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Action, Contemplation, and Living
in Between:
A Meditation on Christian Living

Kenneth H. Carter, Jr.

Introduction: To Be or To Do?

We are saved by grace. We shall be judged by our works. Go ye into all the world. Come apart to a lonely place. Give a cup of cold water. Pray without ceasing. As we listen for the call what are we likely to hear? In times of prayer, we are made to feel guilty for abandoning the world in all of its need. In our acts of compassion we are reminded of the peril of the neglected inner life. It is almost as if there is a double-mindedness built into the design of the spiritual life.

Take the pastoral ministry, for example. It is a profession in which one can do almost nothing: stories are told about those pastors who lose themselves in their work quite literally—they hide, or make themselves scarce during the week. My brother's wife asked me once, quite honestly, "What do you do during the week?" And yet pastoral ministry can also be the opposite: one can work oneself to death; the pastor can serve without ever taking a vacation or a day off; the day can begin early and end

late. In the pastoral ministry, there are both scoundrels and saints, charlatans and servants. A wise pastor put it this way: "I realized early on that there is a high road and a low road." There is detailed exegesis and the snappy sermon conversation starter, involvement in the life of a people or surface level that never moves beyond the perfunctory. The pastoral ministry is an enigma.

At the core of this enigma is the perennial struggle that has engaged God's people from the beginning: how much of what I am involved in is my own doing (personal agency), and how much is a gift from God (Grace)? Is the faithful life primarily one of action or contemplation? Is it more important to be or to do? There is a middle way that most of us find ourselves on, between pride and sloth, between frenetic activity and hushed stillness. Yet at times we find ourselves looking in one direction or the other, feeling inadequate for either a) not devoting enough time and energy to pastoral calling or b) spending too little time in the study or c) neglecting our families.

The Good Samaritan and the Blessed Contemplative

Acknowledging a pastoral dilemma is one thing; seeking some sort of resolution is quite another. The scriptures, on first glance, are not much help. Two of the most familiar stories in the Bible are found in the tenth chapter of Luke's Gospel, side by side: the parable of the Good Samaritan, and the telling of Jesus' visit to the house of Mary and Martha. The first pericope is a celebrated summons to action, a call to faithfulness in life: the priest and the levite are unable, despite their religious training and standing, to rescue the wounded man who had fallen among thieves; the Samaritan, outside the law and the religious tradition, proves to be a neighbor to the beaten man. "Does your faith work?" we ask those who listen to our sermons. "Does it help that wounded person whom we encounter along our daily journeys?"

This is unambiguous enough. But on to the next passage: Jesus comes to the home of Mary and Martha, where Mary sits at his feet to listen while Martha is "distracted" with the busi-
ness of providing hospitality. Jesus’ judgment is clear: Martha is anxious, troubled about many things, but Mary is single-minded in her attention to that which cannot be taken away from her (the contemplation of his teaching).

A Medieval Detour

St. Thomas Aquinas, in his discussion of the active and contemplative lives, depended heavily upon the story of Mary and Martha in claiming a superiority for the contemplative rather than the active life. For Thomas, life was judged according to its end, and the greatest end for humanity was the hope of the "Beatific Vision." This greatest end, which Thomas also described as happiness was approached by two means, action and contemplation. Or, life has two elements, the active and the contemplative. Within the intellect there is a twofold division which corresponds to the two lives: the contemplative intellect, which has as its end the knowledge of the truth, and the practical intellect, which is related to external action (Summa Theologica 2-1. 179.2).

In his treatment of contemplation, Thomas employs Gregory's definition of the contemplative life: "The contemplative life is to cling with our whole mind to the love of God and our neighbor, and to desire nothing beside our Creator" (2-1. 179.2). The love of God, on the one hand, and the love of the neighbor, on the other, pose a dilemma for Aquinas, however, for the former is more suited to the contemplative vocation of men and women, while the latter necessarily issues in external activity.

Thomas' discussion of action and contemplation proceeds along two lines. First, he discusses the relation between the two as they occur in ordinary human life. Thomas is willing to allow for the exigencies of human existence; while he generally claims that contemplation is more excellent than action, he does allow for exceptions. Thus, "it may happen that one man merits more by the works of the active life than another by the works of the contemplative life" (2-1.182.2). This might be due to the "immoderation" of one's contemplation; however, Thomas also alludes to the possibility of individual differences.
among persons: "He that is prone to yield to his passions on account of his impulse to action is simply more apt for the active life by reason of his restless spirit" (2-1.182.4). Others, however, "have the mind naturally pure and restful, so that they are apt for contemplation, and if they were to apply themselves wholly to action, this would be detrimental to them" (Ibid.). In commenting on these different aptitudes, Thomas judges them both to be noble and proper. Action prepares us for contemplation, and contemplation trains us also for "works of the active life."

Thomas also discusses the relation of action and contemplation within the context of human need. Not only are different persons disposed to different styles of activities, but we must also encounter different circumstances. The "demands of charity" might call us to help the neighbor in need; in this way the active life is preferable to the contemplative life "in a restricted sense and in a particular case" (2-1.182.1). The active life, nevertheless, is one of "bondage," and because of human necessity we are to engage in good works only as they dispose us to the life of contemplation.

Thomas goes further in his analysis of the active and contemplative practices to their "generic" or "essential" relationship. Here the contemplative life is superior to the active life. Thomas depends heavily upon the previously noted story of Mary and Martha (Luke 10:38-42); Mary, who sits and listens at the feet of Jesus, personifies the life of contemplation; while Martha, who scurries about performing acts of hospitality, exemplifies the active life. Contemplation, Thomas argues, is more excellent on several grounds: one acts according to one's highest principles (the intellect) and toward the most proper objects (intelligibles); contemplation is more "continuous" and more "delightful" than action; it is more "self-sufficient" and less dependent on externals than action, and is done for its own sake and not for some further end (for it is an eternal pursuit).

David Burrell in Aquinas: God and Action, has noted that Thomas's, in treatment of the relation between action and contemplation, depends more on Gregory and on the scriptures than on Aristotle:
Aquinas deals with the issue of the active or contemplative life without a hint of the conflict Aristotle feels in the *Ethics*. The Greek philosopher obviously prizes the *homo politicus*, deeming it necessary to realize one's humanity fully. Aquinas, however, quotes Gregory more than Aristotle, and glosses Luke 10:42 (the account of Mary and Martha) as his central text (pp. 165-166).

Burrell criticizes Thomas for an inadequate accounting of the active life with respect to human needs. Citing Paul's dilemma in the Letter to the Philippians ("I want to be gone and be with Christ, which would be much the better, but for me to stay alive in this body is a more urgent need for your sake," 1:23-24), Burrell maintains that Thomas errs in "too neatly resolving the dilemma of the active and the contemplative lives"; in this way, Burrell suggests, Thomas "sounds more Greek and less Christian than Aristotle" (p. 166). This is perhaps due to the nature of the concerns of Aristotle and Paul; the former was engaged in the work of the polis, while the latter was involved in the development of new Christian communities. In sum, Thomas was willing to grant a place for the active life, but only as it is related to and enriches the contemplative life.

**Action, Contemplation, and the Dangers of Specialization**

We might find reasons other than philosophical and scriptural to question Thomas' evaluation of the active and contemplative lives. Remember that Thomas was a contemplative, one dedicated to the life of the mind and its quest for the knowledge and apprehension of God. In our age of specialization, we would find Thomas a place in the seminary or at a retreat center, where he could proceed in the writing of his *Summa* unhindered by the needs and demands of the marketplace, i.e., ordinary men and women. After all, one might ask how much intellect it really takes to organize a church softball team, or to participate in the parish bazaar, or even to administer the church school? These rather mundane aspects
of the ministry are best left to others, we say tacitly; many are called, few are chosen. Thomas would be "above" the parish ministry.

All of which leads to the dangerous outcome of the age of specialization, of the divorce between action and contemplation which occurs in the "study" or does not occur there. Fred Craddock offers a chilling portrayal of an all too frequent occurrence:

> When the life of study is confined to "getting up sermons," very likely those sermons are undernourished. They are the sermons of a preacher with the mind of a consumer, not a producer, the mind that looks upon life in and out of books in terms of usefulness for next Sunday. The last day of such a ministry is as the first, having enjoyed no real lasting or cumulative value in terms of the minister’s own growth of mind, understanding, or sympathy. (Preaching, p. 69)

The encouragement of such practices is the result of a kind of unconscious conspiracy on the part of some of the laity, denominational programs and officials, and, unwittingly, the pastor. Many people have little insight into the amount of time necessary for the most basic public tasks of the pastor: preaching, teaching, counseling. Small provisions of time or space are made for the life of prayer, study, reflection and introspection—a visit to the nearest parish will usually bear this out.

To suggest that it ought to be otherwise is to swim against the tide. My friend Ralph Wood, a professor at Wake Forest University, gave the charge to the congregation upon the installation of a new pastor. "Do not settle for Time and Newsweek reports on current events," he advised the congregation. "Refuse sermon illustrations drawn entirely from television sit-coms and ACC athletics. Reject every gimmick, and howl at all sentimentality. Cry out, instead, for the transcendent word of grace." Such a Word is possible, he later noted, only when there has been ample regard for the disciplines of study and prayer, reflection and contemplation, by pastor and parish alike.
Ours is the malaise of split personality. We are either pietist or intellectual, circuit rider or contemplative, activist or scholar. Yet the cure is perhaps seen in those two familiar stories laid side by side in Luke’s Gospel. Together they form a whole, or what scripture scholars have called a “chiastic structure.” The literary connectedness of the stories about the Good Samaritan and Mary and Martha is indicative of the bond between contemplation and action, love for God and neighbor, prayer and service. The pastor must always recognize this unity, while also acknowledging that most days find us somewhere in between. The relation between action and contemplation has puzzled Christians for centuries, and will continue to do so until we are found to be in the presence of God, where all our labors will be praise, and where our actions and contemplations will be one in the God who is One. In the meantime we live somewhere in between with St. Paul and St. Thomas, with Mary and Martha, and with the lawyer, the man who fell among thieves, and the Good Samaritan.
Wesley’s Preferential Option for the Poor

Theodore W. Jennings, Jr.

One of the bases for today’s liberation theology is the commitment to a preferential option for the poor. Such an option entails the commitment to make solidarity with the poor the foundation and goal of pastoral practice. Thus the authenticity of Christian existence and of ecclesial life is determined by measuring it against its meaning for the situation of those who are impoverished. This commitment to the poor as the norm against which to measure Christian life is then also employed as a yardstick for measuring the economic and political life of nations. The test of justice is: how does this affect the poor?

Those theologians who are known as liberation theologians do not claim that this position is an innovative approach to the biblical witness or the Church’s theological heritage. Indeed they claim essential continuity with some significant elements of Christian tradition. For Catholic theologians this is often related to the encyclicals on social and economic justice dating from the previous century as well as significant elements of patristic theology. Among Protestants the Methodist theologians of liberation have an especially strong claim to

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represent the heart and center of their own theological tradi­
tion as this comes to expression in the life and writings of John
Wesley.\(^3\)

This connection was long obscured by the focus upon political
questions and the widely shared belief that Wesley’s political
views were essentially reactionary. Wesley’s support for con­
stitutional monarchy, his personal loyalty to the king, and his
critique of the position of the American rebels have served to
make Wesley’s social ethic suspect, even when it is acknow­
ledged that he became a relentless critic of both slavery and
colonialism. Much of the debate about the significance of
Wesley’s social ethic has focused on the question of the effect
of Methodism on the revolutionary situation of England in the
late 18th and early 19th century.\(^4\)

Wesley’s own reflections on the Christian life seldom bring
him into contact with what are called political issues.\(^5\) But the
issues of economic life are often at the forefront of his thought.
And the fruit of these reflections is the development of a radical
economic ethic which entails a preferential option for the poor.

If the significance of this dimension of Wesley’s thought has
been obscured by a focus on political rather than economic
issues, then the content of Wesley’s economic ethic is distorted
by a reading of Wesley which systematically ignores the basic
pertinent texts. Impatient to arrive at a summary statement of
Wesley’s economic ethic, commentators have fixed upon
Wesley’s sermon, \textit{On the Uses of Money}, with its celebrated
three rules, "earn all you can, save all you can and give all you
can," as the definitive synopsis of Wesley’s views.\(^6\) These three
rules are then taken to be an example of Wesley’s classic
Protestant ethic of diligence and frugality, an ethic which
enables Methodists to join the ranks of socio-economically
upwardly mobile; training the poor to be reliable workers
(diligence) and tradesmen to become effective entrepreneurs
and managers (frugality). Thus Wesley is taken to be the ex­
ample par excellence of the thesis of Weber and Tawney that
Protestantism is the handmaid of capitalism.\(^7\) The plausibility
of such a view is strengthened by the anecdotal evidence of
Methodist economic mobility in Third World contexts\(^8\) and by
the position of the Methodist churches in the United States as
bastions of middle class respectability. These results are then read back into Wesley himself as the consequence of his positions on these issues. The only difficulty of such "eisegesis" is that Wesley's own texts contradict these views at almost every point.

In order to see Wesley's views in the round it is necessary to pay attention to the scores of essays and sermons in which he directly addresses questions of economic justice as well as the many references to these issues in his letters and Journal. When this is done it becomes clear that the famous sermon on The Uses of Money, so far from being representative of Wesley's views, is an anomaly, and that Wesley himself engaged in an energetic and persistent (although ultimately doomed) attempt to counteract the common interpretation of this sermon.

**Commitment to the Poor**

When Wesley attempted, toward the end of his career, to place Methodism in the story of the history of salvation, he remarked:

> Never in any age or nation, since the age of the Apostles, have these words been so eminently fulfilled, "The poor have the gospel preached to them" as it is at this day. (The Signs of the Times VI, p. 308)

Wesley does not regard this fact as fortuitous. It is the result of a conscious policy. Thus he claims that he avoids the rich:

> Many of the rich and honourable were there; so that I found that it was time for me to fly away. (Journal April 15, 1745)

And he explains that this is theologically necessary:

> Religion must not go from the greatest to the least, or the power would appear to be of men. (Journal May 21, 1764)

Thus he can say to others:

> The honourable, the great, we are thoroughly willing to leave to you. Only let us alone with the poor, the vulgar, the base, the outcasts of men. (A Farther Appeal VIII, p. 239)
It is clear then that Wesley sought in principle to direct himself to the poor.

What is the basis of this intention? There are passages where Wesley seems to have a sentimental attachment to the poor. Such sentimentality could produce a regard for the poor which avoids coming to terms with the horror of their plight, or which fails to attempt to design effective remedies for their condition.  

But Wesley was far from ignorant of the plight of the poor. Indeed he made it a regular practice to acquaint himself directly with their situation. He was not content to preach to them, even though his favorite venues for preaching (open fields, market places, public hangings, etc.) made certain that he would reach them in ways closed to those who stayed within the bounds of churches and meeting halls. Instead Wesley made a point of visiting the poor and even of lodging with them. The practice of visiting the poor on a regular basis goes back to Wesley's Oxford days. He regarded it then simply as an essential aspect of that holiness without which none can see God. He could no more imagine a week without visiting the hovels of the poor than he could a week without participation in the Eucharist.  

Nor did Wesley regard this as what we might call "a counsel of perfection." Indeed in the ordinary sense of this term either nothing or everything was a counsel of perfection, since for Wesley there was no possibility of salvation without "perfection" in love. He insisted to all those who placed themselves under his direction that visiting the poor was an essential means of grace and an indispensable form of obedience to the command of Christ.  

The walking herein is essentially necessary, as to the continuance of that faith whereby we are saved by grace, so to the attainment of everlasting salvation. (On Visiting the Sick VII, p. 117; see also On Zeal VII, p. 60)  

Because of this practice Wesley's view of the poor did not remain at the level of sentimentality. He knew the condition of the poor and could speak eloquently of what it meant to lack bread:
God pronounced it as a curse upon man, that he should earn it "by the sweat of his brow." But how many are there in this Christian country, that toil, and labour and sweat, and have it not at last, but struggle with weariness and hunger together? Is it not worse for one, after a hard day's labour, to come back to a poor, cold, dirty, uncomfortable lodging, and to find there not even the food which is needful to repair his wasted strength? You that live at ease in the earth, that want nothing but eyes to see, ears to hear, and hearts to understand how well God hath dealt with you, is it not worse to seek bread day by day, and find none? Perhaps to find the comfort also of five or six children crying for what he has not to give! Were it not that he is restrained by an unseen hand, would he not soon "curse God and die?" O want of bread! Want of bread! Who can tell what this means unless he hath felt it himself? (Heaviness Through Manifold Temptations VI, p. 96)

Because he knew this condition intimately he could authoritatively repudiate the Anglican and Puritan libel that the poor were poor because they were idle:

On Friday and Saturday, I visited as many more [of the poor] as I could. I found them in their cells underground; others in their garrets, half-starved both with cold and hunger, added to weakness and pain. But I found not one of them unemployed, who was able to crawl about the room. So wickedly, devilishly false is that common objection, "They are poor, only because they are idle." If you saw these things with your own eyes, could you lay out money in ornaments or superfluities? (Journal Feb. 9-10, 1753; II, p. 279-80)

Thus Wesley suggests that there is another value to the constant practice of acquaintance with the condition of the poorest of people:

One great reason why the rich in general have so little sympathy for the poor, is, because they so seldom visit them. (On Visiting the Sick VII, p. 119)

Wesley's practice of visiting the poor, which he continued for three quarters of a century across the length and breadth of
England, gives his view of poverty and wealth, labor and expenditure a definiteness and vigor far removed from mere sentimentality.

An immediate consequence of this intimate awareness of the conditions of poverty was the determination to develop programs of aid for the poor.

On the following days, I visited many of our poor, to see with my own eyes what their wants were, and how they might be effectually relieved. (Feb. 13, 1785; IV, p. 296; cf. Feb. 8, 1787; IV, p. 358).

One level of response was the practice of "begging for the poor." Here is one illustration of this practice which comes from Wesley's 82nd year:

At this season [Christmas] we usually distribute coals and bread among the poor of the society [of London]. But I now considered, they wanted clothes as well as food. So on this and the four following days, I walked through the town, and begged two hundred pounds in order to clothe them that needed it most. But it was hard work, as most of the streets were filled with melting snow, which often lay ankle deep; so that my feet were steeped in snow-water nearly from morning till evening. (Jan. 4, 1785; IV, p. 295).

Wesley made a point of the fact that he took up collections for the needy and never for himself or his movement. 12

Even here Wesley's practice far exceeded what is normally thought of as alms giving and charity. But he went much further than this. He sought to help the poor help themselves. Thus he organized clinics, cooperatives, and credit unions to enable the poor to escape the degradations and indignities of impoverishment.

Even at this level one could dismiss this as "social service" which stands at the margin of the main business of Methodism. But Wesley sought to make the welfare of the poor the criterion of every aspect of the Methodist movement. This is already obvious in his choice of venue for preaching. It is also the motivation for his publishing of small tracts and abridgements and indeed whole libraries. It is the criterion for the building
of meeting places which were to be cheap so as not to make the Methodists beholden to the rich:

Let all preaching-houses be built plain and decent; but not more expensive than is absolutely unavoidable. Otherwise the necessity of raising money will make rich men necessary to us. But if so, we must be dependent upon them, yea and governed by them. And then farewell all Methodist discipline, if not doctrine too. (*Large Minutes* VIII, p. 332)

Despite the fact that these instructions were included in the document from which the Methodist *Book of Discipline* is derived, it must be admitted that the Methodists have been no more willing to be instructed by Wesley on the manner of building churches than they have in the essentials of Christian stewardship. The result, just as Wesley saw, is the loss both of Methodist discipline and of doctrine.

In any case the poor were never to be burdened with the cost of maintaining even the modest chapels that were built:

We must beware of distressing the poor. Our substantial brethren are well able to bear the burden. (*Letter to Joseph Benson*, July 31, 1776; XII, p. 424)

It was even to be made the basis for the choice of leadership in the classes:

Put the most insignificant person in each class to be the leader of it. (*Letter to Mr. John Criket*, Feb. 10, 1783; XIV, p. 361)

Thus every aspect of Methodism was subjected to the criterion, how will this benefit the poor? Solidarity with the poor was not to be a side issue, but the test of every dimension of activity.

It should then come as no surprise that Wesley could apply this same criterion to the questions of public policy. His essay *Thoughts on the Present Scarcity of Provisions* [1773] (XI, pp. 53-59) takes as its starting point the plight of the poor and makes concrete recommendations with respect to such things as tax and trade policy with the single aim of improving the lot of the poor.
Stewardship for the Poor

While Wesley does make forays into the area of public policy on the basis of the principle of solidarity with the poor, his strength in this as in other matters lies in the area of a theological reflection on concrete issues of Christian life. Just as Wesley does not develop a Christology except in connection with the clarification of issues in Christian living, so also his "evangelical economics" comes to expression not in theoretical reflections on property and production but in the context of clarifying what it means to actualize scriptural holiness in everyday life.

The preferential option for the poor then becomes a reflection on the form or style of life consistent with this commitment. This reflection is generally developed under such headings as stewardship and riches and in treatments of such issues as the drinking of tea and the question of dress. Interpreters of Wesley often do not realize the radical character of Wesley's economic views because they disregard the very texts within which Wesley regularly develops these views.

Wesley's calls for stewardship are often understood in modern terms as referring to the level of financial support given to the church in order to underwrite its budget for buildings, personnel, and program. This definition of stewardship has become so self-evident, especially in Protestant Christianity, that it is difficult to see that something quite different is involved in Wesley's view. The call for stewardship is never connected by Wesley with any campaign to subscribe the budget of his movement. Rather, it is always stewardship for the poor.

1) Wesley maintains that we are to be stewards "for God and the poor."

Be a steward, a faithful and wise steward, of God and the poor; differing from them [the poor] in these two circumstances only, that your wants are first supplied, out of the portion of your Lord's good which remains in your hands; and, that you have the blessedness of giving. (Sermon on the Mount, viii, V, p. 377)

2) I am to regard myself as another of the poor.
You may consider yourself as one in whose hands the Proprietor of heaven and earth, and all things therein, has lodged a part of his goods, to be disposed of according to his direction. And his direction is, that you should look upon yourself as one of a certain number of indigent persons, who are to be provided for out of that portion of his goods wherewith you are entrusted." (The More Excellent Way, VII, p. 36)

3) Everything beyond what is necessary for life belongs to the poor. God gives me what I have so that I may give it to the poor.

Do not you know that God entrusted you with that money (all above what buys necessaries for your family) to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked, to help the stranger, the widow, the fatherless; and indeed, as far as it will go, to relieve the wants of all mankind. (Danger of Increasing Riches, VII, p. 362)

Thus the basis of an "evangelical economics" is stewardship for the poor.

It may be helpful to clarify the meaning of poverty in this context. As we have seen in Wesley's reflection on the scarcity of provisions and in his articulation of the cry for bread, the problem of poverty is seen in terms of an absolute lack. That is, there are some who lack what is necessary to human life. They lack food, shelter, medicine and so on. This is not a question of relative poverty (some are richer than others) but of absolute poverty (the lack of resources for a minimum of health and decency). Similarly the problem of wealth is understood absolutely as the possession of more than is necessary for life. It is the question of surplus.

Now surplus is a problem in two ways. First, it leads to viciousness both relatively and absolutely. Relatively, in that I think myself better than others (pride) and absolutely, in that it makes me look for my welfare in the world of getting and spending.  

But it is not only the effect of surplus which is evil. There is a sense for Wesley, as for several of the earliest theologians of the church, in which any surplus is a violation of the rights of the poor. Given that our economic life is to be governed by
the welfare of the poor, the attempt to acquire more than is necessary, and especially the attempt to consume, is to be understood as robbery. Thus consumption or needless expense is simply the robbery of the poor.

... the more you lay out on your own apparel, the less you have left to clothe the naked, to feed the hungry, to lodge the strangers, to relieve those that are sick and in prison, and to lessen the numberless afflictions to which we are exposed in this vale of tears. ... Every shilling which you save from your own apparel, you may expend in clothing the naked, and relieving the various necessities of the poor, whom ye "have always with you." Therefore, every shilling which you needlessly spend on your own apparel is, in effect, stolen from God and the poor! ... When you are laying out that money in costly apparel which you could have otherwise spared for the poor, you thereby deprive them of what God the proprietor of all, had lodged in your hands for their use. If so, what you put upon yourself, you are, in effect tearing from the back of the naked; as the costly and delicate food which you eat, you are snatching from the mouth of the hungry. (On Dress VII, p. 20 [italics supplied]; see also Wesley's Advice to Methodists on Dress XI, pp. 470-471; and his Farther Appeal VIII, p. 190)

Wesley's view of what we would call consumerism is as strict as a commandment: "Everything about thee which cost more than Christian duty required thee to lay out is the blood of the poor." (On Dress VII, p. 21)

But how then are we to understand surplus? How are we to deal with it? How are we to escape its snare? The answer of course is to give it away. And to whom is it to be given? To the destitute. In order to do this I must practice frugality. Here frugality has nothing to do with a kind of asceticism. It is what enables me to aid the poor.

One of the ways in which Wesley's reflections on consumption are distinguished from those of the Puritans and the Quakers is that for Wesley this is always related to the question, how may I respond to the need of the poor. Thus for example, while Wesley did not engage in a campaign of teetotalism he did engage in one to eliminate tea from the diet. Why?
a) Because in this way the poor could be helped to save their own resources:

If they used English herbs in its stead, (which would cost either nothing or what is next to nothing,) with the same bread, butter and milk, they would save just the price of the tea. And hereby they might not only lessen their pain, but in some degree their poverty too. (Letter to a Friend Concerning Tea, Dec. 10, 1748, XI, p. 505)

b) Because in this way one could save money for the aid of the poor:

I will compute this day what I have expended in tea, weekly or yearly. I will immediately enter on cheaper food. And whatever is saved hereby, I will put into the poor-box weekly, to feed the hungry and clothe the naked. (Ibid., p. 506)

Thus the point of these disciplines was the aid of the poor. This point comes to be lost in Victorian Methodism, which practices abstinence on moralistic grounds and frugality on personal economic grounds.

This concrete starting point in the plight of the poor for Wesley's evangelical economics leads him to deny the principle of private property. Whereas John Locke had argued that labor as the mingling of sweat with the earth produces an absolute right to the property thereby produced, Wesley rejected this as a kind of economic deism. For Wesley the rights of the Creator remain unaffected by human labor. In the following passage he puts the issue in the context of a common objection to his insistence on the necessity of stewardship for the poor:

Nay, may I not do what I please with my own? Here lies the ground of your mistake. It is not your own. It cannot be, unless you are Lord of heaven and earth. (Danger of Increasing Riches VII, p. 362)
Thus in principle God is the sole owner (against Locke). And God lodges all in our hands for the benefit of the poor.19

It is then but a short step, although a controversial one, for Wesley to adopt the model of the Pentecostal community (Acts 2:44-45; 4:32-35) for Christians. This community of goods aimed at the benefit of the poor. This was Wesley's motivation for going to live with the Indians (XII, p. 39). There is the report that he attempted to make it a rule for his preachers.20 It is even referred to in his early sermons (Scriptural Christianity V, pp. 41-42). But it begins to come to the fore in his exegesis of Acts in his Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament.21 Here he maintains that having all things common and making distribution to the poor was not to be understood as exceptional but as the ordinary working of the Spirit. Thus he writes:

And if the whole church had continued in this spirit, this usage must have continued through all the ages. To affirm, therefore, that Christ did not design it should continue, is neither more nor less than to affirm that Christ did not design this measure of love should continue. (Notes Acts 2:45)

To say that Christ did not intend a full measure of love to continue in his church would be to reject Wesleyan doctrine root and branch. Farewell then all talk of holiness, of sanctification, of deliverance from sin, not to mention perfection in love. What would be left is but the fading Cheshire grin of an imaginary Aldersgate22 haunting the corridors of yet another ecclesial institution catering to the mores of the middle-class.

Wesley repeats this insistence on the continuing pertinence of Pentecostal communism in his note to Acts 4:32: "So long as that truly Christian love continued, they could not but have all things in common." And again noting the connection between the presence of grace and the abolition of want through the practice of communism, Wesley again insists:

And it [the abolition of want through the practice of communism] was the immediate, necessary consequence of it [grace]; yea, and must be, to the end of the world. In all ages and nations, the same cause, the same degree of grace, could
not but, in like circumstances, produce the same effect. 
(Notes Acts 4:34)

"In all ages and nations" thus does Wesley dismiss the idea of the limited relevance of Pentecostal communism. Wesley subsequently makes clear that he believes that this practice is to be strongly recommended to Christians. Wesley supposes that the Methodist movement will produce not only a spread of the gospel throughout the earth but also, and therefore, bring in the communist society. Thus speaking of the spread of the gospel by Methodism he writes:

The natural necessary consequence of this will be the same as it was in the beginning of the Christian church. None of them will say, that aught of the things which he possesses is his own; but they will have all things common. Neither will there be any among them that want. For as many as are possessed of land or houses will sell them; and distribution will be made to every man, according as he has need (The General Spread of the Gospel VI, p. 284)

From this actualization of Christian identity would come the conversion of persons of other faiths to Christianity, for they would no longer have the excuse of Christian misconduct to prevent the reception of the gospel (Ibid., VI, pp. 285-287). It is noteworthy that Wesley believed that the adherents of other faiths would be converted because of the Christian practice of Pentecostal communism. This is a mission strategy which may have been overlooked by our Board of Global Ministries!

For Wesley the practice of a lifestyle which makes the plight of the poor the litmus test of our relation to property, to getting and spending, is a natural development of the general theme of the priority of the poor.

The Place of Wesley's Evangelical Economics

Just how important to Wesley was this insistence upon solidarity with the poor and the practice of an evangelical economics? The main elements of Wesley's views on this subject are already worked out during the time before his missionary journey to Georgia. His own personal discipline of visiting
the poor, of seeking to aid them concretely, of cutting off every needless expense in order to meet their needs were developed then and remained unaltered for his entire lifetime.

But the period following his return from Georgia saw other issues take center stage. The whirlwind launching of the Methodist movement, the attempts to safeguard it from quietistic and Calvinistic distortion, the attempt to fend off the bitter wave of persecution and then the subsequent work of consolidating the movement in the face of his (as he always believed) imminent demise, all combined to put the theme of evangelical economics on the back burner. His sermons on the Sermon on the Mount and on the danger of riches, his Notes referring to Acts, his reputed attempt to make community of property the rule at least for pastors of the societies all show that Wesley had not changed his mind on these matters, but they lack the degree of prominence which they come to have in the last quarter century of Wesley’s supervision of Methodism.

Now this period (roughly from 1738 to 1760) of relative quiet on the economic front corresponds fatefully to the period of what we may call the "canonical Wesley." The first volume of the Journal, the Appeals, the so-called Standard Sermons and the Notes all come from this period. Again all of the elements are present, but they are muted relative to their subsequent significance. Thus Methodists who stopped at this point could ignore Wesley’s sparse references to these themes in these texts, and so come to suppose that Methodism could be simply another version of the Protestant work ethic with a more or less strong flavoring of compassion for the poor.

This result began to manifest itself in the Methodist movement in the sixties. It is about then that Wesley’s tone suddenly and irrevocably changed. In 1759 he wrote:

We on the contrary, severely condemn all those who do not take care of everything on earth wherewith God hath entrusted them. The consequence of this is, that the Methodists, so called, do not "neglect their affairs and impoverish their families;" but by diligence in business "provide things honest in the sight of all men." Insomuch, that multi-

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tudes of them, who, in time past, had scarce food to eat or raiment to put on, have now "all things needful for life and godliness;" and that for their families, as well as themselves. (Letter to the Rev. Mr. Downes, [1759] IX, p. 99).

And then, as if realizing the horrifying implications of what he had said, he begins to regularly admonish the Methodists:

On the three following days I spoke severally to the members of the society. As many of them increase in worldly goods, the great danger I apprehend now is, their relapsing into the spirit of the world. And then their religion is but a dream. (Oct. 12-21, 1760, III, p. 23; see also July 11, 1764, III, p. 187; Oct. 20, 1764, [p. 200]; June 28, 1765 [p. 227], etc.)

Once the issue is joined Wesley becomes relentless in his critique of the movement he was still leading.

The problem is that Methodists are becoming prosperous! Now for a more conventional representative of the Protestant work ethic, like Richard Baxter, this could be taken as a sign of divine blessing. But not so for Wesley. It was one thing to seek to escape the degradations of poverty. It was quite another to seek to become prosperous. For possession was the mark not of divine blessing but of satanic temptation. Thus nearly one hundred and fifty years before Weber discovered a connection between protestantism and capitalism Wesley wrote:

Therefore do I not see how it is possible, in the nature of things, for any revival of religion to continue long. For religion must necessarily produce both industry and frugality; and these cannot but produce riches. But as riches increase so will pride, anger, and love of the world in all its branches. (Thoughts Upon Methodism [1786] XIII, p. 260.)

Indeed as Wesley notes in another sermonic essay, what is at stake here is the very self-consistency of Christianity itself:

Does it not seem (and yet this cannot be) that Christianity, true scriptural Christianity, has a tendency, in process of time, to undermine and destroy itself? For wherever true Christianity spreads, it must cause diligence and frugality, which, in the natural course of things, must beget riches! and
riches naturally beget pride, love of the world, and every temper destructive of Christianity. Now, if there be no way to prevent this, Christianity is inconsistent with itself, and of consequence cannot stand, cannot continue long among any people; since, wherever it generally prevails, it saps its own foundation. (Causes of the Inefficacy of Christianity VIII, p. 290)

Thus for Wesley the very prosperity which we often take to be a sign of success was understood as a practical reductio ad absurdum of the gospel.

But this only could be true if solidarity with the poor and the lifestyle consistent with that commitment were normative for Christian existence.

During this last quarter century Wesley wrote a number of histories of Methodism. Some of these essays seek to place Methodism in the scheme of world history as a movement called into being to bring about a fundamental change in history (for example, Of Former Times, The Signs of the Times, or At the Foundation of City Road Chapel). But there were other related sermons which sensed that Methodism might not live up to its God-given vocation (On the Causes of the Inefficacy of Christianity, On God’s Vineyard, On the Wisdom of God’s Counsels, and Thoughts Upon Methodism). In every case, that which threatens Methodism with ruin is prosperity, the turn from the poor to the consolidation of middle class status. It must be emphasized here that Wesley always attributes this impending collapse to a failure to actualize his economic ethic. This is always the cause, and it is the only cause. Moreover there is always one and only one remedy: give all to the poor.

Again and again Wesley hammers on this theme. And often it is couched as an attempt to overcome the misreading of that old nemesis, the sermon on The Uses of Money.

But how many have you found that observe the third rule, “Give all you can.” Have you reason to believe, that five hundred of these are to be found among fifty thousand Methodists? And yet nothing can be more plain, than that all who observe the two first rules without the third, will be
twofold more the children of hell than ever they were before. 
(Causes of the Inefficacy of Christianity VII, p. 285-286)

Are these simply the fading opinions of a querulous old man? Is this insistence on the practice of evangelical economics the fetish of one who has already said all he has to say about important matters and is now reduced to the picking of nits?

It is important to recall that Wesley deployed his evangelical economics at the same time that he was expressing his mature understanding of Christian doctrine, including--prevenient grace, his basic defense of Arminianism, and sanctification as the process of growing in grace, of growing in love, that is, his most important theological contribution. At this time, too, Wesley was most keenly interested in natural science and cultural anthropology, as well as global issues of slavery and colonialism and human rights.

Wesley's insistence on evangelical economics and his criticism of those Methodists who even then were making a preferential option for the middle class were not products of gloom and sterility and shutting down. Instead they demonstrate Wesley's greatest vitality, the time of his greatest optimism, and his greatest openness to the world.

And it is precisely in this context that Wesley maintains that the poor are the test of all that we do, that the welfare of the poor is to be the criterion of personal lifestyle, of church program, of government policy.

The preferential option for the poor is not one theme among others, not something that can be relegated to the occasional foray into social questions, or ignored in pursuit of more important things like church growth or evangelization, personal holiness, or final salvation. It is the test and norm for all of these.

**Conclusion**

In spite of Wesley's consistent and urgent call, Methodists have in general been characterized not by a preferential option for the poor but by an option for the middle class. Wesley saw this in his own day and he did not shrink from drawing the most
sobering conclusions from it—it threatened the very existence of Methodism.

If Wesley's own yardstick were to be applied to the various denominations which derive from his labors he would undoubtedly regard Methodism as a failure, a "dead sect having the form without the power of religion." 21

In a note which Wesley added to the discussion of the example of the Quakers in the Farther Appeal he writes what may stand as his curse upon Methodism, a curse which falls, I fear, on us:

Lay this deeply to heart, ye who are now a poor, despised, afflicted people. Hitherto ye are not able to relieve your own poor. But if ever your substance increase, see that ye be not straightened in your bowels, that ye fall not into the same snare of the devil. Before any of you either lay up treasures on earth, or indulge needless expenses of any kind, I pray the Lord God to scatter you to the corners of the earth, and blot out your name from under heaven! (VIII, p. 187)

Notes

1. For the best summary statement of liberation theology written by two of its most distinguished practitioners see Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff Introducing Liberation Theology (Orbis: Maryknoll, 1987).

2. Thus liberation theology is, above all, a pastoral theology. In this regard see the influential reflections of Juan Luis Segundo The Hidden Motives of Pastoral Action (Orbis: Maryknoll, 1978).

3. In English, see Jose Miguez B. "Wesley's Doctrine of Sanctification from a Liberationist Perspective" in Sanctification and Liberation edited by Theodore H. Runyon (Abingdon: Nashville, 1981) as well as Runyon's influential introductory essay in the same volume, "Wesley and the Theologies of Liberation." The most important essays by several Latin American Methodist theologians on this issue are to be found in La tradicion protestante en teologia latinoamerica (Primero intento: lectura de la tradiacion metodista) edited by Jose Duque (DEI San Jose, Costa Rica, 1983). This collection includes several essays by Miguez as well as contributions from Elsa Tamez, Mortimer Arias, and Emilio Castro among others.

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5. Despite a number of essays on the question of the political situation of the late 70's, only one (Some Account of the Late Work of God in North America [VII, pp. 409-419]) integrates this with Wesley's distinctive theological positions.

6. For example see John C. Cort Christian Socialism (Orbis, Maryknoll, 1988), pp. 17, 35 and passim. Even a careful interpreter like Manfred Marquardt who recognizes the radical implications of Wesley's economic views falls into the trap of taking this sermon as the definitive statement of Wesley's views; see Manfred Marquardt Praxis und Prinzipien der Sozialethik John Wesleys (Goettingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1977), pp. 39ff.


8. For an illustration of the way in which Methodism tied itself to this ethos in Mexico (without, at first, forfeiting a more radical social ethic), see Jean Pierre Bastien Protestantismo y sociedad en Mexico (Mexico: CUPSA, 1983) esp. pp. 67-104 and 169-202.


10. This is one of the concerns of Thor Hall in his paper "How Advanced Was Wesley's Social Consciousness?" presented at the AAR, 1986. It will be apparent that I think Wesley's social consciousness was somewhat more advanced than Professor Hall believes.

11. See, for example, Wesley's defense of the Oxford Methodists in the introduction to the first "Extract" from the Journal (Oct. 18, 1732, I, pp. 9-10).

12. See, for example, A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists (VIII, p. 269).


15. Advice to the People Called Methodists, With Regard to Dress (XI, pp. 466-477); Thoughts on Dress (XI, pp. 477-478); On Dress (III, p. 15-26).

16. Note that the Social Creed as well as The Social Principles of the UMC speak of stewardship in relation to God but not the poor.

17. This is Wesley's point not only in the sermons on riches cited above, but also in his reflections on Mammon and worldliness.

18. So, for example, Basil, in his sermon, "I Will Pull Down My Barns" avers: "He who strips another man of his clothing is he not a robber; and he who does not clothe the naked when he could, should he not be called the same? That bread you hold in your clutches, that belongs to the starving. That cloak you keep locked away in your wardrobe, that belongs to the naked. Those shoes that are going to waste with you, they belong to the barefooted. The silver you buried away, that belongs to the needy. Whomsoever you could have helped, and did not, to so many have you been unjust." The Sunday Sermons of the Great Fathers translated and edited by M. F. Toal (Regnery: Chicago, 1954), p. 332.

19. Note that Wesley in his essays against the rebels (e.g., Thoughts Upon Liberty, Some Observations on Liberty and others in volume XI of the Jackson edition of the Works) does seem to admit for the sake of argument that they have some property rights. He does so in order to say that they have not been
arbitrarily subject to dispossession by the Crown. The argument accepts the
notion of liberty vis a vis the state. But it certainly does not admit liberty vis a
vis God. There are limits to how far Wesley will accommodate himself to Deist
principles even in defense of the Crown.

20. See Thomas W. Madron "John Wesley on Economics" in Runyon
Sanctification and Liberation pp. 108-109. But Madron seriously underes-
timates the importance which the later Wesley attributed to this example.

21. (Baker Book House: Grand Rapids, 1981) There are no page numbers,
hence references are to the chapter and verse of the NT text in question.

22. See my essay, "John Wesley Against Aldersgate" in Quarterly Review
(Fall 1988), pp. 3-22, and my response to Kenneth Collins' objections "The
Continuing Confusion About Aldersgate" in the Winter issue of the same
publication.

23. Wesley even gave this as his reason for letting his hair grow long. (See
Letter to his brother Samuel, No. 17, 1731, XII, p. 21.)

24. This much quoted phrase (from Thoughts Upon Methodism) refers not
to a loss of evangelical fervor but to a growing "preferential option for the
middle class" as I have shown in "Form Without Power" Circuit Rider
(forthcoming).
The Book of Proverbs has always stood as a didactic obstacle in the path of biblical salvation faith. Israel's priests and prophets saw Yahweh served when the rich and powerful upheld the rights of the poor. Her sages, however, examined wealth and poverty as if they were separate moral states, in some cases mandated by God. Poverty, like wealth, had a purpose. A look at proverbs concerned with the rich and the poor can provide a counterweight to the claim that there is a single biblical outlook on poverty. In the process, we will also expose the ancient roots of some current economic views.

Retribution and Its Downfall

The poor fit badly in the scheme of things devised by the authors of Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes, who enjoyed the privileges bestowed on society's influential leaders. As advisors to kings, friends of aristocrats, and professional teachers, the wise lived a protected existence. They even convinced themselves, and perhaps others also, that such luxury was their proper reward for the virtuous lifestyle they had adopted. This line of reasoning necessarily implied a less than enviable existence for those unfortunate persons who chose a way of life contrary to that of the teachers. These fools exhibited lack of morality that...
was matched by a shortage of the things that contributed pleasure and at least a modicum of happiness.

The argument went in the other direction, too. People who found themselves in a miserable situation must surely have possessed some character flaw, sometimes visible but often concealed from public scrutiny. Conversely, individuals who rose high in social standing and acquired the advantages of rank were naturally thought to have superior moral character.

The fundamental premise that produced these conclusions was theological. The creator of the universe took an active interest in its just order, punishing iniquity and rewarding virtue. Ethical decisions affected the essential order of the universe, either threatening its inner harmony or contributing to its stability. Choosing a pattern of life that elicited divine favor transformed the pursuit of pleasure, eudaemonism, into religious performance.

Over the years this conviction became dogma, for sufficient evidence of both aspects of the theory seemed present in society generally. The teachers who promulgated this idea found sufficient data to substantiate their claims, for they were eager to confirm their own favored status, and in doing so they condemned those less fortunate than they. The ambiguous assertion that divine solicitude never fails deserving individuals (Ps. 37:25) cruelly dismisses the poor as morally deficient while at the same time lauding God's providential care for the wealthy.

In the end the teachers actually defended the poor, but not before their own world came crashing down. The story of Job's fall from an exalted position to the ash heap forced the wise to reassess both sides of the equation they earlier championed. It became painfully clear to them that notable exceptions to the theory of reward and retribution occurred at least on the side of virtue. That concession led them to revise their understanding of vice and to admit that not all miserable persons deserved what befell them.

Once the sages acknowledged exceptions, their entire scheme became problematic. Not every deserving person fared well, and not all villains received just punishment. The earlier simplicity and optimism vanished, for now every individual case
required careful study to determine whether or not the person's character accorded with external circumstances. The collapse of a cherished conviction precipitated a religious crisis, one which pushed believers over the threshold into the comforting (?) arms of a theophanic creator (Job) and skeptics into the empty abyss of a distant despot (Ecclesiastes).

Thus Israelite sages viewed poverty in the light of a retributive world view, with the emphasis falling on a negative assessment of the poor. The teachers acknowledged an obligation toward the unfortunate, but they harbored suspicion that the poor deserved their misery, which resulted from indolence. Idealizing the poor as special favorites of God, as, for example, in Amos' identification of the righteous with the poor, and Jesus' pronouncement that the poor are blessed (Lk. 6:20), did not find expression in wisdom literature. The wise would hardly have rejoiced to be called Ebionites (the poor ones), as a later sect seems to have done.

This attitude to poverty and its victims remains relatively consistent with the different expressions of wisdom in the Hebrew Bible and the Apocrypha. Furthermore, that understanding of the poor coincided with the sages' teachings in Egypt and Mesopotamia. One exception is an Egyptian text, the Instruction of Ani. Social turmoil in Egypt produced this pious wisdom text, which comes perilously close to claiming a special relationship between the deity and individuals in humble circumstances.

The Poor in Collections of Proverbs

The book of Proverbs gathers together several collections of sayings from various periods and localities. It contains at least three collections of foreign extraction (22:17-24:22; 30:1-14; 31:1-9), each of which has an identifying comment, in one instance mistakenly inserted into the initial saying (22:17). This small unit resembles the Egyptian Instruction of Amenemopet, an earlier text that has thirty chapters. The other two collections derive from Aramaic wisdom, the first from an otherwise unknown Agur and the second from the
mother of a king whose name, Lemuel, is given but about whose rule no further evidence has survived.

The remaining collections are associated with the name Solomon, for the most part (1-9; 10:1-22:16; 25-29); exceptions are 24:23-34; 30:15-33; 31:10-31). The tradition in I Kings 4:29-34 [EVV] credits this monarch with exceptional literary productivity, but virtually nothing in the collections attributed to Solomon agrees in content with this description of proverbs about trees, beasts, birds, reptiles, and fish. Perhaps Solomon achieved this association with wisdom collections as a reward for sponsoring the wise, although the subject matter rarely relates to special interests of royalty. An alternative explanation for the tradition of Solomonic wisdom relates it to his vast wealth, which must have suggested to many that he was exceptionally wise. Such reasoning was inevitable so long as the theory of reward and retribution flourished. The close juxtaposition of wealth and wisdom in the closing observations of the story about the Queen of Sheba lend credibility to this hypothesis.

The specific origins of the several collections are obscure, although their probable provenance and relative dating seem reasonably clear. The oldest units (10:1-22:16; 25-29) derive from actual family contexts, for the most part imparting parental teachings. Nevertheless, the present form of these proverbs lends itself to wider use, possibly in Israelite schools, for which evidence has vanished, except for a single witness in the second century B.C.E. That sole example was Jesus Eleasar ben Sira, called Sirach for convenience. The latest collections in Proverbs (1-9; 31:10-31) differ immensely from earlier sentences, or aphorisms, employing elaborate paragraphs replete with imperatives, exhortations and threats, or using an alphabetic device that is known as an acrostic. One miscellaneous collection (30:15-33) makes generous use of numerical sayings, both as heightening ("Three things are too wonderful, for me, four I do not understand"), and an absolute number ("Four things on earth are small"). These collections have material that predates Israel's monarchy as well as some from as late as the post-exilic period.
Some interpreters have attempted to trace a growing religious influence on the sayings, assuming that the earliest sages were wholly secular. That effort has not been entirely successful, for a religious element probably existed from the very beginning, perhaps becoming more explicit in the latest extensive collection (1-9).

The astonishing thing in Proverbs 1-9 is its virtual silence about the poor. The lone exception, 6:6-11, for which there is a partial parallel in 2:30-34, describes the calamitous results of laziness--poverty will overwhelm the indolent one.

Go to the ant, O sluggard:
consider her ways, and be wise.
Without having any chief, officer or ruler,
she prepares her food in summer
and gathers her sustenance in harvest.
How long will you lie there, O sluggard?
When will you arise from your sleep?
A little sleep, a little slumber,
a little folding of the hands to rest,
and poverty will come upon you like a vagabond,
and want like an armed man.

This sharp warning adopts a simplistic approach to the problem posed by needy members of society, a response that many citizens of our own time readily endorse. By this reasoning, the poor only get what they deserve, the just fruits of their own laziness. If 3:27 ("Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due, when it is in your power to do it") actually refers to someone who is destitute, from whom the withholding of promised assistance might have drastic consequences, the collection would escape the charge of unmitigated bias against the poor. Outside 1-9, only two sayings come close to this negative attitude toward the less fortunate. In 10:4 ("A slack hand causes poverty, but the hand of the diligent makes rich") the implicit teaching of 6:6-11 becomes explicit; not only do the indolent suffer need, but the industrious acquire riches. Another explanation for poverty occurs in 21:17 ("He who loves pleasure will be a poor man; he who loves wine and oil will not be rich"),
which notes the way individuals squander resources in pursuit of pleasure.

If we are correct in assuming that the students to whom these sayings were ultimately directed came from wealthy families in Judean society, one wonders why the teacher did not try to instill a sense of charity in these young men. (I assume that these students were all males, for they are enjoined to be faithful to the wives of their youth and to spurn the sweet seduction of the foreign woman.) On the assumption that the poor were simply malingerers, did teachers think they would incur God's wrath by helping lazy people? This sort of thinking certainly led to ambiguous attitudes toward physicians, at least in the early second century before the Christian era, contrary to the negative view implied in Sirach 38:15 ("He who sins before his Maker, may he fall into the care of a physician"). Ben Sira struggles mightily to defend the medical profession against charges of interfering with divine punishment for evil, namely that by endeavoring to cure the sick, doctors risked shortening the divinely decreed period of affliction that befell sinners.

**On Kindness to the Poor**

That explanation for the absence in Proverbs 1-9 of any sense of obligation toward alleviating the circumstances of the poor—that they have personally merited their lowly status—depends on an increased emphasis on *individual* retribution, as opposed to a *social* retribution, that is, the poor must be seen as an aggregate of individual sinners, not merely as a more or less suspect segment of Israelite society.

In any event, the earlier "Solomonic" collections openly praise kind actions toward the poor. The profit motive surfaces in 19:17 ("He who is kind lends to the Lord, and he will repay him for his deed"), a saying that presupposes the act/consequence scheme and uses it to good advantage. Those who do a good deed on behalf of the poor, the proverb insists, put the Lord in their debt and eventually receive payment from above. Similarly, 28:27 states that gifts to the poor pay worthy dividends, and 28:8 even asserts that those who lend money on
interest will lose it to those who show generosity toward the needy. Such a statement as 21:13 fails to escape charges of self-interest, for it claims that an attentive ear and appropriate action in the cause of the poor ensure the same result if the situation is ever reversed.

The highest stage of blessedness is promised those who show kindness to the poor. Two different verbs indicate the happiness resulting from such considerate action, the first emphasizing the personal disposition and the second stressing others' praise. In 14:21 the charitable person is assured happiness, whereas 22:9 suggests that the needy with whom one has shared bread will sing the praises of their benefactor. The remarkable woman whose praises are heralded in 31:10-31 includes the "poor and needy" in her list of persons who come under her care. For the sum total of her actions, this virtuous wife receives praise from her children and husband. Curiously, the only other use of this combination, "poor and needy," appears in another late collection, the sayings of Agur. Four sayings, each beginning with the word "Generation," describe loathsome individuals who dishonor their parents, practice hypocrisy, think too highly of themselves, and consume the poor and needy. A different word in the initial position does occur in 14:31, which announces that insulting the poor (dal) actually demeans the one who made that person, whereas showing compassion for the needy honors "him." Although the pronoun could refer to the needy person, it may also apply to God, for whom the Bible uses masculine pronouns. By deeds of kindness, one honors the Creator.

This tendency to associate God with the poor extends to specific behavior such as ridicule. Whoever mocks the poor insults that person's Maker, according to 17:5, and anyone cruel enough to rejoice when calamity strikes (presumably the same poor person) will pay for such malice. In some instances the wise came very close to urging love for one's enemies; perhaps the motive was conservative self-preservation, but whatever the reason, the teachers decried violence of any kind. The metaphor about heaping coals of fire on an enemy's head by acts of kindness (25:21) remains obscure, although an Egyptian ritual of repentance may throw light on it.
Not every linking of the poor and deity served to protect the lowly against potential oppressors. In 29:13 the neutral statement asserts that a single sovereign empowers both oppressor and victim. No moral judgment appears in the observation, but the larger context probably lends it some small degree of censure. The next verse promises that kings who dispense justice to the poor will reign for a long time. By implication, the heavenly ruler ought to favor the poor over an oppressor.

The wise realized the precarious situation in which poor people existed, particularly in times of unscrupulous or weak rulers. Not all kings subscribed to, or actually implemented, the lofty ideal put forth by Lemuel's Mother (31:9, "Open your mouth, judge righteously, maintain the rights of the poor and needy"). According to 29:7, the poor have certain inalienable rights, which good people recognize but wicked ones fail to grasp. Astonishingly, not all who numbered themselves among the ranks of the poor respected the rights of others in their own social class.

The situation that James abhors, rich Christians (5:1-6) oppressing the poor, is comprehensible if also reprehensible; a rapacious poor person is almost unthinkable. The rich oppressor resembles a torrential rain that destroys vital crops instead of assuring the growth of life-sustaining food. The implication is that a deficient yield would tempt harvesters to neglect the obligation to leave some produce in the fields so that the poor could glean like the ancestress of David in Boaz' grain fields.

The advantageous position of the wealthy was taken for granted, for everyone knew that lenders possessed power over borrowers (Prov. 22:7). A curious observation surfaces at the transitional point between the older "Solomonic" collection and the section resembling the Instruction of Amenemopet, where the warning against such conduct appears. The robbing of poor people is at issue here. One would think such action would result in nothing worthwhile, but poverty, like wealth, is relative. Furthermore, the poor offered little resistance, because they lacked access to legal redress. Hence the wise insisted that individuals who take advantage of the poor for personal benefit or who toady to the rich for the same reason will experience need themselves (22:16). The warning against depriving the
poor of their meager resources (22:22) actually mentions the place of judicial action, the gate of the city or village. This text also uses the combination "poor and afflicted," the latter term being 'ani rather than 'ebyonim.

Some sayings reflect the adverse social ramifications of poverty. The rich do not lack friends, but the poor cannot even rely on faithfulness from relatives (19:7, "brothers"). On the principle of "How much more!" the teachers assert that if brothers of poor people abandon them, neighbors and friends will avoid the poor even more quickly (19:4; 14:20).

In general, the sayings about the poor acknowledge their desperate plight. Lacking sufficient financial resources to secure their existence, they have no hope (10:15; 13:8), in sharp contrast to the wealthy, who can ransom their lives by prudent use of vast resources. Inherent to their status as wealthy members of society, the rich ignore the pleasantries of polite company, but those who occupy the bottom rungs on the ladder of success are obliged to plead their case (18:23). Even in rare instances when the poor act productively, lawless people seize their profit for themselves (13:23). Such miserable circumstances might have deprived the victims of their integrity, but the teachers saw things otherwise. The lowly people functioned as an example that the proud of spirit would do well to imitate (16:19), and a poor person with integrity was better than a perverse or foolish rich liar (19:1; 28:6). One sentence actually registers approval of a poor individual over an untruthful person (19:22). The wise refused to accept the notion that all poor people were stupid; in fact, one saying asserts that a poor person's grasp of things can be superior to the self-delusion of the rich (28:11).

"Neither Poverty nor Riches"

An intriguing text expresses the view that both wealth and poverty hinder the achievement of a healthy spiritual relationship (Prov. 30:7-9). That opinion corresponds to the teachers' general emphasis on moderation in all things, arising from fear that excessive conduct endangers life. A close look at this text seems appropriate at this time.
Two things I ask of you,  
do not withhold them from me before I die.

Emptiness and a deceitful word keep remote from me;  
give me neither poverty nor riches;  
tear off for me my portion of bread.

Lest sated, I lie, saying, "Who is Yahweh?"  
or lest impoverished, I steal,  
besmirching the name of my God.

The external similarity with Job’s request that God do two things for him to enable him to appear before the divine tribunal has not escaped notice (Job 13:20), but the contexts differ greatly. In Proverbs, the request seems to be a prayer with no forensic setting intended, whereas Job seeks safe entry into God’s courtroom.

The abrupt "two things" engenders expectation that a numerical sequence will follow ("three things"), or that one preceded ("one thing"). What follows as a request takes a peculiar form, for prompt action on God’s part is required for the gift to make significant difference. Delaying its receipt until just prior to death makes no sense. The petitionary address implies vertical discourse (prayer, that is) even if this text is the sole example of that genre in Proverbs. Of course, one could direct this request to other human beings such as parents, teachers, or kings, but the probable addressee is the deity.

The first petition actually embraces both ideas that follow, and one has difficulty discovering two requests. Perhaps the person asks to be spared idle thought and destructive conduct. Clearly, the emptiness and deceit relate to denial of Yahweh’s claim over one's existence, whereas the full stomach will make it unnecessary for persons to commit desperate acts to stay alive. As illustration of the importance of sociological conditions in shaping human values, the author reflects on the impact of wealth and its absence.

The danger concealed in excessive possessions is that their owner cultivates a false sense of security, thinking nothing can arise for which money does not have an answer (cf. Eccles.
10:19). Like the rich man in Jesus' parable, the hypothetical individual in Proverbs runs the risk of trusting in wealth and forgetting the ultimate owner of everything in the universe. The question, "Who is Yahweh?" amounts to practical atheism, for it implies absolute reliance on one's own resources. The Septuagint, or Greek translation of the Bible, understood the question differently, rendering it "Who sees me?" This reading accords well with the theme of practical atheism in some Psalms and easily derives from a Hebrew text that closely resembles the present one. From the reading in the Greek, one can more readily explain the strange allusion to lying. The question, "Who sees me?" functioned as an emphatic denial that anyone observed misconduct, an intellectual position that constituted a spiritual lie.

The problem with poverty was less intellectual, for a hungry stomach forces one to extreme action regardless of its consequences. The ambiguous wording in 6:30 leaves open the possibility that society condones theft resulting from hunger, although the context seems to compensate for the missing sign of the interrogative. I refer to the observation that the thief must pay heavily for lawlessness. The thief's offense may be a grasping after the sacred name without realizing its sanctity, but the nuance of besmirching fits the context better. The choice of the general name for God accords with the foreign nature of the text's origin, a usage softened by the personal pronoun "my."

The coolness of this petition is noteworthy, especially the absence of the vocative "O Lord," and direct address "you" instead of "the name of my God." The lack of a vocative may derive from someone who thought God was unfavorably disposed toward the worshiper, but another explanation seems preferable. The prayer for a comfortable existence on neither end of the social scale contains a stinging attack against Agur, who represents the privileged class of the wise. In light of Agur's blasphemous inanities, as this person saw them, the prayer makes sense. Because it hovers between discourse among humans and communion with God, the cool tone and distancing from the ardor of religious devotion are quite understandable. The speaker did not remain afar off but drew near
to the flame and uttered profound truth: destitute conditions force individuals to behave criminally, and living in the lap of luxury tempts persons to imagine self-sufficiency. The first, poverty, forces one to sully the divine name; the second, riches, blinds one to the possibility of transcendence.

The prayer has no concluding "amen." Instead, a transition to human discourse occurs with the ambiguous allusion to servant and master. On one level, the warning against belittling a servant before a master could refer to God, the supreme Lord. On the other level, it connotes human beings.

Whoever wrote this profound prayer could hardly have subscribed to the notable viewpoint expressed in the portrait of personified wisdom, who held vast riches in her hand and invited young men to pursue her like a lover. This remarkable figure, which resembles the Egyptian goddess of truth and justice, Maat, claimed to have occupied a favored position with Yahweh before the creation of the world and to have participated actively in that event. She even boasted of being the plaything or artisan of Yahweh, bringing joy to the creator and rejoicing in the finished product. Her largesse also extended to human beings, for she promised to endow her lovers with riches (8:21).

The section of Proverbs that coincides with parts of the Instruction of Amenemopet expresses considerable reservation about the pursuit of wealth, regardless of its source. In that author's opinion, acquired riches quickly vanish, taking wings like an eagle and flying off into the heavens (the Egyptian text has geese).

Conclusion

This examination of attitudes toward poverty and wealth in the book of Proverbs has exposed the ambiguities inherent to both. Those who lacked a fair share of worldly goods often suffered the added indignity of society's scorn, for which religious arguments were advanced. People who held an abundance of possessions also basked in almost universal favor, and this attitude, too, was supported on religious grounds. At least one concerned citizen, the Queen Mother from Massa in Edom,
urged her royal son to offer something other than religion as an opiate for the miserable and perishing members of society. That solution was booze (31:6-7), enabling people to forget their poverty by drinking. Such a judgment from one in a position of authority, and therefore having access to better means of reducing want, has been repeated many times over the centuries. Equally dubious was the refusal to take a stand against those in power, shrugging one's shoulders and observing that officials always look out for their own interests (Eccles. 5:8-9).

Rare imaginative individuals, recognizing the inadequacy of such attitudes, saw the plight of the poor among them as an occasion for demonstrating the reality of the faith they professed. If Yahweh championed the cause of widows and orphans, then those who claimed allegiance to this Lord were obliged to extend that compassion to all needy persons. For that grand step to occur, another one was essential: the cessation of placing blame on those who found themselves in lowly circumstances.

Selected Bibliography


POVERTY AND PUNISHMENT

How do United Methodists do theology? Our denomination’s style is a little like riding a mule down into the Grand Canyon. A few years ago, my daughter and I made our first mule journey into the canyon, fulfilling a dream that I had held for more than 20 years. We had made an effort a few years earlier, but the rides were already booked. When we arrived at the Grand Canyon this particular year, we learned that visitors could put their names on a waiting list in case of last minute cancellations. We gathered the necessary information on the run; we registered, gathered the recommended supplies, and arose very early to wait by the mule stalls. Sure enough, our names were called, and we were soon on our way.

As we rode down the steep canyon trail, I looked over the chasm and wondered whose idea this had been anyway. Unfortunately, it was too late to turn back. Our situation looked something like this. My mule was an edge-walker, moving along the border of the steep trail. We had a guide in the front of us, but he was far away. We also had a guide at the end of the line,
but he was taking a new mule down for the first time. Before we reached our destination, this guide's mule charged the other mules four times, and when we finally reached the level land below, she threw the guide onto a prickly pear cactus and ran away. The guide stood, trembling visibly, and when he and his partner finally did round up the wandering mule many minutes later, he begged the more seasoned guide to trade mules. The seasoned guide insisted that the wary young man stay with his nervous mule friend because it would be good for both of them.

In the meantime, I was making friends with Frog (my jumping mule) and with the other people in the group. And I was pondering the vastness of God's world, the indescribable beauty of the moment, my own fears, and the craziness of sending this new mule down with greenhorns like us. I felt daring and grateful to be so close to the wonders of millions of years and the awesome movements that had made the Grand Canyon.

This, I believe, is the way that United Methodists do theology--on the run! United Methodists dream of ideas which would be good for the church, ideas for action or belief or structures. The denomination then makes some efforts to put the ideas into practice. Often the efforts are not effective because they are begun too late to win the church's support and get the vote. Sometimes the church leaders intensify and rush the efforts when the conditions seem right. Frequently, the efforts do finally succeed.

Then when the new ideas are being implemented, the church begins to think about what it has done, sometimes wondering, "Whose idea was this anyway?" But, by that time, it is too late to turn back. The situation is like this. The church folk are walking down the edge of a steep path with an even steeper drop-off two inches from their feet. The guide, if there is one, is in the front, far away. The guide in the rear of the line is taking a new mule down for the first time. This person is no help as a guide, and furthermore, has no idea how to deal with the movement. The rear guide is actually a threat to everyone because he or she keeps charging ahead and starting an avalanche of uncontrolled movement. This frightens everyone, even allowing the movement to run away at times.
In the meantime, the United Methodist folk are making friends with one another as they journey. They are pondering the vastness of God’s world, the indescribable beauty of the moment, their own fears, and the craziness of this new movement. They feel daring and grateful to be so close to the wonders of life and the historical movements that have led them to this place.

The metaphor of mule-riding calls attention to certain features of the United Methodist practices of theological reflection. First, theology is continually being done. It is usually done while the church is moving, rather than before a movement begins. One vivid example is the 1972 doctrinal statement, which was written as an outgrowth of the 1968 merger between the former Methodist and Evangelical United Brethren Churches. Another example in recent history is the extensive number of theological studies on ministry which have followed the 1976 decision by the General Conference to introduce diaconal ministry into the church’s ministerial structures. Four theological study commissions (one each quadrennium) have been named since that time, and the number of pages discussing the theology of ministry has multiplied in all ministry sections of The Book of Discipline every quadrennium since.

Another feature of United Methodist theological practice is that theology is sometimes motivated by wonder, sometimes by fear, and sometimes by the need to analyze the craziness of the present situation. An analysis of the roots of the 1988 doctrinal statement reveals these various motivations. The 1984 General Conference mandated the Council of Bishops to appoint a committee to write a new theological statement to be presented at the 1988 General Conference. The motivation was a mixture of wonder-filled hope that the United Methodist denomination would give serious attention to its theology, fear of pluralism, and a need to analyze existing theological currents, however differently they were named and argued by different factions within the denomination.

A third feature of the United Methodist approach to theological reflection is that theology filled with moments of celebration when the people stop to express gratitude for living on the cutting edge and daring to walk down the precipice,
moving so close to the wonders of life. Last year we witnessed this celebration as delegates returned from General Conference pleased, that the theological and mission statements adopted represented a compromise that satisfied everyone on some points. A pastor who had supported the Houston Declaration and its attempt to preserve certain traditional doctrines and language wrote to his parishioners after General Conference, saying that they would be pleased to know that conservative Christian principles had not been compromised in the new statements. A pastor who had been an open critic of the Houston Declaration said to his parishioners that the discussions and revisions of the statements were open and conciliatory and the statements themselves were good; he was proud of them. There was celebration not only for the statements, but for the conciliar process that led to their adoption.

Marks of United Methodist Theology

The metaphor of the mule ride may be playful, but the theological enterprise should be taken very seriously. United Methodist theology can be identified by marks that continually appear in the church's theological reflection, quadrennium after quadrennium.

The first mark of United Methodist theology is that it is practical. I mention this again because practicality is an enduring part of the style of United Methodist theology. The 1988 General Conference adopted a new Paragraph 66 for The Book of Discipline entitled "Our Doctrinal Heritage." Its prologue emphasizes the practical divinity of John Wesley: "The underlying energy of the Wesley theological heritage stems from an emphasis upon practical divinity, the implementation of genuine Christianity in the lives of believers." The characteristic Wesleyan doctrines actually grew from these concerns for practical divinity, for Wesley "considered doctrinal matters primarily in terms of their significance for Christian discipleship." Both the life of the individual Christian and the organization of the church were concerns that affected theological formulations, and these formulations in turn in-
fluenced Christian living and church polity. The relationship was interactive.

A second mark of United Methodist theology is discipline. Theology is done in a disciplined manner for the sake of discipline; that is, to order life toward the fullness of salvation. The discipline includes an organization for doing theology. In 18th century Britain the organization was based largely in the Methodist societies, and it was based in similar societies in the United Brethren Church and Evangelical Association. All of these societies were designed for edifying believers and spreading Scriptural holiness. Discipline can be observed in the church of today, in that local churches, annual conferences and general boards and agencies are clearly organized and mandated to foster theological proclamation and teaching. The roles of each are put forth in The Book of Discipline.

By definition, the work of the church takes place under the discipline of the Holy Spirit. The Preamble of the Constitution states: "Under the discipline of the Holy Spirit the Church seeks to provide for the maintenance of worship, the edification of believers, and the redemption of the world." The theme of discipline applies not only to organizational structures, but also to guidance from the Holy Spirit for the whole theological enterprise.

The third mark of United Methodist theology is a tension between fluidity and constancy. This is a factor in all formal theological discussions in the denomination, including the discussions that produced the 1988 theological statement entitled "Doctrinal Standards and Our Theological Task." This theme hearkens back to John Wesley himself, who read and reproduced historical treatises widely, but who also critiqued and offered alternatives to historical positions. Wesley maintained the Anglican Articles of Religion for his movement but he made some changes and selections from them.

The United Methodist Church has frequently debated the issue of fluidity and constancy in relation to the first Restrictive Rule in The Constitution: "The General Conference shall not revoke, alter, or change our Articles of Religion or establish any new standards or rules of doctrine contrary to our present existing and established standards of doctrine." This rule led
to considerable discussion as to whether the Confession of Faith of the Evangelical United Brethren could be placed side-by-side with the Articles of Religion after the merger in 1968. The theological statement that was adopted by the denomination in 1972 included both doctrinal statements, and it spoke forthrightly about the desire of the denomination to avoid giving final authority to any doctrinal statement. Furthermore, the 1972 document stated that the first two Restrictive Rules are not to be interpreted literally, but that the people are encouraged to "free inquiry within the boundaries defined by four main sources and guidelines for Christian theology: Scripture, tradition, experience, reason." Fluidity and constancy have been a source of contention in the denomination, as well as a clear mark of the United Methodist style of theology.

A fourth mark of United Methodist theology is connection. The importance of connection to the organization of the church is obvious. The emphasis on connection goes back to the early roots of the Methodist movement. John Wesley established circuits for the sake of itinerating preachers and implementing ministry across all of the local churches. He established societies, classes, and bands as structures of inspiration, nurture, and accountability. Furthermore, the theological work in the early Methodist movement was done in the connection, primarily in the Conference. The minutes of early Wesleyan Conferences are filled with theological discourse, especially Wesley's presentation of answers to frequently asked questions. After the time of Wesley, the theological discourse continued in Conference and other connectional settings, but without such reliance on one central person.

This process of communal theologizing within the connection has been referred to as a conciliar process. In the 1972 theological statement, the pioneers of the United Methodist traditions are described as operating by a conciliar rather than a confessional principle. Thus, they did not function from a "claim that the essence of Christian truth can, and ought to be, stated in precisely defined propositions, legally enforceable by ecclesiastical authority." These early leaders "turned to a unique version of the ancient 'conciliar principle', in which the collective wisdom of living Christian pastors, teachers, and
people was relied upon to guard and guide their ongoing communal life."

References to the communal process do indeed carry over into the 1988 theological statement. It affirms that "[o]ur theological task is communal," including all United Methodist constituencies, every congregation, laity and clergy, bishops, boards, agencies, and theological schools. In practice, the doctrinal guidelines are sponsored and adopted by the connection in General Conference, and doctrinal disputes are referred to Annual and General Conferences. The question of the status and function of doctrinal standards has been left somewhat ambiguous, but the answer presented in the 1972 theological statement is that "for the determination of otherwise irreconcilable doctrinal disputes, the Annual and General Conferences are the appropriate courts of appeal, under the guidance of the first two Restrictive Rules (which is to say, the Articles and Confession, the Sermons and the Notes)."

A fifth mark of United Methodist theological discourse is breadth. The theological reflections of the church have been far-reaching and inclusive of many different kinds of concerns. Considerable attention has been given to theological method by the denomination; this emphasis is represented most vividly in the 1972 and 1988 theological statements in which the guidelines (1972) or criteria (1988) for theological reflection are put forth. These are Scripture, tradition, experience, and reason, all of which serve both as source and as guide to theological deliberation. Besides theological method, theological reflection has also attended to historical doctrines, rules for disciplined living, and principles for social responsibility. These are evidenced in minutes of Annual and General Conferences, in Parts II and III of The Book of Discipline (dealing with doctrine and social principles), and in the newly adopted study document, "The Mission of the United Methodist Church."

The final mark of United Methodist theology to be mentioned here, though this list is by no means exhaustive, is the universally-minded nature of the denomination's theological reflections. John Wesley was himself concerned with the whole globe in the sense that he wanted to spread scriptural holiness
as broadly as possible, stating at one point that "the world is my parish." Wesley also drew broadly from resources of the larger Christian tradition, including Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Moravian and other sources present in his Anglican and pietistic British background. In addition, Wesley was always aware of the broad social context and social mission of the church, speaking and writing eloquently on the concerns of British miners and on slavery in Britain and other parts of the world. Wesley was also concerned with church unity, the most profound example of which his insistence on keeping the early Methodist movement within the Anglican Church. Such a spirit of opening to the larger world and joining with other Christians has persisted in the various Methodist traditions. The early cooperation and eventual merger among the Methodist, United Brethren and Evangelical Association communions is one such example.

This universal orientation is still evidenced in the life and documents of the United Methodist Church. The Preamble of the Constitution includes these words: "The Church of Jesus Christ exists in and for the world, and its very dividedness is a hindrance to its mission in that world." The theological statements of 1972 and 1988 affirm the richness of the whole Christian tradition and the importance of the whole tradition to the theological task of the United Methodist Church. Similarly, both affirm the theological contributions that come from various cultures and communities around the globe. The denomination has been more ambiguous about relating with other religious traditions, but both of the recent theological statements call for explorations and understanding of other traditions.

This introduction to the practices and marks of United Methodist theology will provide background for analyzing the most recent theological movements in the denomination.

**Formation of the 1988 Theological Statement**

Lively theological discussions have characterized the 1980s. The 1984 General Conference acted to recommend three new study commissions for the United Methodist Church. Their
respective tasks were to prepare a revision of the 1972 theological statement, to create a new statement on the mission of the church, and to study ministry. All were to be appointed by the Council of Bishops and were to offer guidance to the church. The commissions included laity and clergy, theological scholars and bishops, women and men, and persons of different ethnic communities. The theological commission was specifically asked to consider the problems of pluralism and doctrinal identity in the denomination.

I will focus here on the work of the theological commission. The commission's work took place in a context of considerable ecumenical reflection on theology. The Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches of Christ has been working to define and describe apostolic faith, a term that has found its way into the United Methodist theological statement. The Faith and Order Commission has centered on as a summary of apostolic faith, the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, the last official creed of the church before it divided between east and west. Faith and Order has described this creed as a test of the faith expressions of later Christian bodies. Ecumenical statements and United Methodist theological constructions share the effort to base theological norms on the early church.

We should also note the considerable theological diversity within the United Methodist denomination in the 1970s and 1980s. Several groups have formed to express their theological convictions and to influence the directions of the church. The largest on-going group is the Good News. The largest special group called together to influence General Conference decisions was the group that produced the "Houston Declaration." Other groups also formed, however, and produced statements before 1988 General Conference, such as the "Chicago Declaration" and "Perfect Love Casts Out Fear." These diverse groups within the church probably influenced the shape of the theological document that was produced, revised, and finally adopted.

The earliest drafts of the theological statement were not discussed widely in the general church, and no mechanism for broad-based discussion was implemented. The drafts did undergo considerable discussion and revision within the commis-
sion, however, in dialogue with the Council of Bishops and in a joint meeting with the mission commission. Later drafts were also discussed in the Oxford Institute of Methodist Studies and with several leaders of general boards and agencies and theological schools. Considerable communication was addressed to the commission through informal networks, and considerable debate took place regarding the statements in such public church arenas as Circuit Rider and The Christian Century. The commission took the responses very seriously and did revisions until the final deadlines.

Then the documents were circulated to General Conference delegates, who began to discuss them in their respective delegations. The discussions were again very active, resulting in further response through formal and informal channels. These responses contributed to further revisions by the legislative committee on Faith and Mission during the General Conference deliberations. The process of the committee was described as collegial and frank, leading to a growing consensus. The document that was finally presented to the General Conference received 94 percent concurrence.\(^{12}\)

The theological document underwent considerable revision from the first drafting to the last. The revisions included: a greater emphasis on the interaction among Scripture, tradition, experience and reason and the possibility that theological reflection may begin in any of the four; a modification of normative language; an expansion of the meanings of experience and reason to include the breadth of human experience and reason (rather than experience and reason related only to the biblical witness); and an expanded statement of the church's ecumenical and interfaith commitments. Such revisions obviated some of the sharp differences between the 1972 and 1988 theological statements without obliterating them. The revisions reflected a dynamic process of dialogue in the denomination, not necessarily pre-planned to continue the communal and conciliar processes described above, but certainly reflecting that those processes are alive and well.
Theological Shifts from 1972 to 1988

A comparative study of the theological statements of 1972 and 1988 reveals many continuities. The continuities are considerably greater with the final version of the 1988 document than with earlier versions. In fact, some language from the 1972 statement was reintroduced into the new statement. My focus, however, will be on what I think are potentially the most influential changes made in the new statement.

The first and most profound shift in the 1988 theological statement is the move to be more normative in the approach to doctrine. This appears even in the new title of Part II in The Book of Discipline; the title is changed from "Doctrine, Doctrinal Statements and the General Rules" to "Doctrinal Standards and Our Theological Task." The language of standards, criteria, and validity dominates the new theological statement, whereas the language of guidelines held sway in the earlier one.

The 1972 statement acknowledged more theological diversity and the dynamic of critique within the Christian tradition itself. One example of this is the 1988 statement's introduction to the heritage that United Methodists share with Christians of all times and places: "This heritage is grounded in the apostolic witness to Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, which is the source and measure of all valid Christian teaching." The earlier statement read, instead: "There is a core of doctrine which informs in greater or less degree our widely divergent interpretations. From our response in faith to the wondrous mystery of God's love in Jesus Christ as recorded in Scripture, all valid Christian doctrine is born. This is the touchstone by which all Christian teaching may be tested." This is one of the few places where the word valid is used in the earlier statement, and it refers back to "our response in faith," leaving room for divergent interpretations and appealing to Scriptural and doctrinal guidelines for testing interpretations. The new statement not only eliminates the rejoinder about different interpretations, it refers to the apostolic witness as "the source and measure of all valid Christian teaching."
THEOLOGY IN TRANSITION

This, of course, is only one example of the shift toward a normative status of doctrine, and it is subtle. Several other examples exist, but these will only be summarized here. One example is the removal of language recognizing and affirming pluralism.\textsuperscript{15} The word pluralism is not used at all in the new document, and the word diversity is used sparingly. Scripture is now the primary source and criterion for doctrine, rather than the primary source and guideline.\textsuperscript{16} Finally, the new document gives a more normative interpretation to the work of our theological forebears by concentrating on the history of doctrinal authority. The earlier statement maintained instead that our forebears followed a conciliar principle rather than a confessional principle.\textsuperscript{17} Also, the earlier statement gave far less attention to the status of doctrine in general.

The degree of this shift to normativity can be overemphasized, however. In its final version, the new statement does recognize theological diversity and the critical and communal nature of the theological enterprise. In fact the theological task is described in one section as critical, constructive, conciliar, and a matter of individual responsibility, reminding the reader that the Christian truth is not a complete and unequivocal given.

One might say that the two statements were written to answer very different questions. In the 1972 statement, the dominant question seemed to be, "How do we do theology faithfully in the context of a rich tradition and a pluralistic church and world?" In the 1988 statement, the dominant question seems to be, "How do we do theology that clearly defines our Christian identity in relationship to our doctrinal tradition, and offers standards for judging the adequacy of theological formulations?"

The second shift in the new theological statement is an appeal to history for answers to questions of faith. The expansion of the historical material is the most vivid evidence of this trend. Another example of the shift is the frequent appeal to the Wesleyan heritage as the rationale for a particular belief or practice. The frequent appeals to Wesley and other forebears are somewhat ironic in that more weight is being placed on
tradition (even appealing to it as a starting point) than the
description of tradition in the statement would warrant.

A third shift relates to the first two, namely, that *the theological method moves from a critical and constructive theology to an applied theology*. Both the normative status given to doctrine and the dominant appeal to history for answers to questions of faith suggest a theological method that is less critical of the tradition itself, less constructive in response to new revelation, and less open to new interpretations in light of faith experience in the contemporary world. Appeals to the conciliar principle, flexibility, doctrinal development, loyalty and freedom, pilgrim people, and non-literalism have been removed from the earlier statement. Both fluidity and mystery are deemphasized. The history of practice is elaborated much less than the history of doctrine.

Again, the differences are subtle, but they are real. For example, the new statement reveals a fluid perspective on the Wesleyan tradition: "The heart of our task is to reclaim and renew the distinctive United Methodist doctrinal heritage." The statement also has a fluid perspective on the theological task: "Our theological task includes the testing, renewal, elaboration and application of our doctrinal perspective in carrying out our calling 'to spread scriptural holiness over these lands.'" Such statements do not call for theological rigidity, but the tone is different from the 1972 statement which addressed the "pressing need of renewed effort both to repossess our legacy from the churches we have been and to re-mint this for the church we aspire to be."

A fourth change in the 1988 document is closely connected to the different perspectives on theological method. This is the *shift in the approach to Scripture in relation to tradition, experience, and reason*. Both documents affirm the primacy of Scripture, but the relationship between Scripture and the other sources is shifted in the new document. In earlier drafts of the 1988 document, a complete organizational and descriptive separation of Scripture was offered. This is greatly modified in the final 1988 document, but the Bible is still separated from tradition, experience, and reason in much of the language. One example is found in the description of Scripture
in relation to the rest of the quadrilateral: "The Wesleyan heritage . . . directs us to a self-conscious use of these three sources in interpreting Scripture and in formulating faith statements based on the biblical witness."^22

Another example is the tendency to relativize tradition, but not Scripture: "But the history of Christianity includes a mixture of ignorance, misguided zeal, and sin. Scripture remains the norm by which all traditions are judged."^23 Such statements about Scripture and tradition separate them in a way that moves counter to the recent work in the World Council of Churches of Christ, which affirmed the unity of Scripture and tradition. It also runs counter to much recent biblical criticism which recognizes the ignorance and misguided zeal that often helped shape the biblical witness as well.

Furthermore, the 1988 theological statement clearly describes tradition, experience, and reason as subservient to Scripture, in that each is described largely in relation to Scripture, with frequent reference to scriptural truth and norms.^24 Despite the examples given here, the picture is somewhat ambiguous because some credence is given in the 1988 statement to the mediation of God's grace that is possible through all four elements of the quadrilateral. Perhaps the best summary of the position of the document is found in the conclusion of the section on doctrinal guidelines:

In theological reflection, the resources of tradition, experience, and reason are integral to our study of scripture without displacing its primacy for faith and practice. These four sources—making distinctive contributions, yet all finally working together—guide our quest as United Methodists for a vital and appropriate Christian witness.^^

A fifth shift between the 1972 and 1988 theological statements is the shift toward Christocentricism. Less attention is given to the triune God, and more to God revealed in Christ. The frequent references to Jesus Christ, as well as some subtle changes of wording, are evidence of this shift. For example, the 1972 statement describes the complex texture of the biblical witness as "memories, images, and hopes." In the 1988 statements, the biblical witness is that which reveals Jesus Christ,
or the way by which "the living Christ meets us" and we "are convinced that Jesus Christ is the living Word of God."26

Another subtle change is in both documents concluding words discussing the purpose of the theological task. The 1972 statement spoke of the task "to understand our faith in God’s love, known in Jesus Christ." Whereas the 1988 statement speaks of the task "to understand the love of God given in Jesus Christ" (italics mine).27 The subtle difference between the words "known" and "given" suggests a shift to the idea that God is revealed only in Jesus Christ. Although the new statement does not deny other forms of revelation, it deemphasizes these considerably. Such a shift has considerable implications for the Christian relationships with other religious traditions, particularly Judaism.

A sixth shift with the 1988 theological statement is a self-conscious attempt to be more wholistic in the approach to theology. Examples abound. The document speaks of both personal and corporate experience, love of God and neighbor, the critical and constructive roles of theology, the individual and communal dimensions of the task, the multiplicity of traditions, the concern of theology with the poor and oppressed and with justice and peace.28 These accents are not missing from the 1972 statement, but they are not featured so vividly.

The 1988 document does sometimes contradict such thinking, however. The most obvious example is the tendency to affirm insights from the multiplicity of traditions on the one hand, but to relativize them greatly in relation to scriptural norms on the other. In fact, some of the critical insights that have emerged from feminist and liberation traditions have been ignored in the formulation of the document, particularly the insights regarding scriptural interpretation and critique. The contradictions, however, do not take away the power of the wholistic thinking in the new document.

The 1988 theological statement represents another shift toward slightly less emphasis on ecumenical and interfaith commitments. More attention is given to John Wesley and other pioneers of the United Methodist movement, and a particular accent is placed on sharing our heritage in the ecumenical arena. Less emphasis is given to the ferment that comes from
the ecumenical arena into United Methodism or to the critiques and challenges that come from the search for unity. The 1972 statement spoke of tough decisions that are required in the quest for agreement, decisions whether "something truly essential is in jeopardy, something belonging not only to our own heritage but to the Christian tradition at large."  

Even more evident is a shift in the understanding of interfaith commitments. The 1988 statement includes the idea that God is "the Creator of all humankind," but no longer includes the idea that "God has been and is now working among all people." The idea that God is actually working within non-Christian peoples has been eliminated. Likewise, the idea has been removed that people of different traditions need to work with God and one another for the "salvation, health, healing, and peace" of the planet. The interfaith work described, instead, is "to be both neighbors and witnesses to all peoples." These alterations should be pointed out, despite the strong overall similarities in the documents regarding ecumenical and interfaith attitudes.

Finally, there is a shift away from acknowledging problems and critiques that emerge in theological dialogue. The impetus to reflect critically on the faith tradition and to respond to contradictions is not featured. But problems often do emerge in interpreting Scripture, adjudicating contradictions among the four sources of the quadrilateral, responding to critiques that come from the multiplicity of traditions, responding to the challenges of persons from different cultural and gender communities, and dealing with issues that surface in ecumenical and interfaith dialogue.

One particular example of the shift to deemphasize such problems is found in the description of the Bible in the 1988 theological statement; the Bible is said to express "the fundamental unity of God's revelation as received and experienced by people in the diversity of their own lives." This statement of unity is made without acknowledging the major tensions and debates within the canon itself, as well as in the interpretations of the canon. Perhaps the 1988 statement presents a simpler picture of our theological task than is possible if we are to take seriously the challenges that are before us.
And so, the United Methodist Church has a new statement for theological reflection, continuing the tradition that United Methodist people are continually doing theology. One can even argue that the document is practical, arising in response to practical issues. Certainly, two issues influencing the statement were the conflicts that had emerged from differences in the church, together with the Christian struggle for identity in a rapidly changing and pluralistic world. The statement also continues the United Methodist tradition of discipline, rising out of the organizational structures of the church and offering a disciplined statement to guide the church. It represents both the fluidity and constancy of the United Methodist theological tradition, although the document itself appeals more to constancy. The statement represents the connection. It was commissioned by General Conference, appointed by the Council of Bishops, written by a committee, responded to by numerous groups within the church, reformed by legislative committee, and adopted by General Conference. The process of communal theologizing seems to be alive and well. And finally, the move toward wholism reinforces the breadth and universal-mindedness of the denomination's theology. The question now is where do the United Methodist traditions and the recent developments in those traditions lead the church in its future theological reflection?

The Future of Theological Reflection in United Methodist Tradition

The future awaits us, but many questions remain to be answered. How will we respond to the new theological statement—as a fixed statement of United Methodist doctrine or as a dynamic statement of the church's faith and practice? Will we attend only to the words of the statement or also to the process that gave it birth? What challenges arise before us?

One set of challenges comes from the practices of theological reflection within the United Methodist tradition. Though theological reflection may seem less dramatic than riding a mule into the Grand Canyon, it is no less adventuresome or
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frightening. The first challenge is to do theology continually, even while the church is moving. This is the challenge to continue to reflect theologically on issues even after decisions are made. It is the challenge to see theology as a dynamic movement which is never finished, but belongs to all times and places of the church. The second challenge that comes from the tradition of theological practice is to welcome various motivations for doing theology and for teaching. The motivations may be wonder or fear or frustration, but all are occasions for thinking seriously about our faith. In fact, the ambiguities of diversity and the search for identity will continue to be important motivations for doing theology. Listening to minority voices will also be important. The third challenge is to recognize that celebration is part of the process. Creating opportunities for genuine celebration is an important part of the theological enterprise.

The new theological statement, taken alone, supports a transmissive mode of theological reflection grounded in doctrine and biblical interpretation. Critical reflection and reformation of the tradition would be limited, as would be theological reflection on the contemporary world itself. Less attention would be given to the pilgrimage quality of Christian life, and more to the quest for truth and its application. Less passion would be invested in ecumenical and interfaith relationships, and more would be invested in the United Methodist Christian identity. A strong Christian identity would be passed on, respecting differences but trying to avoid the possibility that these differences might lead to radical transformation of the identity itself.

The same document, when seen within the communal and dynamic contexts in which it was formed, can reinforce and enlarge on the marks of United Methodist theology. It reminds us that United Methodists need to seek ways to understand and proclaim their faith and to find their identity in the midst of a rapidly changing and pluralistic world. It also reminds us of the many resources that guide us in that faith, resources that we can offer to the larger church and to the world. It reminds us of the diversity inside the Christian tradition and the possibility of seeking unity in
diversity. It reminds us of the multiplicity of traditions which can contribute to our fullness and enrich our unity.

These various reminders could lead to Christian exclusiveness, historical literalism, denial of diversity, and refusal to take seriously those people who raise radical critiques of the emerging consensus. On the other hand, these reminders can enrich our theological reflection to be more self-conscious of who we are, more aware of the dynamic quality of any theological statement, more humble and open in relation to our own theological affirmations, and more eager to participate in the ongoing formulation and reformulation of our theological task. As we look back on our theological witness, we can genuinely celebrate, and we can move from that witness into the future.

Notes

2. Ibid.
4. Ibid., p. 25.
7. Ibid.
11. "The Constitution," The Book of Discipline 1984, p. 19. The theme of organic union appears on this same page, where the union of The Methodist Church and The Evangelical United Brethren Church is seen as obedience to God's will that the people of God be one.
15. Ibid., pp. 71-72.
18. These references in the 1972 theological statement can be found respectively on the following pages of The Book of Discipline 1984: pp. 41, 42, 50, 54, 71, and 78.
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23. Ibid.
24. Ibid., pp. 255-256.
25. Ibid., p. 256.
26. Compare the two statements on Scripture for subtle changes of emphasis, in regard to God's self-disclosures and in regard to the nature and function of the Bible itself. The particular phrases cited here are found in "Our Theological Task": The Book of Discipline 1984, p. 78; Daily Christian Advocate, p. 254.
28. The particular references to the phrases listed are found respectively in the following passages: Daily Christian Advocate, pp. 250, 253 and 255; 260; 253-254; and 255.
33. Ibid., p. 255.
 Tradition Meets Revision: The Impact of the Wesley Hymn Corpus on the New United Methodist Hymnal

Craig Gallaway

One of the advantages of the new United Methodist Hymnal, according to recent reports, will be its sensitivity to classical Wesleyan norms and sources. The hymns of John and Charles Wesley have, indeed, been the focus of much interest and attention throughout the course of the hymnal revision process. Now that the final form of the new Hymnal is set, however, what can we actually say about the American Methodist reappraisal of the Wesley hymn corpus? How many Wesley texts will appear in the new Hymnal? Will the theology of the new book reflect specifically Wesleyan concerns? How have new guidelines for language and theology affected the treatment and appreciation of the Wesley hymns?

It will be helpful to organize our reflections in three stages, according to the results of three major working groups of the United Methodist Hymnal Revision Committee: the Wesley

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Consultation, the Hymns Classifications Subcommittee, and the Subcommittee on Language and Theology.

As the Report of the Hymnal Revision Committee to the 1988 General Conference of the United Methodist Church shows, these three subcommittees had primary responsibility for reviewing and recommending a status for all "Texts" in the new Hymnal. These were also the main subcommittees where the reappraisal of the Wesley hymn corpus had significant impact.

The Wesley Consultation

To begin with, we can consider our subject from one of its less controversial angles, that of the initial workings of the "Wesley Consultation." According to the Report of the Hymnal Revision Committee, the Wesley Consultation "was formed to study the Wesley texts as a body" (page 20), and to make recommendations concerning the inclusion of Wesley texts in the new Hymnal. Given this charter, it was only natural for the consultation to see itself as the champion and advocate of the Wesley hymn corpus.

The Wesley Consultation itself was a somewhat heterogeneous group, however. Composed of pastors, academicians, theologians, historians, students, and administrators, the consultation found ample room in which to differ. There never was any question of all Wesley hymns being liked by everyone for the same reasons. Some rather memorable arguments arose over the value to be assigned specific Wesley texts. One hymn, for example, originally published in Charles Wesley's Short Hymns on Select Passages of Holy Scripture (1762) as a reflection on II Cor. 3:6 ("... the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life." NIV) was ardently championed by some as a Methodist manifesto on Scripture, relevant to contemporary "battles for the Bible."

Whether the word be preached or read,
no saving benefit I gain
from empty sounds or letters dead;
unprofitable all and vain,
unless by faith thy word I hear
Some wished to see this as a heading in the new *Hymnal* for a section dealing with Scripture. Others argued it could not be used as the epitome of the Wesleyan or Methodist doctrine of Scripture, since it was originally written in polemical form to address specific misunderstandings (cf. "formalism" and "antinomianism") and did not, at any rate, convey the full orbit of Methodist confidence in the authority of Scripture. Eventually, the text was inserted *within* the section on Scripture, rather than at its head.

Despite such differences among members of the consultation, there was general agreement that the reconsideration and rediscovery of the Wesley hymn corpus was a good idea, deserving full endorsement. In the spring of 1987, the consultation recommended that the number of Wesley texts be increased from about eighty in the 1964 *Book of Hymns* to nearly one hundred in the new *Hymnal*. This included all material written by any of the Wesleys (John, Charles, Samuel Wesley, Jr. and Sr.) of which the lion’s share, of course, came from Charles.

These recommendations seemed to confirm a trend begun in the 1964 *Book of Hymns*, to recover basic norms of Wesleyan praise and worship that had been discounted by hymnal revisions earlier this century. In 1939, for example, Benjamin’s Crawford’s *Theological Trends in Methodist Hymnody* had celebrated, in optimistic and classically liberal tones, the rejection of outmoded superstitions of pre-modern religion in the Methodist hymnals of 1905 and 1935, including the doctrine of substitutionary atonement. In its place Crawford hailed the arrival of "functional" religion, which allegedly placed more emphasis on the liturgical dignity of worship and its moral consequences. This was, perhaps, understandable in the light of early twentieth century trends in philosophy and Methodist theology and in reaction to the excesses of some nineteenth century forms of "experiential" religion. Today, in the "postmodern" era of the holocaust and nuclear threat, earlier optimisms can seem vacant. The classical themes of sin and
redemption as expressed in Wesley hymn texts may be finding new relevance.

Not all of the Wesley Consultation's recommendations were followed, however. These were, after all, only recommendations. Many of the members of the Consultation, myself included, were not full voting members of the officially appointed Hymnal Revision Committee. The Wesley Consultation, as one of three subdivisions within the larger "Texts" Subcommittee, was itself only a section within a section of the total working process. This meant that Consultation recommendations would be filtered through a larger democratic process involving other interest groups, all of whom would seek to make their voices heard in the process leading to a new hymnal for United Methodists. Unlike the early Methodist conferences which were ruled strictly by a founding patriarch, the hymnal revision process would not be presided over strictly by a founding patriarch, presided over by the legacy of his family's hymns.

As the Wesley Consultation's recommendations filtered out into other subcommittees, encountering other interests and agendas, various individual hymns came under scrutiny for one reason or another. Some were thought to be too repetitive of other Wesley texts. Some drew fire for lack of better, singable tunes. Others were questioned in relation to newly developing guidelines for theological content and gender inclusive language. Even the Wesley Consultation recommended the deletion of some Wesley texts from the previous Book of Hymns in order to leave room for newly recovered texts which might find greater use. In strictly quantifiable terms, the net results at this first level of reappraisal can be summarized as follows:

1) Of the eighty or so Wesley hymns in the 1964 Book of Hymns, the Wesley Consultation recommended that sixty-two be retained in the new Hymnal including, of course, such well-known favorites as "Christ the Lord Is Risen Today," "Hark! the Herald Angels Sing," and "O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing."

2) Of the Wesley hymns in the previous Book of Hymns, the Consultation recommended that about sixteen be discontinued, most of which had been little known or used, e.g.,
"Come, Let Us Rise with Christ," "Jesus, My Strength, My Hope," and "Servant of All, to Toil for Man." These recommendations were based on a poll reflecting usage of Wesley hymns in a cross section of United Methodist congregations.

3) The consultation also recommended for inclusion some thirty-seven texts drawn from "new" sources. Among these a number were discovered by paying close attention to the example of the British Methodists' *Hymns and Psalms*, e.g., "Because Thou Hast Said" and "O Thou Who This Mysterious Bread." Others were rediscovered by combing Osborne's *Poetic Works*, as well as other historic collections and manuscript editions of the Wesleys' poems and hymns. In all, the Wesley Consultation made a real effort, under the watchful guidance of counselors like Frank Baker, to examine and recover at least something of the representative range and depth of the Wesleys' hymn compositions and publications. A special effort was made, for example, to recover a more representative selection of the brothers' eucharistic hymns.

4) Among the hundred or so recommended Wesley texts (old and new), just over sixty actually made it through subsequent levels of scrutiny and into the new *Hymnal*. This means that nearly forty of the Wesley Consultation's recommendations were not followed, leaving a net total loss of Wesley material of seventeen hymns, an actual decline of almost twenty-five percent in volume from the 1964 *Book of Hymns*.

In light of these numerical results, one might well question the notion of a "recovery" of Wesleyan hymnody in the new *United Methodist Hymnal*. Whatever the Wesley Consultation may have hoped, it became apparent that the Hymnal Committee would not act as a rubber stamp. But not all recovery can be measured in quantifiable terms. Much of what we should call a recovery, in fact, requires looking beyond sheer numbers to the level of theological priorities and liturgical applications.
At a second level, then, we should consider the impact of the Wesley material on the organization of the new Hymnal. Here, we can refer to the workings of the "Hymns Classification Subcommittee," whose task, as its name implies, was to propose how hymns should be organized in the new Hymnal; this provides the initial theological and liturgical interpretation of hymns.

Examining the Table of Contents for the hymns section of the new Hymnal, as proposed by the Classification Subcommittee and finally accepted by the General Conference (Report, 4-5), we should note two basic features. First, the major sections are structured according to the creeds:

I. THE GLORY OF THE TRIUNE GOD
II. THE GRACE OF JESUS CHRIST
III. THE POWER OF THE HOLY SPIRIT
IV. THE COMMUNITY OF FAITH
V. A NEW HEAVEN AND A NEW EARTH

Second, within this classic structure, special Wesleyan concerns appear. The recommendation of the Wesley Consultation had been that the Classification Subcommittee inform their proceedings by looking at how the Wesleys themselves categorized hymns, such as in John Wesley's famous 1780 Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists. This implied, among other things, attending to what has come to be known generally in Wesley studies as the pattern of the ordo or via salutis. It is precisely this pattern that we find reflected in the third section of the new Table of Contents under the general heading, "The Power of the Holy Spirit."

B. Prevenient Grace
   1. Invitation
   2. Repentance

C. Justifying Grace
   1. Pardon
   2. Assurance
D. Sanctifying and Perfecting Grace
1. Rebirth of the New Creature
2. Personal Holiness
3. Social Holiness

This second "outline-within-the-outline" reflects very accurately the pattern of the *via salutis*. Comparing this part of the new *Hymnal* with a classic outline like that of the 1780 *Collection*, one cannot help noticing basic structural parallels. In both cases the pattern of the "way of salvation" predominates. Beginning with hymns selected for their relevance to the invitation and struggle of *repentance*, and moving forward with hymns evoking the dawning of faith through *justifying grace* (what John Wesley called the beginning of the "Christian life proper"), the order carries through by invoking the power of *sanctifying and perfecting grace*, which expresses both the struggle and the ultimate hope of the Christian community. The reflection of this order in the organization of the new *Hymnal* represents a clarification and a deepening of appreciation for classically Wesleyan ways of appropriating hymns in worship.⁶

On this basis, therefore, we can speak of a recovery of Wesleyan norms in the new *United Methodist Hymnal*. This recovery is not merely theoretical, because it involves the application of specific hymns to specific experimental locations within the context of worship. This affects not only the Wesley hymns, but all the other hymns in these sections and finally the whole *Hymnal*. Such decisions become part of the fabric of worship.

It can be shown that previous Methodist hymnals of this century, including the 1964 book, gave less attention to the pattern of the *via salutis*, concentrating more on issues of the order of worship and the seasons of the Christian year for purposes of liturgical planning.⁷ This was precisely the point of Benjamin Crawford's erstwhile celebration. This also meant, however, that certain dynamics of early Methodist worship reflected in the Wesleys' hymns were shuffled into the background and almost forgotten. Under the new organizational
chart, by contrast, a number of very significant Wesley hymns re-emerge in a fresh and appealing light.

"And Can It Be That I Should Gain," for example, that great hymn of justifying grace, "No condemnation now I dread./Jesus, and all in him, is mine" (cf. Rom. 8:1), becomes in the new *Hymnal* an expression of confidence in God’s love and pardon in Christ, rather than being consigned to a section commemorating the anniversary of Aldersgate. The relocation of this hymn in the new *Hymnal*, under the heading of "Justifying Grace and Pardon" (III: C.1), combined with the excellent tune "Sagina," will surely revive the use of this hymn in Methodist worship, nurturing the people called Methodists in the liberating experience of faith to which the hymn points.

By expanding and articulating the pattern of the Christian life, the new *Hymnal* helps to recover something of the nuances of meaning the Wesleys built into their hymns. Hymns such as, "I Want a Principle Within," and "Forth in Thy Name, O Lord, I Go," until recently lumped together in a single category, will now be more perspicuous in relation to the different aspects of Christian existence they actually address, in this case, "personal" and "social holiness," respectively. Many of these connections can be examined, furthermore, in a companion volume to the new *Hymnal*, *The Hymns of the United Methodist Hymnal*.

A second level at which the reappraisal of the Wesley corpus has impacted the hymnal revision suggests a broader area of impact. The organization of the new *Hymnal* on Wesleyan principles affects all the other hymns. Moving the emphasis on the "order of salvation" toward the center will serve not only to relocate the meaning of certain Wesley texts, but also to provoke deeper and richer reflection on how the pattern of Christian experience is actually expressed and formed in the overall activities of worship.

Returning now to the matter of the larger creedal structure of the new *Hymnal*, it should be acknowledged that the Wesleys did not emphasize a strictly formal or creedal arrangement of doctrines in their hymnbooks. This does not mean they were uninterested in the foundational doctrines of theology. In the Wesley hymns, predications for God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are almost always interwoven with some acknow-
ledgement of the implications of such beliefs for the lives of the people who hold them. To this extent, the segregation of the doctrines of God, Christ, Church, and the Last Things, in the new Hymnal, and the integration of the via salutis under the doctrine of the Holy Spirit alone, is only partly in keeping with the Wesleys' own approach. For them, to speak of justification, sanctification, or perfection, was also to speak of creation, cross, church, and last things. The personal story was always grounded in the larger story of God's activity and purposes in history. Their "practical" bent was always deeply theological. This is just the point, moreover, where we can begin to anticipate a final dimension in the American Methodist reappraisal of the Wesley hymn corpus.

Language and Theology

The questions of creedal structure and theological reference bring us to our final focus on the workings of "The Language and Theology Subcommittee." This was an especially well-known part of the Hymnal Committee, since it was here that most of the controversial issues were generated (such as military and gender inclusive imagery). No matter what else was happening in the revision process, the whole nation would hear when the committee made a decision in these areas or was pressured by popular opinion to regret an earlier decision. In reality, the actual process of the committee was probably far less radical than some reports may have suggested, as can be illustrated in the handling and response to the Wesley material.

It is well known that the Wesley hymns were written in the eighteenth century and, therefore, preceded by about two hundred years the contemporary focus on religious language. This could hardly be held against them. Nor is it any secret, further, that the Wesleys were basically classical Christians in their doctrine of God, affirming the classical structure of Trinitarian story and doctrine. It was no surprise when the Wesley hymns began to encounter some difficulties in the minefield of contemporary language and theology debates.

An initial point requires emphasis: the process of evaluating the language and theology of the Wesley hymns was guided by
a set of principles which the Hymnal Committee adopted for the Hymnal as a whole. The Wesley hymns were not treated separately. Observing the application of three specific principles will illustrate how the Wesley hymns fared in this process—where they seemed to limp and where, perhaps to the surprise of some, they seemed to dance.

First, the Committee made a distinction between "traditional" hymns, those already in the memory bank of the Methodist people, and "new" hymns, those written recently or slated for inclusion in the new Hymnal for the first time. On the basis of this distinction, a number of Wesley texts, including several selected for special display in poetic format as "chapter headings," were allowed to pass unaltered into the new Hymnal, even though they did not meet guidelines designed for newer hymns. Thus, for example, the hymn "Sinner, Turn: Why Will You Die?" was given a place of special prominence in the section on "Prevenient Grace and Invitation," even though it is replete with masculine references to each member of the Trinity. A new hymn in this category would not have been allowed so much leeway.

A second guideline involved the formulation of a distinction between language for God and language for the assembly. In view of the decision to adopt the Trinitarian creedal structure, there never was any real question of trying to be rid entirely of all masculine imagery for God. References to the Father, even in recently composed hymns, and some masculine pronouns for the persons of the Trinity were not automatically regarded as anathema. When it came to language for the assembly, however, a stricter principle was applied. If a hymn intended to address the assembly as a whole, male and female, then it should reflect this both in images and in pronouns. This principle was applied as far as possible even to traditional hymns, including the Wesley material. On this basis, a number of Wesley hymns underwent changes. Many of these, however, will go unnoticed unless they are pointed out; e.g., the second stanza of "Jesus, United by Thy Grace." Originally the stanza read:

Help us to help each other, Lord,
Each other's cross to bear;
Let each his friendly aid afford,
And feel his brother's care.

The masculine pronouns and the reference to "brother" (in the last two lines) were deemed problematic, especially in view of the focus of this hymn on Christian unity and inclusiveness. Therefore, the following fairly unobtrusive alternative was recommended:

Help us to help each other, Lord,
Each other's cross to bear;
Let each their friendly aid afford,
And feel each other's care.

Whatever we may feel about replacing the singular with the plural pronoun and repeating an internal phrase as a way out of this bind, the result is both inclusive and unobtrusive. A phrase potentially offensive to some has been avoided. Most people will not even notice the change. Other changes will not be so easy, especially where they involve well-known lines of favorite hymns. The first lines of "Christ the Lord Is Risen Today," for example, are widely known and cherished. With respect to the guideline for language for the assembly, however, there is an obvious problem:

Christ the Lord is risen today, alleluia!
Sons of men and angels say, alleluia!

"Sons of men" no longer connotes the human race for a growing number of people, even though that is precisely what Charles Wesley intended in his contrast with "angels." In view of its wide use and recognition, any change in this hymn, especially in the first few lines, is bound to be noticed. Only active singing and thoughtful reflection will tell how the Methodist people will respond to the newly altered version. It should be noted, however, that the alternate given below still fulfills Charles' original purpose (enjoining the song of all free creatures), and it does so in a typically Wesleyan idiom:

Christ the Lord is risen today, alleluia!
Earth and heaven in chorus say, alleluia!
Raise your joys and triumphs high,
Sing ye heavens, and earth reply, alleluia!

In the third place, then, an additional guideline was adopted with respect to language for God. If the creedal structure already ruled out any across the board rejection of masculine imagery, this still did not mean that all references to God (to whichever person) should be dominated by such imagery. At this point the Wesley hymn corpus proved to be a real help to the committee's proceedings. In taking stock of the range and distribution of theological imagery in the Wesley hymns, once again drawing on research from the 1780 hymnbook, it became apparent that the Wesleys employed a great variety of biblical and poetic imagery for the Triune God. They use more than 200 different forms of address, reference, and imagery, many of which are either not gender specific or suggest a compassionate and nurturing image of God which some hail as an abiding contribution of feminist theology today. With the biblical range and depth of the Wesley hymns, worshipers learn to address God through many names:

Companion, Defender, Fountain, Friend, Guest, Haven,
Healer, Helper, Joy, Leaven, Life, Light, Medicine, Music,
Mystery, Parent, Peace, Pearl, Prize, Protector, Rain,
Refuge, Rest, Sea, Servant, Shelter, Song, Spring, Sustainer,

This does not mean, of course, that theological imagery in the Wesley hymns resolved every difficulty concerning the Wesley corpus. Certain Wesley hymns became a kind of test case for the different principles. Should the masculine pronouns of "Give to the Winds Thy Fears" be printed as Charles Wesley wrote them, or should these be altered (as they subsequently were) to relieve the hymn of its "masculine density"?

Language problems were not restricted to the issue of gender inclusivity. Another aspect of this question emerged, for example, over the opening lines of the sixth verse of "O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing": "Hear him ye deaf; his praise, ye
dumb, / Your loosened tongues employ. "Should this be changed because of its potential offensiveness to persons who are mute, since the term "dumb" has shifted in meaning from its use in the eighteenth century; or would the hymn scan just as well with this verse simply removed? The Committee's final decision was to leave the stanza as is, but to mark it with an asterisk noting that it could be omitted.  

On the question of military imagery, on the other hand, it was discovered that the Wesley hymns once again were a help rather than a hindrance. Taking "Soldiers of Christ, Arise" as a prime example, and recalling the background of this in Paul's letter to the Ephesians, the issue became not so much whether a hymn included military imagery or not, but how this imagery was being used and to what purpose. In the 1780 hymnbook, John Wesley entered this hymn in a section entitled, "For Believers Fighting," but the fighting envisioned had nothing to do with taking sides in an international conflict. Rather it referred specifically to the struggle of cooperating with the work of sanctifying grace.

Leave no unguarded place,
no weakness of the soul,
Take every virtue, every grace,
and fortify the whole.

Any reading of the military imagery in this hymn, furthermore, would also have to contend with the prayer of a newly recovered Wesley text from the 1780 Collection, originally published in Hymns of Intercession for All Mankind (1758), and titled "For Peace." Here we sense unmistakably the Wesleys' own deep conviction that war is ultimately out of keeping with God's purposes for creation, despite their declarations in other contexts about the French and the Americans. In the new Hymnal this will be entered in special poetic format in the section on "Social Holiness."

O might the universal Friend
this havoc of his creatures see!
Bid our unnatural discord end,
declare us reconciled in thee!

76
Write kindness on our inward parts
and chase the murderer from our hearts!

All of these examples together suggest a somewhat checkered conclusion as to the record of the Wesley corpus under scrutiny of the Language and Theology Subcommittee. Despite the difficulties, nevertheless, it is clear that the Wesley corpus played an important role even in these decidedly more contemporary concerns. Drawing on biblical precedent, language for God should be rich and complex, not avoiding the address to "Abba" which Jesus' own prayers taught, but also ready to consider this address in the full light of biblical allusion and poetic insight. This was, in its own way, a positive contribution of the Wesley hymn corpus to the American Methodist task of hymnal revision.

**Conclusion**

Need it be said, in drawing these reflections to a close, that the value of the new *United Methodist Hymnal* cannot be gauged simply by taking its "Wesleyan" measure? In a different way, the ecumenical range of hymnody in the new *Hymnal* has its own precedent; for the Wesleys themselves drew on many resources—Catholic and Protestant, Orthodox, Evangelical, and Reformed—in the development of their own theology and hymnody. The decision in the new *Hymnal* to include a greater selection of the Wesleys' eucharistic hymns, and the very different decision to include a larger body of contemporary "evangelical choruses," are both examples which reflect and echo the Wesleys' own openness to resources as diverse as the sacramental sensibility of their beloved Church of England and the more lively celebrations of the Moravians.

The Wesley hymns hold a place of permanent respect and influence in the American Methodist Church because they represent and reflect a community of faith, in all of its incompleteness and transition, ready to offer its life back to God in order to live in hope of God's transforming love:

> Love divine, all loves excelling,
> joy of heaven, to earth come down;
fix in us thy humble dwelling;
all thy faithful mercies crown!

This, after all, is the essence of the *via salutis*: pressing on from promise to fulfillment, always living by grace and in the anticipation of grace. This is also the essence of creed and the Christian year: remembering the world in the light of God’s Trinitarian love, and looking for the signs of the kingdom in the church and the world. If these things have at all made their way with the Wesley hymns into the heart of the new *United Methodist Hymnal*, then Christians of every communion may be glad to join with the people called Methodists in singing:

Finish, then, thy new creation;
pure and spotless let us be.
Let us see thy great salvation
perfectly restored in thee;
Changed from glory into glory,

till in heaven we take our place,
Till we cast our crowns before thee,
lost in wonder, love, and praise.

Notes


2. See, for example, Gallaway, “Patterns of Worship in Early Methodist Hymnody, and the Task of Hymnal Revision,” *Quarterly Review*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (Fall 1987), 14-29. Comparing this with the current discussion affords a “before and after” picture of the consideration and impact of Wesleyan norms on the revision process.

3. Along with evidence cited from the *Report*, my experience as a consultant to each of the subcommittees in question serves as primary source material for the current discussion.


5. See, for example, Gallaway, “Patterns of Worship in Early Methodist Hymnody,” 15-18; and the more extended discussion in my dissertation, “The Presence of Christ with the Worshipping Community: A Study in the Hymns
of John and Charles Wesley” (Ph.D. dissertation, Emory University, 1988), 40-91; as well as the secondary works cited in each of these sources.

6. It should be noted that the Wesleys also deployed other principles in the arrangement of some of their hymnbooks. See, for example, their *Hymns on the Lord’s Supper*, 1745. Even here, however, careful examination reveals that sacramental themes are grounded in a consistent infrastructure of theological and experimental concerns.

7. This can be easily corroborated by comparing the Table of Contents of the *Book of Hymns* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 1966), xiii, with the new outline we are discussing. It may be taken as a substantial advantage that, with the new outline, matters of the Christian Year are more vigorously integrated into the larger theological structure.

8. This question of the relation between doctrine and experience in Wesleyan theology has a long history beginning with charges of “enthusiasm” in the Wesleys’ own time, and reaching down to present debates in Wesley scholarship. For a very different conclusion see: James A. Townsend, “Feelings Related to Assurance in the Hymns of Charles Wesley” (Ph.D. dissertation, Fuller Theological Seminary, 1979), 95, 98, 257, 266. The whole discussion and the relevant secondary literature is given extensive treatment in Gallaway, “The Presence of Christ,” 8ff, 90-98, 149-155.


10. This first address to the Wesley Consultation (February 1986), reported a count of 200 forms of addresses and was a conservative estimate based on my research at that point. The total number of christological images in the 1780 *Collection* was 282. As Dr. Carlton Young pointed out to me in conversation, this corresponds to an earlier study done by the United Methodist Division on Worship which calculated by actual count that, since the time of the King James Version of the Bible, some 250 metaphors and forms of address of deity have been used both in hymns and liturgy. See also, *Report*, 19, 25-26.

11. In this instance we are, of course, referring to the sixth stanza as it appears in the 1964 *Book of Hymns*: "Hear him, ye deaf; his praise, ye dumb,/Your loosened tongues employ..." The full text of the original eighteen stanza poem will be printed along with an expanded version of the hymn in the new *Hymnal* excepting, that is, the original seventeenth stanza which was deemed potentially racially offensive, with its reference to the “Ethiop washed white” as an image of redemption.
The Lost Parable
of the Generous Landowner
and Other Texts for Imaginative Preaching

Paul Scott Wilson

There may be trouble for some of us in the gospel texts which lie ahead for the autumn preaching schedule. Luke is a wordsmith, a poet, a tender crafter of language and stories. He knows, as contemporary preachers also know, how important it is to take care in choosing the words and polishing the phrases that might bear judgment and hope to God's people. The trouble comes in opening the Bible to texts we may have preached so often before, rich texts such as are prescribed for this season, but texts so familiar and well-thumbed that we may despair of finding something that will seem fresh to us. We may be in need of putting our imagination in service of the Spirit.

There are splendid resources on Luke for our use. Three of these deserve some comment here. Kenneth E. Bailey's two-volumes-in-one, Poet and Peasant & Through Peasant Eyes, is an invaluable book on Luke. His own extensive work in the

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Middle East with a peasant culture that has remained largely unchanged since biblical times allows us to slip easily back into Jesus’ culture and to read many of the Lukan texts with fresh understanding. It is so important for us as preachers to be able to picture the biblical scenarios and to recreate them with vivid sensory detail for our congregations. John Dominic Crossan’s pioneer work, In Parables, provides models for preachers to arrive at what might have been the original form and meaning of many of the parables Jesus told. Authentic and exciting biblical interpretations happen when we are able, with care and study, to arrive at these possible original forms. Finally, while I do not like the Good News translation of the Bible, I find Eduard Schwiezer’s commentary The Good News According to Luke to be among the best, partly because he hesitates, as others also do, to suggest what the specific meaning for a text is today. It is the preacher who is best able to determine this.

I am convinced, however, that even the best commentaries do not help the preacher, especially the one who is struggling to be imaginative, as much as they could. Part of the fault may lie with us, for we often turn to these books too soon without allowing our thoughts to marinate in the biblical text alone. But part of the fault is with the format of the commentaries themselves. While we do not want them to tell us what the biblical text of necessity means for today, we do need some imaginative probing of the possible directions to take, something that takes us further toward the act of proclamation than is generally the case. This probing should not be prescriptive for us, shutting down alternative directions we might take, but rather should be disclosive, opening up for exploration avenues of sermonic possibility. It is for this reason that I have tried to develop something of a rhetoric or grammar of preaching that takes us into a possible sermon, giving us a vocabulary to sketch a barebones movement that could prompt the preacher’s own creative energy.

We are all creative. We may assist the Holy Spirit when we prepare to preach by using an approach that will help to tap the considerable imagination each of us has. Interpretation fails if it is only reiteration. I will experiment here with a possible format for working with biblical commentaries. I have ventured
to take the reader into a new idea which is the concerns of the
text. These dislodge from the text many thoughts we might not
have noticed before. If we get in the habit of trying to identify
them, they may provide a fresh interpretation of the biblical
texts with which we work, Sunday after Sunday. When these
are then transposed out of the biblical context and into our own,
powerful sparks happen, which are evidence of the imagination
working. It should become clear that when we speak of being
creative, we are not speaking about letting imagination go wild,
like releasing a horse onto the open range. Rather we are
talking about harnessing imagination, for there is a discipline
involved. If we follow a discipline that has a good rationale, one
step at a time, we will end up with something wonderful indeed.
The approach used here may provide a means for us to be more
creative, even though we may lack confidence in our gifts of
creativity. The steps we will follow here with each of the texts
are the following:

1) Imagining the Story of the Text. Before we turn to any of
the commentaries, or even what is written in the following
pages, it is important that we tell and retell the story of the text
in its detail, to ourselves, to our families and friends, or to
parishioners. In doing this we will discover parts of the text that
are new to us. This is essentially an oral exercise that is good
and pleasurable to do as part of the weekly preparation. In some
ways this is the most important stage of sermon preparation. It
has been common for preachers to rush immediately to the
commentaries, bypassing this important creative step. I would
encourage preachers to trust their own personal resources in
the first instance and to use the commentaries as a vital second­
dary resource. For our purposes here I will record the ideas that
strike me from my retelling of the biblical story, in the hope
that the reader will sense the kinds of ideas after which we are
searching. In this process I would urge us to question even the
most insignificant details of the text. We might try to imagine
the original context in which the story might have been told.
What we are doing is raising ideas that we will then test at the
next step. We will begin to identify what I call concerns of the
text.
2) Exegesis and Concerns of the Text. There are rules to be followed if we want to be creative. These rules are not difficult to follow and will provide us with some startling results in improved preaching. Do not be afraid to risk or to feel foolish—when we are trying something new, it takes time, practice, and permission to make mistakes.

If we take chunks of information from the commentaries and move them directly into our preaching, they can sit like lumps of porridge in our sermons, sticking up the works. When digesting scholarly material essential for any act of preaching, try recording insights that you have from the biblical text or from the commentaries in very short complete sentences or what I am calling concerns of the text. These are thoughts about which you could say much more, and will, if you finally choose to use them. They may be from step No. 1, above, provided they have been tested exegetically. Much of the scholarly data remains in our minds, not written down but nonetheless in the background of these short sentences, waiting to be pulled into the foreground when we begin to compose the sermon itself. It is a difficult thing to communicate simply, especially if the thought is tough.

The idea of concerns of the text may seem superficial at first, but in fact their implication is quite profound. They do three things. First, they help us to state the difficult textual ideas simply and with force. These are essential ingredients we could use in our sermons. Second, they help us see the many ideas that are actually in the text, but generally go unseen. It is so important for us as preachers to realize that there are many ideas in every text which can be preached. Third, they give us a means of moving into our own contemporary situations in our next step, below.

3) Sketching the Flow of the Sermon. I assume that the movement of a sermon will be from judgment (in the first half of the sermon) to grace (in the second half), or from confronting the brokenness of our lives to the hope that is ours in Jesus Christ, or from describing reality as it seems to be to identifying how God is acting in the present to bring about God’s will for all creation. Another way of describing this is to speak of the movement of law to gospel. But we must be careful not to equate
law with Old Testament and gospel with New Testament, for law and gospel are in both. God's Word is always a dual-edged Word, binding even as it frees, wherever it is found in the Bible. While we cannot be sure about what is law or gospel in a text (for the word that convicts us of our sin may be the word that frees us), in our preaching we can be sure at least to provide the structures for each to be heard with clarity and depth. It is from a recognition of our corporate and personal sin that we are then able to claim the saving actions of God on our behalf. Most preaching develops law only, and if there is gospel it is in the last minute or so, insufficient to make an impression upon us. The good news and what God's actions look like in our midst need to be painted with as much color and intensity as we have used to paint the ways in which we have fallen short of God's will. It is a hard thing to preach good news, to use our imagination in such a way as to suggest God's action in the present even in the midst of the worst situations. Although we affirm as preachers that what we are doing is theology (talking about God), it is unfortunate that most of us spend our time talking instead about humanity apart from God.

I also argue that for this important movement to take place, we need to choose from among our concerns of the text one gospel or good news idea which will become our central idea, our major concern of the text. There are many good news ideas in every text. We are not wanting to revert to the old idea, for instance, that every parable is about one idea. The one idea we are after is simply the one good news idea, from among several, which most excites us. Ideally it will focus on an action of God, Christ, or the Holy Spirit. It will become the central idea in the sermon precisely because we choose to structure the sermon so that this idea is our repeated and central theme. We choose to emphasize it above all others. It will be mentioned at the beginning and end of the sermon, but the actual development of it comes midway where it will bear the full weight of the shift into good news. It will perhaps be followed by another good news concern of the text. Remember that good news centers on the action of God. Moreover each concern of the text will have a transposed version, a concern of the sermon, which speaks of us in our own contemporary situation. Similarly the major
concern of the text will have a corresponding major concern of
the sermon.

The movement of preaching, then, is not only one movement
from law to gospel, but also a series of movements from the
biblical text to our situation, back and forth, in a spiral of loops.
What is the difference between these loops and a sermon in
point form? One difference is that this is not a direct linear or
didactic structure of preaching. Rather it is modular or organic,
each idea growing out of the idea before it, yet not strictly
dependent upon it. The congregation participates as a partner
in a dialogue of their experiences of the world with the text,
even though it is the preacher alone who is talking. Another
difference has to do with the role of the biblical text. Most of
us want our preaching to be biblical, yet we may not feel capable
of making it biblical. A sermon in point form may draw its points
from the biblical text, but it may as easily start with a truth
from our situation and attempt to link it to a text. Alternatively,
it may leave out the biblical text entirely. In this approach we
always start with a truth which arises out of the text; we then
develop that idea from both the text itself and from commen-
taries, in as lively a manner as we are able; and finally we seek
to see what that truth looks like in our own context.

One major advantage of developing these concerns of the
sermon which speak of us in our time as opposed to the text in
its time, is that we begin to see how any text can speak to any
situation. We may trust any text to have relevance for today. If
we want to speak to a major doctrine of the church, I suggest
that we allow the major concern of the text to suggest which
doctrine that is. If we want to speak to a major social issue, I
suggest we steer the development of the major concern of the
sermon in this direction.

It is my belief that in any one sermon we only have time to
treat one of the texts in the depth that it deserves. Other texts
that are read on the Sunday may be alluded to on a surface level.
To try to develop them all may satisfy the preacher but bewilder
the congregation.

With each of the sermon sketches provided here, I use four
loops, two in the law section and two in the gospel. The number
of loops that you use would vary. You might have two and one,
or one and three, or whatever. This would depend, among other things, upon how much you wanted to say about each of the concerns you include in your sketch. Each time we come to either the text or to our situation we would stay long enough (in written form perhaps a paragraph or so) for our listeners to be drawn in. We are like tour guides in God’s mansion of many rooms, who give a chance for the congregation to sit down and experience each room before further touring. Not all biblical texts move from law to gospel in the manner our sermons should move. It is useful to note that the chronological order of the biblical text does not need to be followed in this approach. Once the congregation is clear as to the events in the text, as your development of the various concerns of the text will make clear, the chronological order may be broken without confusing the congregation. I have developed this approach in a more detailed manner in a recent book.

Let us now turn to two of the texts from Luke for this autumn.

(or: The Dishonest Steward)

1) Imagining the Story of the Text

Even as the parable of The Prodigal Son, which immediately precedes this in Luke, could equally be called The Prodigal Father (prodigal with his love), the text for this Sunday could also have title other than The Dishonest Steward. It could be called The Generous Landowner. This is the story of a wealthy man who has trusted one person above all others in making him his steward. When his debtors petition him concerning the dishonesty of the trusted one, the owner dismisses him as manager, and tells him to get the books in order and hand them over.

Is the master a fool? He seems to be. What owner in right mind would allow someone who has been found cheating the opportunity of cheating yet more? The fact that he is wealthy and therefore successful in that society, suggests that he is not a fool, however. Could it be that the master, who has long
trusted this steward, is trusting him once more? The steward's actions have not only broken his own relationship with the tenants, but also threatened the master's relationship with them. The master may be trusting him to come to his senses and to restore the relationships through correcting the accounts. If so the master is generous indeed, at great risk.

The steward, for his part, works with his mind, not with his body. He cannot dig ditches and will not beg. He alters the accounts and gets each of the debtor-tenants to initial the change. Are the tenants fools? Why would they trust this man about whom they have complained? He could be involving them in another one of his schemes, this time directed at the master. Or, more to the point, are they, along with the steward, dishonest? If they are, then they are fools. They depend on the landowner to lease them their land. It seems reasonable that they are honest and that they accept this action of the steward as a fair adjustment of their accounts to the proper amounts. The steward is restoring to them, presumably from his own funds, the sums that he stole. Alternatively, it is possible that he thought he was doing the master a favor by his initial cheating and that the sums he stole were put in the master's account.

Traditional interpretations of this parable given by scholars over the ages have tended to follow Luke's own suggestion as to the meaning, even though his comments were not part of the original story. They focus on a dishonest steward being commended for using the things of this world to ensure his future. Christians are urged to be just as shrewd. Traditional readings break down in asking us to believe that the master would commend a steward for further wasting the master's money. The master, in doing so, steps out of the story and becomes a preacher with a moral message. This is inconsistent with Jesus' common use of story. Someone else's hand is evident here.

The commending of the dishonest steward does make sense, however, if the master's apparently foolish trust in the steward has been rewarded. The steward has made good. Both the steward's and the owner's relationships with the tenants have been restored. The relationships are all-important to the
master, more important even than the risk that the steward might have been unworthy of a second chance and stolen more.

In terms of the master's relationship with the steward, the story does not let us conclude necessarily that it is over and ended. The steward has done the first act of the traditional Jewish ritual of repentance. He has made compensation for the loss. We do not see whether there follows confession and a period of repentance outside of employment. In the Prodigal Son these rituals were bypassed by the father. It would not be too much to allow here, from what we know of the master's generosity, the possibility of a restoration of some relationship with the steward. Perhaps this could even be as manager, given the similarity in generous, vulnerable, and trusting love we find in both the prodigal's father and in the master. At least, one might expect some form of restoration of the steward to a legitimate place in the community.

This problematic parable, in an earlier version which we may be glimpsing, might have been a wonderful parable of reconciliation and community, similar in stature to the Prodigal Son. God wants all people to belong. God's love exceeds what we deserve. It is another parable of the Realm (Kingdom) of God. The letter of the law (outright dismissal and loss of place in the community) is set aside in favor of a higher law of reconciliation. This earlier version was lost to us partly because of Luke's use of it. Sometimes, however, if we turn a text upside down and allow imagination to have a say, the lost can be found.

This reading suggests that the early version of this parable might have ended with verse 8a. Why, in transmission, were the other verses added to it? They suggest that money should be used to make friends. Those who are faithful in little will be faithful in much. Those dishonest in little will be dishonest in much. If you cannot trust someone with someone else's riches (or earthly riches), you cannot trust them with their own (or heavenly riches). These harsh words may speak of an early church community which knows dishonest stewards of the collections for the poor and will not tolerate them. They are excommunicated and cast out, not just out of the church but out of God's grace. In the need to deal with these stewards, the parable of the dishonest steward was seized upon. Here was
Jesus talking about just such a person. It was made to say what the early church needed it to say. As we understand it, this was entirely opposite to what Jesus was in fact saying.

2) Exegesis and Concerns of the Text

This parable has no parallel in the other gospels. G. B. Caird offers that the parable is an allegory with the master or lord (kyros) as Jesus. Alternatively, he suggests that the Jewish laws allowed usury in certain circumstances in cases of mutual benefit to lender and borrower. The steward was returning to the debtors their promissory notes and adjusting their loans to be without interest. This was a righteous action, in accordance with the letter of the law, and he was commended for the reason that the owner was seen to be a pious observer of the law. Kenneth E. Bailey argues that the tenants did not know of the dismissal and after their debts had been reduced they threw a party to honor the owner, as their customs would dictate. The master thus has little choice but to commend the steward.

None of the arguments in the commentaries detract from the validity of the interpretation developed above. I would assume therefore that many of the shorter sentences we have above could stand as legitimate concerns of the text on their own. Let me just list a few gathered from there and elsewhere.

The master is an honest man (i.e., he acts on the reports). The steward is dishonest. Someone has complained to the master. The master could have fired the steward outright. The debtors are land renters (cf. Bailey I, 88 ff.). The steward is fired. He has time to adjust the books. The master gives the steward a second chance. The master operates by a new law. The steward comes to his senses. He repays what he has stolen. The debtors are honest. The amount deducted from each is the same (Bailey I, 101). The steward restores his relationship to his community. He restores his master’s relationship to his community. The master commends the steward. The master values money over relationship. The master’s love is generous. He is vulnerable. The master believes in the steward’s true character. The master is faithful. God wants all people to belong.
You may recall that now we want to be sketching the movement of the sermon both from law to gospel and through the repeated looping movements from the biblical text to our situation. Each loop is composed of a concern of the text and its transposed version, a concern of the sermon that deals with our situation. In the final prepared sermon each of these would appear and would become the topic of a paragraph or so. The loops and the number of them you choose probably would be much different from my own selections.

From stages 1) and 2) above, we have before us a wide range of rich textual ideas. We may now select from these a few that excite us the most. Often when I am choosing I think of three things: a) Do I have enough background textual matter, including some of the unused concerns of the text, to develop this into a paragraph? b) Do the concerns I choose allow me to draw on different material from the biblical text and the commentaries in developing each? and c) Do their transposed versions allow me to address a sufficient breadth of contemporary experience? Furthermore, when choosing for the gospel section I made sure that I am choosing concerns of the text which focus on an action of God or Christ where possible. Here, since God is not in the parable, I choose concerns which, when transposed, allow me to speak of God or Christ. One of these good news concerns of the text I elevate to be my major concern of the text. Along with its good news transposition, the major concern of the sermon, it becomes the central idea of the sermon. I will mention it briefly at the beginning and end, but develop it midway, and each of the other loops will be developed to serve it.

Law

**Concern of the Text (T): The steward is dishonest.**

(The first time I come to the text I give enough textual detail to remind us of what happened, assuming others are no better at remembering the readings than I am, but yet without telling the whole story.)
Here I would focus just on the nature of his dishonesty and what it meant.)

**Concern of the Sermon (S): We break trust.**

(I would not want us to think that the finger only points at the steward. It points at us as well. There are many ways which as individuals in our work or at home we too break trust. There may be a story from any number of sources that comes to mind. Communities, churches, and nations also break trust, and this might be an alternate direction to move.)

**OR S2: The world discourages trust.**

(Depending on what had happened this week I might choose instead to look at the apparent foolishness of trust.)

**T: The master could have fired the steward outright.**

(I would look for some link phrase at the end of the above discussion of our situation to bring us back to the text, this time examining the legal options available to the master in responding to the steward’s dishonesty.)

**S: We operate by strict observance of laws.**

(Our own lives are usually lived according to a harsh adherence to the law, particularly in dealing with others. Might we identify some instances? I am preparing for a striking contrast with the master’s actual response. I have now used approximately one half of my sermon time.)

**Gospel**

**Major Concern of the Text: The master operates by a new law.**

(Usually the major concern of the text, as part of the central idea of the sermon, will suggest a doctrine that can be effectively developed. Here I would choose
the doctrine of reconciliation. I would also include many of the relevant ideas mentioned earlier.)

Major Concern of the Sermon: God created community.
(I would further elaborate on reconciliation in our time. This is a wonderful opportunity to tell a specific story of reconciliation: personal, local, church or world.)

T: The steward comes to his senses.
(This is again a good news idea. If there is a way of developing it so as to emphasize God's action in this, I would do so.)

S: God trusts us beyond what we deserve.
(I might name a variety of possible situations of moral failure in which we find ourselves, and in spite of which, God still trusts us. God enables us to return to our true selves.)

OR S2: God deems us worthy of trust.

15 October--Luke 17:11-19 The Cleansing of the Lepers

1) Imagining the Story

The setting of this story is problematical. Luke pictures Jesus encountering the lepers while travelling from Samaria to Galilee on his way to Jerusalem in the south. Either Luke or Jesus is mixed up for Samaria is south of Galilee, not the other way around. Alternatively Luke is more concerned with creating the theme of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem than he is with the historical details as he draws his various sources together. We might even allow Luke a sense of humor. Humor is not out of the question, given the end of this life-like parable. The setting holds an overlooked key to the story that we may not have enjoyed.

Jesus is approaching a village. At the edge of any village it was common to find roadside beggars. In this case the beggars are ten lepers, but they are standing at a distance. They have
been declared unclean and are not allowed in the village. Lepers lived in groups outside of a community, yet near enough to allow villagers to tend to their needs for food, water, clothing, and shelter. The leprosy laws forbade them to draw close. We tend to think of these laws negatively, forgetting that they were the only means whereby the health of the community could be preserved. People dreaded leprosy, for it meant a disastrous break in all of their relationships. Someone who had leprosy was as good as dead, so minuscule was any chance of a cure. There were, surrounding these lepers, a host of superstitions that still surround any major misunderstood illness today.

There are emotional and spiritual consequences for those with such ailments: shame, self-loathing, guilt, and rage. They would have the vulnerability of those who have been stripped of rights and who have experienced stones being thrown in their direction as often as money. These roadside beggars are friendless, disowned, and impotent to change their circumstances.

They have heard that Jesus is coming. They address him by name and call him master (epistata). In asking for mercy we do not know whether they were asking simply for money or for healing. Jesus sees both their physical and spiritual needs. He answers them with healing. He obeys the law in instructing them to go to show themselves to the priest to be declared clean. The surprising thing is that they do it! There are no signs of healing when they set out. They go forth only on the strength of Jesus' word. In other words, they have faith in him.

Where would the lepers find a priest? Jerusalem would have to be their destination, for only in the Temple could there be purification rituals involving sacrifice. This may be one instance in which we actually see some messengers departing who subsequently will announce Jesus' approach, even as his arrival in this story was heralded. The lepers have already begun their journey when they are healed. The nine continue on, in strict accordance with what Jesus has commanded. Nothing in the story precludes the possibility that they will again encounter Jesus, particularly since they are now headed in the same direction and for the same place. And nothing precludes the possibility that they will yet give due thanks to both God
and Jesus. It is the traditional interpretations, not the story itself, which have ruled this out. Luke, in his concern for the expanding Gentile community of Christians, is hard on the nine, using them as a symbol for Judaism in contrast to the Gentile mission.

The Samaritan returned to give thanks. But we might ask why he went with the others in the first place? He was a Gentile not a Jew. What was a Jewish priest to him or he to a Jewish priest? Yet he set forth with the nine, seeming to forget his important difference, open to what was in store. When he is healed (and perhaps as a sign of his healing!) he comes to his senses. "Why am I going to Jerusalem? My priest is in Samaria!" It is impossible that a people of that time and culture would have missed the obvious humor of a Samaritan heading to see a Jewish priest and discovering his error. There is further humor. Where is Samaria except back the way he came? He cannot get to Samaria without passing Jesus who has just come from Samaria himself. The Samaritan was thankful. The humor is that he did not just return to give thanks to Jesus--he was on his way home!

How does salvation come to him? Does he receive a blessing that the others did not receive? No and yes. No, the others also had faith and received salvation. Yes, what the Samaritan received was a special blessing precisely because he was outside of the normal faith community.

The apparent condemnation of the nine for missing out on salvation through faith is problematical. Perhaps the story of the healing of the lepers originally was separate from the story of the healing of the Samaritan. In spite of Luke’s apparent condemnation of the nine, physical healing and spiritual healing are one and the same in the New Testament. It was the faith of all of the lepers that made them well. Luke tells the story to foreshadow the opening of the Realm of God to the Gentiles. But earlier versions of the story would have been told to assert the authority of Jesus to perform miracles, and to demonstrate, among other things, that an outcast (Samaritan) can offer due thanks to God.

2) Exegesis and Concerns of the Text
G. B. Caird argues that the source of the miracle, God, and God’s agent, Jesus, were due to receive thanks. Luke savored the fact that the Samaritan surpassed his Jewish counterparts in his open gratitude. Craddock maintains that two stories existed independently. He suggests that Luke’s church had begun to take God’s blessings for granted. Schweizer notes that “healing” and “salvation” are the same word in Greek. The curing of disease and the removal of social barriers are part of the process of salvation, a process only completed in recognition of God’s action. Real salvation comes to the Samaritan because he comes to the one who bestows it upon him. What matters is that healing leads to new life with God.

Some concerns of the text might be listed: The ten were outcasts from the community. They call on Jesus for help. The lepers are as good as dead. Their faith makes them well. Jesus heals them. Jesus gives them new life. Jesus restores them to community. Jesus obeys the law. The lepers do what Jesus commands. They head for the Temple. The Samaritan is outside Jewish ritual. Jesus extends a special blessing to the Samaritan. Luke’s Christians were lacking gratitude for their blessings.

3) Sketching the Flow of the Sermon

Law

Concern of the Text (T): The lepers are as good as dead.

(Again, I would give enough textual material to remind us of the story. I would speak about the significance of leprosy in that culture.)

Concern of the Sermon (S): Many in our world have no hope.

(Here I would probably tell a story about someone I had seen on TV who was starving in the third world.)

T: The lepers do what Jesus commands.

(They went forward in faith. I would include any ideas from above which support this.)

S: We long for Jesus to come to us.
(We long for Jesus to come but we fear he does not, that we are abandoned--like when?)

Gospel

*Major Concern of the Text: Jesus restores the lepers to the community.*

(The doctrine of community comes to mind. What is the Christian idea of community? This idea, along with the Major Concern of the Sermon, is our central idea. Note that an action of Jesus is the focus.)

*Major Concern of the Sermon: God gives us wholeness of life.*

(There are many stories from which we might choose, perhaps a scene from a recent movie.)

*T: Jesus gives the Samaritan a special blessing.*

(Here I might include discussion of why Luke felt it necessary to deny salvation to the nine, being careful to continue emphasizing good news.)

*S: God’s blessings are given to all.*

(This would be a good opportunity to dream prophetically about those we mentioned in the law section and to suggest the manner in which God is acting for them.)

**Conclusion**

The ideas that have interested me in these texts may not be the ideas which have interested you. You may not agree with some of the interpretations given here. What matters is not that we have the same interpretations, but rather that each of us has found something in each of the texts that excites us. If the text has not set a fire burning within us, we cannot fairly expect to ignite sparks of faith in the minds and hearts of our people. The idea of concerns of the text, while new to us, can open up biblical texts for our imagination in ways we have not dreamt were possible. I encourage you to use the precise wording of the concerns you select in your final sermon, perhaps
even repeating them—they will help your congregation to hear what you are saying. These are essentially theme statements of the paragraphs of the sermon, each of which is developed so as to serve our central idea which is the major concern of the text and the major concern of the sermon.

Similarly it does not matter whether the flow of your sermon has two loops in each half. A law section might have three movements into the text and back to us, and a gospel section might simply have one, or any other combination. What matters is that there be an attempt to give a rough balance to law and gospel. Gospel focuses on an action of God. God or Christ or the Holy Spirit is the subject of the sentences wherever possible, as demonstrated above. Too often in preaching it is our actions which remain the focus throughout, except perhaps for the last few minutes in which God’s actions are mentioned briefly and in broad, sweeping, and allusive terms.

Generally speaking we preachers benefit from training ourselves to talk about God’s actions in the world. What do God’s actions look like? This is a proper thrust of the preacher’s imagination. They look like acts of mercy, peace, justice, love, and righteousness, wherever these are found, both in individual and corporate lives around us and in other parts of the world. Obviously there are times when we must be rather tentative in identifying God with particular acts, recognizing our own regrettable and all too obvious limitations in perceiving truth.

There is a hazard also that we will only look to situations which may have meaning to us but may not translate well when moved out of the subjective realm. Let us say we were to talk, for instance, of feeling good one morning while out for a brisk walk and of seeing the sun rise over a fragrant field, or someone smile at the roadside, and of being convinced that God was near. It may be true, but it does not help the woman who saw the same sunrise or similar smiles and experienced only God’s absence in the wake of her friend’s death. Easy kinds of experiences can be included, but if they are our primary focus, God’s good news will seem like warm, wet noodles, easily tossed around, sticking here and there, but with no real substance or strength. Pick tough situations in the law section of the sermon
to ensure that the good news, when it comes and is applied to those or similar situations in the gospel section, will have the power we associate with the Holy Spirit.

As we turn to expand the flow of our sermons, preparing the actual sermons themselves, our main focus should be on discerning God's action in the midst of the toughest situations, here and elsewhere. Try to include as wide a range of situations as possible, thinking of personal, local, church, and world experiences. Part of the task of preaching, as I understand it, is to restore our humanity by establishing a right relationship with God. What enables our humanity to become more authentic is the breaking down of the barriers which prevent us from seeing our neighbors as ourselves. I am fully committed to the importance of our telling stories, stories from our own experience, television, the newspapers, movies, or novels. Give faces, names, smells, sounds, tastes—as many details as relevant—so that we may connect in various ways our own humanity with that of others. I suggest that after we are finished with the first draft of the sermon, we go back to see that we have included something which addresses each of the senses. If we read at least a short story a week, for instance from the Norton Anthology of Short Stories, edited by R. V. Cassill, we will find exciting ways of doing this. When we are specific in suggesting how God might be acting in the lives of others, taking our cue from the biblical text, our people will be able to find God in their own lives. There is no better, more privileged or more joyous service to which we may put our imagination than this.

Books of Interest

Book Review


The publication of these three volumes stands in the best tradition of British scholarly publication that attempts to combine academic expertise with clear exposition of major issues within a historical context for the general reader. Twenty-seven essays, substantial in content and length, plus an editorial introduction provide critical insights into the thought of key European and American figures and movements from the impact of Kant's critical philosophy to the beginning of the First World War. The editorial rationale for publishing these essays is given in a statement on page 1 of the first volume:

Whilst taking care not to underestimate the distance between [the nineteenth century] world and our own, one must nonetheless allow that greater understanding of . . . contemporary issues can often be gained by attending to those thinkers who in the main have determined the direction of modern religious thought in the West. Theirs was a revolutionary time when the older theistic world-view, already under attack since the Renaissance and throughout the Enlightenment, gave way to a new, more variegated, more complex circumstance for religious thought.

The procedure for exposing this variegated and complex situation is to have a team of twenty-nine scholars analyze, in
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independent essays, the contributions of dominant religious thinkers and movements. As the editors remarked:

The volumes are not intended to be an anthology of articles merely summarizing historical and exegetical details; they are intended, rather, to engage the thinkers covered in a rigorous manner in order to see what they said and why they said it, and also to explore what is of lasting value in their work.

The focus, then, is on European and American intellectual currents and conceptual issues of the nineteenth century, not on social, economic and political factors or popular religious forms—though these are recognized as contributing background cultural aspects of the intellectual ferment in several essays. The authors examine the development in the thought of notable personalities, and analyze philosophical claims, schools of thought, and emerging methodological approaches to religious life. Also, each entry includes a bibliographical essay, or at least a bibliography, of secondary literature primarily in English while including some other European languages.

The breadth of coverage by well-known scholars in these twenty-seven articles, the provocative insights into the intellectual development of key thinkers, new interpretations which stand on the shoulders of many previous researches and debates, and fresh delineations of the contours found in the nineteenth century mental landscape make a detailed assessment of individual articles a bit presumptuous. I will try, rather, to describe the approach and organization of the essays, expose some of the basic issues portrayed by the editors and authors, and indicate the significance of this collection for understanding religious thought today.

These three volumes are not a history of the religious thinking found in the popular mind and religious institutions of nineteenth century Europe. Rather, they are an effort to portray what is today popularly labeled a "paradigm shift" in religious thinking that went beyond the concerns of any religious community or denomination and language group in Europe. The editors—together with the readers—recognize that
it is not possible to consider all the important aspects of the intellectual scene; so it is informative to note that in these volumes there is a dominant consideration of British and German scholarship in Western philosophy and Christian theology. There are only two essays on American thinkers, one on Jewish thought, and none on the impact of the Western esoteric tradition. Volume one concentrates on German scholarship from Immanuel Kant to Ludwig Feuerbach and Karl Marx. Volume two examines a range of figures and movements, especially British figures and movements, and includes two essays on Roman Catholic schools and one on Russian religious thought. In volume three the central focus is on the impact of the social scientific (historical, anthropological) study of religion for hermeneutics and philosophical-theological reflection.

Most of the essays are structured around the analysis of a major figure’s writings. The authors often express their sensitivity to the difficulty of pinpointing the subject’s thought as they portray the dominant motifs in a figure’s development. Most writers tried to combine their analysis of the thinker’s contribution to a discussion of religious issues with a recognition that personal life-situations and cultural patterns impact that contribution. In their interpretation of the religious thought, each author probed the topic beyond the level of an introductory summary while making seasoned assessments of the secondary literature. The editors are to be congratulated for their choice of authors who maintain a high level of scholarship, and consistency of purpose in these essays; nevertheless, there is no escaping the fact that in these in-depth analyses of particular figures and movements the authors have distinctive concerns, making the presentation of a coherent discussion of the over-arching themes and issues in nineteenth century religious thought in the West difficult.

The analyses presented in over a thousand pages of essays demonstrate the diversity of concerns and approaches found in the materials. Pervading this diversity is the recognition of a major shift in the assumptions of intellectuals who reflected on religion. This shift is seen to result from the eighteenth century critical reflection, labeled the European "Enlightenment,"
which questioned traditional institutional religious authority
and stressed the power of reason and the use of empirical data
for acquiring knowledge. Religious sources, especially the Bible
and traditional interpretations, were themselves brought
under scrutiny throughout the nineteenth century. Such a
shift, of course, did not mean that reason and empiricism were
the only sources of knowledge, or that the Bible, tradition, or
personal religious experience were wholly rejected in the effort
to understand religious claims. It meant that reflection on
religious experience, scripture, human nature, and the cosmos
responded to the critical issues presented within the En-
lightenment agenda. Self-understanding, religious commit­
ment, and religious institutional authority were placed within
a more general or universal framework of interpretation. For
example, the definition of personhood was to be formed by the
recognition that human beings were quite diverse, that cul­
tures--including religious institutions--developed and changed,
and that religious commitment itself was related to a trans-
cultural human nature which made possible having anything
like religion in human experience at all. Within the range of
nineteenth century positions on the nature of religiousness--
and more specific theological issues of revelation, the com­
munity of faith, and salvation--religious intellectuals had to
wrestle with the issues of epistemological relativity, the
developmental character of history, and the complexity of
biological, psycho-social and linguistic conditionedness as they
came to terms with their own (traditional or non-traditional)
comprehensive value commitments. The Enlightenment agen­
da revolutionized the context within which religious claims
were validated.

In an effort to identify some basic themes that pervaded
nineteenth century European religious thought, the editors
designated three "clusters of issues" that "attracted the inter­
est of its best minds." These are:

(i) the limits of reason and the nature of rationality;
(ii) the idea of "true humanity" and the question
of human nature;
(iii) the problems of history and the effects
of "historicism."

These are, indeed, useful issues which help to integrate the diverse analyses. While recognizing that they are meant to be intellectual foci throughout the century, and thus are concerns found in all the volumes, one can see each "cluster of issues" also as the nucleus of concern in each of the three volumes. Thus, volume one, which includes the analyses predominantly of German philosophical reflection, highlights the consideration of rationality—both in the affirmation of its importance and its limitation—for religious knowledge.

Volume one provides nine analyses of individual thinkers through essays on Immanuel Kant by E. L. Fackenheim, J. G. Fichte and F. W. J. Schelling by J. H. Thomas, G. W. F. Hegel by P. C. Hodgson, F. Schleiermacher by B. A. Garrish, A. Schopenhauer by R. Taylor, S. Kierkegaard by A. McKinnon, D. F. Strauss by H. Frei, F. C. Baur by R. Morgan, and L. Feuerbach and K. Marx by V. A. Harvey. These are analytical and critical essays of these thinkers as they wrestled with key philosophical and theological issues such as the definition of knowledge, existence, God, freedom, faith, or religion. Pervading these issues is the experienced juxtaposition between subjective and objective aspects of knowing, between faith or intuition and empirical verification or rational justification, and between freedom or will and necessity or order. Nevertheless, the authors have chosen to engage these thinkers from often quite different standpoints. For example, E. Fackenheim wrestles with the adequacy of Kant's claim that morality necessarily leads to religious commitment because moral obligation—which is rationally justifiable—requires a belief that ethical goals which a person is obligated to realize in the world can be realized in it. P. Hodgson analyzes Hegel's attempt to describe a universal principle of nature and spirit while also engaging in an evaluative activity with the judgment that Christianity (in a rationally purified form) embodies the most developed consciousness of the spirit. Or, after delineating Schopenhauer's acute sensitivity to the suffering and evil found in the world and his claim that the true reality (God) is "will," R. Taylor questions how it is possible for there to be release from suffer-
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A. McKinnon's essay attempts to locate the "real" Kierkegaard by understanding Kierkegaard's special integration of faith and reason as this is found in his view of the Incarnation, his social and political views and his use of writing as a therapy (education) in self-understanding. And, V. Harvey, after empathically analyzing the descriptions of religion by Feuerbach and Marx, questions their adequacy on grounds of internal consistency and adequacy of evidence.

Volume two is comprised of nine essays covering diverse topics which wrestle with the nature of religiousness as an expression of human nature. The thinkers and movements can be seen as exponents who relate the head to the heart, or in contemporary parlance, the left-brain to the right-brain. The essays consider the thought of S. T. Coleridge by C. Welch, R. W. Emerson and the American Transcendentalists by S. E. Ahlstrom, J. H. Newman and the Tractarian Movement by J. M. Cameron; J. S. von Drey, J. A. Mohler and the Tubingen School by J. T. Burtshaell; Roman Catholic Modernism by B. M. G. Reardon, Russian religious thought by G. L. Kline, British Agnosticism by J. C. Livingston, The British Idealists by H. D. Lewis, and Wm. James and J. Royce by J. E. Smith. These entries describe the concerns of thinkers whose personal religious experience and faith were deeply engaged with critical thinking and empirical studies. As the sciences of humanity impacted theological reflection, the poets, preachers, and scholars affirmed and analyzed the processes of religious thinking, taking seriously traditional liturgical symbols, contemplative prayer, devotionalism, and a mystic sense of oneself in the universe as positive conditioners of religious thought. They regarded volition, affect, and even--among the British Agnostics--the value-stance of "learned modesty" as significant factors for understanding the particularity of true religious thought.

Of course, the studies found in volume one included a consideration of the non-intellectual aspects of thinkers--such as Schleiermacher, Schopenhauer and Kierkegaard--but the subjects of study in volume two seem to accentuate these factors. Thus--by way of example--C. Welch points out the distinctive concern in Coleridge's thought on the quality and character of
personal religious experience, the role of imagination and belief in religious reasoning, and the act of will in the apprehension of spiritual truth. S. Ahlstrom, in describing Transcendalism as "the single most provocative spiritual movement in American history," emphasizes Emerson's mystical interpretation of nature and the integrity of one's own mind, as well as Thoreau's study of mysticism in the world's great religions. J. M. Cameron points to the importance of tradition-based beliefs and devotion in the Anglo-Catholic movement, and the central concern for the "mystery of faith" in relation to dogma developed in the thought of J. H. Newman. J. C. Livingston places his clear and provocative description of British Agnosticism within "a larger religious drama of the struggle in Victorian Britain between scientific naturalism and the quest for a spiritual interpretation of life." And, J. E. Smith claims that faith, defined as "a willingness to act on behalf of a cause without advance guarantee of its success," is "of the first importance throughout [Wm.] James' thought"; and that, for J. Royce, the ground for the uniqueness of the individual is to be found in "the fulfillment of a purpose."

The third collection of essays focuses on the cluster of ideas which derive from scientific, historical and socio-anthropological studies of religion. In this volume the authors stress the impact of scholarship which indicated the contingent nature of religion, and the theological and exegetical response to a growing perception of the historical conditionedness of religious consciousness. The sensitivity to the historically contextualized expression of spiritual values is not unique to these essays, but the thinkers and scholars considered here emphasize the social and cultural conditioning of religious thought. The articles in this volume are "Religion and Science" by J. Kent, "Friedrich Nietzsche" by C. H. Ratschow, "Jewish Thought" by N. Rotenstreich, "The Study of the Old Testament" by R. E. Clements, "The Study of the New Testament" by J. C. O'Neill, "Friedrich Max Muller and the Comparative Study of Religion" by J. M. Kitagawa and J. S. Strong, "The Anthropology of Religion: British and French Schools" by E. Leach, "Max Weber and German Sociology of Religion" by R. Robertson, and "Ernst Toeltsch" by T. Rendtorff and F. W. Graf. As the editors point
out in their introduction, historical studies—and one can add, social scientific analysis—have a double-edged result in understanding the nature and forms of religious life: on the one hand, they develop confidence in reconstructing accurate historical information and describing linguistic, political, and social conditions in which religious life emerges; on the other hand, they develop skepticism in ever having certain knowledge of the past or of all the conditions that can account for human values. Also—and most importantly from the standpoint of a "crisis of faith"—the sensitivity to the cultural relativism of religious claims raises the spectre of the relativity of any claim to truth, value or salvation. The affirmation that religious life, like all social experience, was constructed within historical-social processes required a philosophical decision by reflective thinkers regarding the degree to which religious claims were human constructs. Either religion was wholly caused by fundamental psycho-social forces, or only the empirical forms—symbols, institutions, ideas—were determined by historical social forces, beneath which was a trans-historical, and infinite, reality. As the essay on science and religion, that on Jewish thought, and the two essays on biblical studies indicate, there were scholars and scientists who distinguished scientific studies from religious beliefs which were seen to arise from a transcendent source; however, the context for understanding the stories of a religious community, lives of holy persons, and unusual states of consciousness was that of historical and cultural studies. Paradoxically, as indicated in the essays on historical and social scientific study in this volume, the scientific study of religion was itself pervaded by value judgments. The idealized hope to explain the functions and variegated expressions of religion by general sociological, anthropological, and linguistic theories has proved to manifest personal philosophical, social, and cultural biases. Overall, the experience of the late nineteenth century is profoundly expressed in the thought of Nietzsche and Troeltsch, who, while coming to very different conclusions about the nature and true meaning of religious life, expose the late nineteenth century European sensitivity to the impor-
tance of individuality, the power of human creativity, and the relativity of the ever-changing human situation.

The overall impact of Nineteenth Century Religious Thought in the West is that there is an inescapable fragmentation of concerns and approaches in the attempt of scholars to understand the recognized complexity of religious life. The affirmation that historical and personal-cultural conditions contribute to religious sensibilities leaves open two central questions: Is there an absolute or universal norm beyond conditioned religious awareness by which to judge the value and truth of all religious claims? Can scholars devise a comprehensive approach—which may include different methodologies—for understanding the concrete expressions of religion?

These questions suggest a two-pronged intellectual legacy which continues into the twentieth century. One of these prongs centers on the concerns entailed in personal religious commitment as expressed in theological reflection. It focuses on the integration of religious belief with rational justification and social scientific and historical studies, including a specification of those past norms of a religious tradition which still have persuasive power in light of critical and empirical analyses. The other prong focuses on the question of understanding and explaining the wide variety of religious behavior, ideas and institutions in a cross-cultural context. It wrestles with the social and historical determinants of the ultimate value judgments that people make in relation to some universal, or general, categories of human experience. As seen in these essays, such attempts are complicated by a sensitivity to the hermeneutical issues involved with the selection, classification, and explanation by scholars who themselves are conditioned by personal and particular cultural perspectives.

The presentation of the nineteenth century European-based discussion of religious thought in these three volumes can be compared with other analyses of the topic. Of course, each essay, in its consideration of a specific figure or movement stands in a tradition of scholarship best seen by reference to the bibliographical information given at the end of each essay. However, as a general presentation of the issues in religious reflection, these three volumes together can be compared to
two other attempts to deal with this area of concern. The first is Claud Welch’s *Protestant Thought in the Nineteenth Century*, 2 vols., New Haven, 1972 and 1985. It is a clear, insightful and coherent discussion by a well-known historian of Christian thought, who also contributed the essay on S. T. Coleridge in volume two of this work under review. Besides the fact that Welch’s two-volume work was the analysis of one person, which brought a consistent interpretive framework to the overall discussion, it is significant that the discussion was limited to Christian Protestant thought. Thus, while dealing with "Enlightenment" rationality and historical consciousness, Welch’s discussion is organized around issues of Christian faith, theology, authority of scripture and orthodoxy. By contrast *Nineteenth Century Religious Thought in the West* has, as its basic context for discussion, the "Enlightenment" philosophical reflection on knowledge, the nature of humanity and the impact of historical and scientific methodologies.

The second analysis of nineteenth century reflection on religious life that comes to mind for comparison with the present work is Joachim Wach’s *Das Verstehen: Grundzüge einer Geschichte der hermeneutischen Theorie im 19. Jahrhundert*, 3 vols. Tubingen, 1926-1933. This, as yet untranslated, study of understanding religious thought presents the history of especially German theological hermeneutics. In these volumes Wach wrestles with theological and philosophical issues arising from a historical understanding of normative religious claims. Again, Wach’s analysis arises predominantly from within a theological framework, but he also focuses on the general issues of hermeneutics as they apply to understanding distinctively human phenomena. In regard to this latter concern Wach was influenced by the effort of Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911) to develop a theory of knowledge that was valid for understanding human expression, including religious life. The lack of a separate article in *Nineteenth Century Religious Thought in the West* on hermeneutics as a general issue of all intellectual disciplines is an unfortunate omission. Such an essay, centering perhaps on the issues raised by W. Dilthey’s pursuit of a science for the humanities (*Geisteswissenschaften*), would have provided an exposure to a fundamental issue that

One last comment on the significance of learning about nineteenth century European-based reflection on religion might be apropos for contemporary understanding of religious life. From the vantage point of the end of the twentieth century study of religion, it is apparent that, on the one hand, the nineteenth century religious discussion "has determined the direction of modern religious thought in the West"--as well as scholarly reflection in various academic institutions throughout the world. On the other hand, the availability of a much larger store of information of non-Western peoples and the present heightened level of intercultural intellectual exchange, indicate the parochial character of the nineteenth century discussion. Most of the philosophers and theologians who presented general notions of religion--even those who claimed to use non-Western sources--had a very limited knowledge of the religious life in three-quarters of the world population. The basic definitions of religion that they used were informed by notions drawn primarily from ancient Mediterranean based cultures and contemporary European Christianity or Judaism. Thus, philosophical reflection on religion was couched in terms of revelation, scriptural authority, and mainly Christian institutional patterns; and general--even universal--concepts of knowledge, reality, human experience, and morality were derived from European and Mediterranean based cultural sources. One of the lessons clearly presented in the excellent essays throughout the three volumes of *Nineteenth Century Religious Thought in the West* is the vitality and complexity of the religious thought in this legacy, and the inherent limitations found therein.

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