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Russell E. Ritchey

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CONTENTS

The Role of History in The Discipline  
Russell E. Ritchey ............................................ 3

Two Funerals: A Meditation on Grief and Faith  
James E. Sargent .............................................. 21

What Must I Believe to Recover?: The Spirituality of Twelve Step Programs  
Michael Wyatt .................................................. 28

Biblical Perspectives on Aging  
Lloyd Bailey ..................................................... 48

QR Lectionary Study

Sectarian Division and the Wisdom of the Cross: Preaching from First Corinthians  
Ronald P. Byars ................................................ 65

Review and Comment

Paul M. Minus, Walter Rauschenbusch: American Reformer  
Reviewed by Charles Cole .................................... 98
The Role of History in The Discipline

Russell E. Ritchey

In The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church, 1988, there appear two historical accounts of Methodism, one in the prefatory "Historical Statement," another in the section entitled "Doctrinal Standards and Our Theological Task." Why are they there? Why do Methodists introduce themselves historically? Why do they explain their doctrine historically? While it is by no means obvious that a denomination should begin its constitution with history or frame its doctrine historically, Methodists have consistently taken a historical starting point in their Disciplines; it is less obvious but of great interest that since 1972 they have chosen to frame their doctrine historically.

We will begin with a brief exercise in comparative polity, suggesting the distinctiveness in Methodist disciplinary appeal to history. A review of Methodist disciplinary practice will underscore the fact and significance of that Methodist habit. Then we will turn to the historical dimensions of the doctrinal statements.

Comparative Polity

Two sister denominations, the Episcopalians and Presbyterians, make interesting comparative case studies. Both possess a keen sense, even a theology, of polity (though they differ sharply on its nature, source and limits). Like the Methodists, both produced constitutions in the 1780s. Each

Russell E. Ritchey is associate dean for academic programs at the Divinity School, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina.
recognized that American independence called them to reexamine their relationship with British church authorities:

- they could no longer depend upon the Bishop of London or the Scottish kirk for legitimacy, the adjudication of disputes, ordination, and the like;
- they needed to make provision for their own authority, and furthermore through a national rather than just a colonial, provincial or state authority structure;
- a formal constitution would need to carry its own warrant of authenticity.

Their situations resembled that of the Methodists. And like the Methodists they, too, thought and spoke out of the Anglo-Saxon political and constitutional experience. One might even add that the flight of Tories had left all three bodies in what might call 'whiggish' hands—even the Anglicans. In the 1780s then, Presbyterians, Anglicans and Methodists shared in a constitutional crisis, even though their recent political experience and their conceptions of polity differed markedly.

The documents that resulted were entitled Constitution and Canons for the Government of the Protestant Episcopal Church and The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church. Both have, like the Methodist Discipline, persisted to this day, serving as the root stock for two centuries of growth achieved by successive grafts and pruning.

Neither the Episcopal or Presbyterian constitution, either initially or in later years, made significant appeal to history. That could scarcely constitute an oversight, since both these traditions are quite self-conscious about the nature and bases of authority. The Episcopalians prize tradition. One might imagine that tradition would find its cousin 'history' a companion in the warranting of a constitution. Instead, tradition apparently expresses itself immediately in canon and liturgy. It is apparently unnecessary, perhaps unthinkable, to render an historical account of that which the church has accepted.

Similarly, one might imagine that Presbyterians, who prize Scripture, would regard 'history' a companion warrant for their constitution. But the Presbyterians put too high a premium on
Scripture and its perspicuity to think they should explain what they believe historically. The Book of Order translates Scripture directly into structure and procedure. Creeds put Scripture into the mouths of the people. Here, too, a historical preface to either Confessions or Order would be unthinkable.

**Early Methodist Disciplines**

Since the beginning, American Methodists have consistently appealed to history. The exception to this pattern, however, was the very first *Discipline*, which followed in style, substance, and order the loosely constructed, question-and-answer document derived from John Wesley’s conferences with his preachers, known as "The Large Minutes."

Two years later, in 1787, the church restructured the volume, announcing it to be "Arranged under proper HEADS, and METHODIZED in a more acceptable and easy MANNER." In this new format, before it said anything about what it believed about Scripture, sacraments, authority, or polity, the church’s first statement was historical. Still honoring Wesley’s question-and-answer style, the church asked first, "What was the Rise of Methodism so called in Europe?"; second, "What was the Rise of Methodism so called in America?"; and third, "What may we reasonably believe to be God’s design in raising up the Preachers called Methodists?"

The answers to these three questions provided a short history of American Methodism. The first two answers sketched the very beginning of Methodism in Britain and America. The third answer, which americanized Wesley’s original formulation, placed a most significant construction on the first two. It was continuously cited and is still cited as the central definition of Methodist purpose. It epitomized Methodism. God’s design was

To reform the Continent, and spread scripture Holiness over these Lands. As a Proof hereof, we have seen in the Course of fifteen Years a great and glorious Work of God, from New York through the Jersies, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, North and South Carolina, even to Georgia.
Thus, *The Discipline* gathered the entire Methodist movement into Providence, turned mundane into sacred history, conceived of history in redemptive terms. History rendered the work of God. History made a statement of Methodist belief. History said what no other part of *The Discipline* could quite so directly affirm—God worked through and God works through the Methodists.

Although Methodists do not seem to have drawn out its implications, they carefully preserved both the precise wording and the placement of this formulation. It continued to be their first statement about themselves. Even when they changed the very character of *The Discipline*, they retained this providential history and its prominent placement.

So when in 1790 they departed from Wesley's question-and-answer format, Bishops Thomas Coke and Francis Asbury recast this historical-providential self-understanding into a prefatory episcopal address. Two years later, in further recognition of history's priority, the church added a new section immediately after the episcopal address. Entitled "Of the Origin of the Methodist Episcopal Church," it brought the account of Methodist beginnings up to 1784.

This historical addition functioned to legitimize the church as an institution, particularly its orders and sacraments. Each statement—the historical episcopal address and the section "Of the Origin of the Methodist Episcopal Church"—amounted to only one page of text. With two pages alone, Methodism introduced itself, said what it was, defined itself.

This concise self-definition remained sufficient. So for the rest of the 19th century, the church left these formulations intact and in place. History said the first necessary word about Methodism. History declared Methodist meaning and purpose. History introduced Methodism's constituting documents appropriately. History provided the definition of Methodism, or to be more precise, The Methodist Episcopal Church [MEC].

**History Justifies Methodist Division**

When the movement fragmented, the new Methodist bodies recognized their divergence from the MEC, but they each
preserved the original sense of historical self-identification. They did so in the way that Methodists claim legitimacy: they began their Disciplines with history. So the Disciplines of each movement—the AME Church, the AME Zion Church, the Evangelical Association, the United Brethren in Christ, the Methodist Protestant Church, the Wesleyan Methodist Connection, the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, the Free Methodist Church, and the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church—all featured some sort of historical preface. Each Methodist movement defined and introduced itself with an account of how it had come into being. These later movements were less prone to discern Providence in events connected with their founding, but they clearly recognized the value of history as a self-definition. For them also, the first word had to be historical.

A Methodist Experience

There is something very Methodist, then, about a constitutional appeal to history, an initial historical statement of legitimacy. Children of providence by their own estimation, Methodists turned to history for the frame for their church, The Discipline. This is an appropriate juncture in the discussion to return to the 'why' questions. Why is it that Methodists turn to history in this fashion?

Certainly one cannot argue that these prefaces represent self-conscious exercises in theological prolegomena. Although I contend that they performed that function, they can scarcely be seen as intentionally so. Rather, they seem to be more spontaneous, instinctive movements of the Methodist spirit. Methodists seem drawn to tell how it is with their spirit, collective or individual. Such statements take journal, confessional, conversionist, autobiographical, biographical, or historical form. The early Methodist histories clearly betray their origins in these outpourings of the Methodist spirit. At their root lie the conversion narratives, the dramatic, self-authenticating encounters with God that must be related as a personal story. The first histories were little more than a string of accounts of conversions and revivals, the gathering of religious
experiences into the narrative of God at work, the church's story as conversion writ large.®

But why history? Perhaps, the claim must finally be confessional. Our fascination with history has to do with the dynamics and character of our movement—the prominence we allow to both tradition and experience in our epistemology; the premium we (along with other evangelicals/pietists) put on the inward experience of salvation; the place we have given to testimony in class meeting and Sunday school; the emphasis we place (following Wesley) on popular media (magazine, tract, newspaper), which both necessitates and accommodates narrated experience; the confidence we have had that God works providentially in our corporate life as well as savingly in our individual lives; the recognition we consequently gave to Wesley's demand that we record (and share) our stories, our histories; the apologetical use we found for appeals to history and tradition; and the obvious value and impact that we (members and prospective members) discovered in the story of conversion, revival, and missionary encounter.

Human interest, Methodists learned, displays the Divine Interest. Personal testimony discloses the spiritual identity of an individual; history evidences corporate identity. So we Methodists do theology in our own way. And one way we do theology is by telling our story, the narrative of God's work in us and among us. History is a Methodist mode of theologizing. We begin *The Discipline* with a historical word about ourselves and we publish history because we know we need to tell God's modern story.

The historical prefaces in *The Discipline* portray existence as story, a narrative construction of the Methodist reality. They share the Methodist religious experience. Hence the appropriateness of their placement and their function as introduction. Like Pietists generally, Methodists typically had come to faith by sharing religious experience. The shared experience—in class meeting, love feast, quarterly meeting, camp meeting—quite literally constituted the movement. What form could portray the movement better than the form with which it actually began?
Experience and Not the Quadrilateral?

So, although the Methodists were not as self-conscious as the Presbyterians or Episcopalians about how their ‘Book’ should be constructed, they had, in fact, discovered an appropriate methodological starting point. History belongs at the beginning because the shared religious experience belongs first. The Discipline appeals to experience. Seasoned observers of Methodist affairs will take this last statement to be a declaration of war, a repudiation of the Methodist four-fold theological method. Some qualification is in order.

First, the historical, and therefore experiential starting point for The Discipline does not imply that Methodists would not have profited from a more self-conscious theological prolegomenon. In particular, Methodism and The Discipline might have benefited from greater theological clarity about the warrant for its doctrine and polity. Early American Methodism could call upon few persons with formal theological training, however, and its most eminent resource, Bishop Coke, was not regarded as fully committed to the American movement. The church made do with the intellectual leadership it could trust.

Second, the experiential base of these historical prefaces does not imply that The Discipline made experience (rather than Scripture, tradition, or reason) normative and its point of theological departure. These prefatory essays were more instinctive than reflective; they indicate the priority of conversion narrative and historical account in Methodist genre. These prefaces do not present themselves as the organizing factor of The Discipline as a whole. The present debates over the quadrilateral concern the shape and internal priorities of The Discipline, which depends on decisions appearing in the legislative record of early Methodism. To understand the organization of the ‘Book’ one does have to look to those factors, beliefs, and commitments that informed it. In that sense the debates in conference have at least as much theological bearing on The Discipline as the prefaces.

Third, an accent on these historical prefaces should not imply that Methodist reflection was ever one-sided. The historical statements expressed Methodism’s dependence upon
reason, which functions in any ordering of discourse. It was obviously at play in the conference's re-ordering and 'METHODIZING' of The Discipline, the construction of the historical narratives, and the decision to place them first. So also the prefaces appealed to tradition—in their retention of the Wesleyan queries and answers, in their identification of a tradition that was passed along, in their focus upon the constitutive phases of the movement (in both Britain and America) that had 'traditioning' value, in their function as the memory of the church, and in their definition of The Discipline as a living past. The appeal to Scripture is operative in the representation of Methodism as a scriptural way of holiness: that pattern is based on biblical salvation history in the Hebrew Bible, and the stories of Peter and Paul in Acts. These reflective maneuvers shaped the prefaces. They also informed the writing of Methodist history generally. Hence the tremendous attention paid over the years to historical endeavor. History represents a kind of proto-theology for Methodism, a lay theology, a witness of Methodism to and for itself.

**History Justifies Methodist Union**

Prior to the 1939 union, the 1932 Discipline of the MEC began in a fashion that Bishops Coke and Asbury would have easily recognized: a very short episcopal address followed by a four page "Historical Statement." That statement spoke of the rise of Methodism so called in Europe and the rise of Methodism so called in America, leaving out only the quaint language of the early Disciplines. But rather than carrying the church's history toward the present, the account came no farther than 1784. By claiming that the present remained faithful to the past, the statement legitimated the church union that was taking place.10

The next Discipline, that of 1940, had to make sense of a new church, The Methodist Church formed by the union of the Methodist Episcopal Church [MEC], the Methodist Episcopal Church, South [MECS], and the Methodist Protestant Church [MP]. Where else would the church turn, but to the "Historical Statement"? The prior MEC statement gave structure and bulk to the text. The MP and MECS contributed two paragraphs
each. While it concentrated on the origins of the three churches, the final account also documented the stages towards union and its consummation.

Each church contributed a brief sketch of its origin, the origin of the new Methodist Church was added, and the mix constituted the new history. Still, this was history in the spare, gospel-like mode, nothing more than what was needed to establish the legitimacy of The Methodist Church. The new history was in the old mode. Why?

One would be hard pressed to argue that the appeal to history at this late stage in the church’s life partook of the experiential immediacy and instinctiveness of the early prefaces. General Conferences gathered the theologically trained, including the best theological minds of the denomination. Why history first? If the church still believed its history was providential, it was reluctant in an ecumenical age to be so self-congratulatory. History’s placement here doubtless had more to do with precedent than anything else. And yet that very habit is not unimportant. Narrative had become an established pattern for Methodist reflection.

And Union Again

The 1968 union of The Methodist Church and The Evangelical United Brethren required yet another effort at self-definition. Here, too, the new church found no more appropriate a self-declaration than through history. The statement took up the old task afresh. It established the new entry, The United Methodist Church, as in legitimate continuity with its predecessors. Concerning the 1968 Discipline, three points are in order. First, that Discipline gave almost equal treatment to The Methodist Church and The Evangelical United Brethren Church—four full pages to the former and slightly less than four to the latter. The separate sagas of the MEC, MECS, MP, and the earlier union consumed one small paragraph. The distinct histories of the United Brethren and of the Evangelical Church loomed larger than that of the MECS. The 1968 account estab-
lished the legitimacy of The United Methodist church; it was no longer burdened with legitimating the prior union of 1939.

Second, this Discipline carried a list of United Methodist Bishops. That, too, functioned to integrate the separate traditions. After Asbury and Coke came Martin Boehm and Philip William Otterbein; after Whatcoat came Jacob Albright; after McKendree came Christian Newcomer. Here, too, the endeavor to legitimate the 1968 union obscured the prior union and the sensibilities of the Methodist Protestants who did not think so highly of bishops.

Third, this Discipline prefaced "Doctrinal Statements and General Rules" with a terse two-page discussion of standards. Its primary function seemed to be to establish the congruence of the Methodist "Articles of Religion" and the EUB "Confession of Faith" (which followed immediately). It did not yet press history into the service that the 1972 Discipline would.

All three sections—Historical Statement, list of bishops, and doctrinal preface—seemed to serve the same general purpose. They functioned, as had earlier statements, to confer legitimacy on the new creation, The United Methodist Church.

Thus, for almost two hundred years, from 1787 to 1968, there persisted a rather striking continuity in the Church's appeal to history. The 'Historical Statements' conferred legitimacy on the church by connecting the church of the present with its origins and Mr. Wesley; by locating its purposes in those that had animated the church from the start; and by construing Methodism as a design of Providence. The 1972 Discipline represents a dramatic addition to that tradition.

History and Doctrine

The disciplines up to and including that of 1988 retain the historical statement of 1968. In the Disciplines of 1972 and later, very substantial interpretive sections appear both before and after the doctrinal statements and general rules. The authoritative "Landmark" documents are sandwiched between a fourteen-page "Historical Background" and a fifteen-page section entitled "Our Theological Task." Here, for the first time really, something akin to the constitutional self-consciousness
of the Presbyterians and Episcopalians is at work. After two hundred years of relatively instinctive or habitual appeal to history as the warrant for its Discipline, Methodism gives deliberate attention, but surprisingly also historical attention to what is constitutive. These sections should be viewed against the backdrop of what we have described thus far. But they also represent an important new venture for Methodism, an innovation in the tradition of disciplinary historical reflection. As evidence of this continuity and innovation, the Disciplines from 1972 on carry both a "Historical Statement" prefatory to the Discipline as a whole and historical segments that frame the long and important doctrinal section.

These historical sections invite general reflection that applies to the 1972 Discipline as well as that of 1988. So, finally we have reached the 1988 Discipline and particularly paragraph 66, beginning with "Our Distinctive Heritage as United Methodists," and continuing through paragraph 67. In assessing this section, readers should keep in view its several possible functions and uses, including some that may not have been anticipated by its drafters or General Conference. It may be seen as

- an exercise of General Conference's teaching office;
- midrash or commentary on United Methodist texts;
- an effort at doctrinal restoration and conservation;
- a judicial finding on the Landmark Documents, as though rendered by the Judicial Council;
- instruction in the reception of Methodist teaching;
- constitutional history in the tradition of Buckley, Neely or Tigert;
- an essay on the evolution of Methodist doctrine; and insofar as it has been written over against the 1972 statement,
- a revisionist recasting of the history of doctrine.

These paragraphs have purely historical utility, as the last three items suggest. But their value extends beyond mere history, as have the prefatory historical statements over the
years. History has consistently legitimated Methodist polity, but here it legitimates Methodist doctrine. Although by now we can see an established Methodist habit of mind, we may not realize its full implications.

1) The reader who compares this section with the 1972 version cannot help but be struck by the differences in shape, tone, structure, and emphasis of the two. Apart from this, however, the change itself bears comment here. I have contended in this essay that the church has not favored a pronounced recasting of its historical self-understanding. On the contrary, Methodism left the historical prefaces largely unaltered until changed circumstances dictated a new account, that is after a division or union. It would presumably be even more reluctant to change a narrative that explained Methodist doctrine. After all, the Restrictive Rules were meant to inhibit change from touching those beliefs most precious to Methodism. There is at least an irony or incongruity, if not a problem, in redrafting a narrative whose purpose is the preservation of Methodist doctrine. Ends and means, intent and vehicle, are mismatched.

2) This section also reveals the overwhelmingly Wesleyan character of this Methodist history. To be sure, it locates United Methodist teaching within "Our Common Heritage as Christians" and honors the Reformation’s contribution, notably in the Anglican Articles (through the MEC) and the Heidelberg Catechism (through the EUB). However, in the decisive transitional section--"Our Distinctive Heritage as United Methodists"--Wesley figures, implicitly or explicitly, in every paragraph. Wesley’s spirit hovers over the remainder of the Methodist discussion and even that of the EUBs. Here, also, the contrast with the prefatory historical statements is instructive. In those, the American developments claim center stage and Wesley figures primarily as a point of departure. The accent falls on the American character of Methodism. In the 1968 prefatory account (for United Methodism), Wesley looms larger than he had in previous prefaces, but even there the combined Methodist and Evangelical United Brethren sagas yield a very American story. So the strongly Wesleyan motif of the 1988 doctrinal historical statement contrasts sharply with the more
American theme of the prefatory account. It is remarkable that two such variant constructions can occur within one Discipline.

The contrast in emphasis between the "Historical Statement" and "Our Distinctive Heritage as United Methodists" underscores the fact that there are less 'Wesleyan' ways of construing Methodist doctrinal history. What does the church intend to say by such an exclusively 'Wesleyan' self-understanding? Furthermore, one can ask whether the Wesleyan heritage should be envisioned as a self-contained stream or whether its theological purity eventually diminishes as it loses its proximity to the source? There are historical readings of the development of Methodist doctrine that downplay Wesley's impact in the shape of American Methodism. Should not The Discipline take account of other factors that impinge upon the formation of doctrine, or at least acknowledge alternative ways of construing its development? For instance, Methodist practice, polity, and worship had a considerable influence on Methodist doctrine. Camp meetings and revivalism obviously deserve mention. The powerful influences of American culture, Pietism, and the Enlightenment could readily be acknowledged. This point seems to be conceded in the text but not explicitly developed. Despite the limitations of such a brief account, can the church afford to depict itself only in Wesleyan terms?

3) "Our Distinctive Heritage" reads Methodist history as a long decline from an original state of purity. This perspective, known to historians as declension, is suspect for scholars in general. Here, it certainly bears scrutiny. The notion of an original Wesleyan purity, its dissipation and the gradual decline of Methodism easily becomes a jeremiad, that is, a denunciation of current standards and practices in the church. The hidden motive in jeremiadic history is to build a case for reform through recovery. It is a strategy of primitivism, a prophetic call to return to the covenant. This may be exactly the note that the church wishes to sound. Critics concerned with declining membership within the denomination have struck this note repeatedly. But this is not the only way of explaining historical and doctrinal change. We must ask ourselves seriously whether
the church really has committed itself to jeremiadic politics and to the negative energy that jeremiads unleash.

4) The historical discussion clearly bears the mark of Richard Heitzenrater's interpretation of the Restrictive Rules. Such a textual nuance (compare the Albert Outlerian tone of the prior Discipline) may be the consequences of employing top-flight Wesley scholars in the drafting process. Drafters will inevitably put their own stamp on the text. The church has been blessed by the services of such qualified scholars. Still, there may be some problems in according disciplinary status to what remains a controversial historical argument.

If the church decides that The Discipline can fittingly embrace historical controversy, then why not acknowledgment of the entanglement of doctrine with slavery, war, opposition to women's lay rights and ordination, and anti-Romanism? Obviously, those dimensions of the evolution of doctrine the church would rather forget. Nor is it the place of an official (and brief) history of doctrine to examine, critique, and assess in the manner of a scholarly survey. Yet here too one can legitimately ask about the consequences of a selective memory.

All these concerns share the premise that the historical account functions as a claim of the church about itself. As such, then, this is not mere history but in some sense ecclesiology. It may well be that the historical discussion in the doctrinal section will have more value to the church than the documents it purports to introduce. Certainly one could argue that for the 1972 historical/interpretive statement. That statement, with its affirmation of pluralism and the notion of a quadrilateral, claimed attention as United Methodist belief, and so much attention that the present revision was demanded. Pluralism was made almost creedal. The quadrilateral slighted the unique witness of scripture, and so forth. The interpretation of the doctrinal statements had become the doctrine. The historical/interpretive statement of 1988 may well be read and critiqued as a faith statement. If so, United Methodists will sustain a long tradition of employing history for self-definition; but they will also become far more self-conscious about the doctrinal implications of that appeal.
The History in The Discipline and the Doctrine in that History

This essay first examined *The Discipline*’s historical prefaces. A rather spontaneous effort to introduce the new church—drawing on an established pattern of Methodist narrative reflection, not developed as self-conscious prolegomenon, nor ever mined for its theological implications—the preface nevertheless functioned successfully to locate Methodism in the economy of providence. History made a statement of Methodist belief, belief about God at work, belief about Methodism itself. For Methodist history was sacred history. At least it was so initially. And even as the 19th century wore on and historiography became more objective and scientific, the prefatory histories continued to recall that God works in and through the Methodists. Without ever discussing the matter formally, Methodists of various stripes seemed to know that a historical preface appropriately opened their *Disciplines*. So at every point when new forms of Methodism emerged, history served as prolegomenon.

Since 1972, United Methodist *Disciplines* have also placed history to work in introducing the church’s doctrine. On the assumption that here, too, the church’s act may speak and may, perhaps, say more than the church has self-consciously willed, this essay has endeavored to begin the process of exploring what this new historical statement means. Clearly, the history has been written to explain the doctrine. What, it may be asked, are the doctrinal implications of undertaking such history? Why, in a doctrinal section, would a church, its highest authority and its theologians, appeal to history at all?

Notes


2. See, for instance, *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA)*, Part I "Book of Confessions," Part II "Book of Order" (New York: Published by the Office of the General Assembly, 1985) and *Constitution & Canons for the Government of the Protestant Episcopal Church*.
3. Behind the American Methodist appeal to history lay that of John Wesley. Wesley's apologetical use of the Methodist story, which lies beyond the purview of this essay, obviously informed these early American efforts. Asbury, Coke, and others of the American leadership would have known his "A Plain Account of The People Called Methodists," of 1748; the historical appeals made elsewhere in Wesleyan apologetics; the premium he placed upon his own and his itinerants' diaries and journals and his efforts to publish them; the place of history in the recently launched Arminian Magazine. For Wesley's "A Plain Account," see The Works of John Wesley, Jackson edition, 14 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1959), VIII, 248-68.


5. A Form of Discipline, For the Ministers, Preachers, and Members of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America (New York, 1787), 3-4. For sustained reflection on the import of the changes that the Americans made, see the first seven essays in Reflections upon Methodism During the Bicentennial (Dallas: Bridwell Library Center for Methodist Studies, 1985; Papers presented at the 1984 Regional Conference of the World Methodist Historical Society).

6. An accessible version of the early Methodist Disciplines is The Methodist Discipline of 1798, Including the Annotations of Thomas Coke and Francis Asbury, facsimile edition, edited by Frederick A. Norwood (Rutland, VT: Academy Books, 1979). Designed for apologetic purposes to address critics from other denominations and critics from within like James O'Kelly, the annotations bear on the argument of this paper. They appeal consistently to scripture; and, as appropriate, to tradition. And they make a reasoned case for the rubrics of The Discipline. In the notes—after the fact, as it were—the bishops become self-conscious about the nature of Methodist authority. Why, one might
ask, had they and the church not been more self-conscious in their prefatory statements? Or, perhaps had they?

7. See The Doctrines and Discipline of the African Methodist Episcopal Church (Philadelphia, 1817); The Doctrines and Discipline of the Wesleyan Methodist Episcopal Zion Church in America, established in the City of New York, October 25th, 1820, 2nd ed. (New York, 1840); The Doctrine and Discipline of the Evangelical Association, Together with the Design of Their Union, translated from the German (New-Berlin, 1832); Origin, Constitution, Doctrine and Discipline, of the United Brethren in Christ (Circleville, Ohio, 1837); Constitution and Discipline of the Methodist Protestant Church (Baltimore, 1830); The Discipline of the Wesleyan Methodist Connection of America, particularly in the 2nd, New York, 1845 and 3rd, New York, 1849 versions which include a Preface by a committee appointed "to prepare a short account of the Wesleyan Methodist connection of America, to be inserted in the Discipline" (1845: iii); The Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South (Richmond, 1846); The Doctrines and Discipline of the Free Methodist Church (Rochester, 1870); The Doctrines and Discipline of the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church in America (Louisville, 1874). All were consulted in The Archives Center, Drew University.

8. See Jesse Lee, A Short History of the Methodists (Baltimore, 1810; reprinted Rutland, Vt.: Academy Books, 1974), especially the preface.


10. By the 20th century, the MEC Discipline had added an additional page which identified, celebrated, and apologized for the Methodist system. It affirmed of the MEC that "while its polity and administrative rules have been modified from time to time to meet changing conditions and opportunities, it remains unchanged in doctrine and ministerial offices." [Discipline, 1932: 9] The brief apology and self-conscious attention to doctrine set important precedents for what would follow in 1972.

11. In an interesting reflexive moment, the "Historical Statement" indicated consciousness of its high calling, of its obligation to tell the story, of its function as an authoritative statement about the movement. On mention of the Methodist Protestant Church, it said, "The history of this movement may be read in the last Discipline of the Methodist Protestant Church . . ." Doctrines and Discipline of The Methodist Church, 1940 (New York: The Methodist Publishing House, 1940), 6. The Methodist Protestant Disciplines always carried a much fuller and
expressive historical account, some 10 pages by the 1930s. Even so it only detailed origins.

12. This particular function is especially interesting since constitutional continuity was formally and legally cared for elsewhere in The Discipline.

13. The listing of bishops had actually begun in the 1964 Methodist Discipline and was carried over into United Methodist practice.

14. One significant addition to the initial historical statement of The Discipline was made in 1976 and continues to the present. Entitled "Black People and Their United Methodist Heritage," it functions, as does the rest of the "Historical Statement" to confer legitimacy. In this case, it symbolizes within The Discipline the end to the segregated Central Jurisdiction, the end to de jure marginal status for blacks, the end to de facto racism.

15. As an aside, I would concede perplexity at the Church's dramatic revision of the 1972 historical account. I made this point to Heitzenrater when outside comment was invited. It strikes me that radical changes to constitutional and quasi-constitutional documents tend to induce skepticism and doubt. The advocates of change to the 1972 Discipline, persons wanting greater doctrinal clarity and commitment, may have set in process a self-defeating stratagem.

16. Here the 1988 Discipline does not diverge radically from the 1972 version. That account also portrayed Methodist doctrinal development in Wesleyan terms.

17. See, in particular, Thomas A. Langford, Practical Divinity. Theology in the Wesleyan Tradition (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1983) which struggles with the issue of whether such a tradition exists and how it might be conceptualized. Langford devotes an early chapter to "The Americanization of Wesleyan Theology," and there attends to matters raised here.

18. A jeremiadic construction of reality comes easily to Americans who have, according to Sacvan Bercovitch, defined their very being, construed their national self-understanding, in such terms. For discussion of the genre and its uses, see his The American Jeremiad (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978).


20. The issue is raised as a matter of principle. I happen to concur in Heitzenrater's reading.
Two Funerals:
A Meditation on Grief and Faith

James E. Sargent

Recently in a period of two weeks I conducted one funeral and attended another. In a small town, two funerals in such close proximity shock people. These deaths silenced much of the small talk, even in the coffee shop. But it is the difference in the two funerals that prompts this reflection. In a small town where social issues are not particularly pronounced and time passes with no major changes or challenges, relationships are much deeper than politics. Sometimes they are even deeper than religion.

The funeral I conducted was for a young man named Rich. Only 25 years old, Rich was young and energetic. During football season he helped coach the high school team. He and a few of his friends had been riding in the town park adjacent to a quarry. Somehow he became disoriented, and he drove his all-terrain-vehicle over the edge of the quarry and was crushed. He died during emergency surgery.

Rich's family has a distant connection to the church I serve: I solemnized his mother's second marriage last fall. Other than that, the family has no church. The family's distance from the church may stem in part from a strong sense of loss, even tragedy, which seems to have stalked them. Rich's mother had lost a brother many years ago. He too had died while in his 20s. Her father was crushed to death in the local power plant years ago.

I called on the stunned family. Rich's mother sat stoically, concealing every emotion except a gritty resolve not to let yet another accidental death overwhelm her. She said that if this

James E. Sargent is pastor of First United Methodist Church in Bluffton, Ohio and a member of the West Ohio Conference.
is what life handed her, she'd take it. She vowed to be strong and not let this defeat her. Since I had performed her wedding service in the church I knew she held bits and pieces of faith in her life. However, during the numbed hours following her son's death I could not ascertain any evidence of hope. She seemed certain that she should not break. Granted, during the initial shock of an unexpected death, a sensitive pastor will not arbitrarily point to hope. A pastor should not need to hear "the right words," the God-talk of premature resolution to an awful shock. The numbed shock must be expressed. What struck me, however, was the family's sheer grit, which seemed to exclude any sense that God is still at work, even in the darkest hours. Somehow from her silent resolve I would have to evoke an authentic measure of trust that God had not abandoned her family, that death does not mean a brutal and cruel end to all that is good.

Rich was engaged to a young woman named Vicki who was a senior at the small college here in town. Ironically she had been taking a course in her final term on dying, death, and grief. Even more ironically, I was set to conduct a workshop in her class. The instructor and I had made arrangements months ahead of time, but now I would teach the class on the day between the accident and the funeral.

Every funeral meditation is different. Canned, prepared messages do not capture the drama of an individual life or the message of hope for the bereaved and grief-stricken. I have often given thanks that there are two or three days between death and a funeral, since it takes this long for the Spirit of God to move in the preacher's own soul and imagination in order to birth appropriate words. For this funeral, however, the message eluded me more than usual. What could I possibly say that wouldn't offend people clinging to shreds of faith? Blithe affirmations would be irresponsible. Somehow I would have to capture the anguish of an accidental and unnecessary death as well as stir whatever faith Rich's family and friends had. Throughout my preparations I recalled Caryle Marney's assertion that we should speak with an appropriate stutter when we say more than we know.
The funeral home couldn't hold any more people. Over 300 people packed into every possible space. Students from the college who knew him and his fiancee, students and staff from the high school who knew him from his years as a student and then as an assistant football coach, teachers and administrators from both schools, and friends of all sorts from town gathered silently. His fiancee nearly ran up to the casket for the final viewing before the casket was closed for the service. I had heard the expression "shaking like a leaf"; this day I saw what that looks like. She shook and sobbed nearly uncontrollably. Then his family walked in. Silently they proceeded to the reserved places in the front row.

I have officiated in many funerals. However, this was by far the saddest occasion I had ever attended or conducted. The entire gathering was weighed down by a nearly tangible sadness. His mother sat impassively. She never shed a single tear. His brother delayed his entry until the very last moment. He too sat impassively. The college choir, of which Vicki is a member, began the service with a sensitive rendition of a spiritual. Sobs punctuated the singing.

I believe a pastor is wise to begin with the deep and rich tradition of the Scriptures. A steady reliance upon the Psalms allows the preacher to establish immediate rapport with the gathered congregation. Even those who feel furthest from the church recall their favorite psalms, and nearly everyone is familiar with Jesus' words in John 14. I began with these words, whose familiarity seeped through numbed grief. The room became quieter than quiet. After these words had been read it was time for my own words. I began by sharing words that would frame this tragic event with both meaning and hope. Events are like paintings. They must be carefully framed in order to have them appear in their finest light, in their most beautiful setting. My stumbling words would have to frame this event. The presence of death exposes any sham, so the words would have to be authentic.

I said that all of us would rather be someplace else than here. High school students who regularly complain about classes would rather be in class. College students whose final papers are due would rather be in the library working at those dreaded
papers. Teachers too, despite dull students and endless workdays, would rather be in class than here. It was the same with workers who had taken time off from their jobs. Why? Because all of those places have life in them . . . and here we have gathered because of death.

When we gather in a funeral home we ask searching and troubling questions, some of which defy quick and simple answers. But we have to ask the tough questions: "Does this premature and unnecessary death mean that we have somehow been abandoned by God? Has God turned his back on us?" Someone has to speak the words that have been silently formed in anguished souls. If the preacher can do nothing else, at least the event can be framed by words expressing anguish, anger, fear, and hope.

I went on to suggest that if we have been abandoned then we are a desperate people indeed. However, I had been asked to conduct the service as a minister of the United Methodist Church. Therefore, after the utterance of the unutterable question, I went on to affirm the hope that in no manner does this mean that God has abandoned us. Not even our angry question about abandonment can make God turn his back on us. God is faithful and will never willingly grieve or afflict the children of men and women.

I continued with a reading from Paul's letter to the Romans: "...neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (8:38, 39). I concluded by saying that now we must cling to the faith we have, trusting that we have not been abandoned; God still attends us with mercies of comfort and hope. It was all that I could say to them. I knew that many of the people there could barely confess what little I had dared to affirm. Though no Amens punctuated the meditation, I could tell that I had begun where they were. Through the course of a few minutes' speaking, I had taken them to where they yearned to be: affirming God's presence and relying on God's grace. A number of people approached me during the next few days to thank me for my words.
Two weeks later another young man died. Dale was 42, a fifth grade teacher who was also a college track and soccer coach. He had four children, one of whom is on the high school track team with my oldest son. Dale was playing softball. While standing on first base after his fourth hit, he dropped dead of a heart attack. I had talked with Dale only two days earlier after my run at the track. He had kidded me about being too old for the hard work of running. He kept in shape by playing racquetball three or four times a week. Now he was gone.

He had grown up and lived in the Mennonite tradition. After graduating from college he spent two years in voluntary mission work. Afterwards Dale began his life-long commitment to teaching. He invested his life in young people through his teaching, coaching at the college, and his work at the church, where he had been the youth leader for many years.

The funeral and burial were held early in the day in a private service. However, a memorial service would be held later that afternoon. Over 400 people filled the sanctuary's main floor and balcony. Hushed whispering broke our otherwise silent gathering. All of us were saddened by this premature death. But on this day people did not appear as overwhelmed by grief as others had two weeks earlier.

The service began with the prelude, a classical setting of a familiar hymn. The words and our singing served as a reminder to all gathered of the hope central in the Christian tradition. After a brief invocation we stood to sing "Great Is Thy Faithfulness." The organist played for the first verses. As the congregation began singing the final verse the organist stopped and the congregation continued singing. All four parts echoed in that beautiful sanctuary. Mennonites, Methodists, some Catholics, and even a few Baptists harmonized.

Five years ago it had been my turn to sit in the reserved seats. Memories of my mother's funeral filled my imagination. So did memories of standing in the family pew in my home church, the Congregational church, with my mother standing next to me. Mom would sing alto, I would join in with the tenor part. My sisters sang soprano. Those memories flooded over me. She would have loved to sing harmony today. I wanted to sing. I wanted to sing because I believe God is faithful. I wanted to sing
because in my own hours of loss five years ago I was sustained by our faithful God. But as I stood today, tears spilled and a choke replaced words. A half-sobbed word would have to suffice for the first stanza.

The service continued with a tribute to Dale, some voluntary reminiscences. Two of his friends sang his favorite songs. We tapped our feet to the country rhythms of banjo, we hummed along with the familiar tune of a popular song, "Dust in the Wind." Our faith was affirmed through Appalachian and popular rhythms as well as through the magnificent lines of traditional hymns.

At the conclusion of the service we stood again, this time to sing "How Great Thou Art." Again I wanted to sing, but I could not. Not really. As the rest of the congregation continued, my tears spilled again. Yes, we were sad. But the tears came from a place deeper than sadness. They came from the deeper place of hope. I recalled with a vivid freshness how important that hope was to me when it was my hour of greatest grief. The vision of my mother's freshly dug grave in the distance as the bearers carried the casket, and the almost surrealistic sense in which I saw myself at the funeral, came back to me as if it happened yesterday.

So I stood with tears of hope streaming down my cheeks, singing thanks for the greatness of God as well as I could.

I once heard William Sloane Coffin, Jr., say that a little laughter and a little crying make good movies and good sermons. The same should be said about a good funeral. The memorial service had been a good one. We laughed a little and cried a little. When the final verse's harmony ended we simply stood there. The high school guidance counselor, who had attended the earlier funeral as well, leaned over to me and whispered, "You know, there's something different about a Christian funeral." I had noticed the difference between the two funerals, too.

He wasn't arrogantly gloating over one family's roots in the tradition of the church. Instead, he had put into words the mystery of the transcendent. Because he's right. There is something immediately apparent when people gather as a Christian congregation. There is a shared hope and faith in
God's sufficiency that sustains even in the darkest hours. Grief is still grief, tears are as salty, and the heart is equally saddened regardless of denomination or nationality. However, there is a difference in demeanor and general attitude when firm commitments can be drawn on. In a crisis we can only draw on what we have learned and internalized as a part of us. As a Christian minister I celebrate the resources of faith.

Another of the Apostle Paul's affirmations resurfaced: "... we would not have you ignorant, brethren, concerning those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope" (1 Thessalonians 4:13). I know this to be true. I have witnessed funerals where people with minimal resources of faith grieved in a different way from people who gathered for a memorial service with strong rootage and belief in the Christian tradition.

Someone may ask what different it makes to have a Gospel in a little town where social issues are relatively low key and prophetic utterances seem strangely out of place. The difference may be difficult to explain, however, is readily apparent in the difference in two funerals.
What Must I Believe To Recover?  
The Spirituality of Twelve Step Programs

Michael Wyatt

With a sly wink at the bartender, Bill, a New York stockbroker, grabs the bottle of bourbon from the bar and pushes his way through the crowd into the storage closet where the phone is. It is October, 1929, and things have gone inconceivably wrong. Bill spends the next few hours making deals: to shield his reputation, to rescue his finances, to hide from his wife, and above all, to have his own way. As he talks, he swallows bourbon with the desperation of a man about to be washed away in a flooded river.

The same man, over twenty years later, is not the embittered wreck one might expect to see. Instead he is instrumental in organizing a vast program to help alcoholics. But for all this activity, and the ceaseless travel it requires, he is unrecognized among the very groups he helped form, and he does nothing to call attention to himself. His gaze on the frightened man sitting next to him is candid and gentle, and he puts aside his own plans for the evening without comment when he realizes the man needs help.

These are scenes from the Hallmark Hall of Fame dramatization of the life of Bill Wilson, one of the founders of Alcoholics Anonymous. Perhaps some of us have seen a similar transformation: a person we once knew as hostile, unreliable, evasive, unsteady, prone to erratic behavior, and suspected of hiding some secret, now looks better, smiles, contributes, participates, and comes across with rare candor and courage. You may have wondered what happened to bring this change about. One possibility is that the person has become involved in a Twelve Step Program. If we ask what these programs have that enables these transformations to occur, we learn that they claim to ground recovery in spiritual principles. For those of us who are

Michael Wyatt is an Episcopal priest. A former substance abuse counselor at a residential program, he is currently doing doctoral work in theology at Emory University.
tempted to think of "spirituality" as something esoteric, or neurotic, or self-indulgently ineffectual, these claims can sound nonsensical. For those of us who think of spiritual principles as the particular domain of the church, these same ideas can be threatening. These programs counter criticism with a simple boast: "it works."

Several questions come up. How does it work? Where did these programs come from? What do they offer? What are these spiritual principles? Are the principles in conflict with Christianity at some level? What might these programs need from or offer to the church? Or are they somehow in competition with the church?

Where Did Twelve Step Programs Come From?

Alcoholics Anonymous is the mother of all the Twelve Step Programs. It names two co-founders: Bill Wilson and Dr. Bob Smith, an Ohio surgeon, both natives of Vermont.

The United States already had a long history of attempts to deal with "dipsomania." Bill Wilson's recovery took place in the mainstream of that tradition. He was dried out more than once at Towns Hospital in New York, which was considered to be on the cutting edge of the treatment of alcoholics (or users of barbiturates and belladonna!). He had come to trust Dr. Silkworth, his doctor there. He had begun to go to Calvary Episcopal Mission, which was connected with the Oxford Group. Their members had also been successful in sobering up drunks. Bill investigated it in the first place because he was amazed by the recovery of one of his old drinking buddies, Ebby, who had joined the group.

On the 11th of December, 1934, Bill returned to Towns Hospital, having been drinking for a month. His attempts to quit had all failed, and he knew his life would end in insanity or alcoholic death. There he had a startling spiritual experience: in a pitch of despair, he cried out for help, and suddenly found himself in an ecstatic blaze of light, surrounded by wind, and heard "You are a free man." After a time, the sensations subsided and he felt "a great peace" and "a Presence which seemed like a veritable sea of living spirit."

Dr. Silkworth gave him cautious but sincere encouragement. Such experiences did occur, he said, and whatever the change was, Bill ought to hold on to it, because it was better than what
he had before. Ebby, though now "religious," was even more cautious, stressing moral responsibilities (restitution and working with others) over insights and experiences. He gave Bill a copy of William James' Varieties of Religious Experience. That book was to prove seminal, since it gave Bill a philosophical validation of spiritual experience and introduced the idea of gradual conversion, what he was to call the "educational variety."

It is of supreme importance that Alcoholics Anonymous does not date its founding from that experience. Bill tried for months to "carry the message" to other alcoholics; none stayed sober. Eventually he had two insights. One came from Dr. Silkworth: Bill's aggressive preaching, emphasizing his "vision," was driving prospects away. Why not start where Bill himself had started, the fearful, entrapping finality of alcoholism? First break their denial of the gravity of their disease, then they will listen. It was Bill's despair, after all, that led him to call out.

The second insight came in Akron, Ohio. In April, 1935, Bill went there on business, but after setbacks and angry maneuvers, the deal collapsed. On a Saturday night in early May, Bill found himself in the hotel lobby, alone, depressed, and for the first time in months, wanting a drink. He recalled that he had not wanted to drink while he was trying to sober other alcoholics up, even though he had not yet been successful with any of them. His second insight hit him forcefully: he needed another alcoholic to work with as much as he had been telling himself they needed him. He must "work with others."

Here is the seed of the principle of anonymity: hope lies not in the distinction of who I am, but in the equality of what we are. Alcoholics need each other as alcoholics.

These two insights, the inexorable progression of an actual disease (resolved by abstinence) and the inescapable obsession of dependency (relieved by surrender to a Higher Power and by working with others) are the core of the Twelve Step Programs.

Bill made some phone calls and organized a meeting for the next day, May 12. Among those who attended was Dr. Bob Smith, an alcoholic surgeon. "Dr. Bob," as he was called by the early members of Alcoholics Anonymous, had made his wife promise they would only stay fifteen minutes; but they arrived at 5:00 p.m. and left six hours later. As he later recalled the meeting, the doctor said the difference was made in hearing for
TWELVE STEP PROGRAMS

the first time someone "who knew what he was talking about in regard to alcoholism from actual experience." He did not stop drinking immediately, but on June 10, 1935, after a binge that lasted several days, he told Bill that he was "going to go through with it." One is not the core of a group, but two can be. Alcoholics Anonymous dates its founding from that day.

Bill and Dr. Bob formed an effective team. Others in Akron joined quickly. When Bill returned to New York, the program was on firm footing in Akron, and New York soon followed.

Within a few years, their focus on alcoholism led them to separate from the Oxford Group and to develop a group on their own. They kept the principles of surrender, confession, restitution, and work with others. With the help of the Reverend Dr. Samuel Shoemaker of Calvary Episcopal Church, who was a strong supporter of the Oxford Group in New York City, they formulated the steps which give the program its name.

Further milestones in the history of Twelve Step Programs are the extension of Bill's second insight: working with others. The message could be carried in print as well, so Alcoholics Anonymous ("the Big Book") was published in 1939. It was essentially written by Bill Wilson, though with constant revision and approval by the groups in Akron and New York. It was favorably reviewed by Harry Emerson Fosdick and praised (though not officially endorsed) by the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of New York.

Not only alcoholics assisted in spreading the word about recovery. John D. Rockefeller, Jr., bought 400 copies of the book, which he distributed among friends. Though he stated that the new program ought to be financially self-supporting, he hinted that some temporary assistance would help them through their initial steps and he set an example with a contribution of $1,000. The "Jack Alexander Article" was published in The Saturday Evening Post of March 1, 1941, giving a sympathetic and perceptive description of the program and the fellowship. These events brought astronomical increases in both attendance and inquiries, and an office was established in New York City to handle these new demands on the groups.

Growth meant changes. Through trial and error certain organizational principles evolved. The first International AA convention met in July of 1950 and accepted the Twelve Traditions, which are the guidelines for the organization of groups,

A significant change involved the formation of new groups based on the same principles. The first of these was the Al-Anon Family Groups, which began in the late forties. Originally, alcoholics and their spouses met together, as was customary in the Oxford Group, to discuss the application of general spiritual principles in their lives. As emphasis shifted to the work of alcoholics with other alcoholics, it became apparent that the spouses were being left to one side; but it also became apparent that certain problems were specifically connected with recovery from the role of "caretaker" or "martyr," which many spouses felt they had been forced into by the behavior of the alcoholic. Why shouldn't they work with each other? Why not have meetings that focused on the spouse's experience both before and in recovery?

A second important change occurred in the formation of groups to deal with problems other than alcohol. After serious soul-searching, the AA groups decided, first, that they could only be effective with their own kind, and second, that they had no exclusive claim to the principles by which they lived. If others wished to form groups along the same lines, they had the blessing of Alcoholics Anonymous. The first of these was formed in July of 1953. It dealt, as might be supposed, with the abuse of other substances: Narcotics Anonymous. Others followed, most significantly applying the principles to non-chemical dependencies (i.e., Gamblers Anonymous) and to dependencies on substances from which abstinence was difficult or impossible (i.e., Overeaters Anonymous). The Al-Anon Family Groups evolved as well into Alateen (for the children of alcoholics) in the early 50s and into the groups for the Adult Children of Alcoholics (for adults whose childhood was passed in an alcoholic home) in the late 70s.

Currently the application seems unlimited. For example, according to the analysis of some theorists, the obsessive heedlessness of technology and the paranoid willfulness of contem-
porary corporate business practice are identical to the patterns of addiction. They see the Twelve Step understanding of addiction and recovery as the most incisive way to do social, institutional, and systemic critique.

**Why Are Twelve Step Programs Needed?**

An adequate medical definition of addiction has not yet been formulated. Even when it is admitted as a disease, it is seen as an unusually complex one. And throughout the debate, the millennia-old but often unrecognized prejudice, which claims that addiction indicates moral laxity and a weak will, continues destructively.

The complexity of addiction points to a spectrum of factors, none of which can be isolated as causal. George Vaillant, in *The Natural History of Alcoholism*, eventually quotes the National Council on Alcoholism for the best summary definition, in his opinion: "The person with alcoholism cannot consistently predict on any drinking occasion the duration of the episode or the quantity that will be consumed" (Vaillant, p. 44). Paradoxically, with this behavioral definition, what we are to observe is the failure to predict behavior.

A more recent presentation is that of Gerald May in *Addiction and Grace*. May's definition pivots on the word "attachment." He uses it to point to the physical and mental condition of increasing adaptation to and dependence on a substance, behavior, or relationship. He also uses that word because of its historic connections with asceticism: it is pointless, even perverse, to displace our spiritual longing onto the things of this world. That is the first step of idolatry. The world can never satisfy us, who long ultimately for God. In this, he stands in line with Carl Jung and Gregory Bateson, both of whom saw addiction, especially alcoholism, as distorted and disoriented spirituality.

Twelve Step Programs agree with that analysis, and offer three ways to identify the disease to be treated. None of these should be understood as clinical. They are all functional: they provide addicts with an approach to recovery spiritually.

One is the original description of Dr. Silkworth: alcoholism (that is, addiction) is an allergy manifested by the phenomenon of craving. This allows the essential coupling of a physical condition with a mental one. Whether or not alcoholism is
technically an allergy, it does involve an abnormal, toxic, irreversible, eventually life-threatening, physical reaction to a substance. There is no cure; abstinence is the only hope of arresting the course of the disease. But there is also a craving for the substance, an obsession that leads to characteristic self-destructive behavior. Recovery is learning how to deal with the physical craving and mental obsession and how to repair the damage they have caused.

A second identification stresses behavior: addiction is a disease characterized by denial, isolation, and relapse. This allows the obsessive pattern to be examined more closely. Any addict routinely denies the existence of the problem, hides in order to continue using the substance, and returns to the substance whenever possible. These therefore set the agenda for the addict's recovery, which becomes focused on learning to live by honesty, participation, and abstinence.

A third identification, building on the previous one, emphasizes a tripartite schema: addiction is a disease with physical, mental, and spiritual components. Whether one starts with the physical dependency or with the spiritual defiance, each eventually issues in the other. As addicts, the need for the drug (on the physical level) will distort our outlooks and interactions with others (on the mental level) and set our addiction up as the governing principle of our lives (on the spiritual level). Or our self-centeredness (spiritually) will make us indifferent to others and to our own integrity (mentally) in the search for the removal of our pain and the gratification of our desires (physically). As examined in the next section, the program addresses all three levels.

We must not leave this section without looking at a related issue: codependency. Some years ago this was thought of as an addiction as well, but to a person rather than to a drug. In other words, the codependent was unable to let go of a destructive relationship. Dr. Vaillant's description of the inability to predict quantity or duration as characteristic and the program's identification of denial, isolation, and relapse, with their physical, mental, and spiritual components, as distinctive, both have applications here. The lives of codependents become defined by others. As codependents, we cannot resist their appeals, nor can we predict how much we will relinquish to them next. We deny that anything but love is involved, hide bruises and scars
whether physical or psychological), and return for more. We "actually hurt" when we are apart. We think about them all the time. They become the principal focus of our life, in effect replacing God or our Higher Power.

Some, the "adult children" of alcoholics, were trained in these destructive relationships during childhoods in dysfunctional families. The child who learned to survive by playing a role, by giving the parent what that parent narcissistically demanded, must, as an adult, "discover who he or she is" and learn to become for themselves the nurturing parent they never had.

Codependent recovery views alcoholism as a family disease. One advantage is that "the addict" is no longer "the problem." The collusion of the family in the disease and the potential for sharing healing is recognized. In many ways, this is more realistic. However, this appropriation of the Twelve Step Programs by a therapeutic model has drawbacks. Too often alcohol and drugs become symbols and the Steps become psychologized. To talk of a single systemic addiction loosens the two initial moorings Alcoholics Anonymous had: the inexorable progressive reality of the physical disease, and the irreplaceable healing possible when one alcoholic works with another. We lose the sharp focus on a deadly physical problem, a situation both humbling and urgent, which unites the group. Ironically, this recalls the early days of the program, when all met together as the Oxford Groups, trying to apply the principles in common. Responsible family therapy, however, will not deny the physical reality of addiction.

How Do Twelve Step Programs Work?

Twelve Step Programs simply attempt to solve a common problem in common. A disease shared on a physical level is treated by principles shared on a spiritual level. This commonality expresses itself in meetings, sponsors, and slogans. The common principles are arranged in the Twelve Steps.

Meetings exist to "share experience, strength, and hope." Though meetings are of various kinds, there is a consistent framework. A selection of readings is used: a definition of the program, the Twelve Steps, other excerpts from program literature. Either the Serenity Prayer or the Lord's Prayer is used to open and close the meetings. Three types of meetings exist: either the discussion of an issue in recovery, usually introduced
by a brief personal account of the discussion leader's experience with the topic; or a personal story recounting the progression of one's addiction and one's entry into and experience of recovery; or, more rarely, a lengthy reading of a chapter from program literature, followed by discussion. Usually the meetings are highly structured: participants are neither allowed to speak without being recognized nor to interrupt. Members customarily identify themselves as alcoholic when they speak and use only first names. Newcomers are recognized and applauded; anniversaries of sober time (30 days, 90 days, 6 months, 9 months, a year, several years) are acknowledged. An indispensable aspect of the meetings is the time spent in conversation and fellowship before and after the meeting; failure to establish these mutually supportive relationships within the program is a danger sign.

Sponsors are often the first of these therapeutic relationships. A sponsor is a person experienced in the program who guides a newcomer through the steps and encourages the newcomer in participation and exploration of recovery. Often the newcomer first begins to abandon the denial and isolation characteristic of the disease by means of questions and tentative confessions addressed to the sponsor. Often the sponsor is the first person the newcomer is able to trust as the reconstruction of a life begins. Sponsors vary from the empathic to the emphatic; no formula is foolproof. Of central importance is the fact that the sponsor has the same disease, though more time in recovery, and that the sponsor must "work with others" as part of his or her own healing. The situation is not one of "master and pupil," but one of mutual need.

The slogans of the program are trite phrasings of profound truths: "First things first." "Easy does it." "Live and let live." "One day at a time." Their simplicity enables them to be recalled in extreme situations. What do these slogans mean? Their connotations are myriad within the program, though the initial interpretation usually refers to one's addiction. The first thing to remember in a tense situation, for example, is that one is an addict and that, just for today, one is intending not to use drugs. Once their effectiveness in dealing with situations which used to lead to relapse is proven, they can be applied to other issues equally successfully. The slogans come to have personal associations with individuals and situations as well. To recall a
slogan at a critical moment is to draw on a common wealth of support, reassurance, and conviction.

The Twelve Steps: The Twelve Steps are the distinctive characteristic of these recovery programs. They are admittedly neither new nor unique, but a reformulation of traditional spiritual wisdom. They outline the method to be used for personal recovery.

When people talk about "taking," "applying," or "working" a step, or "being on" a certain step, a variety of things is meant. One is the deliberate study of the step, reading what has been written about it, discussing insights with others in recovery, writing one's own reflections down. Another is the deliberate application of it to oneself, a disciplined shift in perspective, reviewing the facts of one's life in the light of the principles embodied in it, making connections, sitting with the insights. The first is active and external; the second is reflective and internal. A third aspect is the "footwork": the steps involve deliberate behavioral changes and activities, without which their successful application is either blunted or illusory. I have used "deliberate" three times deliberately: taking a step is a conscious process. If we are not sure which step we are on, we are not taking it. "If you aren't looking for anything, then this isn't the place."

The steps are most effective when taken in sequence. Each step, when worked well, leads smoothly, almost inexorably, into the next. Some are used on a daily basis, some at wider intervals; all the principles are relevant at any point in one's life. Familiarity with them enables one to select the most appropriate one to apply in a given circumstance.

1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.

The first three steps are thought of as "foundation" steps; they lay the foundation for the successful working of all the rest. Though powerlessness initially feels like hopelessness, the possibility of change offered in the Second Step and the
readiness to attempt it transforms hopelessness into hope and strength. When I stop trying, something else has a chance. They can also be taken on a repeated, even daily, basis, since the principles contained in them summarize a perspective on the world which can be reaffirmed as a statement of faith. They have been condensed into slogans ("Let go and let God") and quick blunt versions ("I can't; God can; I think I'll let God").

4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
5. Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
7. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.
8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed and became willing to make amends to them all.
9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.

Steps Four through Nine are thought of as "action" steps; they are a sequential unit. To many churchgoers, they are familiar as the procedure for confession. They provide a way to come to terms with one's past, to make restitution, to "sweep off our side of the street." Since behavior during substance abuse is invariably destructive, these steps enable one to repair the damage. It is important to keep in mind that, for the addicted person, the motivation for these steps is not so much moral ("I ought to apologize and make it up") as it is practical ("If I hold on to these guilt, I am likely to return to my former behavior"). However, embodied in these steps is the belief that avoidance and evasion, though they may enable us to feel less "guilty" momentarily, are dead-ends; the only way to relieve guilt is to face responsibility. These steps are usually done thoroughly once, early in one's time in the program. Later the sequence can be applied to troubling topics; for example, one might decide to work these steps around anger or jealousy.

10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.
11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.

12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

The last three steps are thought of as "maintenance" steps; they are the ongoing security of recovery. They maintain the new insights and habits gained by working the other nine. In a sense, Step Ten summarizes Four through Nine, Step Eleven summarizes Two and Three. Note that "a spiritual awakening" is not mentioned until this point; only after we learn and practice a new way of life can we expect it. No doubt some persons have events similar to Bill Wilson's vision, and no doubt some change must occur on a spiritual level if a person is even to attempt recovery, but the wisdom of the program is that behavioral change precedes (and perhaps precipitates) the fuller and more stable interior change.

The important new ingredient in Step Twelve is the idea of carrying the message. This is what is called "Twelfth Step work." In fact, "working with others" is the way Bill Wilson condensed this step. "Practical experience shows that nothing will so much insure immunity from drinking as intensive work with other alcoholics" (Alcoholics Anonymous, p. 89). Again here, note that the motivation is neither moral nor altruistic, but practical.

This might seem excessively formal and simpleminded, but it works. Formality and simplicity facilitate focus. For people trained in avoidance, as addicts are, the tendency to rationalize and evade can be snipped at the root in this way. "Read the lines, not the blank spaces between them." However, in another paradoxical move, the program presents the steps as "suggested" and the entire Big Book as "suggestive only." No one, after all, can force addicts to do what they aren't ready to do. For them, "it works" can sound smug.

Most people enter recovery, though, when one particular force becomes overwhelming. As one program saying puts it, "I make promises to my intelligence, but I obey my pain." The difference between my good intentions and the actual changes I make to escape the grip of a disease is a vivid one to people in
recovery. For them, "it works" is the first turning of hope. The steps are not seen as ideals, but as practical functional guides out of the pain (physical, psychological, or spiritual) that one is in. At the same time, people in recovery only claim "progress, not perfection" in working them. As the Big Book says, "the spiritual life is not a theory. We have to live it" (Alcoholics Anonymous, p. 83).

Two steps have "as we understood Him" in italics. This qualification goes back to the earliest days of the program. In Bill Wilson's telling of his story in the Big Book, the offer to "choose his own conception of God" is stressed even more than his vision. That flexibility made the difference to him. In the preparation of the Big Book, the phrase in italics was one of the changes the group insisted on. In this way, the door to recovery was opened as widely as possible, and the group was kept from becoming a theistic debating society. The point is not who or what God is, the point is surrender to and reliance on that Power for recovery.

Obviously, one understanding of God is not "Him" at all. Paradoxically, given its creedal "laissez faire," Alcoholics Anonymous is cautious about changing the language of the early documents. Members have a vivid sense of inheriting a miracle and are reluctant to tamper with it. Newcomers who object might be told that a Power truly greater than themselves can hardly depend on their language, and that they are free to interpret that Power as works best for them. All are urged to share their insights, but to practice tolerance as well. More importantly, the first Tradition is that the unity of the program comes first; personal reservations must not override the preference of the group nor AA as a whole. Changes for the good of the program, approved by the majority of those in it, can be made. And some discussion of inclusive language is already under way.

Spiritual Principles: Often when asked how the program works, members will say, "how it works is H-O-W: Honesty, Openmindedness, and Willingness." These are the foundational spiritual principles.

Honesty is the appeal to experience. True to its roots in pragmatism, the program insists that our starting point is life as we know it. Without firm grounding in reality, no meaningful sense of spirituality can ever be achieved. However, in order to
deal with a disease characterized by denial, experience seems
a starting point that is oddly vulnerable to self-deception. So
the stress falls on honesty: not initially as self-conscious "feel­
ings," but as blunt facts. First, the experience of those in
recovery is shared ("it works"). Second, the experience of those
needing to recover is appealed to ("identify, don't compare").
Newcomers are told to listen for the ways they identify with
what they hear, to look for similar events and emotional states
in their own lives, to notice what they recognize in the stories
they hear. They are not to waste their time comparing them­
selves to others in recovery, singling out what is different; that
is merely try to locate an excuse to leave.

Honesty is the condensation of the First Step, the admission
of powerlessness. It is associated with recognition of the physi­
cal damage of the disease and the confession of facts that make
up a life in disarray. As one progresses in recovery, this rather
extended form of honesty becomes internalized, and one learns
to recognize and be honest about emotions and one's inner life
as well.

Openmindedness is the appeal to spirituality and hope. In
the Twelve Step Programs, a "Power greater than ourselves" is
stressed as indispensable, but this Power is "as you understand
it." It can be anything that truly works for the person (what
William James called a "live hypothesis" in "The Will to
Believe"), from Cosmic Flow to Christ to a specific Twelve Step
group to one's sponsor to a lightbulb. Though the early litera­
ture is definitely theistic, the early members rejected "or­
thodox" Christian formulas in an attempt to open the program
to as many as possible. But they expect this same openminded­
ness from the person who will attempt to recover by the steps,
especially in the area of spirituality. What matters is that you
believe that you can change and that a Power greater than you
can help you.

Openmindedness is a condensation of the Second Step, the
belief that a "Power greater than ourselves" can "restore us to
sanity." The question of "sanity" leads to the admission of the
mental or psychological damage of the disease. As one progres­
ses in recovery, this rather intangible suspension of disbelief in
spiritual matters becomes concrete tolerance of others and of
the dreadful scandal of their particularity, both inside and
outside the program.
Willingness is the appeal to transformation and commitment. If we truly believe we are powerless, but that a Power greater than ourselves can help us, a decision to engage that help follows naturally--provided, of course, that we do want to recover. It is worth noting how "late" a decision comes; two steps must be taken before this. Of course, if they have been properly worked, the newcomer will sense the Third Step as practically inevitable. Since God is "as you understand Him," this decision can be made in a variety of ways; all are legitimate if they promote recovery. The point is commitment, willingness to "let go absolutely" of our old ideas. Experienced members will say "This is a program of surrender, not self-improvement."

Willingness is obviously a condensation of the Third Step, the "decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God." This leads to the recognition of the spiritual damage of the disease: the profound self-centeredness of the addicted person, unable to consider anything except in relation to oneself, unable to form an equal partnership with another human being. As one progresses in recovery, willingness becomes outgoing, self-giving service, the ability to "work with others" freely and generously.

A single reading cannot exhaust the interconnections between the first three steps and the foundational spiritual principles of the program. In the same way, the steps are never worked only once: new areas of powerlessness are discovered whenever the ego stakes new claims, whenever it is fanned into new obsessions. The only true expression of powerlessness is surrender, either to the object one cannot control, which is to choose death, or to the Power which restores and cares for all, which is to choose life.

How Can Twelve Step Programs Interact with the Church?

One simple way of beginning to address this question is to raise the distinction between form and content. We can think of form as the common or generic aspect of a thing and of content as its particular expression in a given instance. Form and content influence each other deeply; they are inseparable.

Religion can be examined this way. There are elements common to all religions: ritual, ethical codes, some sense of a transmitted teaching and those who mediate it, common
stories, and a sense of ultimacy. There are also particular expressions: specific liturgies, explicit beliefs, articulated theologies, identified institutions, and recognizable hierarchies.

Twelve Step Programs can be seen, from this angle, to have the form of a religion, but to firmly avoid corporate articulation of content. Because of this, they are neither in competition nor in alliance with any existing religions. When members explain this renunciatory position, they usually indicate the phrase "God as you understand Him," and point out that the Program firmly refuses to establish any content for that phrase. Instead it returns the theological responsibility to the addict, to encourage the seriousness of the addict’s own spiritual effort. The form of theological statement is there, a reference to God, but the content is strictly "fill in the blank." Given this, there can be no creed and no ritual. In a sense, God remains anonymous.

The roots of that position can be found in the origins of AA. Bill Wilson’s preaching did not sober anyone up. The exodus from the Oxford Group had largely to do with the Oxford Group’s expectation that recovery was a prelude to, or even ought to be indistinguishable from, conversion to Christianity. The early members of AA found this expectation stifling and detrimental to their work with alcoholics, their Twelfth Step work, which they had to continue for their own sobriety.

Other members will explain the program’s disavowal of itself as a religion by showing that it has no professionals and no property, both characteristics of the content of established religion as this country knows it. All space is rented, and all functionaries are elected for specific periods of time as "trusted servants." In this way, the membership of the program remains anonymous as well.

It is hopefully apparent from this that what Twelve Step Programs provide is not religion in the traditional sense. They are not typically religious in content. That is, they have no articles of belief, no theology or official understanding of God, no rituals of worship, no institution, no functionaries, no central and primordial myths or symbols. However, a careful reading will also have shown that the programs are quite religious in form. That is, they have ritual, a simple but stern ethical code, a sense of the transmission of a teaching through both texts and the lived example of people who have accepted
the program's spiritual discipline and advanced in it, an emphasis on shared fundamental spiritual principles, and, of course, the sense that one is dealing with ultimate issues.

This satisfies many members. The programs give them a religious form that provides both a communal and personal focus, and that serves to energize and validate their lives. For those who want a religious content that is corporately articulated and celebrated, some connection with institutional religion becomes desirable.

Do the programs need the church? The individuals within them often do. Some of their reasons are part of the essential work of recovery, which cannot be neglected. The foremost of these is the search for a place to do a Fifth Step. A formal confession, with absolution, is one interpretation of this step. Another is the use of a minister as a pastoral counselor with whom one can review the course of one's life and assess what needs to be done. Some look for a place to share spiritual journeys or to learn the discipline of prayer, as part of their Eleventh Step. Still others look for a context or vehicle for "working with others," an application of the Twelfth Step; they look for those congregations with outreach and service programs that need volunteers.

Of course, other reasons are more personal. Some individuals look for a way to become reconciled to the religion of their past. For others, going to church is a symbolic way of "returning to society." Others simply want an appropriate and explicit formal worship of the God that they understand is supporting them in recovery.

It is important to realize, however, that for many of the more radical codependents and Adult Children of Alcoholics in recovery, the church perpetuates the worst features of a sick family. It has staked everything on maintaining an illusion; it demands total commitment and submission. It is authoritarian, dishonest, manipulative, defensive, and avoidant. They reject it and urge others away from it as well. For them, the program replaces the church with a healthy secular form. The church has nothing they want.

Does the church need the programs? I believe so. Individual congregations can be revitalized by people intentional about a spiritual program for living, who see gratitude and service as central to their lives.
The phrase "if you want what we have" is used as part of the introduction of most meetings. In early recovery, the addict's impression is that the Twelve Step Program, the groups, the sponsor, all have something unidentified that the addict lacks and wants. As recovery progresses, what the addict wants becomes clearer, as does the addict's responsibility to help the group be what the addict needs for recovery. The search for a spiritual awakening is appropriated as one's own inner growth, for which one has responsibility. It is no longer seen as something owned by those around us, which we might expect to eventually receive from them.

People in recovery will approach religion in a similar way. Initially, the congregation has an indistinct something the recovering addict wants, but participation clarifies what that desire actually is and raises the duty of the participant to contribute to the realization of those hopes. As I said above, usually this is some aspect of explicit religious content, often satisfied by ritual, creedal affirmations, or some form of mission or apostolate, either social service or social action.

However, this religious content must not violate the common form of the same programs which empowered the person to approach the church. Some content is significant enough to shape its form, and this is particularly true of the foundational principles of recovery which cannot be repudiated: honesty, openmindedness, and willingness to change. The difficulty is the uneasiness of some congregations with those principles. Many churches, in order to survive, become dishonest, closed, and unwilling to change. They live by denial, isolation, and relapse. They are not at fault; we all make mistakes when survival is our ultimate goal, and survival is not a mistake. These cramped values are antithetical to recovery, though.

If people do not talk about the facts of their lives, or if the budget never seems to be discussed openly, it becomes clear that honesty is not prized, denial is. If the sermons prove by example that an unexamined life is not worth living, certainly not worth listening to, or if theological speculation by the laity is frowned on or mocked, it becomes clear that openmindedness is not prized, isolation is. If the liturgy is corseted so tightly it cannot breathe, or if suggestions for new projects are dismissed at the outset, whether with sneers or sighs, it becomes clear that willingness to change is not prized, relapse is. Those in
recovery will quickly realize they cannot survive under those conditions.

In *Addiction and Grace* Dr. May states that no addiction is ever good. All attachments have an addictive side, even those to life and to God. For this reason God deliberately remains hidden from us. With luminous insight, Dr. May adds, "I think God refuses to be an object for attachment because God desires full love, not addiction. Love born of true freedom, love free from attachment, requires that we search for a deepening awareness of God, just as God freely reaches out to us" (May, p. 94). This is the secret behind the "God, as you understand Him" clause. The secret is not that God is ever to be understood, but that the attempt at understanding is personal, and therefore involves personal surrender to the exploration of spirituality. As Dr. May goes on to say, the desert of detachment (or withdrawal) is fearful. But, as Hosea proclaimed, the desert is also the place of wooing and betrothal, and as Isaiah promised, one day it will blossom like a rose.

The three principles of recovery grow from the recognition of two facts: one has a deadly disease and that one must be in honest, mutual relationships to arrest it. Perhaps the greatest gift the Twelve Step Programs offer the church, then, is the opportunity to ask certain questions: what is the disorder over which we are powerless and what is the work we do with others? Is it the disorder of sin and the work of forgiveness, or social oppression and empowerment; lies and truth? What is the life we cannot manage and what is the message we carry? Is it spiritual torpor and the message of awakening; estrangement and reconciliation? We may even address liturgical self-indulgence on the part of the ministers to work for true disciplined common worship by a whole congregation. What is the death we are fleeing and what do we truly need from one another?

Those of us in the church are accustomed to rhetoric about ultimate concerns—I indulged in some of it above. But those brought to maturity in Twelve Step Programs ask the church what the reality is with which the church deals. And they bring to the church some experience in facing that question fearlessly and in supporting each other as the answers are explored.
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"Anyone can get old; all you have to do is live long enough."

Groucho Marx

Another person of profound wit, whose name I have since forgotten, once observed that "being dead wouldn't be so bad, if you didn't have to die in order to get there." He might have added that, for the average person, the harshness of human reality is compounded: one must suffer old age, with its infirmities, in order to die and thus reach the state of death. Aging may not be as sure as the proverbial "death and taxes," but death is the only way to avoid it. Some choice! With luck, you get them both--two life crises, but hardly for the price of one.

The complex of problems associated with human aging are well known: increasing social isolation, reduction of income, rising medical costs, loss of a positive body image (somatopsychic maladjustment), diminishing physical and mental abilities, heightened awareness of one's mortality, a sense of being superfluous, and so on. Moreover, for the person who has long striven for a theological perspective on life, there may be a spiritual crisis as well. Where is God, not merely in the anatomical engineering which led to mortality, but also in the establishment of the process of deterioration which usually precedes it? What has the biblical faith to say about this human reality in the divine scheme of things?
A decade or more ago, reflection on this problem would have had less appeal to me than it does at present. For the young, aging and death are equally remote and perhaps morbid to think about. "Out of sight, out of mind," as the saying goes. But then, almost imperceptibly at first, little signs of human reality begin to manifest themselves: We notice that our eyesight is not what it used to be; our children may be able to hear sounds that we cannot; we cannot remember names as well as we used to; little brown spots begin to appear on the backs of our hands; there is an occasional tingling in the joints of our fingers; the sunburn area on our forehead seems ever to expand; and whereas, formerly, we could have eaten a dead frog, now there is a certain craving for antacids.

The list could be expanded, but it becomes depressing to do so.

Aging is a reality which, unlike death, cannot be ignored. We cannot deny it to the very end, since evidence of it confronts us at every turn. One may seek to disguise it with cosmetics, clothing, exercise, and so on, but it alters our personality, it destroys our body, it weakens our mind, and it may prove worrisome to our soul. This is our shared reality, our common humanity, and thus the need for sustained and regular theological reflection upon it.

The Difficulty of the Task

The search for a biblical perspective or perspectives faces considerable difficulty at the outset. Such an inquiry must begin with recognition of at least the following four realities.

First, aging is a problem for the individual. The Bible, however, tends to focus upon the goals, failures, and concerns of the community. It consists of regulations for public worship, of reflections upon Israel's role in the events of the ancient Near East, of letters to various congregations, and so on. It is more God's Word to an ongoing social reality than it is advice to individual members about how to cope with their creaturehood. Thus, while aging may be, for me, a very upsetting reality, it simply is not at the heart of the Bible's agenda (or even solidly
at its edge). While, as the slogan says, "Christ is the answer," the question is not, "What about these liver spots?"

Second, aging, as we moderns know it, was not widespread in ancient Israel. The average life span likely was from thirty to forty years of age, and thus those persons whom we regard as middle-aged were, by and large, the elders of the biblical period. Aging was not perceived as a problem with the intensity that it is experienced today.

Such a suggested modest average life span may strike the reader as peculiar, given the fact that the pre-diluvians and early post-diluvians are said to have lived for more than a century. Methuselah reached the age of 969, Abraham 175, Sarah 127, and Joseph and Joshua 110 each. Doesn't Psalm 90 tell us that "the number of our years is three-score and ten" (i.e., 70), or "by reason of strength eighty"? Doesn't Genesis (6:3) speak of a limit of 120 years?

The reason for such great ages, and whether they are historically accurate or not, has often been debated. In some cases, they seem to result from a sophisticated symbolic number game which is quite alien to our own culture. For example, just as the Babylonians, who counted in base-60, recorded ages in multiples of 60² years (i.e., 3600), the biblical ideal of 120 is 60 x 2 (with 7 for complement in the case of Sarah). The life span of Adam is 930 years, or (60 x 15) plus 60/2 years. Thus, the ages are often idealized, and in any case they are depicted as exceptional: they convey something of the importance of the individual. For ordinary folks, the situation was quite different.

The only source of exact and reliable information about the "biblical" life span comes from the books of Kings. There we are given the names of fourteen kings of Judah who reigned between 926 and 587 B.C.E. The average of their life spans is 44 years. Given the fact that royalty had the best of care in infancy, a greater abundance and variety of food, and were physically protected in adulthood, we may suppose that this figure was considerably above the norm for the average citizen, perhaps by as much as a decade. Even in the 20th century, there are areas of the world where the average is between 30 and 40 years.

Thus, old age as we know it, averaging in the 70s, was rare in ancient Israel. Only in the last few decades, thanks to advances
in diet and medical care, has such an average figure been realized in human history. It has, of course, been a mixed blessing. It has brought with it greater infirmities of mind and body: senility, deterioration of circulatory and skeletal systems, loss of physical senses, and so on. With those losses have come a host of ethical, psychological, sociological, and spiritual problems. Does one necessarily want to live to advance age, given its likely complications? For some persons, an earlier death, even if by suicide, is an attractive option.

Third, aging, for most modern Western persons, brings a concern for more than the deterioration of mind and body. It also has sociological ramifications: shall one continue to live alone, even if scarcely able to care for oneself? Or shall one live with one's children, provided one is given that option? Or shall one reside in an institution of some sort, provided that one can afford it? How is one to continue to pay for health care, food, housing, and so on?

Such very real concerns are largely a product of modern Western society, and this further alienates us from the concerns of the biblical world. Our problem is caused by mobility, which scatters the family over a wide area; by national and international affairs, which affect the value of our currency and the availability of goods and services; and by technology, which makes assistance available at astronomical costs and raises ethical questions about the quality of life. In ancient Israel, by contrast, the family's location was quite static and the entire country was not much bigger than some of our counties. It was largely a rural, monolithic society in which real estate was handed down, in perpetuity, from one generation to the next. Several generations inhabited the same dwelling, and at most one's extended family was next door. The elderly, therefore, were seldom left on their own, either socially or economically. Someone was usually at hand to care for them, and institutions to do so were nonexistent and not needed.

Furthermore, individualism was not then prized in the way that it is now. We have been trained, from childhood, not to want to be a "burden"; made to feel guilty about our infirmities and dependencies; instructed to want to "make it by ourselves" as long as we can. Consequently, we feel worthless when we can
no longer care for ourselves; we feel that our children do not want to have us around; and our children will thus view us in the same way. Thus, we have not only "dug our own grave," so to speak, but have distanced ourselves from the Bible to which we turn for help in our crisis.

The fourth reality is that ours is a technological society, in which change is an ever accelerating reality. The family farm is disappearing, the local factory is closing, silicon is replacing iron as a basis of the economy: computers, we are told, soon will be necessary for everything. Retraining for a new career is the order of the day: "future shock" is indeed upon us. In such a society, the young are more adaptable than the middle-aged or the elderly, and this creates yet another barrier between us and the world of the Bible. For us, knowledge is with the young, and obsolescence is with the old. On what basis, therefore, can one revere the wisdom of the aged, which is precisely what the Bible extols?

Well, there you have them: some of the cautions and the difficulties that we face in trying to address our common reality from the perspective of biblical theology. Nonetheless, those for whom the Bible possesses authority must press on, and they will find that most of the reflections come from the Hebrew Bible (and the Wisdom literature in particular). This is hardly surprising, given the separate origins and overall purposes of the canonical sections. The Pentateuch is concerned with communal origins and the appropriate response to God in terms of ethics and liturgy. The Prophets are concerned with God's present activity in history as it pertains to the "chosen" community. The New Testament is concerned with "the Roman peril" and with the imminent end of the age. None of these is an appropriate place for extended musing about the process of aging or the status of the aged.

Much of the Wisdom literature, by contrast, has a "folksy" origin. It was intended to help the individual cope with the problems of everyday existence, be it in public or private life. Since aging has a bearing on one's abilities and upon one's stature in the community, the topic was occasionally addressed by the wisdom teacher.
I want to approach the subject under two headings: (1) attitudes toward the aged in biblical society, and (2) attitudes toward the process of aging itself. The first of these has been well treated in a few recent books (Harris, Sapp), while the second (and more pressing) has received scant attention. It should be evident, of course, that the two attitudes may be related: the first of them will, in large measure, affect the second.

Attitudes toward the Aged

Ancient Israel's response to the elderly was generally positive and supportive. It was an attitude that seems to have rested upon three assumptions.

1. The longer one lives, the more opportunity there is to understand the workings of a world that is thought to operate under divine providence. Graduates of God's "school of hard knocks," therefore, will be able to assist others in living in conformity with reality. Hence, the age-designation 'zaqen," an "old man," came also to designate a person of reliable counsel: an "elder," regardless of age.

2. An older person, having more exposure to folk tradition and liturgy, would know the sacred traditions and rites of the community better than would the younger generations. They were, then, the custodians of what we would call "religion."

3. Since life is a gift from God who requires it back at the appointed moment, long life may be considered a sign of divine blessing. In fact, the text often extols certain behavior "in order that your days may be long in the land which the Lord your God is about to give you" (Exod. 20:12). Honoring the aged, therefore, would seem to be following God's own cue.

To these conclusions, of course, there were always exceptions. There is wisdom in realizing that generalizations are precisely that, rather than infallible laws from which there are no departures. Thus young Elihu, arriving late to visit the afflicted Job, says to the three older friends who are already there:

I am young in years, and you are aged;
therefore, I was timid, and afraid to declare my opinions.
I said, "Let days speak, and many years teach wisdom."
But, it is the spirit of God in humans that gives understanding.
It is not necessarily the old that are wise,
Not necessarily the aged who understand what is right.
Therefore I say, "Listen to me; let me also declare my opinion."

(32:6-10 RSV)

Or, as the writer of Ecclesiastes puts it:

Better is a poor and wise youth
than an old and foolish king,
who will no longer take advice.

(4:13)

This seems to criticize a tendency of the aged to "get set in their ways."

Furthermore, it could be observed that some persons died relatively young, despite abundant evidence of their piety. Consider the case of the great religious reformer of Judean society, King Josiah. He died a violent death in battle, at age thirty-eight. By contrast, the reportedly apostate King Manasseh lived for sixty-six years. All such irregularities aside, however, it was observed, as a general rule, that wisdom resided with the older generation. And thus we read:

Wisdom is with the aged,
and understanding in length of days.

(Job 12:12)

Little wonder, then, that Elihu kept silence in their presence for a long time!

When was one old enough to be trusted with the temple service? Levites, whose task it was to care for this essential matter, were not allowed to assume their duties until the age of thirty (Num. 3:3, 23). Given the particularities of the knowledge which were required, full maturity was demanded.
By contrast, one could serve in the military, or be enrolled in the census, at age 20 (Num. 1:3, 18; Exod. 30:14). The Bible would not have bought the slogan, "If you're old enough to die for your country, you're old enough to be a pastor!"

A good illustration of the biblical attitude is in a famous story, found in 1 Kings 12. At the death of King Solomon, the people petitioned his son to be less oppressive than the "old man" had been. The son pondered their request for three days, listening first to the advice of the Elders. Their advice was that he "loosen up" a bit: after all, tradition said that the role of the king was to serve the people rather than to oppress them! Such advice did not appeal to the son, however, so he then consulted those of his own generation. They advised him to make the following announcement, which in fact he did. (You will notice that my translation does not exactly follow the usual English Bible, which flinches at a literal rendering.)

The King announced:

My "little thing" is thicker than my father’s loins!...
He chastised you with whips, but I will chastise you with scorpions!

The result of this attitude, characterized by vanity, obscenity, and immaturity, was the division of the Davidic kingdom.

There must have been a number of instances, in the history of Israel, where the advice of the young led to catastrophe. And thus the Rabbis (at the time of the New Testament), said:

If young people advise you to build the temple, and old men say to destroy it, give ear to the latter! For the building of the young leads to destruction, and the tearing down of the old leads to construction.

(Tosefta 'Ab. Zara, i. 19)

Little surprise, then, that the elderly were accorded respect! Indeed, Torah from God at Mt. Sinai commanded that it be done. Lev. 19:32 puts it clearly:

You shall rise before the aged, and show deference to the elderly. Reverently obey me in this, for I am the Lord.
Respect was accorded the aged, not merely because of their general wisdom, but because of their knowledge of Torah in particular. And thus the Psalmist reports:

We have heard with our ears, O God,
our ancestors have told us,

What deeds thou didst perform in their days,
in the days of old. (44:1)

Or, as the Deuteronomist advises:

Remember the days of old,
consider the years of many generations;
ask your ancestors, and they will show you,
your elders, and they will tell you. (32:7)

In an advancement on this theme, the Rabbis of the Talmudic period advised:

Respect even an old man who has lost his learning, for there were placed in the ark of the covenant not only the two perfect tablets of the Torah, but also the fragments of the tablets that Moses shattered when he saw the people dancing before the golden calf. (Berakot 8b)

Rabbi Johanan, of the same period, made it clear that such respect was to be accorded even non-Jews—it has nothing to do with their knowledge of Torah, either retained or forgotten. He always arose in the presence of an aged non-Jew, he said, because of the sufferings which anyone must endure in the course of a long life (Kiddushin 33a). Similarly, Rabbi Meir said that he arose in the presence of even an ignorant old man, because "the very fact that he has grown old must be due to some merit" (Bikkurim iii.65c).

Such purely humanitarian respect did not have its beginning with the Rabbis. Indeed, the prophet Isaiah denounces the Babylonians because "...you showed... no mercy; on the aged you made your yoke exceedingly heavy" (47:6). Deuteronomy likewise comments on the harshness of an enemy "...who shall not regard the person of the old, or show favor for the young"
A contrast between these attitudes of foreigners and those of Israel is surely intended. (One may suspect that, from their point of view, there are many "foreigners" within the church today!)

The Essenes, who preserved the Dead Sea Scrolls, are described by their contemporary, Philo, as follows:

They honor the old, and provide for them; just as lawful children honored and provided for their parents, so they offered the aged all possible comfort, by personal care and wise forethought.

(ed. Mangey, ii, 459)

The primary source of respect and support, easing anxiety about old age, was to be one's own children. And thus one of Israel's proverbs advised:

Hearken to your father who begot you, and do not despise your mother when she is old.

(23:22)

More to the point was Torah from Sinai, one of the Ten Commandments which Moses received from the deity:

Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land which the Lord your God is about to give you.

(Exod. 20:12)

That a child did not do so was regarded as a near unspeakable horror, an attitude that was a threat to the entire community:

Whoever curses his father or his mother, shall be put to death.

(Exod. 20:17)

What is meant by the term "honor" is not stated, but it is surely more than the simple obedience of childhood. The term carries the nuance of affection (Ps. 91:15), of respect and prizing highly (Prov. 4:8), and of reverence (Lev. 19:3). The "ultimate significance" of the commandment may be the protection of parents when they are no longer able to care for themselves, when they are, from a utilitarian point of view, useless. It is thus not aimed at small children, in contrast to the way that we almost always seek to use it now. Curious, isn't it: we seek to
apply it to our advantage by quoting it to our children, and thus we escape its demand upon us toward our own parents!

One of the more interesting interpretations of this commandment, plausible but not demonstrable, contends that "honor" of parents was meant to extend beyond their earthly life. It included the preservation of the real estate whereon the family graves were located. When that property fell outside the family, there would be no one to care for it and to perform the rites to which deceased ancestors were entitled. The continuity of the family was thereby destroyed. That which had given sustenance and identity, namely the ancestral land, was given away. And thus Naboth, pressured by King Ahab to sell his estate, remarks, "God forbid that I let you have the estate of my ancestors!" (1 Kings 21:3). This may help us to understand a seemingly harsh passage in Deuteronomy:

If a man has a stubborn and rebellious son who will not give heed, then his father and mother shall bring him to the elders and they shall say... "This our son is treasonable, and rebellious; he is a glutton and a drunkard." Then all the men of the city shall stone him to death...; so you shall purge the evil from your midst; and all Israel shall hear, and stand in fear.

(21:18-21)

Does this mean that if their parents are piqued in a little family power-play that all affection is forgotten? Is Deuteronomy unbelievably cruel, so that we can thank heavens for the more humane New Testament (where sinners are only sent eternally to Hell)? On the contrary. The parents now have abundant evidence that their offspring is a traitor to all those generations who have given him life and sustenance. He means to dispose of everything: he is so concerned about himself that he "gorges and guzzles." It will only be worse when everything falls to him at his parents' death. They certainly cannot depend upon him now, and even less so in the future. He is a time-bomb, set to go off at the center of the larger family. A sad prospect indeed for one's aged parents; no comfort for them, as they now cope with their increasing physical infirmities as well.
Attitudes toward Aging

It is one thing to respect the aged, but it is quite another to come to terms with one’s own aging. Toward this reality the Bible has even less to say, perhaps in large measure because of the four reasons I outlined in the beginning. There may, however, be another reason for its silence, at least as far as part of the problem is concerned. Insofar as our worries are sociological and economic (loneliness and finances), then it is the mistreatment of the aged which contributes to our anxiety about aging. Ancient Israel's positive attitude toward the elderly, therefore, may have taken the edge off this aspect of the problem.

There remains, however, another aspect of the problem: namely, the physiological side of aging (i.e., mental and physical deterioration). A shorter average life span may have vastly reduced the number of persons in the Bible for whom that was a problem. Nonetheless, there is no glossing over of the limitations of old age. Thus, it is said of Isaac that "his eyes had grown dim" (1 Sam. 4:18); that David, advanced in years, always felt cold (1 Kings 1:1; as the KJV puts it, "He gat no heat," and he had to resort to a living hot-water bottle named Abishag). And there is the aged Barzillai, who was invited by King David to come to Jerusalem for the remainder of his life. He responds:

How many years have I to live, that I should go up with the king to Jerusalem? I am this day 80 years old; can I discern what is pleasant and what is not? Can your servant taste what he eats, or what he drinks? Can I listen to the voice of singing men or singing women? Why, then, should your servant be an added burden...? Pray, let your servant... die in my own city, near the grave of my father and mother.

(2 Sam. 19:34-37)

Aging within itself is bad enough, but discontinuity with the family, both the living and the dead, would be worse still! At least there is some satisfaction in that solidarity.

The one sustained reflection on old age, and it is a memorable one, is found in Ecclesiastes 12. Some of its analogies are obscure, but in general the aging human body is compared with
a house. Although it is slowly becoming dilapidated, it is still inhabited. The underpinnings are beginning to sag; the windows are growing dingy; the locked doors block sound from the street; it grows darker and darker inside; the roof is getting mossy; and so forth. To change the metaphor a bit: one is afraid to take a walk, for fear of falling; one’s eyes and ears are beginning to fail; one’s hair is changing color. And then the texts adds that sexual stimulation is increasingly difficult (as the RSV puts it: "The grasshopper drags itself along, and desire fails"). All this continues until "dust returns to the earth as it was.

This state of affairs, candidly described by the writer as "the evil days," i.e., non-desirable, is enclosed in theological reflection. It is not meant merely to be depressingly descriptive. It means to teach and to exhort as well. Exactly what it teaches has been a matter of debate, depending upon how you vocalize a noun in the first verse. Some modern interpreters think that the reading should be: "Remember your well-being in the days of your youth;" or, "Remember your grave;" or, "Remember your well (i.e., wife)." In these cases, the point would seem to be purely hedonistic and perhaps sexual enjoyment in particular:

Gather ye rose-buds while ye may,
Old Time is still a-flying:
And this same flower that smiles today,
Tomorrow will be dying.

(Robert Herrick, "To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time")

Such readings, however, are not preferable to the text as it now stands: "Remember your Creator in the days of your youth." Such a theological note would then be resumed at the conclusion of the description: "... the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the power of life reverts to God who gave it." That is, the chapter both begins and ends on a religious note, and this is also the end of the book. Not only is this a more fitting conclusion, but it is in keeping with the author's overall theme that life is given to humans to enjoy. The point would thus seem to be: Affirm what God has made possible while you have the opportunity. The concluding phrase, concerning dust and the "breath of life," alludes to Genesis 3 with its graphic depiction
of the human as creature: Life is not meaningless. Rather, life with both youth and old age is as God intended it.

Despite its limitations, old age is elsewhere described as a time of satisfaction and even potential. Thus a proverb observes:

The glory of young men is their strength,
but the beauty of old men is their gray hair.
(20:29)

Thus, what characterizes the elderly is not to be their declining strength, but rather the pre-eminence which they enjoy because of their status. They are not "over the hill," but are at the summit of fulfillment and influence.

In the Torah, the ideal seems to be the fate of Abraham (and others), of whom it is said that he "breathed his last and died in a good old age, an old man and full of years, and was gathered to his people" (Gen. 25:8). The last element of this description seems to be an important one, as far as a meaningful old age and acceptance of it were concerned. "To be gathered to one's people" meant continuity-of-identity through preservation of the family; living together, being cared for, reposing in the tomb with one's ancestors, the family as an on-going, remembering organism.

In general, then, aging is accepted as part of the life-cycle, as part of the Creator's design for all living things. There are not protests that things should not be that way. Aging is not only the way that things are: from the deity's point of view, it is the way things ought to be. One may thus endure it as part of a package given by the deity, saying, "Righteous art Thou, O Lord" (you are right in having made it so). On the other hand, one may rebel against it by making one's ego the center of the universe, against which aging and death are unbearable insults.

Reflections on the Present

That there are tensions between the attitudes of the biblical period and those of our own time should be obvious to all. Rather than honoring the aged, our society often finds them to be a problem: they drive a car more slowly and get in our way;
they hold jobs that delay our upward mobility; they need physical attention, and thus they interfere with our leisure; they consume more than their proportionate share of medical facilities. Indeed, there is a tension between the modern generations. Back in the 1960s, we said: "Never trust anyone over thirty!" Now, in the realm of business and politics, it is not the senior partner who is the admired topic of conversation, but the "whiz kid." In the realm of religion, it is the child-evangelist who makes a big splash. And in the realm of advertising, the lion’s share of the market apparently belongs to the young: they get sports cars, condos, travel, and they get "Calvinized" (bluejeans). And, what do the elderly get beamed their way on TV commercials? Dentu-Creme, Matamucil, and Preparation-H!

Consider a commercial as it might have appeared on Jerusalem-TV, back in the period of the Bible. A group of young people sit, listening attentively to an elderly couple. During a pause, the senior citizens reach for a bit of liquid refreshment. In the background, we hear the following appeal: "Appear older! Seem Wiser! Drink Coke!" Well, not so on our TV. Instead, the consumers are shown, bikini-attired, cavorting at the beach.

In contrast to the biblical concern for ancestral property and tombs, our countryside is littered with abandoned cemeteries. We flood them for power dams and bulldoze them over to build new houses. Indeed, one sometimes hears, even from theologians, laments that we are running out of space, that cemeteries are occupying valuable land. I suppose, in order to update the commandment, we ought to say: "Honor your land speculator, that opportunity may be much in the land which the County Zoning Commission has given you." (By the way, there is a new, tough law in my state of North Carolina governing damage to cemeteries. You can get a stiff fine even for moving headstones, such as lining them up in order to make it easier to mow.)

My own response to this problem, having served for three years on the committee that prepared the legislation to protect cemeteries, is to advise property owners to exempt family cemeteries from their deeds (that is, to have a separate deed drawn for them). In that way, if the larger property is sold, the
family automatically retains ownership of, and access to, the ancestral (or other) graves. One can also set up a trust (administered by a bank) using life insurance funds to provide for perpetual care for a cemetery.

As for the living members of a family, very little can be done by way of exhortation and pointing to "biblical" attitudes, to create the kind of solidarity socially and economically, which gives support to the aged. The changed realities of society and economics are here to stay. Even if one spouse were not working, or were financially able to take a leave of absence in order to care for parents, sometimes the home facilities are inadequate to meet the demands of the aged. Old personality conflicts continue to live on, and even may be made worse by these circumstances.

Nonetheless, there is one aspect of the problem which continues to puzzle me, and that is the individualism that says, "I don't want to be a burden," or, "I'd like to care for my parents here, but they think they would be a burden!" It is easy for us to forget that we were a burden when we were children: totally dependent upon our parents for some time. One of our parents took time from work; fed us several times a day; mopped the floor after we ate with the manners of swine; loved us despite animal-like tantrums; and changed our dirty diapers.

Financially, we may have been dependent upon our parents for 20 years or more. The estimated cost of rearing a child is now approaching $100,000 in our society. I figure that, as a minimum, one ought to have the decency to repay one's debts. Only after 20 years of care for parents can we talk about continuing the care because of love.

When we think about our own aging, even though the biblical perspective is scant, it is helpful. Starting with the reality that aging is an inevitable part of our life-cycle, the Bible suggests that it is properly so. We are creatures with no independent power to exist. Life is a gift, an unmerited gift, and must be returned to the One who gave it. Some of us retain it longer than others, but at a cost. "We sang and we danced..." and it is now time to pay the piper. Is it possible to do so in theological perspective? Is it possible to keep our religious understanding in conformity with that of our biological reality? As one ages, it
is possible to continue to mature in faith. Is that not what it means to be a "whole" person? Maturity is more than simply a biological event, therefore. It is the full and final acceptance of the Sovereign Lord of birth, life, and death. The faithful may need assistance in coming to such maturity, and they can find it in the proclaimed Word of God. Strange, is it not, that few of us, if any, have ever heard or delivered a sermon on this inevitable crisis of life?

Notes


2. The consonants of the Hebrew Text (its earliest form) are b-w-r-’-y-k, which can be vocalized in several ways. That of the Massoretic Text (the "official" vocalization) is bore,eka, "your Creator" (so KJV, RSV, and other translations, understanding the word to be a so-called plural of majesty).


For Further Reading

Sectarian Division and the Wisdom of the Cross: Preaching from First Corinthians

Ronald P. Byars

Although scholars may debate how many letters Paul actually wrote to the Corinthian church and to what extent one may recover their separate outlines from the existing texts of 1 and 2 Corinthians, the consensus is that what we have is genuinely Pauline. It is also quite clear that 1 Corinthians is in fact a letter and not merely an essay in the form of a letter. Paul has written to a congregation of people he knows personally and for whom he feels affection. He has a stake in the welfare of the Corinthians church, and in his letter he inserts himself into the tensions and disputes that have spoiled the peace of that congregation and handicapped its witness.

Why should Paul care so deeply about the quarrels and factions of a congregation he visits only occasionally? Where does he find the passion to spend on them when there are other churches, other challenges more immediately at hand? Any pastor with experience in more than one congregation can answer that question easily enough. Long after leaving First Church, the former pastor continues to be vitally interested in reports from the old parish. The former pastor feels a sense of satisfaction when there are triumphs, even when there is no question of getting credit for them. Likewise, when Christmas cards come with news of failures and defections, he or she feels diminished. Although codes of ministerial ethics keep her or him at a distance, the codes cannot disengage the heart.

Ronald P. Byars is pastor of Second Presbyterian Church in Lexington, Kentucky.
The discreet former pastor will not become involved in correspondence designed to settle current disputes or give advice about policy even when he or she has strong opinions. The apostle, feeling a similar attachment, had no inhibitions about giving advice. There seems to have been no resident "pastor" for whom Paul must ethically have stepped aside. Paul claimed a continuing relationship and responsibility, exercising a kind of episcopate based on his prerogatives as the "organizing pastor." The fact that others had gone to Corinth from time to time to work in the same field—certainly Apollos and quite possibly Cephas—did not deter him.

Were there elders in the Corinthian church? Deacons? Any collegial body exercising oversight? The letters give no indication of any developed form of polity. There must have been some division of responsibility, because Paul mentioned (in addition to apostles) prophets, teachers, workers of miracles, healers, helpers, administrators, and speakers in various kinds of tongues (12:28). It seems that spiritual oversight had not been delegated to any person or corporate body. Perhaps in an entirely informal way, apart from any developed theory, Paul assumed episcopate because of the history of his relationship to the congregation, and because of his claim to be an apostle (9:1, 2). The bonds of affection would not allow him to have disengaged himself in any case.

Like every pastor and former pastor, Paul had both admirers and detractors in Corinth. In Paul's case, however, people are still choosing up sides for or against him centuries after he has left the field! Paul has been accused, particularly in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, of having "invented" Christianity by distorting the simple religion of Jesus and substituting elaborate Christological theories. Others have charged him with puritanizing the gospel, casting suspicion on affairs of the body. Some see in Paul a traditionalist, captive of his culture, who turned back Jesus' more liberated attitude toward women and supplied misogynists with texts to support female subordination. To those who find Paul guilty of having misdirected the Christian church, no claims of apostolic authority may be sufficient to offset prejudices. But among those who see him as a pastor struggling to bring his best
theological thinking to questions with practical consequences, there may be more sympathy. There is no question but that Paul brought to his pastoral task significant intellectual gifts, rooted in a warm piety that ran deep and strong. It is the two together, joined with pastoral affections, that may very well be the secret of Paul's authority. So it is that even after many generations, the letters of this emotionally complicated, sometimes petulant man may become for the church a word from the Lord.

The readings for Epiphany in Year A of the Common Lectionary form a virtual *lectio continua* of the first three chapters of 1 Corinthians and the first five verses of chapter four. *Lectio continua*, of course, was the early practice of many churches of the Reformed tradition in preference to the use of the lectionary. The Common Lectionary manages to incorporate both of these traditions. It does so both by its systematic attention to particular Gospels over the course of the three year lectionary, and by its occasional offering of a sequence of readings from a particular book. The sequence is intended to expose the congregation to particular biblical material and continuous narratives rather than to support the gospel reading geared to the Christian Year.

In Epiphany of Year A, the epistle readings for the festival itself, for the Baptism of the Lord, and for the Transfiguration correlate with the Gospels. Beginning with the Second Sunday after Epiphany and continuing through the Eighth, the lectionary offers *lectio continua* beginning with Paul's salutation to the letter to the Corinthian church. It is possible, for the Corinthian readings, to find some relationship between the lesson and the theme of the day or season. On the Second Sunday after Epiphany, the Old Testament, Psalm, and Gospel all bear the theme of "light to the nations." The epistle (1:1-9) includes Paul's greeting which addresses the Corinthian Christians as those "called to be saints together with those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ..." (1:2). The Third Sunday, the other three readings reiterate the theme of "light." In the epistle, at 1:17, Paul writes, "For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel," which offers
an opportunity for correlation. There is a clear relationship among all the readings, including the epistle, on the Fourth Sunday, where God's wisdom is contrasted with human wisdom (1:18-31). Contrasting forms of wisdom again become the focus of all the readings on the Fifth Sunday (2:1-11). On the Sixth Sunday, Old Testament, Psalm, and Gospel direct attention to the Law of God and the imperative to "choose life" (Deut. 30:15-20), while the epistle treats Paul's reflections on the Corinthians' divisiveness as a demonstration that they are "of the flesh" (3:3), which may be a hint that they have not chosen life. One may also find a correlation between the epistle and the other readings for the Seventh Sunday. Here the Old Testament theme (Isa. 49:8-13) is "a covenant to the people." The Psalm (62:5-12) refers to God's action as the only basis of hope. The Gospel (Mt. 5:27-37), from the Sermon on the Mount, records Jesus' words, "You have heard it said...but I say..." The epistle (3:10-11, 16-23) affirms "no other foundation than that which is laid." On the Eighth Sunday, while the other readings set forth the Law and Jesus sets a standard requiring us to "be perfect," the epistle (4:1-5) calls for judgment to be left to God.

The question is often raised by those just beginning to use the lectionary whether it is reasonable/traditional/expected that the sermon derive from all the readings at once. Or, if the sermon is based on one of the readings, is there presumption of some obligation to find a way to demonstrate whatever correlations there may be with other passages? The answer is that the lectionary is not some kind of magic which works only when the formulas are properly invoked! The lectionary is a tool for the use of preachers and liturgical planners. Its use makes possible coherent liturgical planning for each Sunday or festival day, as well as long-range attention to major themes of the Bible and the Christian Year. Use of the lectionary also allows the preacher to preach expository sermons which begin with the text rather than with the favorite themes and programs of the one preaching.

For liturgical coordination, all of the texts for a given day are important. For preaching, it may be illuminating as part of the preparation process to study the relation among the passages
appointed for the day. Indeed, there are instances in which one text unlocks another so well that it cries out to be brought into the sermon. However, to spread one's sermon over several texts more often invites distortion and frustration. Nearly always, one text is enough at a time. Sermons based on a single reading are much easier to follow, and in any case the congregation will not be impressed by the gymnastics sometimes necessary to tie all the readings together in a neat scheme.

**Second Sunday After Epiphany**
*(1 Corinthians 1:1-9)*

In this passage Paul opens his letter to the church at Corinth. Although it is in fact a letter and not an essay, the text is not chatty or casual. In fact, it resonates with reminders of the universal context within which the relationship between Paul and the Corinthian Christians must be understood. Three times, in fact, the word "called" is used: once in reference to Paul himself (1:1a), and twice in reference to the Corinthians (1:2b and 1:9). Paul liked to begin his letters with a reference to his apostleship, and perhaps that seemed particularly important in this case, where his authority had been questioned. We cannot be sure who Sosthenes might have been, as he is not otherwise identified. There is a reference in Acts 18:17 to a Sosthenes who was described as "the ruler of the synagogue" at Corinth. There is no indication, however, that he became a disciple. Whether this Sosthenes may have become a Christian and a colleague of Paul we can only guess.

After the salutation, Paul expressed his gratitude for his sisters and brothers in Corinth and testified to the gifts with which God's grace had endowed them. He mentioned "all speech and all knowledge," which are especially interesting because later in the letter Paul would raise certain questions about the relative value of tongue-speaking (chaps. 12-14) and a certain pretentiousness in human claims to wisdom (1:17, 2:1ff). The apostle affirmed that these gifts had been exhibited as evidence of the Corinthians' response to the gospel (1:6). They were not lacking any spiritual gift while they waited for the day of consummation, when what had been known by faith
would become known directly and publicly. Until that day, Jesus Christ, in whom the church's hope rested, would surely sustain all the faithful, and find them guiltless. How could his friends at Corinth dare to set their hopes so high? Because "God is faithful," Paul writes. And it was this God who had taken the initiative to call the Corinthians into relation with Jesus Christ.

What do you suppose the original readers of this letter might have heard as they read and reflected on these opening remarks in Paul's letter? There was, of course, the sense of commonality, of being at one with Paul and with other Christians even across boundaries of space, holding warmly to one another in a hostile world, while trying hard to trust God to hold them fast until the end. They would have heard stated plainly, but not beligerently, Paul's claim to apostolic authority. They would have heard echoes of Paul's affection for them, as he complimented them on the manifestations of God's grace he had seen in them. With the tact required in such situations, Paul had accented the positive, assuring his readers that he did not question the genuineness of their Christian experience nor their basic integrity. He affirmed his confidence that they would see the fulfillment of that hope first kindled in them as they had responded to Paul's preaching, because "God is faithful...."

Knowing what we do about the writer, the readers, and their relationship with one another; and knowing what affirmations Paul was making here, what steps must be taken next in the direction of a sermon? Although the text can be correlated with the other readings (Isa. 49:1-7; Ps. 27:1-6; and John 1:29-34) and seen in relation to the Epiphany theme of mission to the nations, it is more respectful of the text to deal with it as it stands. It is my custom first of all to read the material that comes before and after the text to be sure that I understand who is speaking to whom and the larger contextual situation. Then I read the text aloud. It is surprising how often reading aloud will draw my attention to some nuance not otherwise obvious. Before consulting any commentaries, I react to the text itself. Using a "brainstorming" technique, I list ideas and associations without censoring them. In the case of this text (1:1-9), I would notice the thrice-repeated word "called." The curious words "sanctified" and "saints" invite some considera-
tion. Paul's expression of thanks for the Corinthians themselves would stimulate some thought about his relationship with them. The emphasis on the sufficiency of gifts might merit reflection. Certainly the closing affirmation of God's faithfulness in sustaining the believers to a good and glad end could not escape examination.

After consulting commentaries (the number of which depends on how helpful the first is, and how well I already know the text), it begins to become apparent which of my first reactions may be sustainable, and which unjustified. Often, surprising emphases emerge in the text. Sometimes, it becomes clear that my reaction to the text has been superficial—perhaps a reaction to key words that figure in some current argument, but have nothing to do with the thrust of the text. Once I feel I know as much about the passage as is reasonable, it is necessary to attempt to state in a single sentence what I hear the message of the text to be. The message of 1 Cor. 1:1-9 might be stated as, *The same God who has called and equipped us all for our life together will see us safely through to a glad end.*

This summary statement grows out of the text as a whole, rather than focusing narrowly on one verse or phrase. It is, of course, possible to build a sermon on a single line of scripture—or, for that matter, on a single word—but to do so almost inevitably obscures the historical situation out of which the text arose. It may not always be possible to do justice to a whole text in a single sermon. Even a coherent text may include one or more "asides" or other digressions which might be profitably followed up, but not while trying to deal with the passage as a whole. The shape of the text, once it is grasped, may provide the shape of the sermon.

Having reached the point of a summary statement, there is yet another step before the outline. This next step requires the preacher to identify with the congregation who will hear the sermon, a congregation in which she or he figuratively sits on the front pew. How can this text be heard? What factors will influence the listening process? What is happening this week in the world? in the life of the congregation? in the preacher's inner world?
The culture in which we live is one in which the accent falls on personal achievement. This is likely to be particularly strong in middle-class Protestant congregations. From infancy on, the culture requires us to engage in a fierce, though often veiled, competition with our peers. Not infrequently religious exhortations are used to urge us on. Even those who experience a good deal of success are likely to feel a certain insecurity. After all, one's eyes are usually fixed on those just ahead, no matter that they may be few, while the many behind are of no great interest. Certainly even ministers of the gospel know something of this insecurity. "Sibling" rivalry frequently distorts our relations with other clergy and deprives us of the collegiality we need so badly. In a society so competitive and achievement-oriented, no one ever feels as though she or he is performing quite adequately, and so our common life becomes infected with a pervasive doubt about our worthiness.

If it will be possible to hear it, the word from the Lord in this passage (1:1-9) may be that that is most crucial in defining our status has already come to us as a gift. Paul addressed the Corinthians (and us, with them) as those "called to be saints." We are, after all, through some process which may be as pedestrian as it is mysterious, those who have been given permission to understand ourselves to be among the ones who are called, made holy, and equipped by "the grace of God." It is, of course, difficult these days even to speak of God, who seems either remote or discredited. And that is why the preacher needs to speak of God boldly and unapologetically. There is a reality wider and deeper than what people immediately perceive. Their intuition leads them to suspect that reality to be so, and it is our job to witness to that reality by naming it. There is a God—no need to argue the point, but only to witness to it—who has called, sanctified, and equipped us, feeble as we are in faith and character. This calling, sanctification (the word needs translating), and equipping comes to us as a gift, astonishingly without favoring (or discriminating against) those best equipped for the competitions of the world. The emphasis falls on God’s movement towards us, whatever our assorted weaknesses and handicaps. We are somebody—individually and collectively—because God has made it so. And
this is as true for the child as for the adult, as true for those whose strengths are known only in private quite as much as for those who are recognized publicly, as true for those who have fallen behind in the competition as well as for the super-achievers.

The same God who has called us has equipped us for our life together. Our church may be few in numbers or undistinguished. The budget may be small, and available talents may not be stellar. Nevertheless, we are "not lacking in any spiritual gift. . . ." As it was true of the hybrid Corinthian congregation, so also is it true for our communities. Whatever is genuinely needed to be the church of Christ in the place where we are, God has supplied.

The preacher may take the opportunity to consider some of the gifts which have been given, confident that in the little community as in the great one, there will be much for which to give thanks, "because of the grace of God which was given you in Christ Jesus, that in every way" the congregation for which you labor has been "enriched in him with all speech and all knowledge--even as the testimony to Christ was confirmed among" them.

The same God who has called and equipped us all for our life together will see us safely through to a glad end. A friend once said to me, "I'm not optimistic, but I'm hopeful." In those enigmatic words he touched the very heart of the gospel, which Paul also has affirmed in his opening of the letter to the Corinthians. When we look around us and gather data and impressions about the state of the world and the drift of modern history, we may or may not be warrantied in being optimistic. The Christian gospel is not anchored either to an optimistic or a pessimistic assessment of the state of things. Whatever the apparent prospects, the Christian hope rests in the promise of God. God's promise, heard in Paul's assurance, is that the Lord Jesus Christ "will sustain you to the end. . . ." What God has begun in us, God will bring to completion. Though there may be set-backs, trials, and lost battles, not even tragedy can nullify God's promise. "God is faithful; by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord." The church, and those who compose it, experience disappointments,
divisions, and displays of bad character; and yet somehow God preserves it and brings us through. The preacher need not erect a doctrine here. It is sufficient to affirm the faithfulness of God's promise and the firmness of God's intention to redeem us.

Third Sunday After Epiphany
(1 Corinthians 1:10-17)

One can imagine the Corinthians listening as Paul's letter was read out loud, and responding warmly to his strong assurances. Then, when the reader reached what we know as vs. 10, the listeners might become aware all at once that Paul was about to address some of the sore points in their common life. "I appeal to you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that there be no dissensions among you..." Can you imagine the congregation stiffening, anxious lest Paul's next words might ignite an open controversy? Or fearful that he might slap on the wrist their particular party? Paul dove right in, reporting that he had learned indirectly (from "Chloe's people") that the congregation at Corinth was divided and quarreling. Chloe's people, who might have been slaves, had told Paul about the factiousness of the Corinthian church. Some there claimed a particular allegiance to Paul, or to Apollos, or to Cephas (Peter). Others apparently eschewed these lesser loyalties and claimed that they "belong to Christ." Whether this latter group actually represented a fourth faction is uncertain.

Did the Corinthians recognize themselves in this description that had come back to them through Paul? What sort of denials, self-justification, and resistance may have begun to surface at this point? Or had they been sufficiently troubled by the deterioration of the life of their little community that they turned in eagerness to hear some word that might heal them in their distress? Paul twice uses the word "brethren"--in verses 10 and 11--as though making it clear that he held them fast in his affections no matter what. Paul asks rhetorical questions: "Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?" Notice that Paul used his own name rather than risk the wrath of those who preferred the
ministries of Apollos or Cephas. Paul had no quarrel with these other Christian leaders. It was the exaggeration of personal loyalties that was dividing the community and distorting the gospel. So, Paul tactfully used a device familiar to many homileticians, naming himself in the negative reference rather than appearing to impugn others. In this way he might minimize the defensiveness of those who would write him off as serving only his own personal interests.

The letter moves on for an aside about the people Paul did and did not baptize. In vs. 16 the reader can detect the stream of consciousness method with which Paul had dictated his letter, because here he recalled as an afterthought that he had baptized the household of Stephanas, the first convert in the area, certainly not to be forgotten or left until last!

Where does the preacher find the most crucial leverage point from which to form a sermon on this text? It would be possible, of course, to create a sermon which leans primarily on one part of the passage. Verse 17, in which the apostle says "For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel...", lends itself to the formation of a sermon in which the preacher might weigh the relative importance of sacraments (at least the sacrament of baptism) as over against preaching.

In part because of differences in taste and temperament, Christians still differ over whether the accent should fall on preaching in such a way that sacraments become secondary or even marginalized; or whether preaching and sacraments need to be more evenly balanced. Where such questions press strongly upon a certain community, they will influence the way people hear a passage. In such a situation, the preacher may feel constrained to focus primarily upon the issue of the relative roles of preaching and the sacraments. That can be a legitimate use of the text. Nevertheless, one cannot form a sermon entirely on verse 17 without including in it an awareness of the larger context: divisions and partisan loyalties in the church. It would be ironic indeed to use this passage as a weapon against those who balance preaching and sacraments differently than we do, in order to score points in a partisan battle!
If the preacher were to summarize the whole passage in such a way as to place the accent on the baptism/preaching issue, a summary statement might resemble this: *It is necessary to distinguish between those who baptize and the Christ whom all the apostles have preached as the source of Christian unity.* The task of preaching this particular sermon still remains rather precarious. Even though Paul has insisted (vs. 17) that preaching was his primary vocation, the passage as such does not definitively settle the larger question of the balance between preaching and sacraments. It may frame the question for a congregation where the issue is somehow significant. Caution would be in order.

Another person preparing to preach might be drawn toward vs. 10: "That there be no dissensions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment. . . ." This verse could provide for a sermon weighing the value of uniformity of doctrine. Obviously, the passage as a whole, with its condemnation of sectarianism, could not support an iron-fisted interpretation of this single verse. Nevertheless, a preacher may choose to accent verse 10 in such a way as to explore the question of the extent to which unanimity of mind is necessary in the church and to consider the limits of diversity. A summary statement which leans in the direction of vs. 10 might be as follows: *In the matter of giving primary allegiance to Jesus Christ, all Christians must be of one mind.*

Because a sermon is limited in scope, the preacher must decide the text's meaning for her or his listeners. This passage clearly deals with dissension and disunity among Christians. While 1:10-17 could easily become the foundational text for a conventional sermon on Christian unity, the crucial context for me is not a question of why United Methodists, Presbyterians, Lutherans, or even Roman Catholics must have separate institutional lives, but rather how can we recognize as sisters and brothers those Christians who belong to churches that make the rest of us acutely uncomfortable. I am thinking particularly of the right-wing and "moral majority" types of churches. In working toward a summary statement, this contemporary issue presses on me most heavily.
When we speak of Christian unity in today’s context, do we simply emotionally excommunicate those we consider to be so far outside our faith and practice that no real conversation or communion is possible? Or is the integrity of the Christian faith somehow bound up with the question of how and where we meet those others who name Jesus as Lord, but whose loyalties seem to us to be badly confused? The issue is complicated and the emotional tension heightened by the fact that while the mainstream churches are in numerical decline, the right-wing churches are flourishing. We find ourselves in a kind of undeclared contest to see whether one group or another may be decisive in shaping the moral values and agendas of the nation. Under such circumstances, where and how might we meet one another?

This almost reflexive antipathy between the right-wing churches and the mainstream churches shapes my reaction to the text. Because that is the pressure I feel as I hear Paul’s exhortations, I will prefer to look at how loyalties to persons and parties may obscure our first loyalty to Jesus Christ, thus obscuring the gospel and discrediting the church. I would state the gist of the passage in the following summary sentence: *Communion in Jesus Christ is of such high priority that loyalties to parties and persons must take a decidedly lesser place.* This summation does not specifically include the "aside" in verses 14-17, in which Paul reflected on his role as baptizer with thanks that such a role had been minimal—not because he depreciated baptism, but because the people were less likely under the circumstances to have confused themselves as being somehow spiritually united with him rather than with the Christ. (In some of the mystery cults, the priest who performed the rites was considered to have initiated a special and paternal relation with those being initiated.) Verse 17 is also a kind of aside to the aside, commenting on Paul's primary commission as a preacher of the gospel, and even on the nature of the preaching task with which he had been entrusted. I call verses 14-17 an "aside" not to diminish their importance, but because they are basically commentary on verse 13c: "Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?" Thus, for me, given the context of unbearable splintering in the Christian community, the
meaning of the text lies primarily in Paul's earnest exhortations to put first what belongs first: devotion to Jesus Christ.

How might the preacher move from text to sermon if the primary weight of the passage is understood to be that "communion in Jesus Christ is of such high priority that loyalties to parties and persons must take a decidedly lesser place"? Perhaps first I would invert the sentence to form an outline that begins with limiting loyalties to parties and persons.

The preacher may not be able to propose possible solutions to the progressive fragmentation of the community of faith, but she or he may at least awaken some persons to the radical seriousness of the problem. It will be a good start if those who hear the sermon are persuaded that they must allow for the possibility that our group's view of things may be questionable from certain perspectives. For example, the followers of John Calvin's thought have spoken of "total depravity." This doctrine has often been misunderstood. In Calvin's own reasoning, the doctrine meant that there was no part of a person which was exempt from the pollution of subjectivity and the service of vested interests. Not mind, will, spirit, or body, nor even the most idealistic and altruistic parts of oneself are exempted. The implication is, as Reinhold Niebuhr pointed out, that people may do the most damage when they set out to pursue the loftiest ideals. It is necessary, then, for persons and groups to bring a certain amount of suspicion even to their most cherished principles and their dearest loyalties. It is particularly urgent to recognize that even when we may be "right" in terms of our theological or moral positions, we may be dangerous to our neighbors if we are without love.

Sectarianism and divisiveness is not only a matter of losing touch with neighbors who read the same Scripture and claim allegiance to the same Lord; it is also a matter of discrediting the gospel of love and reconciliation in a culture where the Christian faith already finds itself in a defensive position. While some say, "I belong to the National Council of Churches," others claim the National Association of Evangelicals, or some charismatic leaders, or "the Bible alone."
There are, of course, even closer parallels to the situation of the Corinthian church. The congregation to whom you preach may be experiencing its own inner tensions. There may be a group whose primary orientation is towards personal piety: Bible study, prayer, healing, perhaps even tongue-speaking. For this group, the great moral questions of our time may be framed in exclusively personal terms: marital fidelity, avoidance of drugs (and maybe alcohol), scrupulous honesty. Others, similarly oriented, may embrace a "social agenda" that includes outlawing abortion; "family issues," including opposition to the ERA and civil rights for homosexuals; and support for prayer in schools. In the same congregation there may be people who are committed to peacemaking, justice for minorities, and issue-oriented ministry. Persons with these varying orientations may be more or less ideological, more or less militant, but they are likely to have in common a veiled contempt for those most different from themselves. The congregation may experience a power struggle, or perhaps the sullen resentment of the out-group who remains within the church for whatever reasons. The denomination and its ecumenical affiliations may be a lightning-rod for this hostility. In such a setting, the "ties that bind" are severely tested. A sermon based on this text might begin by pointing out how natural it is for people to attach themselves to some compatible spokesperson or to a congenial group who reinforce their own biases. Natural it is, but dangerous. Dangerous, because it threatens Christ quite as cruelly as Jesus' contemporary enemies threatened him when he came between them and their "natural" inclinations--to condemn neighbors and shut out the "unclean." Dangerous, because it pushes the inclusive and reconciling Christ into the background and eventually onto the cross.

How, then, does one preach that "communion in Christ" is a higher priority than all other loyalties? Rhetorically, of course, few will be inclined to argue the point. Nevertheless, there are other values at stake which complicate this primary value. There are instances in which some party in the church seems to have so distorted the image of Jesus Christ that the distortion must be publicly denounced. The World Alliance of
Reformed Churches took such a step when it declared itself to be in a status confessionis in relation to the practice and defense of apartheid by some Reformed bodies in South Africa. (This action was taken in 1982 at the Ottawa Assembly. A status confessionis declares that there is a situation at hand which requires a confessional statement, but the precise shape of that statement is not prescribed.) When heresy is clearly present, the church has an obligation to name it as heresy. The purity of the church at times becomes more critically important than its unity.

Most of our divisions, however, even when ideologically or theologically based, are not as dramatic as heresy, but separate us along fault-lines of taste, experience, sociological bias, and education. The search for purity, however, can become distorted when it is fed by the human tendency toward self-righteousness and the love of nursing wounded pride; while the case for holding fast to one another despite differences finds only feeble support, except in Holy Scripture.

Paul’s exhortation "that all of you agree that there be no dissension among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment" is not an insistence on intellectual conformity, but a statement about the priority of Jesus Christ. The Christian people of Corinth (and everywhere else) are to be "united in the same mind and the same judgment" with respect to this one thing: giving to Jesus the priority which is his due. It was in his name that the believers were "called," and in his name they were baptized, and in his name they were given gifts for ministry. And who is this Jesus? In Paul’s appeal to the Corinthians, Jesus appears not primarily as the content of a doctrine, but as One who absorbed hostility without passing it on. (Paul will soon speak further about Jesus Christ, crucified.) The Jesus in whose name the Corinthian church had been gathered and formed into a community is One who spread his arms on the cross and accepted the anger hurled against him, embracing it so that such anger might stop with him. This Jesus is precisely the antithesis of that kind of religiousness that prays for fire to come down from heaven to destroy those "others," whose thinking or behavior are "wrong."
Loyalties to parties and persons must take a decidedly lesser place to that first priority, which is communion in Jesus Christ.

**Fourth Sunday After Epiphany**  
*(1 Corinthians 1:18-31)*

The epistle for the Fourth Sunday after Epiphany is an extended commentary on the last verse from the epistle for Epiphany III (1:17). Although it may seem a digression from the serious theme of disunity, Paul is pursuing a logical line of thought that will eventually return to the main point. Having directed the church at Corinth to Christ as One who commands a loyalty higher than any partisan claim, Paul then began to support his argument with a fuller description of the compelling power of the Christian gospel. In this passage, Paul contrasted God's wisdom with human wisdom, and the apparent folly of the cross with the world's wisdom, which God had exposed as "foolish" (1:20c). The weakness of God, seen in the cross, proves stronger than human strength. In verses 26-30, the apostle argued that the Corinthians themselves illustrated how God had turned the conventional wisdom upside down. God had chosen them, even though they had few of the credentials which are impressive by ordinary standards. There was therefore no cause for boasting, except in giving proper credit to God. The implication, which becomes more explicit in chapter 3, was that no human leader, however appealing, is sufficient to give the faithful any of those things essential to their salvation—but only Christ.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, "wisdom" is sometimes hypostatized and treated as an almost personal agent of God's creative action, similar to the way "logos" (the Word) is used in the prologue of John's Gospel. Here, the apostle is speaking of human "wisdom" in negative terms, as a quality of cleverness and sophistication which leaves God out, or perhaps defines God in terms compatible with human presuppositions. "Wisdom," as Paul uses the word, has an aura of self-deception.

John Calvin, in his commentary on this passage, displayed some concern lest Paul be taken to be anti-intellectual.
Let us, then, take notice, that we must restrict to the special­
ties of the case in hand what Paul here teaches respecting
the vanity of the wisdom of the world—that it rests in the
mere elements of the world, and does not reach to heaven.
(John Calvin, Commentary on the Epistles of Paul the
Apostle to the Corinthians, trans. the Rev. John Pringle
83.)

In other words, wisdom, or being conversant with a variety
of disciplines is not to be despised as long as it knows and keeps
its limits. When it storms heaven, however, it becomes cor­
rrupted by human pretentiousness.

In 1:5 Paul had affirmed that God had "enriched" the Corin­
thian church with "all speech and all knowledge." Was he now
rebuking them for having blown out of proportion the "wisdom"
they believed themselves to have acquired as they learned the
gospel? Was he accusing them, on account of their partisan
divisions, of having allowed themselves to become overly im­
pressed with their grasp of various theories and speculative
ideas? Could there have been present in the Corinthian church
some representation of that species of elitist and mystical
thought called "gnosticism" (gnosis=knowledge)?

In this passage Paul also characterized ways of thinking
which he attributed respectively to "Jews" and "Greeks." Jews,
he said, "demand signs" and Greeks "seek wisdom." Clearly, to
Paul, both "signs" and "wisdom" represented ways by which
human beings dictated their expectations of the divine. In both
cases, persons set themselves up to screen out the unexpected.
When God spoke in an unanticipated way, both Jews and
Greeks (everyone) ignored or scorned the divine Word.

According to Paul, God had spoken in an entirely unexpected
word, the "word of the cross." Those who required God to exhibit
credentials in the form of overpowering actions saw in the cross
only weakness, vulnerability, and the loss of dignity. To them,
the traditional view that the victims of crucifixion were ac­
cursed was incontrovertible. On the other hand, those who
required God to demonstrate the divine qualities that had been
described in their philosophical systems saw in the cross some-
thing intellectually and aesthetically offensive. In no case did the cross satisfy traditional cultural or religious categories for imagining the divine. And yet, Paul affirmed that it was precisely in the cross, with its lack of dignity, that God had spoken in an act of self-definition. Since the cross was an act of God's own self-disclosure, all other images of the divine must be corrected by God's Word in the cross. In the cross God redefined both wisdom and strength.

This whole passage forms a coherent whole, even though Paul continued in the following chapter to expand on his theme of wisdom redefined. The passage is wonderfully powerful and enormously rich, both intellectually and emotionally. It shows us a gospel that runs counter to the conventional wisdom both in Paul's day and in our own. It offers an opportunity to reflect in some depth on the meaning of a gospel which does not merely echo the values and virtues of decent people, but calls them and us to rethink from scratch many basic assumptions about God and matters "religious."

When Paul had established the first Christian community in Corinth in the early 50s, the city itself had been hardly more than one hundred years old. The ancient city had been destroyed by the Romans in 146 B.C. When it was rebuilt, the new population came from all over the empire. A port city, Corinth was an intersection of nationalities and cultures. It had a reputation for being a rough place with low morals. Religions of all kinds proliferated, including a Jewish community whose rights were protected by Roman law. Both public and private life were permeated by religious influences. Communal life, private societies, and family were all touched by religious customs and cultic practices. Those converted to Christianity were torn loose from the patterns of behavior that had connected them to other people and the larger society, and they were frequently thrown into situations that created conflicts of loyalties. The new Christian congregation must have offered a strong sense of community to withstand the centrifugal forces of the surrounding culture, but it included Jew and Gentile, slave and free, as well as persons of diverse class and economic situations. There was predictably a certain instability in a community that embraced persons of such different histories.
and experiences. It is not surprising that the congregation faced serious internal tensions, nor that it had to struggle to define its faith as over against the popular wisdoms of the larger culture.

What would the Corinthian faithful have heard in the words of 1:18-31? It seems to us a rather technical argument, rather heavily intellectual. Yet Paul’s letter reads as though he were preaching. There is a passion here, as Paul quotes scripture (Isa. 29:14), asks a series of rhetorical questions, and exalts the insights given to the called community, which has been gripped by the power and wisdom of God while others find unacceptable God’s most profound word. Also, Paul’s passionate argument directly met one of the problems troubling the peace of the Corinthian church: the apparent overconfidence in their own idiosyncratic speculation which had contributed to their quarrelsomeness. It has always been easy to mistake the gospel for a set of mere concepts, and so also to overrate one’s own grasp of its intellectual content. People tend to be drawn toward the conviction that they are among a special elite. Whether Paul’s argument would be sufficient to induce a due humility among his readers, turning their attention away from the nuances of doctrine and differences in style and toward the crucified Lord, who can say? How can anyone ever know precisely what the effect of preaching is? Those who preach must suspend the need to control the outcome--thus running counter to the entire drift of our culture, which measures everything by the bottom line.

How might one move from this text to a sermon? The difficulty with such a rich passage may be in restraining oneself to something manageable. The passage as a whole might be summarized in the following sentence: God, self-defined in the cross, defies all forms of conventional religious wisdom, and reinforces this defiance by summoning the humble. If this sentence were to become the structure for a sermon outline, the emphasis could be placed on that piece of it which seems most appropriate to the particular congregation and the precise moment: God’s self-definition, or God’s defiance of the conventional religious wisdom, or God’s calling of the humble to make a laughing-stock of the proud. If division or internal divisions
in one's congregation are a problem, the text might be summarized somewhat differently, e.g., God, self-defined in the cross, defies the proud and demonstrates that the source of our salvation lies not in ourselves, but in Christ. "Let whoever boasts, boast of the Lord" (1:31).

A few years ago, on the Dick Cavett Show, the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi said in an interview that "God does not suffer." The God of the conventional philosophical attributes—omniscience, omnipotence, and other "omnis"—certainly does not suffer. But the God of the gospel is, in the person of Jesus, a God who suffers. The God of Jesus Christ is a God who is not only the target of human rage, but also capable of sympathy—of sharing the hurts of the other so intimately as to feel the hurt personally. The God whom we discern in the cross is One whose heart is laid bare. We see in the crucified Jesus God's own self-definition. If God is not a sympathetic presence in every experience of suffering, then where is God? And who would a mere watchmaker God—a sterile, distant God—be to us? God is defined, bit by bit, in all the biblical stories; but in the cross God's disposition towards us is brought into sharpest focus.

Whichever way the preacher may choose to develop the sermon, the theme of God defying conventional wisdom is powerful and enormously important in our social setting. Even within the churches, there is a great deal of conventional religious wisdom which has nothing to do with the gospel. In strongly conservative settings, that conventional wisdom may rely on images of a rule-making and punitive God. In most mainline Protestant congregations, the conventional religious wisdom pictures God as mascot for the prevailing cultural values. This democratic and therapeutic God is conceived in vague, but sentimental terms as possessing a benign indifference masked as forgiveness. American conventional religion is oriented toward conventional respectability and self-redemption based either on good character or the possession of a "good heart" despite one's behavior. Certainly this characterization is overdrawn, but most pastors will recognize in it something familiar. While the cross is a ubiquitous symbol, it is always a struggle for us to discover in it its remarkable significance, which runs against the grain of the conventional.
And what is that significance? The significance of the cross is that the God who is imaged in Christ has stepped into the circle of violence in which human beings pass on hurts one to the other. God in Christ experiences the blows that stem from the rage and frustration that circulate endlessly among human beings, each person and group striking out at others because they feel genuinely aggrieved. God in Christ steps in to interrupt the cycle of rage, absorbing it without passing it on. The God who, in other biblical stories, is the God of power and might, becomes the God who sits among the victims of this world.

What kind of "wisdom" is this that accepts the rage of the generations--directed at one another and also at the ultimate Parent--and hugs it close, rather than let it go flying loose to wound others? What kind of "wisdom" is this, that does not try to adjudicate the justice of human rage against God, but simply, without questioning it, holds it fast no matter how it punctures and drains and devastates? What kind of "wisdom," that refuses to raise a plea of innocence, but swallows the beating and the humiliation rather than deflecting the hostility to another? The wisdom of the cross is the wisdom of a God who sees human beings victimized by their own cruelly circulating anger, and steps in to block it and transform it. To calm and heal the anger of the world costs something, and God has absorbed the cost in the torn body of the crucified and rejected Jesus. Here I am not speaking of the "ransom" theory of atonement, but making a pastoral observation. Whenever and wherever there is reconciliation, there is an emotional and spiritual cost to be paid. One or both parties must assume the cost of humiliation, choking back the instinctive insistence that I, and I alone, am the aggrieved party. In the cross, it is God who assumes the spiritual cost of reconciliation, forsaking all weighing and measuring of relative guilt, and absorbing all the rage without questioning its maturity or its appropriateness. God in Christ sacrifices that which human beings are most loathe to sacrifice: the insistence on some fair and impartial adjudication. God absorbs the anger of crucifiers without pleading for a hearing; without accusing the crucifiers in turn.
God, self-defined in the cross, defies all forms of conventional religious wisdom and reinforces this defiance by summoning the humble. The Christian people in Corinth were a mixed group, most probably including a few people with some social standing. Nevertheless, Paul wrote that "not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. . ." (1:26). The God who defied conventional wisdom had also redefined the criteria for evaluating human worth. "God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong, God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are" (1:27-28). As in Jesus' own teaching, here is another great reversal. Those who have been elevated in God's eyes are those who have had the gift to discern where true wisdom lies--to distinguish God's wisdom from the false and pretentious wisdoms in circulation in society. It seems that, for the most part, it was those without claims to status or distinguishing virtues who had been able to respond to God's call in Christ. Claiming less, perhaps they had less to lay aside. In any case, the logic of the cross had grasped them, and they had been gripped by the spirit of the crucified one. It would be a mistake to glorify the ignorant and the simple as though there were some automatic virtue in being at the low end of the status spectrum. Nevertheless, the wisdom of the cross is accessible to everyone, including the most humble, and may even be easier to grasp by the unassuming person than by those who have accumulated more vested interests or who have informed opinions to defend. The very accessibility of this wisdom of the cross to those of humble status is a rebuke to those who believe that everything good is reserved for one kind of elite or another.

But what hope is there for middle- and upper-middle class people like us and our congregations? Is there any good news here for us? The cross runs counter to all conventional wisdom in that it is the symbol of self-forgetting. On the cross, the energy is directed toward giving, enabling, and healing, rather than toward calculating a personal gain. Is it any wonder that the Christian gospel fails to attract members of a culture mired in individualism and the relentless calculation of one's own best
advantage? The conventional strategy of our society is to position oneself favorably. To seek reconciliation with others so passionately as to set aside one's advantageous position, and absorb the emotional and spiritual costs of it, is a wisdom not recognized in a society where the neighbor is a competitor if not an outright threat.

Nevertheless, the quarrels of the Corinthian church and the quarrels among Christians today, might be transformed were we to discipline ourselves to the kind of self-forgetting passion for reconciliation that we see in the cross. Disagreements might not evaporate, nor issues cease to be critical. But it might be possible for us to hold on to one another better if we were less frightfully possessive of our prerogatives. During his ministry, Jesus told his disciples that they would find their lives only in giving them away. He spoke of turning the other cheek, returning to no one evil for evil. The words are moving, but in the cross they become alive, three-dimensional.

To every class of people, God's wisdom comes as a gift—not an achievement—and deprives people of any grounds for boasting. In fact, those who discern the wisdom of the cross will be moved to repentance—that active turning away from all exaggerated claims about oneself and one's character, in order to turn toward what God offers. At bottom, it is a capacity for repentance which is absolutely critical for human beings, and without that capacity neither native gifts nor status can suffice for wholeness.

Fifth Sunday After Epiphany
(1 Corinthians 2:1-11)

In the reading for the fifth Sunday, Paul described what his personal philosophy had been as he had ministered among the Corinthians, and as he ministered generally. Paul's philosophy of preaching had been to eschew the pursuit of dazzling eloquence. He had put aside any ambition to sway people simply by the power of oratorical skills. Nor had he relied upon an appeal purely to the rational side of those who listened to his sermons. What is "rational" anyway? Isn't what's "rational" always somewhat subjective, resting on what people already
believe to be true about the universe; i.e., conventional wisdom? To begin preaching from the premises of conventional wisdom is to prejudice the message at the outset. Since the gospel defies conventional wisdoms, it has to take its beginning from some other point. For Paul, that point was, as he put it, "Jesus Christ and him crucified." The apostle’s preaching rested not on universally accepted premises or on a rational argument leading to some conclusively demonstrated principle. His preaching began with the telling of a story; not a mythical story, but the story handed on by witnesses. The story Paul resolved to tell already had a framework of interpretation. The story was about Jesus. Those who loved Jesus and his story felt compelled to confess him to be the Christ. So Paul preached not simply about the man Jesus, crucified, but about Jesus Christ, crucified. There was a story and an interpretation of the story’s meaning, which underlay the apostle’s preaching. Jesus’ story was a drama with universal dimensions, and those who loved him concluded that it was the climactic moment in God’s story.

Paul told this story not from a neutral standpoint, but as a passionate advocate. The story appealed to everyone who heard it to form personal judgments. Those who were drawn into the story would find that it questioned their own lives, beliefs, values, and loyalties. To affirm the story required a certain break with conventional wisdom. Paul, in choosing to rely on the story of the cross as the center of his preaching, evidently believed that his method was the most effective way to help persons to free themselves from commonplace prejudices and to reorient the axes of their lives.

In verses 3-5, the apostle reflected on his own trepidations in approaching people for the first time unarmed, so to speak, with conventional rhetorical weapons. "And I was with you in much weakness and in much fear and trembling...." How could Paul have expected a warm welcome for such preaching among Jews, for whom the story of the cross would have come as a kind of indictment of their leaders and for whom the story of a long-awaited but unrecognized messiah had a tragic dimension? How could he have expected a positive reception from gentiles, for whom even the scriptural frame of reference would have been foreign? It may have been that Paul had few gifts as
a public speaker, but he had also been venturing into uncharted territory.

Nevertheless, the existence of the Corinthian church itself was evidence that Paul had wisely conceived his approach to preaching the gospel to them for the first time. Not competing with philosophers, skilled rhetoricians, or purveyors of popular culture, Paul had rested the weight of his message on the story of One whose vulnerability had attracted the hostility of those who had been threatened by the way he had questioned the unquestionable.

"And my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power...." The people who had heard Paul preach must have responded vigorously--some certainly with vigorous rejection of his words, but others with manifestations of intellectual and emotional change, "in demonstration of the Spirit and of power...." Then, in conclusion to this statement of his methods, Paul said that his preaching pointed to the God of Jesus Christ, crucified, rather than to some dynamic speaker or to some clever argument that could have been overturned by another argument, "that your faith may not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God."

Paul's statement about the reasoning that supported his preaching invites others who preach to examine their own presuppositions. What obstacles do we face because our listeners have heard the words and the stories before and inwardly tailor them to fit the conventional wisdoms of our own day? On what do we rest our proclamation? Karl Barth asked and answered (at least for himself) the question whether it was possible to do apologetics, that is to argue persons into believing. His conclusion was that it was not possible--perhaps because merely causing a change of mind is not the same as a conversion touching the whole person; and perhaps because Barth was skeptical that any argument will be sufficient by itself to overcome the obstacles, intellectual or otherwise, with which people may resist the scandal of the gospel.

To those in Corinth who perhaps had made a fetish of "wisdom," perhaps esoteric knowledge held back from all but a few, Paul declared his skepticism. In that way he struck another
blow against sectarian divisions. That which was essential, he said, was available to everyone in the form of the story of "Jesus Christ and him crucified."

Nevertheless, the apostle asserted that "among the mature we do impart wisdom, although it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age. . ." (2:6). If Paul had been writing this passage personally rather than through an amanuensis, or if he had prepared a series of drafts before settling for a final copy, one wonders whether perhaps he might have reconsidered those words. Who are "the mature"? There is a risk here of giving ammunition to that elite which considered itself "in the know" while others fumbled in ignorance. It seems, however, that by "the mature" Paul was referring to all people of Christian faith, contrasting them with "the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away." Who are the "rulers of this age"? The probability is that the reference was to supernatural powers, perhaps associated with the stars and planets. These powers effected human destiny except insofar as God limited them. "This age" is obviously one marked by rebellion against God. The "wisdom of this age" is, therefore, pernicious.

In these verses Paul used the word "wisdom" in several ways. "But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God. . ." (2:7). This wisdom was given in the cross, exposing the distortions of that which ordinarily passes for wisdom. "None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory" (2:8). In verse 8 it is tempting to interpret "the rulers of this age" in political terms, but the gospel accounts of Jesus' ministry saw it as a series of encounters with supernatural powers. Nevertheless, whether supernatural or temporal powers, verse 8 underlined the profound contradiction between God's action in Christ and the whole weight and momentum of "this age," whether from ignorance or outright opposition to God's redemptive purposes. If the "rulers of this age," whoever they might be, had been in harmony with God rather than at odds, then Pilate and Caiaphas and their allies "would not have crucified the Lord of glory" (2:8).
Paul next appears to be quoting some source, probably the Hebrew scriptures, in verse 9. However, although the verse is reminiscent of Isa. 64:4, it is far from an exact quote. "But, as it is written, 'What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him,’ God has revealed to us through the Spirit" (2:9, 10). In other words, what God had withheld from those who demanded objective evidence or who showed intellectual prowess, God had granted to those who love God. The agent of this gift is the Spirit. Here, the apostle passed quickly by the theme of love, to which he would return with great fervor in chapter 13. But in his opinion, there is a wisdom accessible to those who love God which eludes those who seek the eternal with detached objectivity.

The narrative shifts at this point to a discussion of the Spirit, who searches the unknown depths of God and delivers to human beings that which they must know about God and God's disposition towards them. To know "the thoughts of God" is utterly impossible unless God provides such knowledge. Here the epistle reading for the day ends, even though Paul continued to reflect on how God gives a new wisdom through the Holy Spirit. The remainder of this passage (2:12-16) is not included in this appointed reading or in the reading for the subsequent Sunday. It may be that the passage had been cut short in the lectionary because the remaining verses tend to repeat what Paul had said in 2:9-11.

What would the people at Corinth have heard as they read these words of Paul? They would have heard, of course, a rebuke to the "wisdom" party. They would have heard an earnest appeal, once more, to put first things first. They would have heard Paul speaking in personal terms about the principles he had followed in his ministry, and about his anxiety as he had approached them for the first time with his message. They would have heard him return to the theme of God's graciousness, by which God had taken the initiative to provide gifts of knowledge and insight to those who responded in faith. This last would also have served as a reminder of the Corinthians' own limitations, and would have come as a mild rebuke to the pride which had already gotten them into trouble.
The first part of the text (2:1-5) focuses on Paul's mission strategy, based on particular theological commitments. The second part (2:6-11) shifts the attention to the good and saving wisdom which God, by the Holy Spirit, had given to people set off from "this age" by their faith. Where might the preacher find a basis for building a sermon? It might be tempting to borrow from Paul and use the occasion to clarify one's own mission strategy. However, there is a great danger that the preacher may succumb to the allure of turning attention to his or her own struggle to keep faith with the gospel, and therefore to the difficulty of his/her mission (especially among such unresponsive people!). A sermon could be constructed from this text comparing and contrasting the wisdom of this age with wisdom not of this age. (The "wisdom of this age" is the logic of human society, which has a coherent pattern of its own, although it lies outside and often runs counter to the gospel and its themes of self-offering and reconciliation. The "wisdom of this age" is not Christ's wisdom, but it can easily infect the Christian community and alienate it from God's gift of a wisdom "not of this age." ) The text itself follows an orderly line of thought and is not broken up into pieces. The substance of its message might be summed up in a sentence such as the following: Christians are not superior to non-Christians in intelligence or information, but by the Spirit God has given us wisdom insofar as we see to the heart of things in Christ crucified.

My preference is to use the text as a whole in shaping the sermon whenever possible. In doing so, however, the preacher usually will be required to decide what pieces of the text are not essential to the substance of it. For example, in 2:1-11, is it necessary to the integrity of the sermon to deal with the issue of the identity of "the rulers of this age?" Can these references be passed by without puzzling the congregation? If the preacher deals with these references, can it be done without hanging up the sermon on a digression? There are choices to be made. Is the question of the "wisdom of this age" and the "rulers of this age" worth exploring on its own? It may be, particularly if the preacher did not preach from the epistle appointed for the preceding Sunday. It is also possible to structure one's sermon
on the text as a whole without getting lost in definitions of "this age" and its rulers.

If I decided to structure a sermon on the text as a whole, I might form my outline (based on the summary sentence) in one of the following ways:

1) We are not superior to non-Christians in intelligence or information;
2) but by the Spirit God has given us wisdom insofar as we see to the heart of things in Christ crucified.

or,

1) We are not superior to non-Christians in intelligence or information;
2) but by the Spirit God has given us wisdom;
3) insofar as we see to the heart of things in Christ crucified.

The substance of the text might be summarized even more simply: There is a wisdom given by the Spirit which runs against the grain of the wisdom of the world. This summary yields to a clear and simple outline, though it may leave behind some of the richness of the text.

However the preacher decides to structure her or his outline, it would be important to preach the text not simply as the abstract statement of a principle, but to acknowledge the Corinthian context. Without turning attention to the preacher's personal efforts to maintain integrity, one should invite the congregation to experience something of Paul's fearful struggle to keep faith with his apostolic mission. The preacher might set the context, helping the congregation to empathize with the apostle who had an unconventional story to announce in a community which thrived on the sensational. The problem the apostle faced is similar to the problem the Christian church (not just the preacher) faces in the contemporary world. We live in a time of an information glut. Lots of people know lots about lots of things. There is also a segment of our society which thrives on sensationalism; e.g., the National Inquirer, Oprah Winfrey, Shirley MacLaine, Geraldo Rivera. There are many spiritual "experts" in our society and many apparently profound
"wisdoms." The church's message is not an attempt to compete by answering every conceivable question about the nature of the universe or how to order the affairs of society. Nor is it an attempt to appeal to people's curiosity about the next world, or to cater to the natural appetite for plausible spiritual theories. The church's message is framed in a simple story and is told without the use of sophisticated-sounding jargon. Christians have no grounds for claiming superiority to non-Christians whether in intelligence, available information, or even character. We come with no claims about ourselves at all, empty-handed except for this story which has gripped us. That story reaches its climax in the narrative of the cross. Just as conflict seems to lie at the center of every human story, so does it lie at the heart of this one. In this conflict, God has confronted the "wisdom of this age" and/or "the rulers of this age" with an altogether different sort of wisdom: "Whoever would save his/her life must give it away...." God's wisdom so flies in the face of other sorts of "wisdom" that to believe it and learn to act on it is nearly impossible in human terms. However, God reaches out through the Spirit to open those who are willing to be opened to the wisdom straight from God's heart—a wisdom visibly enacted in the story of Jesus on the cross.

If the preacher chooses an outline where the emphasis falls on the Spirit, it would be interesting to explore the question of how any human being can expect to know anything of God. Our society is filled with "authorities" on the divine—everything from television preachers to New Age gurus. Some are prepared to describe God in fine detail. All, of course, make claims of personal revelation. The authority of the gospel is based not on either abstract theorizing about the nature of the divine, nor on personal revelations to lone individuals, but on the action of the Spirit in the community. It is not, for example, to Paul alone that the Spirit speaks, but to Paul in the community of other believers. The Spirit, at work in the apostle and the community, bears witness in the hearts of the faithful—of those who "love" God (2:9). The Spirit does not reveal the answers to hypothetical questions, but rather discloses the heart of God. The Spirit speaks to our inner being to testify to self-giving love as the truth that lies at the very heart of things. Partisans may not
claim the authority of unique personal revelations about speculative matters. The testimony of the Spirit is given to the whole community, and that directs us to sacrificial love, as made visible in the particular event of the death on the cross of this Jesus of Nazareth. This testimony does not form an elite cadre of persons with special "insiders'" knowledge, but empowers similar self-giving love, bonding with others far and near, and breaking down barrier walls. The testimony provided by the Spirit gives no basis for setting one person or group off from another or elevating one above another. It is energy for living towards a cross-shaped life--a life not organized to horde its energies or defend special privileges, but a life which strengthens and supports other lives.

Bibliography


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A biography is the story of a life, more or less, in which the more consists of how much we want to make of it and the less the recounting of the essential facts. Paul M. Minus has provided us with a minimalist version of the life of the great Protestant theologian and social reformer, Walter Rauschenbusch (1861-1918), and in so doing makes us wonder all over again whether it is really possible to write satisfactory biographies of our spiritual fathers.

Minus tells us that he considered four options in writing the biography: the intellectual, the social and historical, and the contemporary, meaning by this last the implications of Rauschenbusch's work on current issues. He chose a fourth option, which he characterizes simply as focusing "upon the life of Walter Rauschenbusch," (xi) Ah, if only it were that simple. If only we could tell our life stories without the intellectual and social and contemporary impacts. But the sad truth is that when we try to tell a simple life story, the ellipses as well as the inked-in portions reveal our own judgment about what that life really was and what we think of it.

What Minus thinks of Rauschenbusch is that he was a wonderful person, that he faithfully reflected the integrity of the faith that he proclaimed, and that although he had some limitations he left us with a "compelling vision" of how religious faith impels the church to change society. This is a genealogical biography, that is, it presents a basic narrative about Rauschenbusch, providing details on his personal and family life and describing his education from a pious German baptism into a liberal reformer. Although Minus occasionally interjects his own subjective judgments, for the most part the narrative offers a purportedly objective view of the man.

Those who believe in freedom of speech cannot gainsay the right of Minus and his publisher to give us Rauschenbusch as paterfamilias, Rauschenbusch as beloved teacher, Rauschen-
busch as a civic reformer manque. My question is what difference it makes unless you happen to be one of those doddery liberals who still thinks the original program possesses coherence and power and that all that has gone wrong is the ascendance of a mean-spirited conservatism. Our basic questions about the Social Gospel, about liberal religion, and about Rauschenbusch as a sort of eminence grise of the whole movement go unanswered, despite some tantalizing portrayals within the life story.

Example: Minus tells us that during the period when he was pastor of the Second German Baptist Church in New York City, in the 1890s, Rauschenbusch joined with other American Baptists in a "Brotherhood of the Kingdom." This was an intrachurchly group that devoted itself to the Kingdom of God "in order to reestablish this idea in the thought of the church, and to assist in its practical realization in the world." (86) The group met periodically to read and discuss papers, and it eventually included women, non-Baptists, and persons outside the United States.

It was here that Rauschenbusch began to articulate his "compelling vision." In his writing for the Brotherhood, Rauschenbusch explained his reasons for focusing on the Kingdom of God: in orthodox pietism, salvation had been reduced to an individual conception, the Kingdom was understood as a future state only, and the Kingdom was considered a possession of the church with no reference to the rest of society.

Essentially Rauschenbusch at this time conceived of the Kingdom as "a perfect humanity on earth, living according to the will of God." (89) He saw it as gradual in its coming but was clearly thinking in historical terms. The Reformation focused on Paul's teaching about justification, but what was needed for the contemporary situation was the recovery of Jesus' teachings about the kingdom. This recovery would touch all of life—it would, in today's jargon, be "holistic," because it would extend from the spiritual to the political and would embrace "the redemption of humanity."

Minus then goes on to tell us that Rauschenbusch received criticism for this conception from religious conservatives, par-
particularly on the question of millenialism, but also on the ques­tion of socialism.

Stop right here: Were these in fact the critical questions for the kind of enterprise that Rauschenbusch was contemplating? Religious liberals have for a hundred years or more been engaged in a running firefight with conservatives over these kinds of questions, but are they the bedrock questions? They seem instead to reflect the tendency of Protestantism (and perhaps other forms of Christianity) to become obsessed with the whipped cream and not the pudding.

For although we can appreciate Rauschenbusch’s attempt to recover the metaphor of the kingdom of God, and the difficulties that he must have faced given the state of New Testament and church historical scholarship in his day, it is less easy to understand how he could have been distracted and placed his energy in what are really side issues.

Minus moves us on, however, like the guide in the museum who wants to get the crowd away from its fascination with the crown jewels and on to the display of decorative arts and ephemera. Rauschenbusch declared himself a socialist but not a member of the party, and he participated in the New York City movement for reform that included Carl Schurz, Theodore Roosevelt, and Samuel Gompers. This recitation entails only a few paragraphs, and then we move into the story of Rauschenbusch’s marriage, his call to the Rochester seminary, and other matters.

Can we reasonably expect a biographer to tell us more than the record bears out? Supposing that this intriguing bit of the Rauschenbusch story has been mined for all of its essential worth, ought we to ask for anything more?

Not if the incident was highly original or even unique, such as Luther’s insight into Paul, or Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s martyr­dom. These kinds of unusual events are like lodestars that shine in the dark and we compare them to other human events only at the risk of diminishing them, or drawing them down to a lower level.

But if the incidents draw their inspiration from other, similar human events, if they occur because they are manifestations of historical precedents or contemporary phenomena, then we
have a right to ask the biographer to show how the events that transpired in the life of a given subject are different or similar or in any way distinctive. As it happens, we have good reason to suspect that the Brotherhood of the Kingdom was very much like some other efforts in Protestantism to relate the New Testament reality to one’s own time and world. There have been numerous efforts to establish small communities that would embody the eschatological community of faith and obedience, all the way from Anabaptism to the Wesleyan Holy Clubs to Bonhoeffer’s own experience with a closed community. And much of the program of German scholarship in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was devoted to clarification of the primitive Christian movement, including its socialism.

Why didn’t the movement of Rauschenbusch and his colleagues succeed in a more lasting way? What was different about it, and what did it contribute to his development? What seems to have happened is that Rauschenbusch was so wedded to a bourgeois life-style that he could not conceive of a way to create a communal form for the Social Gospel. For all his dwelling on the Kingdom in the New Testament, he appears not to have connected it to the early church’s socialism. In addition to a possible failure of the intellect, it seems to have been a failure of nerve, which Minus almost but not quite says in describing how the Rauschenbusch family benefited monetarily from association with John D. Rockefeller. Which brings us right back around to one of the continuing controversies in the Social Gospel and religious liberalism: how do we connect these spiritual and religious forms to political and social reality?

A certain nagging question persists about this historical period, one that the examination of a figure like Rauschenbusch might help to answer. Was there a fatal flaw in the whole conception of liberal Christianity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries? Was the scholarship of that period, as represented by the German geniuses, Ernst Troeltsch, Adolf von Harnack, Johannes Weiss, and others—simply too limited in its understanding of early Christianity, or were their insights valuable stepping-stones to later work that more firmly estab-
lished the liberal Christianity of the Niebuhrs, Paul Tillich, the process theologians, and the theologians of liberation? Should we still be seeking the "essence of Christianity" or formulate the theological quest in other terms?

This question is not unrelated to Rauschenbusch's own ability as a scholar and his understanding of Jesus, the New Testament, and historical and ethical relativities. Rauschenbusch wrote Christianity and the Social Crisis, his groundbreaking work, in 1907. Albert Schweitzer published The Quest of the Historical Jesus in German in 1906. Johannes Weiss published The Kingdom of God in the Preaching of Jesus in 1892, a work that Theodore Jennings has said signalled the end of post-Enlightenment theology, particularly the fascination with the Kingdom.

Normally we would not expect an American thinker to take account of a German work until several years after the German publication or a translation into English. But as Minus tells us, Rauschenbusch was fluent in German and kept returning to Germany for research. In fact he was in Germany in 1891, where he wrote a long paper on "Revolutionary Christianity" that contained many of the ideas that later emerged in his books. On another trip to Germany in 1907-08, Rauschenbusch actually met von Harnack and became acquainted with the Albrecht Ritschlian school of thought in German theology.

With all these connections, and with many other American influences (which Minus barely mentions), why didn't Rauschenbusch get beyond his "Spirit of Jesus," "building the Kingdom," and other such limited notions? Minus wants to stick to his program of "just the facts," but it is a peculiarly impoverished notion of the facts that abstracts them from the contexts that give them the most weight and meaning. The result is slightly maddening, since Rauschenbusch was at the scene of the crime, so to speak, but his "mouthpiece" will not let him tell us what he knew.

That it is possible to combine narrative with broader intellectual and social events is amply demonstrated by some recent biographies. W. Jackson Bate, for example, showed in his biography John Keats, how this poet, who died at the early age of 25, developed very rapidly in his understanding of technique
and image. One can imagine without having read it how limited were the personal happenings in the life of a 25-year-old. Yet Bate wrote a commanding biography of some length because he involves the reader in understanding Keats' development as a poet. Whether we consider ourselves poets or not, we are led to understand a great deal about it as Bate weaves his tale. Today we have only the lightest concern in Keats' personal life, which like that of Immanuel Kant and many other influential figures, perdured in placid nondesperation. What we want to know is what made Keats a great poet, and that is what Bate shows us.

A similar work, and one more pertinent to the Rauschenbusch biography, is Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography, by Richard Fox. Fox confesses to being a historian and not a theologian, and he does tell readers a great deal about Niebuhr's personal life—not all that interesting, either, unless you happen to be a Niebuhrophile. But despite his disclaimer not to know about theology, Fox engages readers in Niebuhr’s fascinating evolution into one of Protestantism’s great thinkers by showing how he developed intellectually; and not merely intellectually but in relation to the social and political events of his time.

Here again, what we want to know about Niebuhr is not what his relations were to his father or what his sexual habits were but how he came to be a theologian. In short, to read about Niebuhr is to read about theology. The two are inseparable.

Which ought to be the case with Rauschenbusch as well. Here is a man whose reputation has received some terrible blows in the years since his death in 1918, not the least of which was the devastating criticism coming from Reinhold Niebuhr. Yet the "Social Gospel" continues to be argued over in every church paper across the land. Not only that, Martin Luther King, Jr. expressed his debt to Rauschenbusch and called Rauschenbusch one who "gave to American Protestantism a sense of social responsibility that it should never lose" (x). There was something that Rauschenbusch did that enabled him to exert a continuing force throughout American Protestant Christianity. What was it?

Who was Walter Rauschenbusch—popular interpreter, practical theologian, church historian, social reformer? Unless the
biographer summons us into the realities that make the person qua person, we are left wondering.

Walter Rauschenbusch was born to certain parents, he went to school, he married, he had a career, he had children, and then he died. That is the story of this biography. And that story is pretty close to what most of us experience. We might call this the isomorphic way of writing biography. Every part is equal to every other part. This evenness of proportion ends as dispor-

Consider this: Rauschenbusch was born the year the American Civil War began. He died the year the First World War ended, not so coincidentally the year that Karl Barth published Der Romanbrief. Reflect on the bridges that went under the water during that period and what it must have been like to have participated in such monumental changes.

Consider further the paradoxical situation in contemporary theology, where the narrative and aesthetic forms have become captive to an increasingly conservative school of thought, one that insists we focus on language and community and religion per se, rather than social justice, church renewal, and apologetics. Given this frame, biography seems to fall within the scope of the former enterprise. Yet so many of those to whom we look for inspiration and insight, like Rauschenbusch, spent their lives moving outward toward prophetic reform.

Minus' work is in a sense a genuinely postmodern work: it makes no distinctions between one thing of value and another. In a culture where the assassination of a president is depicted alongside Brillo pads and Hollywood flack, this type of writing fits in. The meaning of superficiality and of profundity come to resemble each other. So there is a "more" to this biography, after all, one that is slightly disingenuously present, making us wish that the moreness of its nonjudgmental murk could have been covert and the lessness of its theological steel could have flashed more overtly.

Charles Cole
Executive Secretary for Research and Planning,
United Methodist Board of Global Ministries, New York.
Index to Volume 9

AUTHORS

Aspan, Paul F., 1:104-108
Bailey, Lloyd, 4:49-65
Byars, Ronald P., 4:66-97
Carter, Kenneth H., Jr., 3:3-9
Crenshaw, James L., 3:30-43
Cole, Charles E., 4:98-104
Darr, John A., 1:98-100
Dunfee, Susan Nelson, 2:52-74
Fishburn, Janet F., 1:63-77
Gallaway, Craig, 3:64-79
Goodhue, Thomas, 1:96-98
Hamilton, Nell Q., 1:63-77
Jennings, Theodore W., Jr., 3:10-29
Jones, L. Gregory, 2:16-34
Kopka, Gustav, 1:19-35
Langford, Thomas A., 2:3-15
Lee, Geoffrey, 1:100-104
Lee, Jung Young, 1:36-47
Mafico, Temba J., 2:35-51
Moore, Mary Elizabeth, 3:44-63
Mosser, David, 2:106-109
Nelson, Richard D., 2:93-105
O'Day, Gail R., 1:78-95
Park, A. Sung, 1:48-62
Ritchey, Russell E., 4:3-20
Royster, James E., 2:75-92
Sargent, James E., 4:21-27
Smith, Joanmarie, 1:3-18
Strong, Frederick J., 3:100-110
Wilson, Paul Scott, 3:80-99
Wyatt, Michael, 4:28-48

TITLES

"Biblical Perspectives on Aging," 4:49-65
"Claiming the World of the Risen Jesus: Easter Lections from the Gospel of John," 1:78-95
"Conciliar Theology: A Report," 2:3-15
"Ecumenism, Commitment, and Evangelism," 1:3-18
"God and the Heroic Prophet: Preaching the Stories of Elijah and Elisha," 2:93-105
"Messianic Exegesis: Christological Interpretation of the Old Testament in Early Christianity," 1:98-100
"Nineteenth Century Religious Thought in the West," 3:100-110
"Poverty and Punishment in the Book of Proverbs," 3:30-43
"The Role of History in The Discipline," 4:3-20
"The Russians and Americans are Coming—Together," 1:19-35
"Search for a Theological Paradigm: An Asian-American Journey," 1:36-47
"Secretarian Division and the Wisdom of the Cross: Preaching from First Corinthians," 4:66-97
"The Theology of Han (The Abyss of Pain)," 1:48-62
"To Love As God Loves: Conversations with the Early Church," 1:100-104
"Toward a Recovery of Theological Discourse in United Methodism," 2:16-34
"Tradition, Faith, and the Africa University," 2:35-51
"Two Funerals: A Meditation on Grief and Faith," 4:21-27
"The Style and Substance of United Methodist Theology in Transition," 3:44-63
"Wesley's Preferential Option for the Poor," 3:10-29
"What Must I Believe to Recover? The Spirituality of Twelve Step Programs," 4:28-48
"Women in Ministry: Estrangement from Ourselves," 2:52-74
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