for clergy trials, the bishops listed the heterodox doctrines that they encountered: Arianism, Socinianism, Universalism, opposition to the doctrine of holiness, the introduction of novel sentiments, or "vain jangling" (Methodist Episcopal Church Discipline, p. 113). Apparently when clergy were brought to trial in the early decades of the nineteenth century in the Methodist Episcopal church in Illinois, it seemed to be either "for disseminating doctrines contrary to the Articles of Religion or for conducting oneself in a manner which rendered one unacceptable to the people as a traveling preacher."\textsuperscript{19} The fact that between 1824 and 1843 there were against Illinois Methodist clergy some twenty-six charges or complaints of immorality, imprudence, or unministerial conduct and only three accusations that preacher was disseminating doctrines contrary to the Articles of Religion\textsuperscript{20} may not mean that our forebears were inclined to be more immoral or injudicious than they were heterodox. It could reflect the fact that the denomination stressed more the clergy's ability to provide the people with a genuine experience of salvation in Christ than a careful doctrinal delineation of what that meant. It is somewhat difficult to obtain a clear picture as to the exact amount of clergy subscription to the Articles of Religion necessary for ordination in the two main branches of American
Methodism. Henry Wheeler admitted that the Twenty-Five Articles were not a formal creed, but "the barest possible symbol of expedient doctrine." Still they were "accepted as one of the standards of doctrine and belief in them was a prerequisite qualification for the ministry." There was episcopal concern in the 1880's about "a spirit of latitudinarian speculation" in which some clergy seemed to be preaching doctrines unacceptable to church teaching.

An abortive series of efforts to determine more sharply what the doctrinal standards of the Methodist Episcopal Church were and to revise the twenty-five articles with this in mind in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries suggested a strong desire on the part of some interested persons to obtain greater theological precision and clergy adherence to it. The historic questions were asked persons aspiring to ordination and full connection in the annual conference. Did they know and keep the General Rules and accept our doctrines as being in harmony with the Holy Scriptures with a willingness to preach and maintain them? Perhaps these questions were not always construed "literally and juridically," however (Book of Discipline, 1984, p. 78).

A sixth usage of the foundation documents is to be seen in the way they were employed in determining admission into the Methodist Episcopal Church and the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. We have noted how the General rules stipulated only a desire "to flee the wrath to come" as the entrance requirement into the early Methodist classes. John Wesley did not provide his American Methodists with a formal membership ritual. Between 1864 and 1916, however, the Methodist Episcopal Church used subscription to the Articles of Religion as a condition for the conferment of church membership. The question originally asked was: "Do you believe in the doctrines of Holy Scripture, as set forth in the Articles of Religion of the Methodist Episcopal Church?" Later this was changed. For example, the Discipline of 1924 carried the more broadly-cast doctrinal question: "Do you receive and profess the Christian faith as contained in the New Testament of our Lord Jesus Christ?" If the Evangelicals or United Brethren had required doctrinal subscription as a prerequisite for church membership, they no longer did so after their union in 1946.
Seventh, we find the foundation documents making an important legal contribution in church unions. When the Evangelical Association and the statements on the doctrines of Regeneration, the witness of the Spirit, and Entire Sanctification and Christian Perfection—the doctrines accepted by both groups before the unfortunate division of 1891—were retained. By this means "all property rights and legal titles of both churches were safely perpetuated."

It appears that the same was the case in the Methodist reunion of 1939. Article III of the Declaration of Union reads as follows: The Methodist Episcopal Church, South, and the Methodist Protestant Church had their common origin in the organization of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America in 1784, A.D., and have ever held, adhered to and preserved a common belief, spirit and purpose, as expressed in their common Articles of Religion. The third article of the plan of union at that time clearly stated that the Articles of Religion "shall be those historically held in common by the three uniting churches." Doctrinal statements, perhaps as much as any other, confer legal ecclesiastical status.

PROBLEMS CONNECTED WITH THE FOUNDATIONAL DOCUMENTS

Having surveyed the usage of the foundational documents in our denomination's heritage, we need to consider momentarily several problems connected with them. It is necessary to face the fact that, although General Conferences in the nineteenth century declared that the Articles of Religion and various Confessions of Faith were to be held in perpetuity, these doctrinal symbols were often permitted to remain the background as far as the lives of their respective denominations were concerned. Several reasons for this can be offered.

In one instance there was disagreement concerning the constituted authority of the Articles of Religion. It was not clear what the First Restrictive Rule of 1808 was actually safeguarding. It does state that

the general conference shall not revoke, alter, or change our articles of religion, nor establish any new standards or rules of doctrine contrary to our present and existing standards of doctrine.
The assumption is that "our present and existing standards of doctrine" in 1808 also included Wesley's sermons and his *Notes Upon the New Testament*. So the current *Discipline* interprets the matter (p. 49).

There was not nor is there yet final agreement over this question, however. In 1879, J. Pullman, a Methodist Episcopal preacher, published a stirring article in which he lamented his church's drift toward a consensus doctrine, which incorporated many new theological formulations at the expense of the vital doctrines of a half-century earlier. Claiming the values of a succinctly drawn theological statement and drawing upon historians like Nathan Bangs and Abel Stevens, Pullman came to the conclusion "that the Articles of religion are the only test of orthodoxy." Early in our century Professor Harris Franklin Rail of Garrett Biblical Institute admitted that the branches of Methodism were not united on the issue of formal creeds or legal standards. He observed:

The Methodist Episcopal Church has an abridgment of the Anglican Articles. The English church has no formal creed at all, but refers to Wesley's Sermons and notes on the Scriptures. The Canadian Church uses both the articles and Wesley's writings. The Southern church has not specifically declared of what its standards consist.

It could be that there were inaccuracies in this dated statement, but it reveals nevertheless the unclarity with which our denomination approached the whole matter of where its definitive doctrines could be found.

Another issue our confessional statements cause us (and this could possibly be maintained about confessional formulations everywhere) is that they do not command our personal loyalties at the very heart of our faith. In the introduction to his little book *What Evangelicals Believe* Bishop Samuel P. Spreng conceded that religion "is not primarily a theory or a system of doctrine, but an experience and a program of life." Nineteenth-century United Brethren pastor I. K. Statton lauded the doctrine of justification by faith, but insisted that "we may believe in a creed, but we have faith in a friend; we may assent to a proposition, but we must trust a Father." Perhaps Harris Franklin Rail was correct in observing that "the only formal creed of any Methodist Church has never been much more than a formal creed." He
contended that Methodist clergy do not find their message in it or instruct the young from it. The reason for this, said Pullman, was that the Twenty-Five Articles did not spring from the life and faith of the Wesleyan movement. Therefore, they could not convey the vital spiritual force that surged through Methodism's "great thought of justification by faith and the new birth." 34

What excites people is not a logical summation of what has happened to the church corporately—the tradition reduced to its essential ingredients—but the more subjective response of a relationship . . .

Perhaps we see here the Methodist tradition coming through—our predilection toward Christian experience as the confirmation of the grace we have known through Jesus Christ. What excites people is not a logical summation of what has happened to the church corporately—the tradition reduced to its essential ingredients—but the more subjective response of a relationship that may be dependent upon the very truths which the confessional summary conveys, but which is so much more vivid because it is related to a Person.

A further problem with the Articles of Religion as a confessional statement has already been cited. They did not include a number of key doctrines that were part of Methodism's traditional message. Richard Wheatley took issue with J. Pullman a century ago when the latter insisted that Wesley and the Christmas Conference intended that the Articles of Religion was the only creed of the Church under which a minister should be tried. 35 Wheatley disagreed. He insisted that the distinctive doctrines of Methodism were not the Articles of Religion but the consensus of doctrines found also "in certain specified writings of Wesley." 36 One of the reasons the Articles of Religion were not adequate as an official confession of the Methodist Episcopal Church was that they contained no mention of such distinctive Methodist doctrines as prevenient grace, the witness of the Spirit, and Christian Perfection. 37

A most interesting renewal of the debate concerning the doctrinal standards of American Methodism has appeared
recently. In 1985 Professor Richard Heitzenrater argued that the First Restrictive Rule of 1808 intended that the Articles of Religion alone should be considered "the established standards of doctrine," to the exclusion of Wesley's Notes on the New Testament and Sermons.* Heitzenrater anchored his thesis partially upon the juridical pre-eminence given Wesley's Articles of Religion by the Christmas Conference of 1784. To be sure, Methodist preaching in America did not change with the adoption of the Articles of Religion, nor did Wesley's Sermons and Notes fall into disuse, but the former were legally adopted as the confession of the new Methodist Episcopal Church (pp. 8-11).

Likewise important for Heitzenrater was the defeat of Francis Ward's motion toward the end of the 1808 General Conference. Ward sought adoption of the sentiment that Wesley's Notes and Sermons and John Fletcher's Checks Against Antinomianism contained the principal doctrines of Methodism and served as a good explanation of the Articles of Religion. Interestingly, the motion called for this sentiment (italics mine) to be recorded in the General Conference Journal, but not be incorporated in the Discipline. Heitzenrater deems the rejection of this motion to be evidence that the General Conference was unwilling to define its standards of doctrine "in terms of documents other than the articles, not even Wesley's Sermons and Notes" (p. 17).

For Heitzenrater Wesley's Sermons and Notes have played a significant role in American Methodism, but only as "traditional doctrinal statements" that supported the "established doctrinal standards," which were the articles of Religion (p. 21). He points to the difference between the "weight of tradition," which the Sermons and Notes enjoyed and the "force of law," which made the Articles of Religion the denominational doctrinal standards (p. 6). This distinction was sharply maintained, claims Heitzenrater, until Bishop Osmond Baker's manual of church administration in 1855 blurred it by declaring that the Articles of Religion did not embrace all that was included in "our present existing and established standards of doctrine." Baker wanted Wesley's Notes and Sermons and Watson's Theological Institutes made the "established standards of doctrine" (p. 22). Heitzenrater, who laments this confusing of the distinction between legally adopted doctrinal standards and traditionally held and
supportive ones, contends that the current standards of doctrine of the United Methodist Church are the Articles of Religion from the Methodist tradition and the Confession of Faith from the Evangelical United Brethren tradition (p. 23).

Not so, says Thomas C. Oden, who believes that Wesley's Sermons and Notes "have had an uninterrupted consensual history of being received as established standards of doctrine in the United Methodist Church and its predecessors." Citing the 1984 Book of Discipline as support, he contends that the "standards of doctrine" referred to in the First Restrictive Rule of 1808 are both the Articles of Religion and also Wesley's Sermons, and Notes. The First Restrictive Rule actually forbade any alteration of the Articles of Religion and any additions to the "present existing, and established standards" which, for Oden, are the Minutes of the British Methodist Conference, the Sermons and the Notes. Oden stresses the importance of the "two-clause theory" of the First Restrictive Rule, which claimed equal authority for two different standards of doctrine (p. 42). Thus, he argues against Heitzenrater's assumption that between 1784 and 1855, when Baker's claim for doctrinal authority beyond the Articles of Religion was made, the Sermons and Notes were not regarded as "legally binding standards" (p. 43). Oden points to five times between 1773 and 1784 when, following the British "model deed" of 1763, American Methodist annual conference minutes insisted that their preachers proclaim "no other doctrine than is contained in Wesley's Sermons and Notes" (p. 44)

Oden performs a useful service, however, in noting that the Articles of Religion are embedded in the Protestant Reforma-
tion, while the more specifically Methodist teachings are to be found in Wesley’s *Sermons* and *Notes*. He can likewise point to the significant fact that Wesley’s *Sermons on Several Occasions* went through sixty editions between 1784 and 1860, while the *Notes* were published at General Conference direction sixteen times between 1791 and 1860 (pp. 53-4). Other arguments Oden musters are the General Conference’s claim for doctrinal affinity with British and Canadian Methodists, whose doctrinal standards were the *Sermons* and *Notes* (p. 54) and his retort that the Francis Ward motion of 1808 was defeated, not because the General Conference refused to include Wesley’s *Sermons* and *Notes* as part of the denominational doctrinal standards, but because the motion was, among other things, unclear, ill-timed, and confusing due to its inclusion of Fletcher’s *Checks Against Antinomianism* as a doctrinal standard (p. 54-6).

Resolution of the conflicting opinions expressed by Heitzenrater and Oden over the intent of the 1808 General Conference in passing the First Restrictive Rule cannot be made here. Each scholar has marshalled commanding arguments for his case. Interestingly, Oden steps a bit in Heitzenrater’s direction in conceding that the Articles of Religion could serve as the “concise standard” to be used alone in the trial of preachers while the *Sermons* and *Notes* should be “the broader standard that applies in preaching and interpretation” (p. 60). This does not exhaust Oden’s argument, however, nor does it approximate everything Heitzenrater had claimed for the Articles of Religion as being “the juridical standards of doctrine” or for the *Sermons* and *Notes* as serving as “exemplary illustrations of the Methodist doctrinal heritage (p. 21).”

When I first presented this paper in July, 1987, without knowledge of the Heitzenrater and Oden articles, I was aware of the tensions existing in American Methodist history regarding the authority of the Articles of Religion. It was apparent to me that some nineteenth-century Methodists (as well the early Evangelicals who altered the Articles of Religion when they adopted them) did not feel entirely comfortable with them as far as the espousal of specifically Wesleyan theological themes was concerned. However, my assignment at the theological conference was to deal with the foundational documents. That,
plus Thomas Oden's admission that although the *Sermons* and *Notes* were widely distributed, the much shorter Articles of Religion could "easily and conveniently be bound with the *Discipline*" led me to consider the latter and the Confession of Faith (which carries some of the unique Wesleyan holiness teaching) as our theological standards. I prefer brief and summary theological statements to several volumes of homiletic and exegetical works, however valuable they might be.

**CONCLUSION**

What is the meaning of our foundational documents for the life of the church today? In answering, I wish to direct most of what I say not to the General Rules, which carry timeless and eloquent appeals to Christian discipleship that I affirm, but more pointedly to the Articles of Religion and the Confession of Faith, which are the standard-bearers of our United Methodist theology. Let me further indicate that as I make my answer I have before me two of the significant articles Thomas Langford included in his *Wesleyan Theology: A Sourcebook*. They both deal with the "Doctrine and Doctrinal Standards and the General Rules" or Part II of the *1984 Book of Discipline*. The first is Professor Albert Outler's report to the 1972 General Conference as chairperson of the committee that had labored for the quadrennium after church union in seeking to provide a doctrinal statement for the new church. It is entitled "Introduction of the Disciplinary Statement." The rebuttal to Outler's address was published by Professor Robert E. Cushman in 1975 and is entitled "Church Doctrinal Standards Today."

The tenor of the two articles by these distinguished theologians reflects the theological tension in the United Methodist Church. Outler told the General Conference why the theological committee he headed had not brought forth new Articles of Religion, a Confession of Faith, or General Rules. Had they been able to write a new creed to displace the current ones, there was no assurance that it would serve the cause of either theological renewal or clarity. Outler admitted that United Methodist statements of faith were pluralistic from the beginning. They were never understood as "merely judicial statutes," but as "so many varied witnesses to the truth of
DOCTRINE, THEOLOGY, AND LIFE

Scripture. Because of a plethora of new Protestant theologies today—"black theology," "women's liberation theology," "third world theology," "process theology," and many more, not to forget ecumenical theology, the landmarks remain essentially that—defining our heritage and giving us a basis upon which to address the contemporary crises—using as we do so the four-fold Wesleyan guidelines for determining truth (Scripture, tradition, experience, and reason). The committee's report, which was adopted by the General Conference, gave the Church not a new theology nor a reworked theology. Instead, invoking theological pluralism, it provided the guidelines by which to theologize.

Cushman, although admitting to the difficulty for a mainline Protestant denomination to confess its faith to a very secularized and pluralized era, was dissatisfied with the work of Outler's committee. He questioned the assumption that the Articles of Religion and Confession of Faith "are not to be regarded as positive, juridical norms of doctrine," if the First Restrictive Rule of 1808 was to mean anything. He wondered what kind of stability could be expected of a church whose doctrinal standards are considered to be no more than "landmark documents" and whose doctrine seems to be a continuing process of "informed theological experimentation" and "our never-ending tasks of theologizing." He felt it unfair to take the ecumenical pluralism of a number of Christian denominations and make that a model by which to judge the doctrinal standards of any one denomination. The four-fold Wesleyan guidelines for theologizing do not pay respect to the centrality of Scripture in determining theological truth. The appeal to "rational analysis" in so doing is unfortunate.

I have spent some time in treating the meaning of the
foundation documents in the *Discipline* from an historical point of view. I have likewise sought in summary fashion to focus attention upon them from the vantage point of the Outler/Cushman "debate" over a decade ago. On this basis I wish to suggest my own understanding of their value for the United Methodist Church today.

First of all, I see the Articles of Religion and the Confession of Faith to be subject to and yet summations of Holy Scripture, which is the final authoritative standard of the church's faith and practice. Both articles V and VI of the Articles of Religion and article IV of the Confession of Faith affirm this. They make it clear that the Holy Scriptures contain all things necessary for our salvation. This means that the Bible is not a textbook in science or history, but that it does contain God's saving message to the world—a message that finds its clearest expression in Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word of God. Although the Articles of Religion and Confessions do not claim this, they actually do provide what theologians and preachers in 1784 and in 1962 believed to be the essential biblical doctrines of God's saving revelation. This also means that we do not ascribe inspiration to the confessional statements of our church, as most Christians would contend for the Scriptures. It does mean, however, that the confessions have a derivative but important authority in focusing for us the salient biblical truths necessary for human salvation.

Second, the Articles of Religion and the Confession of Faith have great value in that they balance the Catholic tradition with the United Methodist heritage. The first four articles of the Articles of Religion and the first three of the Confession of Faith tie our United Methodist Christians of today with the formulations of the ancient church in affirming the doctrines of the Trinity and the two natures of our Lord. Both standards have articles defining the Church and declaring our doctrine of the sacraments. Other articles in each of these standards reflect the cardinal teachings of the Protestant Reformers of the sixteenth century on the issues of sin, grace, and salvation. The changes Wesley made in his abridgment of the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England and the inclusion of an article on "Sanctification and Christian Perfection" in the Confession of
Faith portray special emphases in the heritage of United Methodism. No other succinct deposit of faith is available to United Methodists who wish to understand just how it is that our more-than-two-century-old Protestant tradition both fits into and, in some sense, uniquely expresses the apostolic faith shared by all Christians.

Third, the Articles of Religion and the Confession of Faith provide a forum for dialogue with the myriad number of new theologies that the church both confronts and develops. It is true that the former are dated in that they were couched in the language and suggest issues of centuries or even decades past. The do not address, for example, the political, economic, and social liberation issues so much a part of our time or the complicated new ethical problems confronting the human race in this period of high technology.

However, as Albert Outler suggests, each of them "enshrines perennial Christian truth" and is contemporary in that sense (p. 277). How sad it would be for us to give ourselves entirely to process theology or liberation theology without acknowledging those profound Christian beliefs that are contained in the foundational statements on doctrine. Or, to put the matter more bluntly, there might well be tenets of process and liberation theology that are antithetical to the basic doctrinal formulations in these documents under discussion. If the latter are not so strictly complied with that they would make the embracing of some new theologies absolutely prohibited, they at least should call forth that kind of honest and soul-wrenching dialogue that should make theological liberals aware of the tension between where the traditional theological formulations have been and where they want to go. By the same token the theological conservatives who more literally cling to the Articles of Religion and Confession of Faith need to be aware of the price they pay for a staunch adherence that may suffer for lack of relevance.

Fourth, there is meaning in our Articles of Religion and Confession of Faith because they provide us with a theology upon which to do theology. Cushman is correct, in my judgment, in lamenting the fact that Section 3 of "Our Theological Task," "whether intentionally or not, tends to replace all past, present, or future doctrine or dogma with an
unlimited process of “theologizing” (p. 284). How unfortunate it would be for United Methodists to say in the face of the complicated issues of life in today’s world that these can only be addressed in terms of the Articles of Religion or the Confession of Faith. How infinitely greater the tragedy, however, would be the case if United Methodists accepted as gospel the newest theological fad they or others have developed or confronted without making any attempt at coming at these issues on the basis of those Catholic and Protestant guidelines and road maps that our fathers and mothers in the faith thought to be very important. We American Protestants have often been accused of preferring verbs (action words) to nouns (substance words). I fear a trend that would move us from theology (a noun) to theologizing (a verb)—particularly if we do not do our theologizing in the sharp awareness of the solid foundation upon which our church has ostensibly been building for two centuries.

Finally, the meaning of the Articles of Religion and the Confession of Faith is to be found in what they could do to enhance the spiritual formation and discipleship living of United Methodist clergy and laity. I sometimes shudder when I think of our young seminary graduates, well-schooled in the current theologies of the day, but, perhaps, not very familiar with the Articles of Religion and the Confession of Faith, and of their ability to enter serious theological discourse with pastors and theologians of other Christian denominations. Do they really know our own doctrinal tradition? I further shudder when I think of the thousands of young people, only superficially instructed in our historic doctrines in the church school or even confirmation classes in the local church. When they enter the university will they give themselves over to secular humanism, Mormonism, the Unification Church, or atheism? I agree with Norman Madsen in his recent Circuit Rider article that our reclaiming of the Articles of Religion (and I would add the Confession of Faith) could help “define, direct, enhance, and encourage” a new spirituality for United Methodists. I applaud him all the more when he claims that our historic doctrines “do help bring us back to the essence of the Christian faith” What possibly greater meaning could they, then, have for us?
NOTES
1. Quoted in Thomas Langford, Practical Divinity: Theology in the Wesleyan Tradition (Nashville: Abingdon Pr.), p. 49.
2. The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church, 1994, explains that both the Methodist Articles of Religion and the Evangelical United Brethren Confession of Faith were adopted as doctrinal standards for the new church in 1968. It also implies that Wesley's Sermons and Notes on the New Testament should also be considered a part of "our standards of doctrine." This paper, however, will deal only with those three historic statements that our current Book of Discipline (sec. 69) lists under the heading of "Foundation Documents." It should also be noted that because the Confession of Faith of the Evangelical United Brethren Church was only six years old when church union occurred in 1968, a number of references in this paper will necessarily be made to the doctrinal formulations of the Evangelical Church and the Church of the United Brethren in Christ which antedated it.
12. Weaver, A Practical Comment, p. 39.
23. Apparently this was to stress the fact that through baptism they had received admission into the holy catholic Church. Cf. Spellman, "Formation," p. 221.


29. Ibid., p. 17.


37. Ibid., pp. 47-49. Norwood also indicates that the Twenty-Five Articles of Religion were "not particularly Methodistic." (The Story of American Methodism, p. 320.)


40. It should be noted that these were minutes of annual conference held before Wesley sent the Articles of Religion across the Atlantic for use by the American Methodists.


43. The Evangelical Church felt the inadequacy of its Articles of Faith so largely borrowed from the Methodist Articles of Religion. As early as 1809 it included a lengthy statement on Christian Perfection alongside its confessional statement. This appeared in the *Disciplines* of the Evangelical United Brethren Church from 1947 to 1959. See Kenneth Rowe, "Christian Perfection in the Evangelical Disciplines," *Methodist History* 18 (1979): 66-72.

44. Oden's point was that while their brevity permitted their being bound with each issue of the Disciple, that fact alone did not grant the Articles of Religion preferred or higher constitutional status. Despite his compelling arguments, I find myself holding fast to the Articles of Religion as one of our two doctrinal standards for today, since its partner Confession of Faith of the former Evangelical United Brethren Church provides, in large measure, the desired but missing and unique Wesleyan theological emphasis.


MINISTERS AND MUTUALITY OF RELATIONSHIP

CARROLL SAUSSY

Ask people in ministry what they find most satisfying about their work, what makes their efforts worthwhile, and they will give you some version of "helping people" or "working with people." Ask what they experience as least satisfying (apart from low salary) and you will often hear "not enough time for my family and friends." What we seem to seek in ministry is the privilege of placing interpersonal relationships at the center of our everyday professional lives; what seem to suffer most because of ministry are significant relationships in our everyday personal lives. Do we develop professional relationships at the expense of personal relationships? What accounts for this seeming paradox? Workload? The need to be needed professionally, on the one hand, while on the other taking family members and personal friends for granted? A misunderstanding of call?

Before I begin to explore relationships in ministry, let me state that I use the words ministry and minister in a comprehensive way. Ministry refers to Christian witness through service. All baptized persons are called to ministry. Minister refers both to the ordained or licensed person whose call is to serve as a leader among ministers and to those ministered unto. Through the instrument of an ecclesial representative, the appointed minister is sent by, with, and in the Spirit to convert the members of the congregation to gospel

Carroll Saussy is associate professor of pastoral care at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, DC. Her article, "Control: Power or Impotence?" appeared in the Summer, 1986 issue of QR.

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life, which is a shared ministry. At the heart of gospel life is the mandate to love one another as God Incarnate in Jesus Christ has loved us: "This I command you, to love one another" (John 15:17). We hear that mandate when we are baptized into the Body of Christ, the Christian community. Only those who have not awakened to their baptismal call are "excluded" from the term minister. To rise to that call is to become a minister.

Relating is the underlying basis of ministry through congregational care primarily because all of life is essentially relational. Reality is relational.

One direct way a minister responds to the call is through what has traditionally been called pastoral care. Since the whole congregation is called to express such care, the inclusive expression "congregational care" is perhaps more appropriate. The defining and distinguishing characteristics of relationship for pastoral/congregational care are intentional and focused presence and mutuality that is based on equality.

Relating is the underlying basis of ministry through congregational care primarily because all of life is essentially relational. Reality is relational. Everything that is, is connected in space and in time with everything that has ever been. This truth becomes more tangible when we try to define the limits of our own lives. When did the influences on your life begin? Could you really say that the first influences were your parents? And what about their parents? Have you grandparents' lives influenced you, that is, have they become a part of your history that you carry into this moment? Try to define the limits of an organization to which you belong, perhaps your local congregation. Where does it begin and end? No individual person exists apart from myriads of relations with other individuals and with the whole of the cosmos; nothing is unconnected in space or in time with everything else that is. While all of reality is thoroughly relational, however, not all relationships are mutual.
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In this paper I am concerned with the human need to be in mutual relationship between and among equals. I want to emphasize the two-way direction of relating in pastoral/congregational care, whether that care be extended by the ordained/appointed minister or any caring member of the congregation; I am equally concerned about the quality of relationships in which the person designated as pastoral care giver is engaged in her or his personal life.

I make two distinguishable but connected claims, which I will discuss more fully:

1. In all situations of ministry, care givers or helpers need to see themselves as both givers and receivers, which includes the responsibility to enable the recipients of help in becoming givers and receivers. (Recipients not only give care back to the care giver, but in so giving discover their capacity to give care to others.)

2. Care givers need to be in mutual relations with those among whom they live and work and struggle, apart from situations in which care givers are called upon to meet the specific needs of others.

MUTUALITY AND PASTORAL CARE

Mutuality is the key to relational pastoral care. Martin Buber saw full mutuality as the most profound relation possible, namely the relation he describes as I-Thou. "I" must be spoken with the whole being, in order for another, for "Thou" to be addressed. In other words, for a relationship to be an I-Thou relation, the two persons involved must be totally present to one another, without purpose, without expectation, without seeking: "The Thou meets me through grace—it is not found by seeking." Granted that such profound meeting is a gift, a grace, I would guess that only seekers find it. Buber puts it this way: "It is a grace, for which one must always be ready and which one never gains as an assured possession." In an I-Thou encounter, two persons are totally open and receptive of one other, allowing the other to be.

However, Buber believed that there is a built-in limitation of
mutuality and equality within the helping relationship, and particularly within the relationship between pastor and pen­
tent. Full mutuality is only possible when each person can experience the relation from the other side, a process which Buber called "inclusion." One must be able to walk in the shoes of the other, to share the experience of the other. Since the person outside the ordained ministry cannot act reciprocally toward the one so ordained, cannot take the other's place, Buber believed that inclusion within the pastoral relationship is impossible.

The most emphatic example of normative limitation of mutuality could be provided by the pastor with a cure of souls, for in this instance "inclusion" coming from the other side would attack the sacral authenticity of the commission.

Every I-Thou relationship, within a relation which is specified as a purposive working of one part upon the other, persists in virtue of mutuality which is forbidden to be full.  

Achieving the fullest possible mode of mutuality ought to be the goal in a minister's care giving and in her or his personal relations.

Buber concludes that there are degrees of mutuality, degrees understood as modes rather than quantities. However, if ministry belongs to all baptized Christians, inclusion or full mutuality in pastoral ministry becomes possible in far more circumstances than Buber's restrictive priest/penitent category would allow. While there are situations in which the person seeking help is not able to understand or share the experience of the one offering help, in which mutuality will not be full, there are both professional and personal situations in which inclusion and therefore full mutuality are possible. Achieving the fullest possible mode of mutuality ought to be the goal in a minister's care giving and in her or his personal relations.

The primary functions of pastoral care have been discussed by Howard Clinebell and others (Basic Types of Pastoral Care and
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Counseling, Abingdon, 1984. Healing, sustaining, guiding, reconciling, and nurturing are all initiatives which require the minister to relate to those receiving care. However, when one extends healing care or sustaining care, guidance, reconciliation or nurture, it is taken for granted that the arrow moves from the care giver to the receiver. This understanding of care conceives it as uni-directional. But in the ministerial relationship as I am describing it, one simply is with another. The care giver is called to be with another. "Being with" is always a beginning; mutual relationship through mutual presence is a creative, on-going process. In other words, to be with another is to enter an open-ended process in which two (or more) persons interact, and through that interaction both are changed.

Was it not the intentional, mutual presence of Mary to Jesus that brought forth the judgment that she had chosen the better part?

Even when the minister relates for the sake of relationship, allowing herself or himself to be both giver and receiver at once, the relationship is often perceived by the other as uni-directional: pastor gives; person in relationship with pastor receives. Most church members assume that in relationship with a minister (and here I refer specifically to the ordained/appointed minister), they are receivers. When they discover that they are engaged in a mutual relationship in which the minister is served by them, they are more likely to feel like gifted receivers. An experience of assumed inequality becomes an encounter among equals. What is received, in addition to any particular advantage that comes through a concrete relationship, is a greater sense of self. It might take further relating, more mutual speech and hearing as two human beings and not as disparate roles, for the church member to realize that the giving and receiving and therefore the change experienced through the relationship was indeed mutual.
Again, mutuality is the key. As long as we analyze caring in terms of a giver and a receiver, we perpetuate inequality. Of course there are myriads of social and professional situations in which we do presuppose a giver and a receiver. Skilled people receive a fee for giving professional care to others. The doctor plays one role; the lawyer another. In terms of the medical and legal professions, clients are not often mutually involved in their relationship with a professional. Obviously, we do not expect intentional, focused presence between ourselves and the grocery store check-out clerk or the bus driver. Yet even in these illustrations I would hold that we perpetuate inequality by assuming a giver and a receiver, and that the more mutual the relationship, the more meaningful and human the relationship.

Karl Barth suggests that the elements of human encounter are mutual presence, mutual speech and hearing, and mutual service, all given and received with joy. Perhaps the quality most essential to achieving mutuality is presence: presence to both the “I” and the “Thou.” A minister aims toward mutual relation by being present in an intentional, focused way.

Have we not all felt, with the Samaritan woman, the focused mutual presence of Jesus asking for a drink? Was it not the intentional, mutual presence of Mary to Jesus that brought forth the judgment that she had chosen the better part? Do not Jesus’ words from the cross: “Behold your son... behold your mother” urge us all to attend to our mutual beholding of one another, our presence to one another?

Presence is a sacred word for me, most descriptive of the ongoing action of the divinity in our lives. We can probably count on our fingers the people who have been fully present to us. Such individuals become trusted, cherished friends. Perhaps the list of those to whom we have been fully present is also a short one. Because of its significance in my own process of becoming a minister, I want to tell a story that still has the power to call me to presence.

Early in my professional life I came to know and love a remarkably talented student whose world fell apart with the changes she experienced in the Roman Catholic Church after Vatican II. Her commitment to the church had been total; for
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her, that church had died. There were other complex personal issues at stake at the time, but in my imagination the loss of her ideal church was a key factor, the precipitating cause of a major depression. She came to speak with me and told me that she was contemplating suicide. Needless to say, transference and countertransference issues were blazing in the long pain-filled session, but the Spirit was with me, and I leaned on the power of love to be as present as I could be to a woman whose anguish was incredible. Eager for the referral I made, she began intense psychotherapy.

Several days after our encounter I found the door to my office covered with giftwrap, a huge ribbon across it, with a large card that read “Presence is Presents.” I call myself back to that card when I find myself inadequately focused, distracted, in responding to human need.

I knew that I received a great gift through that incident and its aftermath. The fact was that I knew (unconsciously during and quite consciously after the encounter) that the God-given ability to be present was a gift. Further, the seeker of care, in trusting me with her anguish, in relating to me in a profoundly human way, gave me a lasting gift; as the care giver, I was simultaneously a care receiver.

When we are preoccupied, when we put our own agenda first, when our level of genuine caring is down, we may engage in a relationship, but with little mutuality. There is no room or energy for the other.

Because such interactions are fleeting and fragile and are experienced so differently by the parties involved, I think we need to be explicit (but without exaggeration) in telling the other that we have indeed been gifted. When I conveyed to my friend that she had given me a gift, she was amazed. She was so caught up in her pain that she could not fathom that she had anything to give.

The level of our presence to ourselves, to the other, and therefore to God in large part accounts for the mode of the
mutuality in ministering. We have all both given and received in interactions which included a minimal amount of presence to the other. When we are preoccupied, when we put our own agenda first, when our level of genuine caring is down, we may engage in a relationship, but with little mutuality. There is no room or energy for the other. On the other hand, we have all both given and received in interactions which included a powerful presence of the other, and we do not forget the mutuality which we experienced.

MUTUALITY AND PERSONAL LIFE

We have been considering situations in which the professional person responds to need. How does the minister’s call to mutual relationships show up in her or his personal life?

The image of a meal might be the most fitting metaphor for such relating. Jesus used the image of the banquet in describing the divine/human community, the commonwealth of love toward which we live and strive (Matt. 22:1; 26:29). Rather than a banquet, which is usually a meal received by people who did not prepare and do not serve the food, my image is that of a banquet-quality, pot-luck meal where a group gather to celebrate. Granted, the group need as an organizer of the meal might consist of twelve chocolate desserts. This pot-luck is far more than pot luck.

Assume that an individual has organized the group, but organized it in such a way that one would have a hard time saying who did the work. Everyone worked. From the design of the menu to table setting and decoration, the anticipated event has meant far more than “getting food on the table.” With this group of friends in mind, individuals have taken extra care in the selection and preparation of particular dishes, down to the choice of recipes, of ingredients, even serving dishes.

As each individual or couple arrives at the appointed hour, each presents her or his contribution with anticipation and satisfaction: both the giving and the receiving are underway. The group now gathered, the relating progresses on more and
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more satisfying levels, mutual friends enjoying one another, and through that enjoyment entering into the very being/becoming of one another. There is no consciousness of who is giving and who is receiving; these people simply delight in being actively together. One human being relates to another human being who relates to another human being, so that all are givers and all are receivers. Each brings particular experiences, interests, wisdom, suffering, and hope for the world. If the relating is genuine, is inspired by the lure of God toward more concerned, more generous human living, all are changed in the process.

Ministers who succeed in relating to others as equals will find community developing all around them.

Refreshed and restored by the sharing, partakers of the meal discover a greater capacity to give and receive within wider and wider circles in their respective communities. This meal and what it sets in motion is an extension of the Eucharist: members of the Body of Christ sharing food and drink, spirit and word, sharing and inspiring commitment; members entering more fully into the being/becoming of one another, giving and receiving and being equipped for yet greater giving and receiving.

Ministers who succeed in relating to others as equals will find community developing all around them. Empowered partners in such relationships would probably discover enlarged appetites for the banquet; the felt need for mutuality might spread from table to table, making the commonwealth of love that much more tangible.

THE FAILURE OF MUTUALITY

In both professional and personal relating, efforts to enter into mutual relationship often fail. Mutuality can be destroyed by any number of factors: catastrophe, illness, absence, selfishness, fear, lack of self-esteem.
Mutuality can give way to a relationship of dominance-subordination. People become roles, and the mutuality, the key to genuine relationship, is lost. Both pastor and parishioner buy into the assumption that the minister has the authority; the parishioner is to follow the pastor’s lead. “What should I do when my spouse becomes abusive?” a frightened victim asks. “Remember your marriage vows,” is the “advice.” Or an associate minister enthusiastically suggests a change in the worship format for a particular liturgical season and is told by the senior pastor that such initiatives belong to him or her alone.

If one person dominates the banquet, the change in the group is remarkable. In the place of animated individuals sharing now with one person, now with another, a crisscross of joyful interaction, attention becomes focused on the dominant voice. While the person seizing attention may in fact be cared for through the interactions, the relating becomes uni-directional.

Such skewing of relationships takes different forms. An aggressive person might assume control, using the others as the base of her or his hierarchy: “I speak; you learn from me.” Or a wounded individual might turn the minister or the group into her or his helper, with all arrows moving from the “strong” to the “weak”: “My life is impossible; make it better.” In either case, mutuality, has been lost.

Another factor which keeps mutual relationships from forming is a lack of personal strength: mutuality demands a sense of self and adequate self-esteem. Mutuality requires openness and acceptance of the possibility of rejection: “if the other knew what I am really like, would I be accepted?” Perhaps the person has been badly damaged through previous relationships and has shut down, withdrawn. Relationships do not appear to be worth the risk. Or perhaps the person is afraid of becoming too dependent on another, only to be disappointed or abandoned in the end.

Often people with low self-esteem have determined (and possibly from a very early age) that they are outside the circle of those who have the personality, understanding, and competence to share their lives with other people. People with low
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self-esteem often feel empty inside, with no gifts to give; getting close to another would only expose their inadequacy. When such persons are helped, through the power of relationship, to recognize and claim their value, they are readied for mutual relationship. I am finding that faith resources can trigger such a conversion.

For example, a person professes belief in a loving God made manifest in Jesus, Jesus who loves each of us through life unto death. Yet that person does not think that she is lovable. Once I have established sufficient rapport, I encourage her to engage in theological reflection on the conflict between her self-assessment and her faith. What makes her so powerfully unlovable that the love of the God of love cannot penetrate her self-rejection? If prayer and reflection take place over time, time during which a helping person stays in as mutual a relationship as is possible, a conversion bringing genuine self-esteem can happen. (I have sometimes wondered if a believer’s persistence in self-hatred is not the sin against the Holy Spirit that even God cannot break through to forgive.)

Let us assume that a person who has gone through a program of academic and personal preparation for ordained ministry has both the personal strength and a willingness to take the risk involved in developing and maintaining a network of significant relationships. Other factors that block mutual relationships, specifically time and the willingness to share power, might be more problematic than strength of character and willingness to risk.

Ministers are notorious for lacking adequate time for their personal/interpersonal life, because there is never enough time to meet all of the demands of their ministry. Perhaps most committed care givers share this problem. They do not have enough time for family and friends.

Making relationships a priority would require a reorientation of values. How high a priority? Where on the list of values? determining to make relationship a lived (and not just stated) value would mean breaking the cycle of work. Something has to move off the agenda if a priority item is to move on. Once the
decision is made, time and energy for relationships can be built into the schedule. For example, every other Tuesday I have lunch with a particular friend—it is right there on my calendar. If I am asked to do anything other than attend to a real emergency, I simply respond that I have an appointment.

Relational ministers must avoid abusing hierarchy; their role is primarily one of facilitation among equals, not of assuming power over.

Another factor is power, and here I refer more specifically to the ordained or appointed minister. Through their roles, ministers assume authority that many church members are willing and eager to give them. And they do, in fact, have authority to lead their local congregation. A hierarchical structure is built in. Relational ministers must avoid abusing hierarchy; their role is primarily one of facilitation among equals, not of assuming power over. Through delegating significant responsibility and sharing, when appropriate, the leadership position in preaching and teaching and leading, the minister invites receivers to become givers. It takes a relational leader with a strong sense of self to be able to let go, where appropriate, some of the significant responsibility involved in church leadership and with it the accompanying recognition. However, if one draws one’s sense of self from responsibility and recognition, it is difficult to give up any authority and maintain a sense of self.

CONCLUSION

At the opening of this essay I raised a question about the paradoxical fact that while people enter ministry in order to relate to others, their personal relationships often suffer through neglect. When significant relationships are neglected because
the minister is regularly overextended, both the congregation and its leader have a faulty notion of the call to ministry. They have not understood that everyone in the congregation is called to ministry. The task of the appointed/ordained leader of the many ministers of the congregation is primarily to facilitate congregational ministries. While all share the burden, no one need be overburdened. I recognize that I am describing an ideal; there will be times when one or another is temporarily overburdened.

When significant relationships are neglected because the minister is regularly overextended, both the congregation and its leader have a faulty notion of the call to ministry.

The burden is shared through intentional and focused presence of persons to one another, which results in mutual relationships that are based on equality. The burden is shared through teamwork organized by people who have established mutual working relationships.

Through mutual relationships caring persons discover and develop themselves as individuals, exhibit a lifestyle modeled on the gospel, and fulfill the overarching function of pastoral/congregational care: that is, relating.

Mutual relationship among equals determines the quality of pastoral/congregational care. Apart from situations in which care givers meet specific needs of members of their church families and community through healing, sustaining, guiding, reconciling, and nurturing actions, ministers are called, as human beings and as committed Christians, to model mutual relationships. Within their families, among their friends, and with members of the larger community, all who serve are called to enjoy nonhierarchical and mutually satisfying relationship in which there is mutual presence and mutual service—given and received in joy.
NOTES

1. The word minister is a more inclusive term than pastor. As a Roman Catholic woman, I can be recognized by my church as a minister, but not as a pastor or priest. Some women in the Roman Catholic church are called "pastoral associate." However, since pastor generally refers only to the ordained, and many pastoral care givers are laypersons, I choose "minister" as the more appropriate title when referring to the care giver. In most arenas "pastoral care" refers to the work of both the ordained and the layperson and is therefore heard as an inclusive term.

4. Buber, I-Thou, pp. 131-134. Buber specified two other relationships in which mutuality is limited: teacher/student and therapist/patient. Donald Berry (Mutuality: The Vision of Martin Buber [Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985], p. 53) says that on one occasion Buber added laywer/client to these relationships which do not allow inclusion.
5. Berry, Mutuality, p. 40.
8. By avoiding the concept "kingdom of God" because of many of the connotations of kingdom, most significantly hierarchy and male dominance. In his book Becoming Christian (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984), James Fowler uses the image "commonwealth of love" to replace "kingdom of God." Commonwealth is surely a more democratic word connoting free choice, shared interests, and shared power.
What I propose to do in this brief essay is to look at one of the genres in the Book of Psalms—the so-called lament of the individual—and explore it as a personal quest for meaning in the midst of trouble and confusion. It is a quest that operates within the framework of the worship of the God of Israel and the language provided by that worship, however much the psalmist may challenge God or stretch the language. It is useful to our worship and spirituality because it provides a model of combining in prayer our aspirations and our troubles, the hope of the gospel and the reality of the world.

Biblical form critics make many distinctions in the literature of the psalter, but the two most basic distinctions can be made by asking two straightforward questions: who is speaking, the community or an individual? Is the dominant mood of the psalm praise or prayer? The psalms of praise are generally called hymns or thanksgivings, designations familiar to the modern worshipper. The petitionary psalms, however, are not called prayers or petitionary psalms, but laments. One could make a good case that this is a misleading designation, because the psalmists do a good deal more than lament. Nevertheless, the designation seems here to stay in biblical scholarship, at least for the time being. And it does have the advantage of

William Michael Soll is associate professor of religion at The School of the Ozarks, a four-year liberal arts college in Point Lookout, Missouri. He has written a series of radio broadcasts on the relation of music to words, stories, and ideas, and he is currently at work on From Fairy Tale to Sacred Book: A Reading of Tobit.
highlighting that feature of these psalms that is most foreign to our own prayer life: the heightened manner in which the Israelites describe their own miserable situation and complain to God.

I have noticed a number of different reactions to the Israelite lament from my students. Some respond with a suspicion that borders on indignation. "People are always blaming God for their troubles," they say, "when it's their own fault." There is truth to this observation; indeed, this truth is one that those who lament discover. But when the statement is made as an attempt to silence all complaint before it is even uttered, I feel that I am hearing a less than fully mature faith, one that is somewhat afraid of being human. Of course being human can be frightening—but that is precisely why we need to lament.

Other students enjoy the very thing that the first group of students deprecates. For this second group, the psalmist's moans, complaints, and questions serve as a kind of seal of approval on their own moans, complaints, and questions. They find relief in the fact that "it's OK to do these things, and even to be a little vindictive as well." Humanity, in all its vulnerability and uncertainty, calls to them from these psalms, and their own affirmation of these psalms is an acceptance of their own humanity.

. . . the lament is not merely an articulation of unhappiness; it seeks, in the midst of unhappiness, to recover communion with God.

I can hardly disguise the fact that I feel this second group has taken a step beyond the first. Walter Trobisch, who was as adamant as anyone about the need for conversion from a state of nature to a state of grace, also spoke of a conversion back to nature, in which we receive the fragile, unstable things of this world back again as a gift from God. The psalms of lament can assist us in this "second conversion" insofar as they put us
THE ISRAELITE LAMENT

back in touch with our natural, understandable feelings. But we
stop short of a full understanding of the lament psalms if we
make them nothing more than a vocabulary of complaint. For
the lament is not merely an articulation of unhappiness; it seeks,
in the midst of unhappiness, to recover communion with God.

The individual lament may be said to provide the psalmist
with a stance through which he seeks to understand his
experience and God’s direction. Claus Westermann has stated
that although the individual lament may arise out of need and
distress, it is oriented to praise. Most of the individual laments
end with praise or an anticipation of praise, and by the end of the
psalm one usually feels that some sense of God’s direction and
presence has been restored to the psalmist. Between the initial
cry of distress and the eventual assurance, a process is at work
which may be described, borrowing Anselm’s phrase, as “faith
seeking understanding.” (In fact, Anselm himself employed the
phrase at the conclusion of a long personal lament.)

This process can be analyzed by looking at the major
components of the lament. These components have become part
of the stock-in-trade of form critical studies of the lament. The
picture that thus emerges is both composite and abstract. To
give an example of how these features are integrated in a
particular psalm, I have chosen Psalm 142, partly because of its
brevity, and partly because it conforms more closely than others
to the “typical outline.”

Psalm 142
1 I cry to the Lord with my voice; to the Lord I make loud supplication.
2 I pour out my complaint before him and tell him all my trouble
3 When my spirit languishes within me, you know my path;
in the way wherein I walk they have hidden a trap for me.
4 I look to my right hand and find no one who knows me; I have no place to flee to,
and no one cares for me.

5 I cry out to you, O LORD;
I say, “You are my refuge,
my portion in the land of the living.”

6 Listen to my cry for help,
for I have been brought very low;
save me from those who pursue me,
for they are too strong for me.

7 Bring me out of prison,
that I may give thanks to your Name;
when you have dealt bountifully with me
the righteous will gather around me.

(translation taken from The Book of Common Prayer)

Psalm 142 can be divided into the following major components (whose nature will be discussed below): lament (most of vv. 1-4; “I have been brought very low,” v. 6), confession of trust (“you know my path,” v. 3; “You are my refuge, etc.,” v. 5), petition (“Listen . . . save . . . Bring me out,” vv. 6-7), vow (“that I may give thanks to your name,” v. 7), assurance (“when you have dealt bountifully with me . . . ,” v. 7).

While this essay concentrates on typical features of the lament, the variety that exists within this genre cannot be stressed enough. Components are added, subtracted, lengthened and shortened according to the psalmist’s particular situation in need. The psalmists did not sit down with this outline in their minds as a Elizabethan sonneteer might have sat down with a rhyme scheme. The connection between the various components of the Israelite lament is more situational or psychological than formal. And if, in the course of the psalmist’s prayer, we sense that a light has dawned in his soul, rarely is there even an attempt to verbalize the nature of the illumination. We can only trace the verbal milestones of the psalmist’s pilgrimage from despair to hope. But to do so is certainly instructive, and can even become infectious.

The lament component (I refer here to that part of the individual lament in which the actual lamenting or complaining is done and for which the whole is named) usually comes fairly early in these psalms. The external ills are familiar
enough: most prominent are those related to disease, war and false accusation. But the distress is virtually never described in specific detail; rather, it is given to us in images and a range of emotional motifs. This not only gives the psalms a kind of general applicability and usefulness, but it focuses attention on the internal disposition of the one distressed. In Psalm 142, for example, the psalmist is troubled; his “spirit languishes” within him—that is, he has lost the energy and resolve to continue the struggle: he feels panic, isolation, and humiliation. In other

These, then, are “the depths” from which the lament arises: isolation, fear, a sense of being overwhelmed, loss of purpose and meaning.

words, while particular external afflictions may give rise to the individual lament, more is at stake than the removal of these afflictions. The psalmist has experienced what Paul Ricoeur calls “dislocation”: he has lost his orientation and sense of God’s presence, and as a result views the world in a chaotic twilight where firm ground becomes quicksand and people appear as beasts. In happier times, the psalmist will be restored to human community (this is anticipated at the end of our psalm) and will probably have a more generous estimation of that community. In the jubilant 116th psalm, for example, the psalmist looks back on the affliction he was delivered from and says, “I said in my consternation, no one can be trusted” (v.11); however suspicious or extreme such a statement may appear in the light of the present rejoicing, those were his true feelings in the darkness of past distress.

These, then, are “the depths” from which the lament arises: isolation, fear, a sense of being overwhelmed, loss of purpose and meaning. The psalmist cries to God from the depths; he does not lose hope in God, but cries out to God: even the articulation of his complaint may be a first step out of these nether regions. And in conjunction with the complaint, a counter-theme emerges: the confession of trust. We may see
the confession of trust as the thesis for which the lament was the antithesis—a thesis previously unspoken, but now uttered almost in the same breath as the complaint. Notice how the psalmist bounces back and forth between the two in v. 3:

Lament: "my spirit languishes"
Confession of Trust: "but you know my path"
Lament: "but in that same path lies a hidden trap!" and so on.

Perhaps the best example of this vacillation in mood is found in one of the best-known laments, Psalm 22.

El: "My God, My God why have you forsaken me?"
CT: "Yet you are Holy, the one in whom our father safely trusted."
L: "But I am a worm and no man, despised by all"
CT: "Yet you are the one in whom I have trusted ever since I was born."
(vv.1-11, paraphrased)

While at first glance the confession of trust and the lament appear to be antithetical, it is also possible to speak of a synergistic relation between the two. Unless individuals believe that God is their rock, refuge, portion, one who intends life for them, they do not lament in the manner of the psalmist. One only laments to God if one expects something from God.

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Conversely, lack of lament is not necessarily a sign of the perfection of patience; it may be a sign of cynical or complacent resignation—loss of real hope in God. The recurrence of these confessions of trust in the individual lament is one indication that the laments unfold within the context of faith, and seeks to arrive at some kind of affirmation. The confession of trust does not negate the lament; rather, it is placed alongside it to give the psalmist a foothold in an unsure landscape.

To pursue this line of reasoning into the next component of
the prayer, the petition derives from both the lament and the
confession of trust. It derives from them, and it integrates them.
It brings together the need and the emotional urgency of the
lament with the expectation of the confession of trust. The
resolution of the psalmist's faith and experience in his petition is
not a philosophical justification of the ways of God to man, nor is
it a permanent achievement. The petition is just what it appears
to be—a request for the help of One who is believed to be able to
do something about the problem. But the petition has been
given solemnity and authenticity by the laments and confessions
of trust that have preceded it. They indicate that the petition
is no casual affair, but is deeply grounded in both the psalmist's
faith and his emotional response to the ills that beset him.

This "grounding" of the psalmist's prayer stands over against
an increasing tendency in both personal and corporate prayer
simply to present God with a list of things desired, or even
genereal areas of concern. I will not pause to offer a critique of this
tendency here. However, what does need to be appreciated are
the advantages of the biblical model. It is not merely that it is
more aesthetically satisfying. Affirming our hope in God
together with our fears about life as a "grounding" for our
prayers can assist that mysterious process of transfer whereby
we "cast our cares on God." Moreover, this biblical model finds
a Christian liturgical parallel in the structure of the collects,
especially those which "include in the preamble a descriptive
phrase or attribution which states the grounds on which we
make the petition" (e.g., the collect for Ash Wednesday, which
begins, "Almighty and everlasting God, who hatest nothing
that thou hast made and dost forgive the sins of all those who are
penitent ...")

To return to the psalmist, we have seen how he brings himself,
his hopes and fears, with his petition. This involvement of the
psalmist with his petition continues in the next section of the
psalm, the vow. Most of the time the vow is a vow of praise, as is
the case with Psalm 142. Occasionally sacrifice is mentioned as
well. Vows involving other forms of conduct are rare. We have
"Then I will teach your ways to the wicked" in Psalm 51, and the
promise to keep the Torah of the Lord in Psalm 119, but most often
the vow is, as here, one of praise.

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What are we to make of this? Westermann has asserted that "it is totally false to belittle this as a bargain" but it certainly seems to be something like a bargain. Whether or not we want to belittle it is another question. In the first place, the vow represents the psalmist’s commitment of himself to his own prayer. To refer to Westermann again, in perhaps a more helpful vein, he observes that the one who is praying is conscious of a debt to God, and that "it is only through the promise that I bind to my petition that the petition gains weight and value. I know that with the promise I add to my petition I have entered into relationship with God." Perhaps "covenant" would be an even better word than "relationship." We should also remember that in the Lord’s prayer a petition—forgive us our sins—is followed immediately by a related vow—as we forgive those who sin against us—before we dismiss the vow in prayer as invalid or unworthy. In both cases, there is an intrinsic relationship between what is asked for—God’s deliverance or forgiveness—and what is promised—the petitioner’s willingness to praise or forgive.

Yet for all that there remains a cajoling quality in many of the psalms of lament that seems foreign to Christian prayer. The psalmist believes that he has a stake in God and that God has a stake in him, and he is perfectly willing to remind God of this in prayer. Such a belief may seem bold, naive or purely selfish, but it seems difficult to talk of covenant, the love of God or the mission of the church and to deny it. We are concerned (not unreasonably) about the psalmist’s willingness to use this "stake" as a bargaining chip. Yet at the same time the persistence of the psalms in Christian worship may indicate our need for their frankness and emotional vigor as they wrestle with God.
Finally, there is some sense of assurance on the part of the psalmist toward the end of the psalm. While a few lament psalms lack this feature, the great majority of individual laments end with the psalmist holding his head high, or at least higher than when he began. Some scholars have assumed that this assurance is due to a priestly oracle similar to the oracles of encouragement in Second Isaiah, for example: "Fear not, for I am with you; I have called you by name, you are mine." Such an oracle is said to be pronounced at some point in the psalm, though the oracle itself never became part of the lament psalm. These scholars do not appear to believe that such an oracle was invariably part of the lament psalm, but tend to reserve it for those psalms where the transition from darkness to light, from lament to assurance, is most abrupt.

This hypothesis must be regarded as tentative and uncertain. In the first place, we still have to explain the measure of assurance achieved by the psalmist in those cases where the oracle of salvation is not presupposed, such as the one before us. Secondly, the hypothesis is an attempt to explain not the presence of assurance, but the abruptness of the transition. Since the psalms are not, in any case, characterized by smooth flow of argument, to what extent does abruptness, per se, require an explanation? Finally, as Gunkel himself admitted, the oracle of salvation is not a sufficient explanation for the psalmists' assurance; a real change must take place within.

But though this hypothesis is uncertain, it is instructive. It portrays the psalmist as responding to "an unfamiliar voice," and reminds us that more is going on while the psalmist is praying than simply the words of his prayer, both on a ritual level and on a psychological level. However, it seems plausible to assume that the prayer itself has contributed to his assurance.

To review briefly the progress of the lament: the psalmist began in distress, fear and isolation. The community gave him a language to name his condition and bring it before God; at the same time, the psalmist sets alongside his lament his confession of trust. This may be painful to the extent that it reveals the disparity between the promise and the present situation, but it also points the way out. The psalmist integrates his need
and his expectation in his petition, recognizes that his prayer requires an appropriate response, and promises to make that response. And, we must remind ourselves, he does this before a God who “desires truth in the inward being” (51:7), before whom one must lament truly, confess one's faith truly, ask and promise truly. The person, thus revealed before God, re-encounters God and is assured of God's favorable response. “Blessed be the Lord,” concludes another psalmist, “for he has shown me the wonders of his love in a besieged city” (31:21).

There are, to be sure, varying degrees of reorientation or reassurance to be found at the end of lament psalms. Psalms 39 and 88 seem to end in much the same way as they began. Job and Jeremiah rely heavily on lament, but do not arrive at a resolution as readily as many of the lament psalms. It may be that in such instances the language of lament is even more important, in not playing hypocrite to one's heart, but in keeping, as it were, a channel open to God. Certainly the language of lament takes us to the cross itself where, as George MacDonald said, “He could not see, could not feel him near; and yet it is 'My God' that he cries.”

While lament has ceased to play a role in most Christian public worship, there exists a vigorous strain of complaint in individual Christian writings. One writer who exhibits this is the seventeenth century Anglican parson/poet, George Herbert. In the first of his five opens entitled “Affliction,” he takes up a complaint in much the same vein as Jeremiah did when he charged, “God, you seduced me, and I fell for it” (20:7). Herbert begins:

When thou didst first entice to thee my heart
I thought the service brave

and then traces his life from the initial “milk and sweetness” of his conversion to increasing sickness, followed by loss of friends and betrayal into the limbo of academia. The penultimate stanza of his poem may well serve as a student's lament:

Now I am here, what thou wilt do with me
None of my books will show.
THE ISRAELITE LAMENT

I read, and sigh, and wish I were a tree
For sure then I should grow
To fruit or shade; at least some bird would trust
Her household to me, and I should be just.

Herbert’s general philosophy of lament is best summed up in his poem, “Bitter-Sweet”:

Ah, my dear angry Lord,
Since thou dost love, yet strike;
Cast down, yet help afford;
Sure I will do the like

I will complain, yet praise;
I will bewail, approve;
And all my sour-sweet days
I will lament, and love.

Those who are familiar with Herbert’s poetry in general will recognize that my examples come from the sadder end of his emotional spectrum. They are, however, by no means unique, and they give weight and validity to his more soaring paeans.

The Israelite lament, then, expresses in primary religious language the essence of Christian prayer as described in Herbert’s contemplative poem, “Prayer.” This poem does not contain a complete sentence, but juxtaposes images for prayer one after another in apposition, of which the last—“something understood”—is not even an image, but points to an inner recognition beyond imaging. Here are the last two lines of the poem:

Church bells beyond the stars heard, the soul’s blood,
The land of spices, something understood.

If Herbert characterized prayer by the words “something understood,” perhaps it was because he knew that mode of address that begins in confusion, which gives voice to the neediness of the human condition, and so is most open to God.
1. Quoted in an editorial appearing in His, May 1974, p. 32.
3. Anslem, Proslogion, 1.
4. Often "address" is listed as the first component in the structure of the psalm; so, for example, Westermann, Praise and Lament pp. 36, 64. In the case of Psalm 142, one could designate v. 1 as the address. But often the "address" (which after all requires only the mention of God) is incorporated into an act of lament, trust or petition, as in Ps. 69:1: "Save me, O God, for the waters have risen up to my neck." A few laments, such as Psalm 41, do not begin with an address at all. Thus, it can be questioned whether "address" should be viewed as a separate component of the lament (see William Michael Soil, "Psalm 119: The Hermeneutic of an Acrostic Lament," Diss. Vanderbilt, 1982, pp. 137-141).
5. See Walter Brueggemann, "The Psalms and the Life of Faith: A Suggested Typology of Function," ISOT 19: 6-8. 14. For Ricoeur, the sequence "orientation, dislocation, reorientation" is basic to human experience, and Brueggemann proposes that his sequence provides a "helpful way to understand the psalms" (p.6).
7. Westermann, p. 78.
8. Ibid.
NEW COVENANT CHRISTOLOGY IN AN
EARLY CHRISTIAN HOMILY

HAROLD W. ATTRIDGE

The document known as the Epistle to the Hebrews is one of the more enigmatic texts in the New Testament. Like one of its major figures, Melchizedek, it has neither "father, mother nor genealogy" (7:3). While traditionally attributed to Paul, it is clearly not a work of the Apostle and, despite centuries of speculation, its author remains anonymous. He was obviously a person learned in the Jewish scriptures and Greek rhetoric, and possibly had some association with the Pauline mission. The original addresses are equally obscure. The title, "To the Hebrews," is probably a second-century conjecture based upon the extensive use in the work of Old Testament cultic imagery. The recipients may have been of Jewish origin, but nothing precludes their being gentiles. Christians they certainly were, whether they lived in Jerusalem, as ancient conjecture held, or in Asia Minor, Achaea or Rome, as various modern scholars have guessed. The document which they received has traditionally styled a "epistle," yet, while it has a typical epistolary conclusion, it lacks the formal introductory elements normal for a letter. Although it probably was sent from a distance, its internal structure and techniques are clearly sermonic. It comments on and offers exegetical arguments about scriptural texts and bases exhortations on these scriptural expositions. The text is, in fact, the best example we possess of an early Christian homily.

Harold W. Attridge is associate professor of New Testament in the Graduate Department of Theology at the University of Notre Dame and a specialist in non-canonical Christian writings. His commentary, Hebrews, was published in August, 1988 by Fortress Press.
The situation that called forth this homily is obscure and numerous reconstructions have been suggested. The addresses probably faced various pressures, some external, some internal. They had obviously endured some harassment (10:32-34) from unidentified quarters. They may have found attractive certain teachings and practices, perhaps of a Jewish or Jewish Christian cast (13:9-10). Some passages (5:11-6:3) suggest that they had grown weary in their commitment to Christ. Whatever the causes of their disaffection, some members had apparently not been faithful to the community’s assembly (10:25). In response to this situation, the causes of which may have been unclear even to the author, the homily issues an urgent, yet carefully elaborated and artfully constructed, appeal to renewed commitment to Christian faith.

The appeal proceeds through a reflection on certain traditional affirmations about Christ. These are developed in such a way as to make them seem fresh and vital, both conceptually and in their relevance for the contemporary life of the believer. The movement from Christology to the Christian life is replicated at least twice. The first two chapters set out, in largely traditional terms, basic christological images, chapter one emphasizing the exalted status of the eternal Son, chapter two the process of incarnation and suffering as the fitting prelude to his exaltation. The reflection on Christ leads to a little homily in chapters three and four, which also has the character of a traditional set piece, urging the importance of faith or fidelity. How the christological affirmations undergird the appeal to fidelity remains as yet unclear. To make that connection is the burden of the major portion of the homily. A preliminary reflection (4:14-5:10) on what was probably a familiar christological title, “high priest,” isolates what will serve as the focal point of all the following doctrinal exposition. The innovative christological reflection is introduced with an exhortation to give heed, since the danger of failure is real and the consequences of failure serious (5:11-6:20). The central exposition reaffirms, in a striking new way, the affirmations of the first two chapters. Christ is first seen to be an exalted high priest, “in the order of Melchize-
The notion, derived from Ps. 110:4, is interpreted in chapter seven to mean that Christ is a priest of an eternal and spiritual order. The mythical image of Christ is a heavenly priest, probably based on Jewish analogical speculation, serves as the basis for the presentation of his priestly action, which must be to offer a heavenly sacrifice. Yet in chapters eight through ten a surprising twist occurs in the development of what the heavenly sacrifice involves. It is finally seen to be not an event in the transcendent world, but a bodily act made "spiritual" or "heavenly" by its conformity to God's will (10:1–10). As such an act, wherein the formal opposition of heaven and earth, spirit and flesh, is overcome, it inaugurates the "new covenant" promised by Jeremiah (8:7–13; 9:15–22; 10:16–17). It is this biblical image of the new covenant which serves as the bridge between christology and exhortation.

Life in the new covenant, which provides true and vital access to God (10:19–21), is characterized by hope and love (10:22–25), but above all by faith. What this means to Hebrews emerges in the famous catalogue of chapter eleven. Faith has its intellectual or cognitive component ("belief"), but, more importantly, it is the fidelity to God which permits endurance of trials and tribulations in the hope that the divine promises will be realized. According to Hebrews, this virtue was most clearly and fully displayed by the "inaugurator and perfecter of faith," (12:2), Jesus, who introduced the new covenant by his faithful self-sacrifice. The final parenetic section of the text includes another set of sacrificial images (13:10–16) which again make the point that believers are called upon to imitate Christ and offer their own sacrifices analogous to his. They do so by accepting the reproach of outsiders, doing good to one another, and continually acknowledging and thanking the God who has made life with him possible.

This brief summary of the overall movement of Hebrews hardly does justice to the complexities of argument and imagistic development which characterize the work, but it is useful to have some sense of the whole when wrestling with individual lections.
Hebrews 1:1-4; 2:9-11

Christ, God's perfect representative, became what he is for his followers through the very human process of suffering and death.

The first four verses of the text function as an exordium which encapsulates Hebrews' major themes. They are rich with rhetorical embellishment and display various figures, such as assonance, alliteration, chiasm, and balanced parallelism. The literary artistry of the periscope is a fitting vehicle for highlighting the theme of God's address to humankind (1:1). The importance of the word of God as the vehicle which conveys salvation is a recurrent theme of the first several chapters of Hebrews. The homilist is conscious of being a tradent of that salvific address (2:1-4) and his concern to revitalize commitment through the words of his sermon is the practical expression of his theology of revelation.

The word of salvation is certainly not a simply a message of the author's own devising. Nor is it a repetition of the "multiple and manifold" address of God to the prophets. The author is convinced that God has spoken in a special and definitive way through an eschatological agent who is God's Son. The bulk of the exordium sketches a portrait of that agent, emphatic in its "high" Christology. The Son is seen to be not only the eschatological "heir of all things," but also the instrument of God's creative (1:2) and sustaining activity (1:3). This high Christology comes to expression in striking images, the Son as the "radiance of God's glory" and the "imprint of his very being" (1:3). The source of these images is the portrait of divine wisdom in the Wisdom of Solomon (7:25f.), a part of the sapiential tradition which was influential in the development of the notion of Christ's pre-existence. Hebrews is not, however, primarily concerned to make a statement about the character of Christ's divine nature. Like other early Christian poetic passages (Phil. 2:6-12; Col. 1:15-18) inspired by portraits of Lady Wisdom, Hebrews celebrates the significance for contemporary believers of Jesus and his message. Therein lies something ultimate and fundamental for human existence. For the one who is God's definitive spokesman represents what God actually is.
The last two clauses of verse three suggest how it is that the Son effects this decisive representation of the divine, by his act of "making expiation for sin," and thereupon "taking a seat at the right hand of the majesty on high." These two phrases hint at the christological developments in the body of the text. The latter image of the heavenly session uses language of Ps. 110:1, an ancient hymn about the enthronement of an Israelite king. The text came to be used widely in early Christianity (e.g., Eph. 1:20 and 1 Pet. 3:22) as a prophecy of the exaltation of Christ and allusions to it will recur throughout Hebrews (8:1; 10:12; 12:2).

One of the major novelties which our author apparently introduces is the exegetical application to Christ of the fourth verse from the same psalm, "You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek" (5:5; 6:20). The interpretation of that verse in chapter seven will intensify the affirmation traditionally made through the application of Ps. 110:1 to Christ.

The other focus of the christological reflection of the text is the death of Christ, seen as an act of self-sacrifice in conformity to the will of God, through which a life of covenant fidelity is made possible for his followers. That sacrificial act is intimiated in the reference (1:3) to the Son's "making purification for sins" as a prelude to his heavenly session. The allusion to Christ's very human suffering and death is almost obscured in the cultic language of this phrase. Nonetheless, it will become the center of the christological exposition to come.

The exordium concludes (1:4) with a contrast between Christ and the angels. As the eternal and exalted Son, he is clearly superior to these "ministering spirits sent for the service of those who obtain salvation" (1:14). From the comparison in this verse many commentators have illegitimately that the Hebrews is engaged in polemic against an inappropriate estimation of the significance of angels. The comparison, however, is simply an elaboration of a fixed element in affirmations of Christ's exaltation. Its polemical function is dubious, since the text nowhere else indicates that there is any problem with angels, however they might be understood. The elaboration of the traditional affirmation serves to highlight the truly exalted status of the Son through whom the final and
definitive address of God has come to humankind.

The exordium and the catena of scriptural citations which follows (1:5-13) serve to emphasize one pole of the Christology of Hebrews. The contrasting pole appears in the second chapter. After a brief paraenetic interlude (2:1-4) the text presents a vivid reminder that the eternal and exalted Son is very much a human being. As is characteristic of Hebrews, the reflection on the humanity of Jesus proceeds through exposition of a scriptural passage, Ps. 8:5-7. That psalm was originally a poetic celebration of the glorious status of human beings who have been made only a "little less than the angels," and who in that status have been "crowned with honor and glory." With its christological lenses, Hebrews sees the text as saying something very different, telling, in effect, the story of the divine Son who became incarnate and subsequently exalted. Verse nine contains the heart of the exegesis. Relying on an ambiguity in the Greek, the author drives a wedge between "being made less than angels" and being "crowned." The first phrase is not seen to be a matter of degree ("a little less"), but of time ("for a little while"). The coronation is not equivalent to humanity's status at the head of the created order, but something which happens to Jesus only after his "suffering of death," which has a soteriological goal, to "taste death for all."

Following the exegetical comment on Psalm 8, Hebrews develops an extended reflection on the moment in the Son's story when he was "made lower than the angels," and on the suffering whereby he effected salvation for others. The argument and the imagery of verse 10 are both complex. The author affirms that it was "fitting" for God to bring it about that Jesus should suffer. Discussion of what was fitting to attribute to the divine was commonplace in Hellenistic theological literature. From the standpoint of most of that literature, what is said to be fitting here is quite unusual. To understand how it was fitting for God so to act, it is necessary to understand what Hebrews means by saying that God "perfected" the Son through suffering. The language may be inspired by stoic ethics, which could speak of the perfecting of human character through the cultivation of virtue. This interpretation might
receive some corroboration from an analysis of other elements of the verse. The imagery used of God, "leading many sons to glory," and of the Son, described as the "author" or "guide" (archēgōs) of the sons' salvation, also have a background in Hellenistic culture. Here and throughout the rest of the chapter, Hebrews alludes to traditional redemption myths told of heroes such as Orpheus and Heracles who harrowed Hades and released its captives. Such myths were used by contemporary philosophers as allegories or symbols of the ethical development and hence liberation of the human soul. The interpretation of Christ's action in verse fourteen, as aimed at delivering people from the fear of death, reflects precisely the Stoic interpretation of the true significance of the ancient myths of Heracles' invasion of the underworld. The "perfecting" of Christ according to Hebrews is a similar process to that which the mythical heroes underwent. It is not the case, however, that Christ is understood to have undergone a moral reformation, since he is presumed to have been ever sinless (4:15). He did, however, have to learn through suffering the full meaning of obedience (5:8). It was only because he had that learning experience that Christ was qualified and enabled to serve as the heavenly High Priest (7:28). Enthroned on high, he is ever ready to intercede for those who are being tried as he was (2:17-18; 7:25). The fittingness of the suffering and death of the Son thus consists in the fact that it was in and through those experiences that the Son became what he is for his followers. Through his human experiences he was put in a position to provide them the "perfection" in the life of the new covenant (10:14). Whatever he may have been from all eternity, it is the humanity of Jesus and its continuing relevance which makes him what he is for Christians.

The possibilities for homiletic application of these lections from the first chapters of Hebrews are abundant. They invite reflection on the significance of basic Christian affirmations that Jesus is "Son of God" or "the Christ." They also suggest a fruitful way of engaging in such reflection, by concentrating on the remembrance of the humanity of Christ as the vehicle through which what is ultimate in existence has addressed
humankind. Yet, as the author of Hebrews tried to meet the perceived needs of a particular congregation, so, too, a contemporary Christological reflection should attempt to be sensitive to the needs of contemporary hearers. For those whose view of Christ is excessively supernaturalistic and quasi-docetic, Hebrews' insistence on the reality of the humanity of Jesus as real and of ultimate significance could be salutary. For those with a minimalistic or reductionist view of Jesus as just another prophet, preacher, or revolutionary, the images used by the text in its witness to the significance of Christ might provide helpful categories for deeper understanding.

Yet another fruitful way to appropriate these texts might be through the category of "perfection." There are many different notions of perfection, physical, psychological, social, or economic, operative in contemporary society, as there were in the first century. Yet scripture holds up a formal ideal of Christian perfection, Jesus, whose fidelity to God enabled him to be of service to his fellows. Perfection for Hebrews is not an individualist ideal. It is, rather, an aspect of the life of the covenant community. It comes to expression in the worshipful access to God made possible by Christ's covenant-inaugurating sacrifice and in the growth of members of the community in a life of sanctification (9:14; 10:11,4; 13:15-16).

Hebrews 4:1-3; 9-13

It is the faithful who are called to "enter God's rest."

Following the christological sketches of the first two chapters Hebrews suggests what will be the major theme of its hortatory sections, the importance of faith or fidelity (pistis). The section extending from 3:1 to 4:13 constitutes, in fact, a little sermon in itself now woven into the larger homiletic texture of Hebrews. Its formal features are clear. An introductory comparison between Christ and Moses as examples of fidelity sets the stage (3:1-6). A citation from Psalm 95 provides the scriptural basis (3:7-11). The psalm constitutes a warning based on the experience of the Israelites of the Exodus generation.
who tested Yahweh in the desert and for that reason were precluded from entering the "resting place" of Canaan. From 3:12 to 4:11 the author comments on the citation and makes its summons "to hear God's voice" and not to "harden the heart" into an appeal directed to his contemporaries. He begins (3:12-19) by alluding to the account of the desert rebellion in Numbers 14 and its dire results for those who were disobedient to Yahweh. He thus equates disobedience and faithlessness, indicating, by the way, that faith is not simply a matter of belief. He then goes on to make an application of the observations on the Psalm and its Pentateuchal correlate.

This application first (4:1) suggests that the promise to enter God's rest remains open. An important part of the contemporizing process of the homily is the demonstration that this is indeed the case. In order to do so it is necessary to redefine the "rest" (katapausis) mentioned by the psalm. In its original context, it obviously referred to the "resting place" of the land of Canaan, the goal of the wandering Israelites. In what follows (4:4-5), the author engages in a bit of verbal play, called a gevura shawaw in Rabbinic exegesis, but which works here only on the basis of the Greek translation of the Old Testament. The correspondence of the terms for "rest" in Psalm 95 and Gen. 2:2 indicates that the "rest" to which God promised entry is not the physical space of an earthly domain, but the transcendent place or state into which God himself entered after his labor of creation. It is a promise to enter that "rest" which now remains open.

At this point the author anticipates the result of this exegetical argument and draws a paraenetic inference, warning his addressees lest they "be judged to have fallen short." Verse two makes explicit the analogy between the desert generation and the author's contemporaries and the difference which should distinguish those who failed to enter God's rest and those who will do so. Both groups, the ancient Israelites, and contemporary followers of Jesus, "received good news." How far the author wants to press this analogy is unclear at this point. He certainly does not mean to say that the message spoken of old and that spoken to his contemporaries were simply
identical. His constant arguments about the superiority of the Son’s eschatological revelation to the “multiple and manifold” revelations of old indicate that he sees the “good news” of the Christian community as distinctive. Nonetheless, there is an analogy between the people of God of old and that of the “new covenant,” and the assumption of this similarity undergirds much of the interpretation of the Old Testament in Hebrews. The analogy here consists in the common message “not to harden the heart.”

The difference between the old and the new people of God is the presence of “faith.” This is certainly the fundamental import of the latter half of verse two, although the Greek text is problematic and its precise grammatical construal is uncertain. How the author can be confident of the reality of this difference is not immediately apparent. On the one hand, his statement of the fact of a difference is really part of his exhortation. He says, in effect, “The Exodus generation did not respond to God’s invitation with obedient faith; you must.” On the other hand, he is convinced that the situation of the people of God differs in a significant way, because the people of the new covenant have at their head the “inaugurator and perfecter of faith,” Jesus (12:2). It is the presence of this paradigm of fidelity which, in fact, constitutes a major difference between the “good news” heard of old and that of the author’s community.

Verse three concludes the comparison by pointing to the contemporaries who have faith and therefore enter God’s rest. The verse goes on to quote again the concluding verse of the Psalm as cited at 3:11. This quotation serves to tie the exegetical comment to the text. It also serves the purpose of the argument of this section of the homily by preparing for the demonstration that the “rest” denied to the Exodus generation is a primordial reality, available ever since the completion of the works of creation.

After the detailed arguments (4:4-8) indicating that the promise of entry into divine “rest” applies to his contemporaries, the homilist reaches his peroration. First (4:9) the inference is drawn that a “sabbath keeping” (sabbatismos) remains for God’s people. This unusual designation derives
from the association between the "rest" of Psalm 95 and the original Sabbath when God rested from his works. The connotations of the term indicate that the promised rest consists not simply of idle repose, but of festive celebration in the presence of God. The next verse (4:10) makes crystal clear the analogy between the primordial movement of God from work to "entry into rest" and that of the individual who is now summoned to listen to God's word. An exhortation to the community to strive to attain the divinely appointed goal concludes the body of the homily (4:11).

The exposition by the author of Hebrews of Psalm 95 appears to modern sensibilities to be artificial and contrived, but it stands squarely in the tradition of Jewish homiletic midrash in both its techniques and basic themes. To appeal to the exodus generation as an example of disobedience and failure was a commonplace of ancient Jewish and Christian homiletics. Another example of the phenomenon appears in 1 Corinthians 10. In both cases, the preacher draws a moral from the scriptural episode by finding analogies between elements of the experience of the Israelites and a contemporary situation. Such analogical reasoning remains a common hermeneutical and homiletic technique and the interpretive movement of the text of Hebrews could easily be replicated today.

While the structure and thrust of the chapter are clear enough, certain key elements, such as the notion of "rest," remain obscure and difficult both for exegesis and for contemporary appropriation. This situation is due in part to the fact that the author operates with traditional and generally familiar material. He can presuppose much about his addressees' understanding of the goal of human existence and the content of the divine promises. He is not engaged in an analysis or theological critique of his own or his community's eschatology, which is apparently a somewhat Hellenized or philosophically interpreted version of apocalyptic hopes for deliverance from the world of change, decay, and oppression. One possibility for a contemporary application of this text would be a reflection on the understanding of the content of Christian hope today.
Yet another approach to the little homily embedded in chapters three and four is suggested by its epilogue, a rhetorical flourish which poetically celebrates the power of the word of God (4:12-13). This little pericope, which continues the theme of God’s speech enunciated in the exordium (1:1), serves a fitting conclusion to the interpretation of Psalm 95, which was read as purveying a message directly relevant to the minds and hearts of the author’s contemporaries. His sermonette was, thus, an exercise in showing the word of God “living, active, and sharper than any two-edged sword” (4:12). The subsequent imagery is extravagant and somewhat paradoxical, for the places to which this verbal sword is said to penetrate, the joins of soul and spirit, sinews and marrow (!), are hardly conceivable. The fundamental point about the word is then made less metaphorically, that it is “discerning of the desires and thoughts of the heart.” A vivid image, probably derived from the realm of sacrificial ritual, concludes the comment. Before this word, all creation is open, and all things are “naked and with their neck laid bare” to its penetrating gaze (4:13).

The imagery of this rhetorical flourish, occasionally misinterpreted in the light of John 1:1 as a reference to Christ, presents a challenge both to preachers and their audience. Does the scriptural text come alive for readers and auditors in the twentieth century in the way that this passage suggests? If not are hearts in fact being hardened to God’s call to a life of fidelity in the community of the new covenant?

Hebrews 4:14-16

Confession of the exalted Jesus is a source of consolation and encouragement.

The little homily about fidelity based on Psalm 95 had been introduced with a reference to the fidelity of Jesus (3:1-6), one of the characteristics attributed to him when he was first introduced as High Priest (2:17-18). At this point (4:14), along with the solemn designation “Son of God,” the priestly title is once again deployed. With this application, the other epithet
used of Jesus at 2:17, "merciful," comes to fore. The Christological discussion which follows (4:14-5:9) is formally a treatment of the appropriateness of that title. More importantly perhaps, the pericope develops further the imagery of the High Priest which will become in chapter seven the focal point for Hebrews' innovative Christological reflection.

The concluding verses of chapter four thus serve a transitional function. The reference to the "High Priest who has gone through the heavens" recalls the picture of Christ's exaltation and session "at the right hand of the majesty" which figured prominently in the first chapter. The epithet "Son of God" recalls the term used of Christ in the exordium. At the same time, it probably gives some indication of what it is that author has in mind in his reference to the "confession" to which he urges his audience to hold fast. He may even have some particular creedal formulations in view, although his main concern is not with fidelity to some verbal formula, but to the reality of God made available by his Son.

The exhortation is grounded in an understanding of the character of the High Priest which the community is said to "have." The characterization again alludes to the discussion in chapter two of the participation of Jesus in "blood and flesh" (2:14), his death (2:19, 14-15), and, in general, his being tested and tried (2:18). Only in his sinlessness is Jesus said to be distinct from other human beings (4:15). On this point the author follows widespread early Christian tradition (e.g., 2 Cor. 5:21; John 7:18; 8:46; 1 Pet. 1:19). While some modern commentators have argued that such a description of Jesus compromises his humanity, for our author there is no contradiction.

The human character and experiences of Jesus, through which he was "perfected" as High Priest, enable him to be sympathetic to human weaknesses. For Hebrews, Jesus is not simply a paradigm of faithful existence, although he certainly is that. In his presence to God he is the perpetual intercessor, ready to aid his followers who need his help (4:15-16; 7:25). The image of the royal official ready to aid provide special assistance to clients has been the foundation for much Christian piety directed not only at Christ, but also at the saints.
The insistence on the centrality of Christ in Hebrews was a useful tool in the hands of the reformation polemic against the excessive veneration of the saints in the medieval Church. But today even the notion of Christ as heavenly intercessor, and the piety in which that notion finds expression, is felt by many to be problematic. While the imagery is certainly that of ancient myth, the insight which it contains is valid and important. The Christian who confesses, in the words of the exordium, that Jesus is the “effulgence of God’s glory and imprint of his very being,” that is, the true re-presentation of God, knows that the death of Jesus cannot mean the end of that representative function. That ultimate and utterly gracious reality which is God is, so the Christian confesses, present now in the community created by Jesus’ priestly act. Members of that community have always been able to draw sustenance and strength from that divine presence.

The ancient homilist invited his addressees to “approach the throne of grace” (4:16), as did worshippers to the sanctuary where God was enthroned or suppliants to the dais of a person of power. With this imagery he encourages them to accept the ultimate source of strength, this “mercy and grace,” which will enable them to endure the trials which they face as followers of Jesus (12:3). The modern homilist commenting on this text, could convey the same sense of the availability of God’s gracious strength.

Hebrews 5:1-6

Jesus is qualified for priestly service.

The transitional verses (4:14-16) contained a renewed reference to the title “High Priest” used of Jesus. The exposition of the significance of that title now begins in earnest with a list of the qualifications for the office for ordinary human beings (5:1-4). The way in which Jesus fulfilled those qualifications is then suggested (5:1-9).

The catalogue of characteristics of ordinary “high priests” is not derived from any particular biblical source. It contains
allusions to some Pentateuchal passages, but is designed primarily with the following portrait of Christ in mind. This treatment of the Old Testament traditions within the framework provided by Christian commitment is, as we have seen, characteristic of Hebrews.

The ordinary high priest is "chosen from human beings" and is "established for human beings" (5:1). His sphere of competence is "matters pertaining to God." The purpose of his installation is to effect atonement or "to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins." All of this is a reasonable summary, at least of the selection of the first priest of the old covenant, Aaron, as described in Exodus 28. The following characterization, that the high priest is one who can "moderate his emotion" (metriopath-ein) toward those who inadvertentlly go astray (5:2), is not a biblical datum. The remark continues indirectly the theme of the sympathetic intercessory role of Christ which had been prominent in the preceding transitional verses. This supposed quality of the ordinary high priests immediately prepares for the portrait of Christ in 5:7-9, which describes his experience of "learning obedience through suffering." As the text already indicated (2:17-18), it is Christ's human experience that makes him the effective priestly intercessor that he is.

Two other features of the verse are worth noting. The quality attributed to the ordinary high priest is somewhat limited. He is to "moderate his emotion," especially his emotion of anger. The attitude attributed to Christ throughout the text, and most immediately in 4:15, is the more positive one of active sympathy. The distinction is characteristic of the illustrative use of Old Testament materials throughout Hebrews. While the text establishes a typological correspondence between institutions and actors of the Old and New Covenants, the new is regularly seen to be in some sense superior. This style of argument has the potential to be misused as a warrant for a Christian triumphalism, in which the superiority of the Christian tradition over other religious systems, especially Judaism, is celebrated. Such a construal of this or other similar passages does not accurately convey an important function of the comparative arguments in Hebrews. They are not simply components of a general polemical program, although there is a heritage of early
Christian polemic contained within them. Rather, they often function paraenetically. Their purpose, in other words, is not to teach a doctrine about the superiority of Christianity, but to instill a proper appreciation of the virtues of the new covenant, particularly exemplified in its founder.

The paraenetic function of the comparative arguments here and elsewhere in Hebrews offers a suggestion for the application of this text. Since Jesus is presented as a model for the people of the covenant which he inaugurated, the characteristics of his priesthood are qualities which ought to be found in them. To Jesus as High Priest is attributed the quality of sympathy with those beset with various kinds of weaknesses, a sympathy which subsumes a judicious restraint over against moral failure, but is more encompassing. Those who would be members of his priestly people should strive to imitate that sympathetic compassion.

A second feature of this verse (5:2), that the sinners to which the ordinary high priest reacts are characterized by inadvertence (agnousin), indicates another, and somewhat more problematic element of Hebrews, its radical moral rigorism. As part of his paraenetic program, the author several times issues stern warnings against apostasy (2:1-4; 6:4-8; 10:26-31; 12:15-17). He clearly excludes the possibility of a repentance for such a sin (6:4-6), and seems to reject the possibility of the forgiveness of any deliberate post-baptismal sin (10:26). Attempts have often been made to qualify this rigorism and thereby bring the text into conformity with the Church's later penitential theory and practice, but these are exercises in eisegesis. Hebrews, in fact, represents a widespread presupposition in the early Church that sin was simply incompatible with the new life provided by incorporation into the new covenant community. The Church's understanding of the implications of the Gospel and its appropriation by a sinful humanity progressed beyond that initial presupposition, and the portrait of the divine compassion manifested in Jesus the High Priest was extended and deepened. The presuppositions of this verse could well serve as the basis for an instructive homiletic reflection on the continual growth in the understanding of its message by the Church.
The next observation (5:3) about ordinary high priests indicates a point of contrast between Jesus and them. In Leviticus 16 it is stipulated that the high priest, on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, was to offer sacrifices both for his own sins and for those of the people. The author of Hebrews, however, presumes that Christ is sinless (4:15). Hence, he does not have to offer any sacrifice for his own sins (7:27). The contrast could serve to indicate the superiority of the High Priest of the new covenant to those of the old. Yet in this whole pericope that point is not explicitly made. Instead, in contrast to the sin-offering which the priests of old made, the portrait of Christ as High Priest will point to the metaphorical “offering” of prayers and supplications for deliverance (5:7) by the High Priest of the new covenant. The personal sacrifice of the new High Priest illustrates his humanity just as much as did the sin offerings of the priests of old indicated theirs. The portrait of the prayerful offering of the new High Priest may also contain a paradigmatic element, since the life within the community of the new covenant will eventually be seen to involve offering prayerful “sacrifices of praise” (13:15).

The final characteristic of the ancient High Priest is that he did not choose himself for the office but was called to it by God (5:4). Hebrews maintains that the same situation obtains in the case of Christ, and the discussion of Christ as High Priest begins (5:5-6) with the point of comparison. As usual, the author makes his christological case exegetically, noting that the same one, i.e., God, who addressed to his Son the comment of Ps. 2:7, “This day I have begotten you” also addressed to him the declaration of Ps. 110:4, “You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.” Although the term “high priest” is lacking in the latter verse, the qualification “according to the order of Melchizedek” indicates, according to the somewhat playful exegesis of chapter seven, that the priest so addressed is in fact more exalted than any Levitical priest.

The use of these tests from the Psalms illustrates clearly our author’s interpretive presuppositions and techniques. Both verses are taken from royal psalms, where the person
addressed is an Israelite monarch. In the first century such texts were often, especially by followers of Jesus, taken to be prophetic addresses to the eschatological anointed king. The first of these texts is used elsewhere in Hebrews (1:5) and in other early Christian literature. The latter appears for the first time here. Its christological use is probably an innovation of our author as he tries to expiate the title of High Priest which had been apparently been applied to Jesus in some liturgical or confessional tradition.

Ps. 110:4, in any case, is the scriptural warrant for the claim that Jesus did not arrogate to himself the status of high priest, but was called to it by God. The use of the text and its juxtaposition with Ps. 2:7 raise the theoretical issue of the relationship between Christ’s sonship and priesthood. Traditional dogmatics has seen the latter to be a function of the former. According to this approach, it is because Christ is the eternal divine son that he has special qualification as officiant and victim which lend his sacrificial death its special qualities. Hebrews, however, does not argue in that fashion. It is finally the human qualities of the son which makes him the true and effective High Priest and it is in his priestly role that the meaning of his sonship becomes apparent. This approach to Christology will become manifest in chapter seven. It is intimated in the immediately following verses which record the “prayers and supplications” of Christ for deliverance from death.

While the relationship of sonship and priesthood in Hebrews is an interesting theoretical issue for the modern interpreter, it is not explicitly addressed in the text. The author of this homily, although a profound theologian, is not engaged in a systematic enterprise. His concerns and orientation are pastoral and the modern expositor can take his or her cue in applying the text from that orientation. To expound the teaching of this text about the way in which Jesus is a “High Priest” is not to engage in abstract or abstruse metaphysical speculation. It is rather to reflect on the foundational act of the Church. Despite all its horror, that act has regularly been seen by the Christian tradition as the paradoxical point where what is ultimate in existence becomes manifest. Although the categories in
which Hebrews develops its reflection of the event of the cross are, within the context of the New Testament, unique, its evaluation of the event is not. For Hebrews, as in various ways for Paul, John, and the synoptic evangelists, the cross is at the heart of Christian proclamation. The sacrifice of the heavenly priest is a bodily one whereby he manifests his radical fidelity to God (10:5-10). The ultimate significance of the “High Priest according to the order of Melchizedek” is that by that act he founded a covenant community called to analogous fidelity (12:1-3). A sure foundation for a contemporary homiletic application of Hebrews is to see the connection of the text’s exposition of the theme of the High Priest and its own paraenetic program, its summons to a life of covenant fidelity.

RECOMMENDED READING


Jewett, Robert, Letter to Pilgrims; A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews. A more popular commentary with some useful insights into the theological program of Hebrews, but with a highly speculative theory about the author and address of the text (Paul’s companion Epaphras to the churches of the Lycus valley).


Lane, William L., Call to Commitment; Responding to the Message of Hebrews. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1985. A sensitive reading of Hebrews which presumes that it was sent to strengthen Roman Christians after the persecution of 64.


Montefiore, Hugh W. A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews. London: Black, 1964. A commentary with an imaginative, if under demonstrable hypothesis about the
relationship of Hebrews, authored by Apollos, to Paul's Corinthian correspondence of Paul.

Peterson, Hebrews and Perfection: An Examination of the Concept of Perfection in the 'Epistle to the Hebrews'. SNTSMS 47; Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1982. A careful study of an important motif in Hebrews uniting its Christology and paraenesis.


Thompson, James, The Beginnings of Christian Philosophy: The Epistle to the Hebrews. The Catholic Biblical Quarterly Monograph Series 13; Washington: Catholic Biblical Association, 1982. A series of essays probing the philosophical presuppositions of Hebrews, which are found to be in a form of "middle Platonism."
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