

From Pluralism towards Catholicity?

The United Methodist Church after the General Conference of 1988

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The United Methodist Church is the most widespread Protestant denomination in the United States. It is also perhaps the most accommodating. Statistically, it is in decline, both in absolute membership figures and as a proportion of the population. While the flexibility of Methodism helped it to grow, overstretching appears to have led to such a loss of contour that there no longer exists a sufficiently coherent identity to attract and retain many new adherents. In recent decades, "inclusivism" and "pluralism" have become formal ideological substitutes for a true catholicity which is always both substantive and qualitative. At the General Conference of 1988, there were a few signs--no bigger maybe than a man's hand--that the Church is coming to that awareness of its own predicament which is the human precondition for acceptance of a divine renewal.

It is a matter of the faith, which comes to expression in the teaching of a church and its worship. The two most important documents before the General Conference in St. Louis were therefore the Report of the Hymnal Revision Committee and the Report from the Committee on our Theological Task on "Doctrinal Standards and our Theological Task." That the proposal of a new hymnbook should have aroused popular interest is no surprise, for the Christian people has always maintained at least a lingering sense that the liturgy is the place where the faith is signified. Less expected, given the reputation and modern self-understanding of Methodism, was the attention shown before and at the Conference to the revision of the statement on doctrine and theology in the *Book of Discipline* of the United Methodist Church. In both matters, this represented, not only formally but (as we shall

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see) substantially, something of a return to Methodist origins. The early Methodist Conferences of Mr. Wesley with his preachers were much occupied with "what to teach." And Methodism "was born in song": John Wesley considered that his definitive *Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People called Methodists* of 1780 contained "all the important truths of our most holy religion, whether speculative or practical,...a distinct and full account of Scriptural Christianity." We need perhaps to see what happened in the intervening years in order to make a recovery of identity desirable.

Liberal Methodists like to cite Wesley's dictum that "we think and let think." They forget that this magnanimity was confined to "opinions which do not strike at the root of Christianity."¹ Wesley distinguished between opinions and *doctrines*. The doctrines *essential* to Christianity included "the Three-One God," the deity and redeeming work of Christ, original sin, repentance, justification by faith and sanctification. When, in his *Letter to a Roman Catholic* of 1749, Wesley set out "the faith of a true Protestant," he followed the Nicene Creed for its content ("the faith which is believed"), and he showed the attitude and act of faith ("the faith which believes") to consist in trust and obedience towards the God who is so confessed. In his generous sermon on *The Catholic Spirit*--"If thy heart is right with my heart, give me thy hand"--Wesley made clear, as in other writings, that Deists, Arians and Socinians did not meet the conditions. Wesley explicitly rejected "latitudinarianism," whether of a doctrinal or a practical kind. How, then, did Methodism fall into the indifferentism which has increasingly marked its later history?

Robert E. Chiles offered a perceptive interpretation in *Theological Transition in American Methodism 1790-1935*.² He traced a shift "from revelation to reason," "from sinful man to moral man," and "from free grace to free will." I would put it briefly this way: What had been secondary poles in a Wesleyan ellipse--"reason," "the moral character," and "free will"--took over from the primary poles, in subordinate relation to which alone they find their proper place in a Christian understanding of the human condition and divine salvation--"revelation," "the sinful condition," and "free grace." Methodism thus both helped to shape and, even more important, allowed itself to be shaped by an American culture that was already subject to the strong humanistic influences of an--at best deistic--Enlightenment. The distinctive Christian message was being lost.

Constitutionally, Methodism retained as its "doctrinal standards" the first four volumes of Wesley's *Sermons*, his *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament* and the Twenty-Five Articles of Religion adapted from the Anglican Thirty-Nine. At the union of the Methodist Episcopal Church and the Evangelical United Brethren in 1968, the Confession of Faith of the latter and the Wesleyan standards were judged "congruent" within the new United Methodist Church. Methodist academic and bureaucratic theology, however, had come to bear a more and more tenuous relation to the official standards. Prompted in part by the self-examination that the 1968 union had made

necessary, the Church undertook to clarify the continuing status and function of its doctrinal standards as well as what was to be expected of theology. Following the work of the Study Commission on Doctrine and Doctrinal Standards, the result is seen in paragraphs 68-70 of the 1972 *Book of Discipline*. First, the "historical background" of the official standards is described, with an admission of "the fading force of doctrinal discipline": "By the end of the nineteenth century, and thereafter increasingly in the twentieth, Methodist theology had become decidedly eclectic, with less and less specific attention paid to its Wesleyan sources as such."³ Then the "landmark documents" were laid out. Finally, "our theological task" was set forth. It was this third section which became, in the 1980s, the object of most controversy.

The 1972 text spoke of "four main sources and guidelines for Christian theology: Scripture, tradition, experience, reason." Although the term is not used there, these four became known (fleetingly, one hopes) as the "Methodist" or "Wesleyan Quadrilateral." Scripture is said to be "primary," and the functions of the four are differentiated: there is a "living core" of "Christian truth" which--the 1972 text apparently wishes to affirm in continuity with the United Methodist "pioneers"--"stands revealed in Scripture, illumined by tradition, vivified in personal experience, and confirmed by reason." But there is such a stress on the "interdependence" and "interaction" of the four that--as the popular image of the quadrilateral both expresses and encourages--they have been perceived as placed by the 1972 text all four on an equal footing. There arose from the "evangelicals," but not from them alone, a call for clearer recognition of the normativity of Scripture. Thus the fifty pastors--by no means all conservatives but rather most of them traditional Methodists--who in December 1987 issued the Houston Declaration, spoke of "the confusion and conflict resulting from the ambiguity of the present doctrinal statement" and reaffirmed "the Wesleyan principle of the primacy of Scripture." The "primacy of Scripture" is doubtless to be understood analogously to Wesley's designation of himself as "a man of one book": his being *homo unius libri* makes Scripture not so much the "boundary of his reading" as "the center of gravity in his thinking."⁴

Meanwhile, the Committee on our Theological Task, appointed from the General Conference of 1984, was hard at work in preparation for the (quadrennial) General Conference of 1988. Its report made a structural move to emphasize the special place of Scripture: a section on "The Primacy of Scripture" was followed by one which took "Tradition, Experience, and Reason" all together, without dignifying each by a heading that might appear to rank them severally with the Scriptures. A strong direct statement was made on the Scriptures as norm and nourishment of the Church:

United Methodists share with other Christians the conviction that Scripture is the primary source and criterion for authentic Christian truth and witness. The Bible bears authoritative testimony to God's

self-disclosure in the pilgrimage of Israel, in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Spirit's constant activity in human history, especially in the mission of early Christianity. As we open our minds and hearts to the Word of God through the words of human beings inspired by the Holy Spirit, faith is born and nourished, our understanding is deepened, and the possibilities for transforming the world become apparent to us. The Bible is sacred canon for Christian people, formally acknowledged as such by historic ecumenical councils of the church....Our standards affirm the Bible as the source of all that is "necessary and sufficient unto salvation" (Articles of Religion) and "the true rule and guide for faith and practice" (Confession of Faith). We properly read Scripture within the believing community, informed by the tradition of that community. We interpret individual texts in light of their place in the Bible as a whole....

With only a little retouching, that text was to stand in the version finally adopted by the General Conference. The most notable change was the insertion, after the first sentence, of this:

Through Scripture the living Christ meets us in the experience of redeeming grace. We are convinced that Jesus Christ is the living Word of God in our midst whom we trust in life and death. The biblical authors, illumined by the Holy Spirit, bear witness that in Christ the world is reconciled to God.

As successive drafts of the Report of the Committee on our Theological Task had become available, there was some attempt in the press to align the controversy with that among Southern Baptists on the inerrancy of Scripture; but it is clear that that was not at all the issue for United Methodists. Much more important was the fear expressed by some that the new statement would place unnecessary and unacceptable constraints upon theological work. Thus John Cobb of the Claremont School of Theology, in an article for *The Circuit Rider* of May 1987, wanted to "keep the quadrilateral"; and the faculties of the Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C., and of the Iliff School of Theology in Denver signed like memoranda.

At the General Conference, treatment of the report was entrusted to the Legislative Committee on Faith and Mission, under the chairmanship of Dr. Thomas Langford of Duke University. As we have seen, the strong statement on the normativity of Scripture is maintained; but sensitivity is also shown to the concerns expressed by those theologians who were most anxious that fixity⁵ be avoided:

In [the theological] task Scripture, as the constitutive witness to the

wellsprings of our faith, occupies a place of primary authority among these theological sources. In practice, theological reflection may also find its point of departure in tradition, experience, or rational analysis.

The last sentence quoted there was in fact reintroduced from the 1972 text. Further, the description of the differences allowed by the “catholic spirit” of Wesley and Methodism was extended to read “forms of worship, structures of church government, modes of baptism, or *theological explorations*” (though the Wesleyan distinction as to “all opinions *which do not strike at the root of Christianity*” is retained).

Apart from one or two Promethean touches about creativity, the final text has managed to state the “critical,” “constructive” and “contextual” nature of theology in a way that acknowledges the properly active human role in redemption without on the whole falling into the Pelagian temptation which perpetually besets Methodists:

Our theological task is both critical and constructive. It is *critical* in that we test various expressions of faith by asking, Are they true? Appropriate? Clear? Cogent? Credible? Are they based on love? Do they provide the church and its members with a witness that is faithful to the gospel as reflected in our living heritage and that is authentic and convincing in the light of human experience and the present state of human knowledge? Our theological task is *constructive* in that every generation must appropriate creatively the wisdom of the past and seek God in their midst in order to think afresh about God, revelation, sin, redemption, worship, the church, freedom, justice, moral responsibility, and other significant theological concerns. Our summons is to understand and receive the gospel promises in our troubled and uncertain times....

Our theological task is *contextual* and *incarnational*. It is grounded upon God’s supreme mode of self-revelation--the incarnation in Jesus Christ. God’s eternal Word comes⁶ to us in flesh and blood in a given time and place, and in full identification with humanity. Therefore, theological reflection is energized by our incarnational involvement in the daily life of the church and the world, as we participate in God’s liberating and saving action.

Tradition, experience and reason are each given their own heading in the final text. Tradition is viewed in a preponderantly positive way, though with a recognition that “the history of Christianity includes a mixture of ignorance, misguided zeal, and sin. Scripture remains the norm by which all traditions are judged.” Experience is given a largely confirmatory role: the authors

claim that we should be following Wesley in looking for confirmations of the biblical witness in human experience, especially the experiences of regeneration and sanctification, but also in the “common sense knowledge of everyday experience.” My own greatest worry concerns the uncritical confidence which, after a nod towards the mystery of grace, the text places in “reason”:

By reason we read and interpret Scripture. By reason we determine whether our Christian witness is clear. By reason we ask questions of faith and seek to understand God’s action and will. By reason we organize the understandings that compose our witness and render them internally coherent. By reason we test the congruence of our witness to the biblical testimony and to the traditions which mediate that testimony to us. By reason we relate our witness to the full range of human knowledge, experience, and service.

There follows a further brief concession, this time to “the limits and distortions characteristic of human knowledge.” But I cannot help recalling how much the modern sociology of knowledge has shown us to be governed by our “interests”—and remembering the insistence of the Christian tradition upon the human will as the perpetrator and victim of our fall.

Although the 1988 text recognizes that “all Christians are called to theological reflection,” it clearly sets the individual effort within the churchly community. Gone, certainly, is the glorification of “pluralism” in which the 1972 text indulged itself. Gone, too, is the most unfortunate confusion made by the 1972 text between doctrine and theology. The new document makes abundantly clear that the theological endeavors of individuals and schools are to take place upon the solid base, and within the stable framework, of “our doctrines.” The constitutionally protected texts are no longer labelled mere “landmarks” as they had been since the *Discipline* of 1972. Whereas “pluralism” risks having no center and no edges, true catholicity has a firm substantive center which makes the edges both rather easier, and yet perhaps also slightly less important, to define.⁷

One major doctrine that had appeared under threat in the Report of the Committee on our Theological Task as it came to the General Conference was that of the Trinity. (This is not the place to establish systematically how utterly vital the doctrine and reality of the Trinity is to Christian faith. That was already done by the councils of the fourth century and the theological labors of Athanasius and Hilary and the Cappadocians. Here there is, in principle, ecumenical agreement. Wesley shared in it, amid all the questionings and debates of the eighteenth century.) In what may have been a concession to the liberals or progressives in return for a stronger emphasis on the primacy of Scripture, the report nowhere used the (allegedly sexist) trinitarian name of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. (The advocates of pluralism

usually follow the axiom familiar in liberal and progressive politics: *pas d'ennemis à gauche!* For their part, orthodox trinitarians cannot treat the doctrine as merely optional.) The cited "Standards of Doctrine" did, of course, use the trinitarian name, dating as they did from earlier times; but as to *what the committee itself wrote*, it would *almost* have been possible to read it in a Sabellian sense. That is the inadequacy of the "Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer" formula, which an early draft had seemed to countenance. When the Houston Declaration stated that "God's richly personal being cannot be defined merely in functional terms," it was echoing the perception of John Wesley that "the quaint device of styling them three offices rather than persons gives up the whole doctrine."⁸ In what may prove to have been its most significant single gesture, the Legislative Committee on Faith and Mission reintroduced the scriptural and traditional Name: "With Christians of other communions we confess belief in the triune God--*Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.*" The formulation found the approval of the General Conference. This leaves room for the document to make proper use of the verbs of creating, redeeming and sanctifying, without their exclusive appropriation to particular trinitarian persons. In a similar move, the General Conference has now made the *Discipline* specify that candidates for ordination "are ordained by the bishop, who will use the historic language of the Holy Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" (paragraph 432). (In a related area, the General Conference rejected a proposal to reword the Preamble to the "Social Principles" in the *Discipline*--"We, the people called United Methodists, affirm our faith in God our *Father*, in Jesus Christ our Savior, and in the Holy Spirit, our Guide and Guard"--so as to read "Creator." It was no doubt the progressive reluctance to call God "our Father" which, perhaps subliminally, caused the Committee on our Theological Task to downplay, when stating "distinctive Wesleyan emphases," the category of adoption, which is a major soteriological figure for Wesley. In strictly trinitarian terms [where the Father is the Father of the Son], the substitute formula favored by some--"Creator, Christ, and Spirit"--has neo-Arian implications. As the Houston Declaration succinctly points out, "Christ and the Spirit are not mere creatures.")

With that, we have moved into the liturgical realm, and it becomes appropriate now to move on to the Report of the Hymnal Revision Committee to the 1988 General Conference of the United Methodist Church. It is first to be noted that the baptismal services there all use the Apostles' Creed, address the prayer over the water in full trinitarian form, and give the sacramental formula "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." Similarly, in the services of Word and Table, all the complete forms of the great thanksgiving over the bread and wine are fully trinitarian in address.

Popular attention was most focused, in characteristic Methodist fashion, on the hymns which constitute the great bulk of the proposed new *Hymnal*. Some cynics said that in giving way to the outcry against the proposed omission of

“Onward, Christian soldiers,” the Hymnal Revision Committee was ensuring it had a free hand to make other, less provocative but more significant, decisions in a liberal or progressive direction. In point of fact, the committee has proceeded with wide consultation and considerable expertise, and the results are, on the whole, admirable. The new hymnal will be more Wesleyan and more catholic than at least its two predecessors. Again, a little history is in order.

Throughout the nineteenth century the official hymnals of Methodism remained strong repositories of the Wesleyan tradition, containing hundreds of hymns composed and edited by the Wesley brothers--even while competing in practice with the products of the camp meeting. With the twentieth century, however, liberal opinions took over the official hymnody. The nadir was reached with the hymnal of 1935, which, of course, then served the Methodist Church over the middle third of our century. This hymnal reduced the Wesleyan hymns to about sixty and characteristically contained the infamous bowdlerization of “Hark, the herald angels sing” from:

Late in time, behold him come,
Offspring of a virgin’s womb

to:

Long desired, behold him come,
Finding here his humble home.

The 1964 hymnal marked the beginnings of an improvement, but it has taken until now, with the publication expected in 1989, to raise the Wesleyan texts back to eighty.

An important potential for the 1989 hymnal resides in the order it has established for the hymns. The body of hymns is set out according to a creedal pattern, which thereby corresponds also to the history of redemption, the *Heilsgeschichte*. There are five main sections:

- I. The Glory of the Triune God
- II. The Grace of Jesus Christ
- III. The Power of the Holy Spirit
- IV. The Community of Faith
- V. A New Heaven and a New Earth

Under the “third article” the hymns are then arranged according to the *ordo salutis*, the way in which we are enabled to appropriate God’s saving work and gifts: prevenient grace, justifying grace, sanctifying and perfecting grace. This subdivision is true to the principles of Wesley’s classic *Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People called Methodists*. The overall schema is faithful to Wesley’s recognition that the *ordo salutis* is governed by the nature and works of God as these are rehearsed in the Scriptures, liturgies and creeds of the

Church--and for which the Wesley brothers provided in their hymns for the great dogmas and festivals. The general pattern, and the adequate number of boldly trinitarian hymns it contains, sets the interpretative context for all individual items.

Happily, the 1989 hymnal makes great and proper efforts towards a cultural catholicity, drawing on and respecting Hispanic, Afro-American, Asian-American and Native American Christians, as well as turning to "the global Church" by way of the *Cantate Domino* of the World Council of Churches and the input of "missionaries and ethnic musicologists." The hymnal also contains modern hymns, some of which will not last, and some oddities, such as an alternate version of "The Church's one foundation" which manages to excise entirely the sustaining image of the Church as the bride of Christ--presumably on account of the anthropological "subordinationism" (as it is seen) of Eph 5:22-33; but the minor changes that were made throughout the hymnody in favor of "inclusive language" were not nearly so bad as they might have been. These are small prices to pay for a much improved hymnal.

Another report that came to the General Conference of 1988 was entitled "Grace upon Grace: God's Mission and Ours." Here evangelism is consistently expounded before service. Albeit under the slogan of "inclusiveness," one aspect of catholicity is well captured in paragraph 51:

As a gracious community, a church in mission embraces those whose appearance, behavior, mental or physical conditions mark them as different. People who represent race, ethnic, class, age, and gender differences become one in the Body of Christ. The reach of grace is unlimited, the binding of grace is firm.

This is wedded to the qualitative aspect of catholicity by being placed under a rubric that structures the report: "As United Methodists, we envision lives changed by grace, a church formed by grace, and a world transformed by grace." The substantive content of catholicity is stated epigrammatically: "Jesus Christ defines grace: Immanuel, God with us as a person." On two occasions, the report cites the great commission of Matt 28:18f in its full trinitarian form.

Two other matters may be mentioned as possibly signaling a more general change within United Methodism. First, to the declaration in the "Social Principles" of the *Discipline* that "in continuity with past Christian teaching, we recognize tragic conflicts of life with life that may justify abortion, and in such cases support the legal option of abortion under proper medical procedures," there was now added the further sentence: "We cannot affirm abortion as an acceptable means of birth control, and we unconditionally reject it as a means of gender selection." Official Methodist monies had been going to the Religious Coalition for Abortion Rights--an organization whose name includes, it might be argued, a double oxymoron. Second, in the context

of qualifications for the ordained ministry, the General Conference retained the phrase concerning "fidelity in marriage and celibacy in singleness," and, echoing the declaration of the "Social Principles" that "the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching," once more stipulated that "self-avowed practicing homosexuals are not to be accepted as candidates, ordained as ministers, or appointed to serve in The United Methodist Church." A footnote on candidacy for ordination comments: "The General Conference, in response to expressions throughout the Church regarding homosexuality and ordination, reaffirms the present language of the Discipline regarding the character and commitment of persons seeking ordination, and affirms its high standards."

Now what are we to conclude about this General Conference overall? At the outset I suggested that the signs in favor of a return to catholicity were no bigger than a human hand. Some pluralists have expressed the view that the perceptible shift in United Methodism may simply be the following of a conservative mood in the country at large--a mood which they expect will change. What is there to stop the General Conference of 1988 from turning out to be yet one more example of Methodist accommodationism--this time, for once, in a conservative direction? The answer must reside in the signs of qualitative and substantial renewal throughout "the connection" (as Methodists like to designate their form of church life). We may look, for example, to the growth of "covenant discipleship groups" and to the very modest revival in sacramental observance.

Bishop Richard B. Wilke gave a fresh twist to the Wesleyan hymn by which Methodist Conferences traditionally begin, "And are we yet alive?" Will Willimon and Robert Wilson spoke of "rekindling the flame."⁹ The 1984 General Conference had set the implausible target of doubling the Church's membership to 20 million by the year 1992. It is not at all certain that such a growth of United Methodism in its present form is desirable. My argument would be that significant growth and renewal are impossible, or at least undesirable, without a prior or concomitant recovery of substantive catholicity--a reentry into that scriptural and creedal Christianity which undergirded and motivated the Wesleys' evangelism and social action. Sound doctrine is not a sufficient condition for the revitalization of a church, but it is a necessary one. The General Conference of 1988 will have made a lasting contribution, if it has promoted that cause in the seminaries, the bureaucracy, the pastorate and the episcopate--so that through preaching, teaching and singing the Methodist people may be shaped throughout its whole life of worship, witness and service for the glory of God and the salvation of the world. We shall see what emerges from the mandated study of the revised statement on "Doctrinal Standards and our Theological Task" and from the reception given to the new hymnal.

Notes

1. So in *The Character of a Methodist* (in *Works*, ed. T. Jackson [1872], vol. 8, p. 340).
2. Robert E. Chiles, *Theological Transition in American Methodism 1790-1935* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1965; reprinted Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1983).
3. On the history of the *doctrinal* standards, see Thomas C. Oden, *Doctrinal Standards in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan/Francis Asbury Press, 1988). For an attempt to make the most of what unity there is in the *theological* tradition, see Thomas A. Langford, *Practical Divinity: Theology in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1983). The distinction between official *doctrine* and the more individual but still ecclesial task of *theology* was unfortunately lost in the linguistic usage of the 1972 text. It has been respected in the 1988 text that we shall be presenting, and I have tried to observe it throughout this article.
4. A dictum of George Croft Cell, quoted in Oden, *Doctrinal Standards*, p. 82.
5. In his sermon on "The Catholic Spirit" Wesley says that "a man of truly catholic spirit is fixed as the sun in his judgment concerning the main branches of Christian doctrine" (*Works*, ed. Jackson, vol. 5, pp. 492-504).
6. A printer's proof read "come" rather than the "comes" of the final version in the *Discipline*. It would have been equally possible to retain "come" and replace the previous period by a comma. I have reason to believe that would have corresponded better to the thought of the Committee. It would probably make better theology.
7. For insistence on the distinction between doctrine and theology, and the normativity of the former, credit goes to Jerry L. Walls, *The Problem of Pluralism: Recovering United Methodist Identity* (Wilmore, KY: Good News Books, 1986; updated 1988).
8. Letter of August 3, 1771, to Ms. Marsh.
9. Richard B. Wilke, *And Are We Yet Alive? The Future of the United Methodist Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986); William H. Willimon and Robert L. Wilson, *Rekindling the Flame: Strategies for a Vital United Methodism* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1987).

