

Fondren Lecture
Perkins School of Theology
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Scripture Alone, Yet Never Alone: The Trajectory of United Methodist Doctrine

Forgive me please for a brief personal note. I have a thirty year continuous relationship of active study, teaching and service at Perkins School of Theology and Southern Methodist University. I spent fifteen years here as a student, five years as an adjunct instructor, seven years as a full-time faculty member, and now three years a trustee. I have a great debt to this school, its faculty, students and staff.

I can mark periods in my life by the persons who have served this school as dean—Joe Quillian, Jim Kirby, Robin Lovin, Bill Lawrence. I still have conversations with my teachers and colleagues on the faculty—in my head if not in person. Schubert Ogden said this, but John Deschner said that. Dick Heitzenrater provided this corrective to Albert Outler's over-generalizing tendencies. Zan Holmes taught me this, and Danna Fewell's exegesis of that text brought me these new understandings. Joerg Rieger saw this in Wesley. Chris Harrison as an M.Div. student in my evangelism class gave me a crucial insight. David Maldonado helped me see our context in a new way, and Billy Abraham's critique showed me where I could improve my thinking. Perkins School of Theology has truly been an alma mater, a nourishing mother for many years and I continue to be blessed by its people. This Ministers' Week is, in part, paying attention to one of the formative influences in the life of this school, of the United Methodist Church, of the whole Christian Church, Albert Cook Outler. He was certainly a powerful influence on my life. I am deeply honored to be included in the conversation.

The focus of this lecture is to ask two questions. First, What has been gained in the development of United Methodist doctrine in the last 40 years? Second, what are the doctrinal challenges facing the Church today?

Let me review some of the doctrinal developments that have transpired during since the merger of The Methodist Church and the Evangelical United Brethren Church in 1968.

- Appointment of The Theological Study Commission on Doctrine and Doctrinal Standards in 1968
- Interim report of the Study Commission names the Wesleyan quadrilateral in 1970
- Adoption of Part II of BOD in 1972 surrounding “Landmark Documents” with “Historical Background” and “Our Theological Task”
- Controversy about primacy of scripture, the appropriate shape of the so-called Wesleyan quadrilateral, and pluralism, 1973-1988
- Rise of feminist liberation theology and critique of liturgical language about God
- Rise of other liberation theologies
- Separation of United Methodist doctrine as a separate course at United Methodist seminaries in 1984
- Spread of Disciple Bible Study (1987) and the Walk to Emmaus (1981) which popularize Wesleyan theological categories
- 1988 General Conference revises Part II of the Book of Discipline under the leadership of Richard Heitzenrater and Bishop Earl Hunt
- Publication of 1989 hymnal with a new official version of inclusive language for God and humanity and a Wesleyan theological organization of hymns
- Publication of variety of dissertations and books about Wesley, UM doctrine, and the Wesleyan theological tradition including *The Works of John Wesley* and multiple dissertations and books about Wesley’s understanding of scripture, tradition, reason and experience.
- Sophia controversy over the publication of *Wisdom’s Feast: Sophia in Study and Celebration* by Susan Cady, Marian Ronan, and Hal Taussig (1989) results in formal charges in 1993 against Cady and Taussig
- Re-imagining Conference, 1993
- Formation of Confessing Movement, 1994
- Decline of Consultation on Church Union
- Adoption of a mission statement by the 1992 General Conference and its replacement with a different one in 1996 saying that the mission of the church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ.
- A 1998 publication of the General Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns entitled “In Search of Unity” identifies Christology, ecclesiology, and the authority of Scripture as key issues threatening the unity of the United Methodist Church.
- In 2001 United Methodist Communications brands United Methodism in the Igniting Ministry media campaign as having “Open Hearts, Open Minds and Open Doors.”
- At the 2004 General Conference there is open discussion of schism, followed by a unity resolution mentioning the UMC’s mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ.
- In 2007, the Council of Bishops sponsor a Convocation of Extended Cabinets where they teach The United Methodist Way

How are we to understand such a messy history? Consider the state of the church's doctrine in 1970 as seen by the Commission:

In the acute and deepening crisis of authority in the churches, our sense of tradition (such as it ever was!) has been gravely weakened and with it has come a drastic erosion of force of external standards of every kind. On the other side, there is an escalation of contrariety and discord in the contemporary theological debate, with no dominant perspective in sight or prospect. There is a widening chasm between clergy and clergy and between clergy and laity, with respect to theological "opinions"—and essentials too! The primacy of Scripture can no longer be taken for granted; the pietistic appeal to "Christian experience" has undergone existentialist mutations; the rule of reason is under protest. Activism is "in"; tradition is "out." And in every case, the inevitable tension between any bid for consensus and the priceless values of intellectual and spiritual freedom is more tightly drawn than before. Truth can neither be established nor maintained by majority vote or the imposition of official "standards." And all this poses a double threat to *any* new "creedal statement" that might claim enforceable authority. It would take a miracle to turn out one that was fully *representative* and, besides, it would take yet another miracle to produce one that was actually relevant. The likelier fate for any less miraculous "statement" would be that it would either be rejected or more probably ignored.

And yet, our present theological predicament as a church—a church newly united, wracked by the travails of renewal, committed to the ecumenical enterprise and yet also insecure in its own self-confidence—is quite literally untenable. We can scarcely identify ourselves to ourselves; we baffle our separated brethren. Our Wesleyan heritage goes largely unclaimed; the mingling of Methodist and EUB traditions has barely begun. Our doctrinal norms are ill-defined and anomalous. We have a *Discipline* that is generally clear on questions of administrative polity, but blandly vague with respect to doctrine and doctrinal standards. The simplest proof of this is the frequent mention of "*our* doctrines," with no definition of what the phrase refers to. It is as if, once upon a time, an earlier generation understood it all and then forgot to tell their children—who never asked."¹

The interim report continued in the next section,

What, then, is the wisest course in so ambiguous a situation? Your Commission has no formulary answer and no delusions about its present or prospective influence in the church. Its hope and confidence rest, rather, in the possibility that if the Methodist people were somehow aroused to the challenges

¹ "An Interim Report to the General Conference: An Invitation to the United Methodist Church." The Theological Study Commission on Doctrine and Doctrinal Standards. 1970, 18-19.

and dangers of this crisis and were enlisted in the cause of *doctrinal renewal* as a re-inforcement to all our other commitments, there still remains in our present resources the potential for renewal and progress.²

The various factors described in the Commission's 1970 assessment meant that the process was going to be messy, long and inefficient. It has been messy, uneven, and inefficient. It is possible that whatever progress there has been is imperceptible to most of the participants. Professional theologians bemoan the sloppy distinctions made and the compromises that come from a church governed ultimately by committees and conferences of laity and clergy. Leaders bemoan the slow pace of change. Activists on all sides bemoan the ways in which the other side has won a particular point they should not have won. Many pastors and laity will bemoan the time spent in theological conversation, asking about its relevance to the urgent mission of evangelism, spiritual formation, leadership development and action for social justice.

I am suggesting a different picture. What has transpired in the intervening 40 years is the doctrinal development and progress. The newly adopted "Historical Background" in 1972 said, "By the same token, there is likewise general agreement that The United Methodist Church stands urgently in need of doctrinal reinvigoration for the sake of authentic renewal, fruitful evangelism, and the effective discharge of our ecumenical commitments. Seen in this light, the recovery and updating of our distinctive doctrinal heritage—'truly catholic, truly evangelical and truly reformed'—takes on a high priority."³ (With minor changes, the same wording is still in Part II of the current *Book of Discipline*.⁴) The church that adopted such an optimistic statement had a number of characteristics which made a long, messy and inefficient process inevitable. It was and is committed to discernment by conferences made up of preachers and laity rather than discernment by bishops and theologians. The largest part of the newly formed church had not undergone serious doctrinal work for 160 years. Fortunately, the Evangelical United Brethren part had just completed a revision of its Confession of Faith six years before merger, bringing to

² *Ibid.*, 20.

³ *Book of Discipline, 1972*, 49.

⁴ *Book of Discipline, 2004*, 59.

the united church a much more modern statement. By 1972 the United Methodist Church was already undergoing the first phase of the culture wars that wracked all mainline denominations for the rest of the century. The typical Wesleyan emphasis on both knowledge and vital piety, expressed here as a commitment to academic excellence as well as practical relevance meant that the process of making doctrinal decisions would be complex. Given all of these characteristics, it appears quite understandable that only a small amount of progress has been made in four decades. (It would be an interesting study to compare the processes of doctrinal development in different Christian Churches. Some, of course, claim to have no authoritative doctrine at all and so all of the developmental processes are informal and hard to describe. But one might argue that more hierarchical churches such as the Episcopal and Roman Catholic have equally long, messy, and inefficient processes of development.)

What has been gained in our understanding of United Methodist doctrine in the last 40 years? Four areas can be identified. First, The United Methodist Church has authoritative doctrine. In 1972, this was not a given. The statement approved overwhelmingly by the General Conference that year was internally inconsistent. It distinguished between a “confessional principle” and a “conciliar principle,” suggesting that the pioneers of the Methodist and EUB traditions rejected confessions in favor of “the collective wisdom of living Christian pastors, teachers and people. . . to guard and guide their ongoing communal life.”⁵ The statement continued later, “the *Articles* and the *Confession* are *not* to be regarded as positive, juridical norms for doctrine, demanding unqualified assent on pain of excommunication. They are and ought to remain as important landmarks in our complex heritage and ought rightly to be retained in the *Discipline*.”⁶ Hence, the doctrinal standards were placed in section 3 of Part II and labeled “Landmark Documents.” I once heard Albert Outler describe his understanding of this term. By “landmark” he said he had in mind the buoys in the Mississippi River which guide the pilots of

⁵ BOD, 1972, 40.

⁶ BOD, 1972, 48.

riverboats. They know that to violate the markers is to wreck one's ship, and so freedom of navigation is always to be construed as freedom within the markers. Others characterized the way in which "landmark" should be construed as the flagpole one salutes prior to embarking on a journey for new, uncharted territory. As one journeys, the landmark quickly fades into the background and disappears.

In a crucial phrase in "Our Theological Task" the 1972 statement said, "Since 'our present existing and established standards of doctrine' cited in the first two Restrictive Rules of the Constitution of The United Methodist Church are not to be construed literally and juridically, then by what methods can our doctrinal reflection and construction be most fruitful and fulfilling? The answer comes in terms of our free inquiry within the boundaries defined by four main sources and guidelines for Christian theology: Scripture, tradition, experience and reason."⁷ Since 1972 the Church has come to a more consistent understanding of its doctrinal position. The statements about not having a confession of faith and doctrinal standards not being taken "literally and juridically" could not be maintained in the debate. When the 1988 statement was approved, all such statements were removed. The 1972's statement affirming theological pluralism as a principle was particular offensive to many and was removed prior to 1984.

The result was greater clarity about the relationship between the church's doctrinal standards which are to be taken seriously and are enforceable. More importantly, the requirement that seminaries offer separate courses in United Methodist Doctrine meant that teachers had to decide what should be taught in such a course. For many years here at Perkins the requirement to study doctrine had been considered as being met in the systematics course of the middler year. That is how I met the requirement. In 1984 for the first time it was offered as a separate course only because the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry required it to be separated. None of the faculty wished to teach the course, and I (a third year Ph.D. student) was asked to teach it. Teaching United Methodist doctrine under the incoherent and inconsistent 1980 *Book of*

⁷ BOD, 1972, 75.

Discipline was an interesting challenge. As I designed the course, I sought to help the students understand the internal contradictions in the Church's contemporary statements. Soon after that, the Commission on Doctrine and Doctrinal Standards was appointed with Bishop Earl Hunt as chair. Dick Heitzenrater, then on the Perkins faculty served as vice-chair and the chief drafter for the report that eventually was adopted as the revised Part II of the 1988 *Book of Discipline*. Teaching United Methodist doctrine became immeasurably easier from 1988 on. There is such a thing as United Methodist doctrine, its contours can be specified and its teachings can be summarized. Since the publication of my *United Methodist Doctrine: The Extreme Center* in 2002 there has been only a small amount of discussion about the shape of United Methodist doctrine presented there. The reaction can be described in three ways. First, the small quantity of discussion once more exhibits the United Methodist trait of avoiding explicit doctrinal discussion. Theologians, both professional and pastoral, prefer doing theology without the constraints of official church teaching. Others prefer action to reflection and thus do not pay attention to either theology or doctrinal development. A second reaction has come from those who object to decisions made by the General Conference and think that United Methodist teaching should be different than it is. They do not suggest that I have misrepresented the teaching of the church, but that the church has somehow gotten it wrong. To some of them I have suggested they get elected to General Conference and attempt to persuade the delegates to decide our doctrine differently. So far there has been little change since 1988. The third type of reaction has been affirmation, suggesting that the formal and material characterizations of United Methodist doctrines are basically accurate. Briefly, I argued there that United Methodist doctrine claims to be shaped by three levels: constitutionally protected standards of doctrine as defined by the General Conference, contemporary statements of the General Conference, and liturgical expressions. Materially, I have characterized the ten texts in these three levels as containing a specific body of teachings about the triune God, Scripture, and the way of salvation.

The point I wish to make today is that the church has come to understand that it has doctrinal commitments. A comment made to me by a student in 1985 is much less likely to be heard today. We were eating dinner at a district clergy dinner. He had already finished my doctrine course and he said to me, "I was a Southern Baptist in college. Do you know why I became a United Methodist?" "No," I answered. He said, "The United Methodist campus minister told me that if I became United Methodist, I could believe anything I wanted to and drink beer." On a more significantly intellectual response, Schubert Ogden wrote a review of the 1972 doctrinal statement in the Perkins Journal where he argued that the text of "Our Theological Task" showed strong tendencies toward doctrinal indifferentism. The developments of the last forty years have made such judgments much less likely.

A corollary of this understanding is a distinction cogently expressed by Mr. Ogden and contained in the 1988 revision of "Our Theological Task." According to the current book of Discipline, doctrinal affirmations "guide the church" Theology is critical reflection upon doctrine. Both are important. Theologians of all sorts need the freedom to critically reflect on the Christian witness of faith in all its forms and to help the church be more and more truly catholic, truly evangelical, and truly reformed. We are a pilgrim people seeking God's will and guidance to become more fully the body of Christ which is both our gift and our destiny.

At the same time clergy have a sacred obligation to preach and maintain the Church's doctrine. Public dissent from doctrine is no small thing, and when the doctrines in question are close to the heart of the gospel, what Wesley scholars have been calling essential doctrines, the more serious does it become. In a globalizing, multi-cultural and multi-religious world, clarity about the doctrine and identity of the denomination is essential to fruitful evangelism and action for social justice. Doctrinal integrity is an essential component of our unity and our missional effectiveness, and more attention should be paid to it. How the church lives out its dual commitment to doctrinal integrity and theological innovation has been and will be an important concern for the foreseeable future.

The second development is the awareness that Scripture is never alone. Years ago I began outlining a book entitled “Scripture alone, yet never alone.” It arose out of my study of John Wesley’s conception and use of Scripture, and fit the paradigm of holding contradictory ideas in tension that seems to fit so much of Wesley’s theology. Textually, it is exemplified in Wesley’s famous claim to be “homo unius libri”—a person of one book, that is Scripture—followed a few paragraphs later by his citation of Homer’s Iliad in the Greek. In preparation for this lecture, I ran across one of Dr. Outler’s essays where he quotes the work of Jaroslav Pelikan. In the formative years of the work being done on Scripture and Tradition, Pelikan said cogently that the Protestant watchword of *sola Scriptura* should be replaced with the awareness that *Scripture numquam sola*—Scripture is never alone.

One of Outler’s greatest contributions to United Methodist doctrine was his leadership of the Commission which proposed the so-called Wesleyan quadrilateral as a list of sources and norms for the theological task. This history of the quadrilateral in its first version, poorly formulated and self-contradictory as it was and with its tenuous roots in Wesley has been chronicled in many articles and books since 1972. I continue to believe that, properly understood and properly used (I acknowledge many difficulties in both of these areas) this description of theological method can and should serve the church well.

The 1988 statement makes it clear that this is not an equilateral. Indeed, the whole notion of sidedness implied in the name quadrilateral inevitably denigrates the authority of Scripture. Hence, I prefer the formulation “Scripture alone . . . yet never alone.” Scriptural interpretation should always be accompanied by the proper use of tradition, reason and experience. This method presumes that one has come to clarity about the general tenor of the whole Bible, which is provided for the United Methodist Church by Wesley’s sermons and notes on the New Testament. There should be not doubt about the Church’s commitment to the authority of Scripture. The quadrilateral should be seen as methodological commentary on Articles V of the Articles of Religion and IV of the Confession of Faith. These documents are our constitutionally

protected standards of doctrine which no other statement of the Church's magisterium (that is the General Conference) may contradict. However, we have come to understand in the twentieth century that Scripture's authority is always mediated by the ongoing tradition of the church, and that our God-given rational faculties and the experience of the Holy Spirit's guidance all will inevitably shape our reading of written revelation. Scripture is the inspired Word of God. At the same time, there are twenty centuries of the Holy Spirit's guidance of scriptural interpretation which are also relevant to how we live the faith and teach "the faith once for all entrusted to the saints."⁸ There are people in the United Methodist Church for whom that statement represents constraints they wish did not exist. There are also those within the church whose understanding of Scriptural authority lacks any appreciation for the processes by which the text came to exist in its present form and the on-going traditions that have shaped their own exegetical habits.

This is a methodological approach, not a substantive replacement for all of the teaching in the doctrinal standards and contemporary statements. No one should say "I don't believe the teachings of the Nicene and Apostles' Creeds. Instead, I believe the quadrilateral." This is a category mistake of substituting methodology for substance. But that has not kept it from happening.

Instead, the quadrilateral helps us clarify that United Methodist doctrine is our community's way of reading Scripture. When we talk about the triune God, when we recite the Creeds, when we speak of the way of salvation, when we argue for women's rights and against racism, this is our reading of the word of God for our time. The historic questions bishops ask ordinands are absolutely crucial.

Have you studied the doctrines of The United Methodist Church?
After full examination, do you believe that our doctrines are in harmony with the Holy Scriptures?
Will you preach and maintain them?⁹

⁸ Jude 3.

⁹ BOD 214, ¶327. See also p. 204, ¶321d for a slightly different text used with deacons in full connection. For the presumed universal usage of these questions for elders and since 1996

Three elements of these questions are noteworthy for this subject. Scripture is our ultimate authority and nothing should be preached or taught that is contrary to Scripture. Articles V and IV are fundamental to our faith. At the same time, the questions make reference to “our doctrines” which are contained in specific acts of tradition—Articles, Confession, Sermons, Notes and General Rules—developed by forefathers and foremothers in the faith and now taken as our way of interpreting Scripture. Those who join the covenant community of the ordained make a solemn and sacred promise to preach these doctrines and also to maintain them. I will have more to say about the maintaining process later.

Another of Albert Outler’s contributions which remains enshrined in our current doctrinal statements is the need for ancient formulations to be “transvalued.” One of the Outler commission’s first contribution in this area was a resolution of intent passed by the 1970 General Conference and subsequently renewed. It notes that some of the Articles of Religion, originally composed in the polemically heated days of the Reformation and could be construed as “anti-Catholic.” The work of Vatican II raises the question of whether the condemnations still apply to the Roman Catholic church today. Bi-lateral dialogue between the World Methodist Council and the Roman Catholic Church through its Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity has raised the question of whether the condemnations issued by the various parties of the Reformation correctly understood the positions held by the others. The recent signing of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification by the World Methodist Council (where we agreed with the declaration previously signed by the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation) should indicate that there is far more doctrinal agreement between us than the Articles of Religion would lead one to believe.

The Commission’s strategy was to leave the doctrinal standards unchanged, but to provide a contemporary commitment to interpret them “according to our best ecumenical insights.” Such an approach indicates that we know that past formulations may be inaccurate or

for deacons as well, see footnote 10 on p. 214.

outdated, and it offers the possibility of contemporary re-interpretation. This resolution allowed a prompt response to the ground-breaking ecumenical overtures of the Second Vatican Council. Because of the structure of United Methodism's doctrinal standards and the protection given them by the Restrictive Rules, it would have been impossible for United Methodism to have voiced a positive response that was more specific than this. Yet, our deepest commitments to ecumenism would have been violated had we not responded in some positive manner.

However, it has been thirty-eight years since that first response. The approach of holding on to ancient teachings while adding to them contemporary interpretations made sense at first, but becomes increasingly problematic over time. The General Conference should now find a way to give more concrete expression to the meaning of "our best ecumenical insights" and the recent agreement on the doctrine of justification provides an excellent opportunity for progress. Toward the end of this lecture I will again highlight the need for revision of the Articles and Confession, and caring for these anti-Roman articles is one area in need of attention.

The doctrinal controversies, discussions and especially the 1988 revision of Part II have led to much greater clarity about the shape of United Methodist doctrine. Part of the internal inconsistency of the 1972 statement was the way it described the doctrinal standards. It said that we are not a confessional church—a claim patently false for a denomination with two confessions protected by its constitution. It claimed that they were to be neither interpreted juridically nor legally enforced—another claim patently false when any clergy person could be expelled for "disseminating doctrines contrary to our standards of doctrine."

After the 1988 revision, the basic insight of transvaluation was preserved with most if not all of the blatant inconsistencies removed. Sections 1, 2, and 4 of Part II (namely, Our Doctrinal History, Our Doctrinal Heritage and Our Theological Task) are now clearly subsidiary to the constitutionally protected doctrinal standards. As such, they should be seen as commentary upon, and contemporary interpretation of those more basic texts. In the same way, all of United

Methodist doctrine should be understood as our commentary upon and contemporary interpretation of Holy Scripture.

This approach of transvaluation has a two advantages. It maintains clear and explicit connection with the denomination's founding documents and insights. Those who wish to understand the basic teachings of our church are sent back to those texts to study. At the same time, new issues have arisen and new ways of addressing old issues have been developed, and the contemporary statements give an important, contemporary interpretation to the founding documents. It is fruitful, both in structured teaching situations and in the church's discernment processes to explore the various ways of expressing the church's understanding of the truth.

In addition to the problem of anti-Catholic bias in the doctrinal standards, two other major problems loom with this way of structuring our doctrine. The first is the priority that is too often given to the most recent formulations while ignoring the more foundational and more authoritative standards of doctrine. William Abraham's *Waking from Doctrinal Amnesia* chronicled the ways in which the methodological approach of the quadrilateral and the openness to innovation expressed in "our Theological Task" often were substituted for the foundational teachings of the standards. While every doctrinal statement is open to misinterpretation and abuse and probably will be so treated, the church ought to so shape its teaching as to minimize the opportunities for misunderstanding.

Another problem is the status of the third level of contemporary doctrine—our liturgy and hymnody. When we publish a liturgy, what force should be accorded to its words? When we publish a hymnal, do we intend to teach the views expressed by the hymns contained in it? How should we understand the liturgical practice of a congregation that claims to be serving communion but offers no prayer of great thanksgiving and makes no mention of the triune God? I believe the official liturgies and hymnody of our church are a form of official doctrine, but it is unclear what the church intends to teach in such texts. Is there any requirement in the United Methodist Church that our sacramental practice make use of official liturgies? If not, what does

that mean for the force of this form of official doctrine? I have suggested that our liturgy and hymnody is actually more powerful in shaping the mind and practice of the church than the doctrinal standards, but this most powerful form is also the least intentional in terms of its content. The same is true for the doctrinal expressions of United Methodist Communications. The power of “open hearts, open minds and open doors” to shape the thinking of United Methodist clergy and laity, and to shape how the outside world perceives our version of the Christian faith. A church whose public message makes little reference to God, Christ, sin, salvation still has a long way to go in shaping the doctrinal content of its evangelistic message.

Another problem in the structure of our doctrine, arising from the decision not to revise the older statements, is that the sixteenth century language used in the Articles of Religion and their unnecessarily sexist expressions obscure the message they seek to communicate to modern audiences. Just as the King James Version of the Bible was revised, so the Articles of Religion and Confession of Faith should be revised as well. The problem with such a revision, of course, is how far one ought to go. Should one simply remove antiquated words and find more inclusive language? Once a study commission is formed and the questions of the text are on the table, what aspects are left untouched? I am sure that such questions were considered by Albert Outler and the commission he chaired, and they determined that the method of transvaluation was the best course.

However, this raises the question of how well equipped we are for doctrinal development in the future. Before addressing that I wish to discuss four major issues which are not adequately addressed in our current teaching.

The most pressing of these is ecclesiology. Broadly speaking, this debate takes three forms in the life of our church. The first is the challenge of internal unity. Explicit discussion of schism at the 2004 General Conference bought out into the open ideas which had been discussed by liberals and conservatives in more private ways for years. American Christians in the nineteenth century found many ways of dividing their churches. In the twentieth century

mainline churches found ways to merge and mutually recognize each other while a growing number of non-denominational congregations and parachurch organizations made this official ecumenical movement more and more irrelevant. Thus, for many United Methodists, the interminable debates about issues of human sexuality, reproductive rights and obligations, inclusive language and other divisive issues have led many to weariness of fighting and the desire to leave for less combative communities.

Why stay together? As divorce become more common in marriages, so splitting a church seems a natural solution to some. For the vast majority of United Methodists, however, splitting the church is the last thing they want. Even many activists on both sides want the church to stay together, hoping to win the undivided whole to their position. What is needed today is a clear articulation of why we should stay together and what are the requirements for unity. I have addressed this by suggesting that Christian churches in general and United Methodists in particular are bound together by their doctrine, discipline and mission. Our genetically determined over-emphasis on discipline and mission and under-emphasis on doctrine served us well as long as there was a real if not explicit doctrinal consensus. That consensus disappeared in the middle of the twentieth century and must be achieved again in the twenty-first.

The second ecclesiological problem relates to the world-wide nature of the United Methodist Church. We are one church with worshipping congregations on four continents in over thirty-eight countries. Almost thirty percent of our members live outside the United States. What is it that holds us together as a church? Clearly there are regional variations. United Methodism in California has characteristics that differ from congregations in Texas which are different from the Europeans who are different from those in Ivory Coast who in turn are different from the Philippines. Even within one annual conference like those I serve in Kansas there are wide variations. What holds us together? The church is currently seeking to decide what aspects of its life can appropriately vary from one region to another. It is structured as a United States church with a few regional outposts, a reality which is increasingly becoming out of date. There are deep

ecclesiological issues to be decided in this discussion. The Council of Bishops and the Connectional Table have sent a list of constitutional amendments and a proposal for further study on the world-wide nature of the church to General Conference. The proposals presume that the unity of a world-wide church is maintained through doctrine, discipline and mission. It suggests that specifying what regional variations are allowed will be a key to maintaining a unified, world-wide church.

Another way our ecclesiology is a challenge for us is our on-going involvement in the ecumenical movement. We are constitutionally committed to ecumenism, and in Albert Outler's day hopes were high for organic unity. Since that time ecumenical organizations have fallen into disfavor and grown weaker. Bilateral dialogues have continued and shown promise of significant achievement. Yet what does it mean to be in full communion with two different churches who are not able to be in full communion with each other? What would it mean for the United Methodist Church—a world-wide denomination—to enter into full communion with the Episcopal Church in the United States which may not be in full communion with the Anglican church of Nigeria? As Albert Outler, John Deschner, J. Robert Nelson and other theologians of the 1960's and 1970's die, what United Methodists will carry on with the hard work of ecumenical theological engagement? In addition to identifying a new generation of ecumenically competent theologians we need better vehicles for carrying on the work that has begun.

With regard to our teaching on social justice, whose contemporary statements are contained primarily in the "Social Principles" and the *Book of Resolutions*, two challenges face us. First, the *Book of Resolutions* has taken on the character of a hodge-podge of responses to a mind-numbing variety of issues. One issue may get addressed multiple times. This is the inevitable result of a process driven by the petitions sent to General Conference and the work of committees writing and revising texts in short periods of time. Given the process used, it is amazing that we have as much coherence as we do. Surely there might be a way of seeking a body of teaching that has more coherence and greater impact on the audience we are trying to

reach. One way of doing this would be a closer tie between our teaching on particular issues and the doctrinal standards and scriptural exegesis which give rise to those conclusions.

At the request of the General Conference, the Council of Bishops is currently engaged in drafting a new version of its teaching document “In Defense of Creation.” Since only the General Conference can speak for the whole denomination, when we produce our text in 2012 I hope that the General Conference will consider adopting it as the official teaching of the whole church.

While our doctrine gives a great deal of support for the ministry of evangelism, it is weak in helping our people understand the evangelistic task in a multi-religious world. What is our theology of evangelism when approaching those who practice another religion? Should we evangelize Mormons? Muslims? Wiccans? Atheists? Once again our Wesleyan standards offer some help, but it is quite inadequate for the mass movements of people in a technologically sophisticated digital culture.

I am restating and strengthening a proposal I made at the end of my book on United Methodist doctrine. There I noted the inadequacies of our current texts and their need of revision. Tonight I want to suggest that we need to move toward a revision of these texts which ought to take place sometime in the next twenty years. My request is based a crucial paragraph near the end of section 2 of Part II of the *Book of Discipline*. It says,

The United Methodist Church stands continually in need of doctrinal reinvigoration for the sake of authentic renewal, fruitful evangelism, and ecumenical dialogue. In this light, the recovery and updating of our distinctive doctrinal heritage—catholic, evangelical and reformed—is essential.¹⁰

As a bishop, I am charged with the responsibility of asking “how are we doing on this task?” While I have noted progress over the last forty years, I am one of those leaders who is dissatisfied with the pace. I suggest that sometime after 2016, the church appoint an official commission on doctrine similar to those on which Albert Outler and Richard Heitzenrater served. We will not be ready to undertake this task until a number of conditions have been met, most

¹⁰ *Book of Discipline, 2004, 59.*

notably the resolution of the world-wide nature of the church. In addition to the resolution of that ecclesiological task, we must gain even more understanding of the Wesleyan tradition and the heritage of the Evangelical and United Brethren traditions. Finishing the publication of *The Works of John Wesley*, while not essential, would be a significant resource for this effort. Further ecumenical reflection would be helpful as well.

This commission would have a number of tasks. At the very least they should be asked to undertake an updating of the contemporary statements of the General Conference, notably sections 1, 2 and 4 of Part II. It seems reasonable that a thorough review every 25-30 years would make sense. But I also believe that a revision of the Articles of Religion and Confession of Faith are also necessary. This is much more difficult, and the Outler Commission was wise to refrain from the task. However, the revision of sexist language, archaic language and anti-roman Catholic language could be a bare minimum of changes to be made. I understand that the Restrictive Rules require that such revisions receive widespread acceptance throughout the annual conferences of the United Methodist church. But I also believe that the exercise is absolutely necessary if we are ever going to realize the promise of doctrinal reinvigoration which we have been holding out for forty years. Whether a more substantive revision of our doctrinal standards is attempted should be an open question. The ways in which the work of Vatican II transformed Roman Catholicism and the adoption of the 1996 mission statement is transforming United Methodism today should be instructive about how attention to doctrine, although messy, inefficient and frustrating can yield major improvements in a church's witness for Christ.

We still lack the corporate capacity for doctrinal reinvigoration. Despite the picture of progress which I have painted to describe the last forty years, we United Methodists could be doing much better. A number of years ago Dick Heitzenrater and I proposed a Commission on Theological Dialogue to assist the Council of Bishops in its teaching role. While it was endorsed by the 2000 Faith and Order Committee of General Conference, it got tangled up in floor debate and was eventually referred to the General Council on Ministries, a sure path to oblivion.

By calling for such a study commission to be formed at the proper time, I hope I am carrying on a goodly heritage in which Albert Outler was so prominent. It was my second semester at Perkins, the spring of 1978. I did not take the prescribed course in moral theology which the admissions office told me I should take. Instead, I enrolled in Dr. Outler's course in Wesley and the Wesleyan tradition. It was a life-changing semester. I was twenty-three years old. On my way to becoming a fourth generation United Methodist preacher. Billy Abaraham has referred to Rebekah Miles and myself as genetic Methodists. Yet, I was one of those children for whom the tradition had been lost. Either the older generations had forgotten to tell me the stories or I was not willing to pay attention.

I walked into the lecture room on the second floor of Selecman Hall and Albert Outler told me who I really was. It was like the song by Charles Fox and Norman Gimbel, popularized by Roberta Flack's performance. He was

Strumin my pain with his fingers
Singin my life with his words
Killing me softly with his song
Telling my whole life with his words

Albert Outler had a grasp of the Christian tradition in general and the Wesleyan tradition in particular. For a generation of us his commitment to the teaching of the Christian faith with the highest of academic standards and the best of contemporary expressions inspired a generation of younger scholars and church leaders. The task he undertook is not completed. We face new challenges which were not his, but we also can benefit from all that he and others bequeathed to us. We must help the church to see as far and as clearly as it can. And if we see farther than others have done, we must remember that we are standing on the shoulders of giants. I am grateful for Albert Outler's ministry. As John Deschner said at Outler's memorial service, let us remember in Christ, Albert Outler.

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