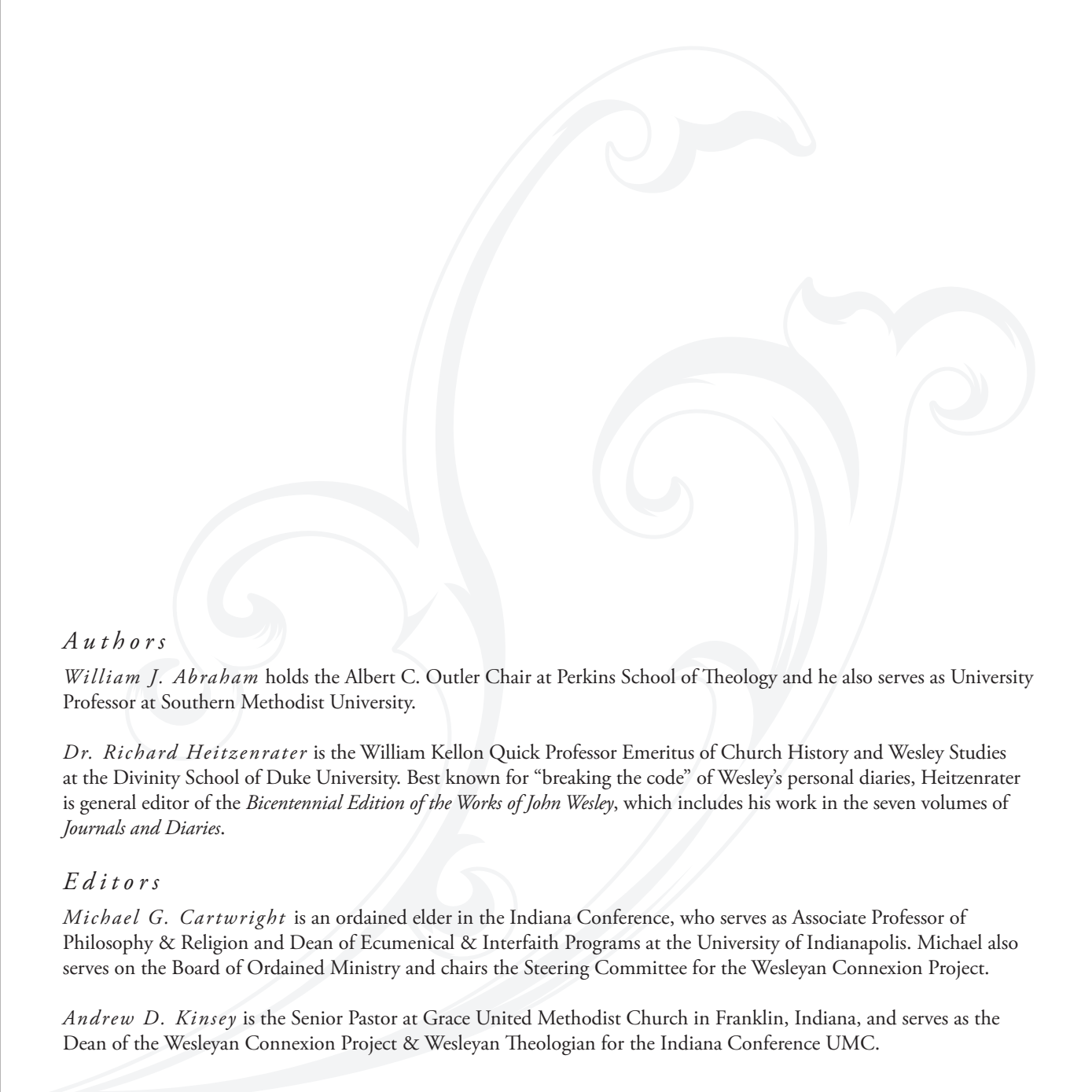


EXPLORING THE PAST,  
RENEWING THE CHURCH:  
WESLEYAN RESOURCES FOR  
OUR MISSION TOGETHER

*Texts by Richard P. Heitzenrater and William J. Abraham  
Michael G. Cartwright and Andrew D. Kinsey, co-editors*



### *Authors*

*William J. Abraham* holds the Albert C. Outler Chair at Perkins School of Theology and he also serves as University Professor at Southern Methodist University.

*Dr. Richard Heitzenrater* is the William Kellon Quick Professor Emeritus of Church History and Wesley Studies at the Divinity School of Duke University. Best known for “breaking the code” of Wesley’s personal diaries, Heitzenrater is general editor of the *Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley*, which includes his work in the seven volumes of *Journals and Diaries*.

### *Editors*

*Michael G. Cartwright* is an ordained elder in the Indiana Conference, who serves as Associate Professor of Philosophy & Religion and Dean of Ecumenical & Interfaith Programs at the University of Indianapolis. Michael also serves on the Board of Ordained Ministry and chairs the Steering Committee for the Wesleyan Connexion Project.

*Andrew D. Kinsey* is the Senior Pastor at Grace United Methodist Church in Franklin, Indiana, and serves as the Dean of the Wesleyan Connexion Project & Wesleyan Theologian for the Indiana Conference UMC.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

---

## *Part One*

Foreword by Michael G. Cartwright.....	4
“John Wesley and the People Called Methodist in the Twenty-first Century” by Richard P. Heitzenrater.....	5
Questions for Discussion.....	16
Notes to Heitzenrater’s paper.....	17

## *Part Two*

Foreword by Andrew D. Kinsey .....	20
“‘Try It, You Like It!’ The Promises and Pitfalls of Renewal in the Methodist Tradition” by William J. Abraham .....	21
Questions for Discussion.....	29
Notes to Abraham’s paper.....	31

## FOREWORD

---

On May 1, 2009, the University of Indianapolis conferred an honorary degree on Dr. Heitzenrater in recognition of his lifetime of achievements as a leader in the United Methodist Church and as the world's foremost scholar of the life and writings of John Wesley, the founder of Methodism. The following day, a group of clergy and lay people met at Grace United Methodist Church in Franklin, Indiana. At this event, hosted by Rev. Andy Kinsey, we heard Dr. Heitzenrater's presentation "John Wesley and the People Called Methodists in the Twenty-first Century."

This event was the first in a series of "forums" that the Wesleyan Connexion Project is sponsoring in the Indiana Conference UMC. Our purpose is to invite United Methodist clergy and laity to engage the Wesleyan tradition in the best and fullest ways. The papers that we have collected in this booklet are intended to be used to help the clergy and laity of our annual conference to re-engage the treasures of the Wesleyan tradition for the purpose of reclaiming the mission of the church to make disciples of Jesus Christ.

With such uses in mind, we have provided questions for discussion for this paper as well as the paper by Prof. William Abraham, "Try it You Will Like It! The Promises and Pitfalls of Renewal in the Methodist Tradition." We encourage groups to read these papers in relation to one another. For example, in what sense does Prof. Heitzenrater's typology of four "uses" of the Methodist tradition help us to locate the set of questions that Prof. Abraham is posing in his provocative paper?

Since we anticipate making these kinds of presentations available in the future, we invite the comments and feedback from readers about the format of this booklet. Please contact us at [pastorkinsey@franklingrace.org](mailto:pastorkinsey@franklingrace.org) or [mcartwright@uindy.edu](mailto:mcartwright@uindy.edu).

—*Michael G. Cartwright*

# WESLEY AND THE PEOPLE CALLED METHODISTS IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

*By Richard P. Heitzenrater*

---

Wesley began his 1786 treatise “Thoughts on Methodism” by saying, “I am not afraid that the people called Methodists should ever cease to exist either in Europe or America. But I am afraid, lest they should only exist as a dead sect, having the form of religion without the power. And this undoubtedly will be the case, unless they hold fast both the doctrine, spirit, and discipline with which they first set out.”

Many present-day critics of Methodism are quick to say that Wesley would not recognize his movement if he could see it now, some 223 years later. But that offhand judgment begs the question of how one should define or determine “faithfulness” to a tradition. World-wide Methodism is certainly different from the societies that Wesley nurtured during his lifetime. And although there are signs of dead wood here and there, the movement still manifests a great deal of spiritual energy in many of its branches, providing some hope that the roots are not dead and the branches have some juice in them.

---

*Methodists recently have begun to see the value of referencing the Wesleys in developing a rationale for interpreting the present and looking toward the future.*

---

Every generation finds itself at a series of embarkation points into the future. Methodism has now had more than two hundred years of peering toward the looming future, while glancing back to the fading past and looking in the mirror at itself in a tumultuous present. Trying to understand and define itself in such circumstances results in a range of different approaches to the use of the tradition or heritage from the past as a touchstone of self-identity in the present, much less a resource to help confront the future.

Methodists recently have begun to see the value of referencing the Wesleys in developing a rationale for interpreting

the present and looking toward the future.<sup>1</sup> That probably would not have happened two generations ago. Alex Haley’s 1976 book *Roots* signaled a rising interest in genealogy, as people became enchanted with the lives of their ancestors and the stories of their heritage as a means of trying to understand themselves in the present. The family genealogist, however, has a much easier task than the spiritual genealogist for worldwide Methodism. Only in the last half century have Methodist studies entered the age of modern critical scholarship. Now, any attempt at understanding Methodism in the present or looking at its future necessarily harkens back to foundational views and actions of the Wesleys.

While many Methodists generally approach the founder John Wesley as a recognized authority within the tradition and attempt to be relatively faithful to that heritage, they manifest a variety of approaches to the Wesleyan heritage and display a spectrum of interpretive angles. That spectrum ranges across several possible approaches<sup>2</sup> that treat the past with varying degrees of authority for understanding the present or designing the future—using the tradition as either (1) normatively prescriptive, (2) significantly instructive, (3) somewhat supportive, or (4) simply suggestive. Each level, of course, has a range within itself, and a clear demarcation is seldom evident between categories.<sup>3</sup> This typology, however, can provide an intriguing framework for our view of how we use our heritage as we approach the future.

## *Tradition and Change*

All traditions change over the years, as James Russell Lowell illustrates with his familiar phrases, “new occasions teach new duties” and “time makes ancient good uncouth.”<sup>4</sup> The first phrase is often true; the second raises some uncomfortable questions. The real conundrum is to sort out the eternal dimensions of goodness and truth from among the time-bound elements that must give way to change. The

epistemological and philosophical centralities of this issue were becoming increasingly apparent in the Enlightenment of Wesley's century. The constant challenge of new situations in contemporary times forces the issues: when is change appropriate, what is most vulnerable to alteration, and what templates are best suited to create the future?

---

*All traditions change over the years.*

---

A Methodist student from the Philippines recently talked with me about his Central Conference's discussions about becoming an autonomous Methodist Church. His own concern centered on the issue of whether that church would be explicitly Wesleyan. His question for me was therefore, What would they have to put in place, in doctrine, polity, or mission, for their church to be considered "Wesleyan." That is another way of asking a question that has appeared over the ages—what is the essential core of the ongoing Wesleyan heritage? Another way to ask the question is, How does a church exhibit faithfulness to the Wesleyan tradition?

Almost immediately, a secondary list of questions begins to roll forth: Are there timeless elements within the tradition? How do we know when something is time-bound or secondary? Who sets the criteria for "faithfulness"? Is it necessary for Methodists to be Wesleyan? Will being Wesleyan necessarily result in being vital? Are the answers to these questions the same for every group in every place in every time? Wasn't Wesley himself in favor of having few prerequisites and exhibiting broad toleration? Doesn't his belief in the reality of witchcraft discredit many of his other ideas? Have we outgrown the need for denominations or even for Christianity?

Let me stop there, because the list is getting out of hand already. Certainly we hear these and more questions every day, but that doesn't mean they all deserve equal treatment. What is especially interesting to me within this arena of questions is the variety of ways that serious people make reference to their heritage, in this case, the Wesleyan tradition. Let me disclose my bias from the beginning and say that I believe there is a place for all four types of reference back to the past, noted above. To limit the scope of viability to just one or two

or these is to limit the usefulness of the historical enterprise and to devalue the meaning of tradition as a dynamic reality.

### *The Challenges to Tradition*

Most traditions contain some core of principles and practices that harken back to their origins. For Methodists, that includes some elements that are basically Christian, some that are specifically Protestant, and some that are distinctively Wesleyan. In various Methodist groups, these core ideas and actions provide a measure of orthodoxy and orthopraxy—right thinking and right acting—that help define the central nature of the organization. At any given time and place, members are expected to conform to these core identification markers.

Over the centuries, this approach to tradition—based on *prescriptive conformity* to past norms—has become less universal or pervasive. Even in Wesley's day, the list of "essential" beliefs and actions was somewhat short, and the tendency to promote tolerance was a practical means to survival for non-Anglicans within an autocratic establishment of church and state in England.<sup>5</sup>

---

*The inherent tension between the openness and the discipline of the early Methodists heightens the issue of what is essential.*

---

The inherent tension between the openness and the discipline of the early Methodists heightens the issue of what is essential. Supporters of openness and tolerance often cite the second half of Wesley's sermon on "Catholic Spirit," which reiterates his tolerance for varying "opinions" held by people, so long as their heart is right. But such supporters usually fail to notice that in the first half of the same sermon, Wesley talks against theological indifference, stresses being as "fixed as the sun" in one's beliefs, and lists more than fifty questions that one must answer positively before being considered as having a "right heart."

Doctrinal standards contain one of the most prescriptive elements in a denomination. And yet, Methodist denominations have no single set of doctrinal standards that prevail around the globe. The British tradition tends officially to

stress the use of Wesley's *Sermons on Several Occasions* and his *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament*, although the enforcement of these standards appears to be quite slack. Some churches in this British tradition, such as the Methodist Church of New Zealand, explicitly require that nothing contrary to the *Sermons* or *Notes* is to be done within the church at any level including the local. As recent court cases have demonstrated, however, there are many ways to skirt this requirement.<sup>6</sup> Other Methodist denominations follow the American model of citing Wesley's *Articles of Religion* as the standard of doctrine. But in some of those groups, other materials also share the spotlight.<sup>7</sup> In the area of polity, some Methodist churches have Bishops, some have Presidents, some have Archbishops under a Prelate. The historic debates within each denomination have often exhibited opinions that this or that form is what Wesley intended to prescribe, but no universal form of polity has emerged. And as for Wesley's focus on the mission of Methodism to "spread scriptural holiness," his followers in recent generations have also taken on a number of foci, such as "to make disciples of Jesus Christ," in varying degrees of excitement or lethargy.

---

*Some Methodists over the years have settled on one or another of Wesley's "methods" as part of a definitive prescription for authentic Wesleyanism.*

---

Some Methodists over the years have settled on one or another of Wesley's "methods" as part of a definitive prescription for authentic Wesleyanism. One common measure used among Methodists these days to signal an authentic Wesleyan approach is the so-called "quadrilateral"—to examine an idea or action according to its conformity to Scripture, Tradition, Reason, and Experience. At one point, every proposal made to boards and agencies in the United Methodist Church had to be accompanied by a rationale that was based on this "Wesleyan" theological methodology, even though the actual Wesleyan nature of this method continues to be challenged.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, the inherent fallacy of this measure of orthodoxy, of course, is that various groups define and use these four guidelines differently. The main problem, however, is to

assume that this approach of using the "four-fold guidelines" is somehow unique to Wesley or Methodists. As I have often pointed out, nearly every Christian body uses some variation of this approach as part of their methodology for theological reflection. Prescribing the use of the quadrilateral as part of theological reflection does not necessarily make the result authentically Wesleyan.

The same would be said for a number of valuable Wesleyan methods that are part of the Methodist way. Elements of his *scriptural hermeneutic* that are useful—seeing the wholeness of Scripture, interpreting passages in the light of the "analogy of faith" (the general tenor of the whole Bible), measuring the hard passages by the easy ones, and so forth—are also used as critical approaches by many people who are not within the Wesleyan fold. Conforming to these methods therefore does not make one a Wesleyan.

But perhaps an examination of Wesley's use of the Bible does in some ways help Methodists approach these writings usefully. Wesley was willing and able to cull from Scripture those ideas and actions that were timeless, that still had meaning for meeting the challenges of his own day, and he recognized that transporting some biblical ideas from the past by way of proof-texting could lead to problems. Remembering this approach could help Methodists appreciate the "primacy of Scripture" without holding fast to some of Wesley's own time-bound interpretations, such as his belief in the reality of witchcraft, his agreement with Paul on the matter of women being subject to men and not speaking in church, or his adoption of Bengal's view that all popes since the Middle Ages are the Beast and represent the "antichrist."<sup>9</sup>

So the debate goes on, but the number of people who hold fast to a set of prescriptive norms that define "Wesleyan" seems to be decreasing within Methodism around the globe. The concept of "dogma" has taken on a negative connotation, but not everyone would agree that "truth" is a totally relative concept. Some people still desire absolutes, just as some groups thrive with a prescriptive list of beliefs. Although a firm dogmatism based on absolutes can be destructive, so also a tendency toward indifferent fuzziness based on universal relativism can also be harmful.<sup>10</sup>

### *Prescriptive Uses of Tradition*

Nevertheless, I might be so bold as to suggest that contemporary Methodists do exhibit certain features that reflect some degree of *conformity to the essentials* of the Wesleyan scheme of doctrine, organization, and mission from the eighteenth century. For instance, Wesley continually referred to the three “*grand doctrines*” of Methodism: repentance, faith, and holiness.<sup>11</sup> This trio of doctrines appears under other terms as well, such as original sin, justification, and sanctification. In any case, as the centerpiece of the Wesleyan focus on soteriology, these grand doctrines continue to define the basic Methodist doctrinal emphases in our time. To these “essentials” one might add other doctrines that Wesley felt were central to the Christian message, such as a belief in the Trinity, a stress on regeneration, the necessity of scriptural Christianity, the possibility of perfection in love, the centrality of grace, and the role of the Holy Spirit. There is no magic number or list of beliefs as such, since the configuration and expression of these ideas comes in a variety of formats, as they develop during Wesley’s lifetime and as they are expressed in the lives and thoughts of his successors to the present day.

---

*Wesley continually referred to the three “grand doctrines” of Methodism: repentance, faith, and holiness.*

---

Certain characteristics of Wesley’s *organization* also persist in most Methodist denominations, conforming very closely to the principles that Wesley himself emphasized. The nature of itinerant ministry and its basic reflection in the *connexional principle* is a central part of the Wesleyan scheme in his day<sup>12</sup> and is still evident in most Methodist denominations. The idea of a thorough commitment to a common mission, exhibited in a covenantal fellowship among the preachers, has also persisted down through the years. The Wesleyan method of talking through the nature and mission of the movement in regular conferencing among the leadership, helping to get everyone on the same page, has been a common element of the connexional approach for generations. And the Wesleyan scheme has always had a shallow

organizational chart—the large percentage of people participating in leadership positions has long been one of the secrets of its vitality.

And although much of Methodism has forfeited the terminology of “holiness” to more conservative denominations, the basic duality of Wesley’s view of *scriptural holiness*—to love God and to love neighbor<sup>13</sup>—is still the motivation behind much of the mission of the Wesleyan movement. Methodist denominations incorporate a variety of programs and subsidiary organizations that promote liturgical concerns, biblical and devotional studies, outreach to marginalized persons at home and abroad, social program for the disadvantaged, and educational agenda for all ages. In doing so, Methodism tries to exhibit the Wesleyan method of holding to a middle way that avoids fascination with an extreme position on either side, but rather that brings together knowledge and vital piety, social concern and holy living, spiritual vitality and moral integrity, faith and good works in an effort to proclaim and live the wholeness of the Gospel.

Most importantly, perhaps, Methodism at its best has recognized that *God is the central figure* in the drama of salvation and the transformation of the world. The sort of synergism that Wesley promoted, acknowledging the necessity of human effort but relying upon the sovereignty of God, has been a central feature of the Wesleyan movement from the beginning. The ultimate reliance upon God’s presence and power (grace) undergirds both the confidence of faith and the efficacy of good works in the Methodist tradition.

While these more or less prescriptive elements of the tradition have persisted strongly within the continuing forms of Methodism, other features of the Wesleyan scheme, while still important, have played a slightly different role over the years.

### *Instructive uses of tradition*

The Wesleyan heritage has provided Methodists with a number of traditional guidelines for thought and action that are open-ended in their application, then and now. They may not be unique in themselves, but they represent part of a *distinctive* Wesleyan approach to the Christian life. The details of application are necessarily supplied in the context

of the times, but the methods in themselves have proved to be instructive over the years. Their use helps prevent the excesses of enthusiasm, spiritism, antiquarianism, and biblicism by encouraging the use of a broader range of contemporary criteria when a person is trying to understand Christian life and thought.

One of the themes co-opted by Methodists over the years has been the “Catholic Spirit.” Although this phrase means many different things to a variety of people and groups, the core of its usefulness as an instructive guideline is its insistence that one must distinguish between the “essentials” of the faith on the one hand and those matters that are secondary matters of “opinion” on the other. Wesley was convinced that believers should be a “fixed as the sun” in their own basic beliefs, but that they should be able to be tolerant of other traditions that vary in secondary matters, such as types of worship and modes of baptism. He would have agreed with the Dissenters of his own day who encapsulated this concept with the motto, “Unity in essentials, tolerance in non-essentials, charity in all things.”<sup>14</sup> The central issue for continuing debate between groups, however, is the determination of just where that dividing line between essentials and opinions should fall.

---

*Methodism at its best has recognized that God is the central figure in the drama of salvation and the transformation of the world.*

---

The theological methodology often described as the “*quadrilateral*” of the Methodist heritage also provides another instructive approach to theological reflection. It does not prescribe answers to the questions or issues, but it does provide instructive guidelines for reflection. By suggesting that a careful examination of issues entails primarily the use of Scripture, but also should include a consideration of tradition, reason, and experience, such a method encourages a broad-based approach that can help prevent simplistic answers (such as “proof-texting”) to complicated questions. Although it is my considered opinion that many thoughtful theologians in most traditions use some variation of this

methodology, the success of such an approach depends of the way it is applied to situations. This four-fold pattern does not present a simplistic template that guarantees a correct solution, but rather these guidelines represent the major areas of authority for determining understandable and appropriate interpretations that can be instructive for a variety of matters.

Some elements of the Methodist tradition that were originally prescriptive can be understood as more helpful if understood within this “instructive” level of application. An example might be the *General Rules*, a Wesleyan stipulation that still has some form of constitutional presence in many traditions.<sup>15</sup> The Rules in their general expression—to avoid evil, to do good, and to use the means of grace—are unquestionably applicable in any age. Some people have difficulty with the specific examples given under the category of avoiding evil, however, and therefore disregard the whole document. The three general questions, nevertheless, are indeed central to the Wesleyan tradition and can be instructive of the basic level of expectations for Christian living.<sup>16</sup> For these questions to be most relevant in any given age, the specific examples of evils to be avoided would need to be updated. In that way, they can be appropriately instructive to continuing generations of Methodists.

The Wesleyan heritage also contains some fascinating *paradoxes*. It might seem, for instance, that Wesley was being prescriptive when he said that he was *homo unius libri*, “a person of one book.”<sup>17</sup> His intention was to stress the importance of the Bible. But later, when his preachers tried to explain their lack of wide reading by saying that they only read the Bible, throwing his own prescription back at him, Wesley replied with a strong exhortation to read more books (citing the Apostle Paul in the process).<sup>18</sup> So the more sophisticated expectation included not only regular reading of the Scriptures, but also the examination of other important books as well. For those who had any doubts about how broadly he expected spiritual leaders to read, his “Address to the Clergy” listed a broad and demanding program of subjects that would instruct the mind.<sup>19</sup>

The Wesleyan approach to *scripture* itself, though not unique, provides another instructive guideline for followers of any age—that any particular questions arising from dif-

difficult or conflicting passages should be resolved in the light of the “analogy of faith” or the “whole tenor of Scripture.” This approach encourages a holistic view of Scripture that includes Old and New Testaments, hard and easy passages, familiar and unfamiliar stories. Wesley would assume that the major themes that tie the scriptures together would be their focus on the drama of salvation. But the use of this scriptural hermeneutic by successive generations in different contexts does not necessarily provide prescriptive answers for interpretation in every instance. It does, however, provide a traditional Wesleyan method by which readers of the Bible can work through questions that arise and derive instructive results that will fall within a range that is appropriate to the heritage.

### *Supportive uses of tradition*

A third level at which tradition operates within the Wesleyan heritage is by supporting and encouraging contemporary ideas and actions that sustain the intentions undergirding the original principles and practices. Such appropriation and adaptation of traditional approaches help keep Methodism vital in successive generations.

One such use might be seen in the contemporary understanding of *itinerancy* as being *inherently subservient to connexionalism*.<sup>20</sup> Rather than prescribing that “traveling preachers” must move to a new assignment every year or two in order to be true itinerants, Methodism in present-day society recognizes that the requirements both to keep a preacher moving around a circuit and to change circuits regularly was a method especially appropriate to a rural and far-flung population. To the small Methodist Societies scattered throughout the hills and dales, these spiritual leaders on horseback represented a spirited Wesleyan movement extending its arms and incorporating them into the community of faithful believers. Itinerancy in terms of constant rotation of preachers who were committed to a common mission of spreading scriptural holiness was a method of implementing the connexion, the Wesleyan movement. The basic principle was the connecting element, not the traveling aspect. The willingness to travel provided the connexion with an ability to deploy preachers with optimum effect on the common mission. So in a more urbanized and settled society, while

itinerancy can still include the practice of moving preachers fairly regularly, the core of the concept is the common commitment to mission that ties preachers and people together in a connexion with conviction.

Another shift in understanding in which the tradition still plays a supportive role is a more contemporary understanding of the concept of “*social holiness*.” I have frequently criticized people for confusing this Wesleyan idea with the practice of exercising works of mercy or in developing programs of social concern. Wesley does use the term primarily to indicate that true religion is not solitary religion, as the mystics might claim. Rather, he would say that true religion is social religion—true holiness is social holiness. At its core then, this concept encourages thoughtful Christians to nurture their faith in community, to worship together, to study together, to sing together, to pray together. Such an understanding of the Christian faith, however, also supports the idea of also working together. If, as Wesley says over and over, “faith worketh through love,” then a faithful community will act together in exercising that faith not only through acts of piety but also through works of mercy. Therefore, the step from the original principle of social holiness as the communal nurture of faith to a contemporary understanding of it as mission to the marginalized in society is a short step that is strongly supported by the tradition itself.

Another practice that has supportive roots in the tradition is the use of a rite for *remembering our baptism*. In Wesley’s day, the main debate was between the idea of infant baptism as a means of regeneration and entrance into the Church, and the idea of adult baptism as a conscious expression of faith and therefore the channel for actual regeneration as the person entered the Church. For Wesley, the debate was more theoretical than practical—he thought that we should not challenge theologically the capacity of the Holy Spirit to cause real change in the life of an infant. But practically speaking, by the time children are old enough to be responsible young adults, they have sinned and stand in need of continued forgiveness and regeneration. The reality of such backsliding, however, did not cause Wesley either to discourage the practice of infant baptism or encourage the practice of adult baptism (or re-baptism). Infant baptism still

played an important role in releasing the child from the guilt and punishment of original sin. Therefore, one need not be rebaptized. But given that his interest was in promoting life-long faithful discipleship, one can understand that for many people, a conscious remembrance of the vows made at their baptism and a recollection of God's forgiving mercy exercised in that sacrament could provide powerful encouragement to continued living as a faithful disciple of Christ. The Wesleyan tradition therefore is very supportive of the practice of contemporary Methodists to nurture their long-time relationship to Christ by consciously remembering their baptism.

The supportive use of tradition would find a number of manifestations in the present agendas of Methodism around the world. The programs of evangelism, from revivals to the use of small groups, are certainly encouraged by the Wesleyan heritage, as are varieties of prison ministries, frequent administration and participation in the Eucharist, the utilization of the latest biblical scholarship, the promotion of life-long learning (perhaps even distance education), the employment of publishing enterprises, and many other parts of the contemporary Methodist mission, without prescribing a singular approach that must be followed.

The various ways that the Wesleyan tradition has become *indigenized* around the world has resulted in a variety of practices within the pan-Methodist community. Their inherent unity is expressed partly through their membership in the World Methodist Council, which has existed for over a century and a half. One of the most important functions of this body is to encourage conversation and sharing of insights among the representatives of the various groups, trusting that each group might learn from other manifestations of the Wesleyan heritage. This continuing dialogue around the world represents one of the finest methods by which various expressions of the tradition can discover new expressions of lasting principles within the heritage.

### *Suggestive uses of the tradition*

One of the most exciting developments of recent years is the recognition that the faithful passing on of a tradition entails *creative appropriation* of the old principles in a new context.<sup>21</sup> Traditions grow into the future by incorporating constructive thinking and actions that are on the cutting

edge while still faithful to the basic principles of the heritage. These "fresh expressions" represent the application of new approaches that are not simple reiterations of the past but are creative approaches to new problems and are certainly congruent with the best thought and practice of the previous generations.

Certainly an adequate understanding of our past is essential not only to a useful understanding of ourselves in the present but also to a faithful movement into the future. One of the bequests of the ecumenical movement of the last sixty years is a lively sense among many people that before a denominational heritage can make a worthwhile contribution to the life and thought of the wider Christian church, it must first understand and appreciate its own tradition fully. Lively engagement with other traditions depends upon a clear self-consciousness and understanding of one's own heritage.

Wesley himself provided a good model as one who was willing to *adapt* to new situations while cognizant of the need for maintaining continuity and congruence with his ancestors in the faith and the recognized standards of authority. He was not hesitant to express his own point of view on matters of theology, organization, or mission, which often seemed to be somewhat less than "orthodox" by some observers. But he was also quick to assert his willingness to be taught, to be proven wrong, if anyone cared to point out a better way or a more adequate position based on Scripture or reason.<sup>22</sup>

---

*Wesley himself provided a good model as one who was willing to adapt to new situations*

---

This type of *constructive* "pushing the edge of the envelope" is often seen as a risky venture, especially in the church, where innovation often leads to internal controversy. But even in the field of Wesley Studies itself, ingenuity and creativity are necessary to move the field ahead. At the 1983 Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies, Albert Outler analyzed the field as having gone through three stages. *Stage One*, grounded in the hagiographical biographies of the nineteenth century, was triumphalist and treated Wesley as a hero. *Stage Two* in the twentieth century began to look at Wesley in terms of his similarities with or borrowings

from one or another tradition of his day, such as Puritanism, Lutheranism, Moravianism, Roman Catholicism, Calvinism, and the like. *Stage Three*, which exemplified the best of the later twentieth century studies, not only examined the whole of the Wesleyan corpus, but also saw Wesley against the backdrop of the multiplicity of his sources. Since then, scholars have taken the field of Wesley Studies one step further. In what I like to call *Stage Four*, those who work in the fields of theology, ethics, political theory, social work, evangelism, preaching, and so forth, have started from the base of the previous state, a critical and holistic approach to Wesley and his sources, and have ventured forth in constructive ways to shape new ideas for the present age in ways that go in directions that Wesley could have never conceived but would appreciate.<sup>23</sup>

In this sense, constructive approaches to the tradition can often vary quite significantly, dependent upon the context and circumstances, while still being faithful to the fundamental historic principles of the Wesleyan tradition. An example would be to show the basic idea behind one of Wesley's most famous sayings ("I look upon all the world as my parish") and show how it might be applied today in quite different ways from the typical interpretation, which has often been to promote world missions. That is not what Wesley had in mind at all—he was not in favor of opening up mission fields in foreign lands when there were not enough helpers to serve the needs of the primary mission in his own country. Rather, in this phrase he was providing a rationale for having broken one of the limiting rules within the Anglican tradition—he preached within the boundaries of another priest's parish. His argument to the Bishop of Bristol, who called him on the carpet, was to say that his ordination at Oxford was not limited by the usual expectations of parish ministry—he was not restricted by the demarcation of parish lines. The basic principle here is that Wesley's field preaching was a branching into innovative ministries, crossing parish lines, not limited by institutional boundaries. This idea of creating new approaches to ministry under the primary impulse of spreading the gospel is a powerful call to think outside the box when it comes to applying Wesleyan traditions to contemporary situations.

This suggestive use of tradition does not have a set method or pattern in mind, much less a predictable content, but rather challenges the idea that "one size fits all." The tradition can, in fact, *adapt to different contexts in different ways* and still be faithful to the heritage. Faithfulness as such is not just a matter of careful passing on, in keeping with the best of the past. But *faithfulness also entails appropriate reception*, in keeping with the needs of the present and future. Hearing our story again with new ears, receiving the tradition with new problems in mind, finding the overlooked messages in our heritage, can be an exhilarating moment of discovery that might have significant consequences for our present self-understanding as a church in the Wesleyan tradition.

---

*The tradition can, in fact, adapt to different contexts in different ways and still be faithful to the heritage.*

---

The suggestion to view social holiness, in terms of programs of social outreach, as a logical (or theological) outgrowth of Christian Perfection, in terms of loving God and neighbor, is a constructive connection of two Wesleyan ideas that are never quite put together that way by Wesley himself. A reference to "*Wesley's emphasis* on Christian Perfection as social holiness" might seem like historical reconstruction, but the connection between the two concepts can easily be developed today in ways that Wesley himself might never have conceived but with which Wesley himself might be in total agreement, especially in terms of the outcome or fruits of that approach. The community acting in love to their neighbors in programs of social concern that are motivated by pure love could certainly be understood as a manifestation of Christian perfection by the congregation of the faithful. In Methodist terms, this sort of action would not just be a group of people just doing some good in society, but rather a good Society of people that is doing something very Christian.

"*Do all the good* you can, to all the people you can..." is not John Wesley's exact words, but the statement reflects his spirit. You can find it on the entrance wall of Wesley Centre in Sydney, on napkins, T-shirts, etc.

A similar comment might be made about another common concept that is used today as though it were a basic part of Wesley's method, namely "*holy conferencing*." The idea comes from the reference in the Minutes to the importance of the means of grace, and the naming of the five "instituted" means that are grounded in the ministry of Christ: prayer, searching the Scripture, the Lord's Supper, fasting, and Christian conference.<sup>24</sup> The phrasing in that context is further illuminated, however, by Wesley's subsequent comments about "ordering our conversation right," planning our conversation beforehand, and limiting our conversation to an hour. He was not talking about the annual conference of preachers, but was apparently talking about private conversations between individuals, which could be seen as an occasion for the experience of God's presence and power. That concept, however, could certainly be broadened into group conversations such as occur at Methodist annual conferences, without doing damage to the basic Wesleyan concept that such holy conferencing could be seen as a means of grace. And certainly the prospect of annual conferences being seen as a means of grace (as well as an hour's limitation at a time) could be understood as a useful suggestion in the present day.

This suggestive use of the tradition by constructing new approaches based on timeless principles represents one of the most exciting prospects for the *ongoing vitality* of the Wesleyan tradition. And fortunately, many of the positive suggestions that are currently being discussed in the church and the academy are based on just such an approach. It seems that Wesley would be confident that with such an approach to the future, Methodism would certainly not become a dead sect, but would be filled with the power as well as the form of religion, as he understood it.

### *Methodism in the future*

These observations contain several reasons for being optimistic about the future of the Wesleyan heritage. Wesley himself probably did not anticipate that Methodism would become such a thriving presence around the globe. His view was much narrower and, quite honestly, much more focused. He accepted the traditional view that the Church was "the congregation of faithful men in which the pure Word of God

is preached and the Sacraments be duly ministered."<sup>25</sup> But Methodism was much more than that. John Wesley's little treatise on "The Marks of a Methodist" suggests what "faithful" means when he says that the *true Christian* (with whom he equates the true Methodist) is one who loves God and loves neighbor. I would suggest that while this is the heart of the distinctive Wesleyan expression of Christian Perfection and a central mark of a Methodist and a Christian), several other characteristics distinguish the Wesleyan heritage in his day and ours, and provide a realistic hope for its vital future.

---

*Wesley himself probably did not anticipate that Methodism would become such a thriving presence around the globe.*

---

Many people chose a church to attend based on what seems to be quite superficial criteria, such as geographical location and attractive facilities—pleasing sanctuaries, beautiful organs, and special features such as nurseries, kitchens, and gyms. But these features, important as they might be, are not denominationally specific and not distinctive to any particular heritage. Over the years, historians of Methodism have suggested several reasons for its particular attractiveness to society. The common reasons given have been good biblical preaching ("plain truth" *ad populum*), powerful spiritual singing, good religious education, concerned pastoral care, and widespread social outreach.<sup>26</sup> While these five elements are significant elements of Methodism's identity and success over the years, I would suggest five other features that have strong roots in the Wesleyan tradition and will help determine the ongoing vitality of our heritage.

### *Focus*

Methodism will continue to exhibit to "power" of religion so long as it stays focused on its primary mission to spread scriptural holiness. Those particular words need not be used to specify the purpose of the organization's single intention. Wesley once said that God's design in raising up the Methodist preachers was "to reform the nation (especially the Church) and spread scriptural holiness across the land." Wesley also said that his preachers had "nothing to do but to save

souls.”<sup>27</sup> Such terminology can be expanded and updated to include a wide range of ways by which the company of faithful might nurture the love of God and of neighbor, might help people overcome their sinful tendencies, might encourage the imitation of Christ, “who went about doing good” (Acts 10.38). There may be many means to this end, but the church will be most relevant to society if it stays focused on fulfilling this mission rather than becoming fascinated by the various methods of achieving that goal.

### *Discipline*

Methodism has never been a movement that simply promoted “having faith.”<sup>28</sup> Such solafidianism often results apathy toward the holy habits that energize the Christian life of love. As any athlete, student, artist, or teacher knows, discipline is the secret to success in reaching goals in many fields.

---

*Accountability to each other and to God has always been a notable feature of Wesleyan communities of “faith working through love.”*

---

A life marked by careful patterns of thought and action in concert with other people committed to the same goals can become a powerful agent for change in society. And within that approach, accountability to each other and to God has always been a notable feature of Wesleyan communities of “faith working through love.” Combined effort, concerted teamwork—people helping each other become more Christ-like—provides a most effective approach to making a difference in the world today.

### *Flexibility*

Methodism has always been able to adjust to the needs of its context. Whether that meant Wesley adapting his theology to meet the perceived needs of the people, or Coke widening the Wesleyan mission to include overseas ventures, or Asbury crafting the itinerant system to meet the challenges of the American frontier, our tradition has characteristically been flexible enough to make adjustments in the light of changing circumstances. Just as Wesley had a firm framework within which to revise his thinking (remember, his critics

needed to demonstrate their point by Scripture and reason), so the revisions within the tradition should be constrained by the principles of the primary mission of the movement. But as we have said, the movement can remain relevant and become most vital if it is able to confront the distress of people in the present day and anticipate the needs of God’s children in the future. This approach may mean using time-tested methods of action; it may mean revising older systems that no longer function well; it may mean coming up with innovative approaches to challenges, old and new. The use of new technologies, appropriate art forms, creative methods of communication, and other advances in our own day can certainly enhance the long range implementation of our mission.

### *Connexion*

Methodism has always been a connexional organization. The strength of that organizational arrangement rests not so much in its pattern of itinerancy or program of combined finances as in the commitment of leaders and members to a common mission. Every local situation has a unique combination of needs within that common vision, which is why the itinerant system has the potential of being effective in such situations. Pastors can be assigned according to the particular needs of the parish, and a continuing succession of pastors can meet the constantly changing needs of any given situation. The Wesleyan connexion has always thrived on a shallow organizational chart with a very large percentage of the members participating in local leadership positions. This approach, of course, depends upon careful mentoring of those in positions of responsibility. But when more people have a stake in the implementation of the goals, progress to the achievement of the mission is more likely.

### *Practicality*

Methodism has always been concerned with the practice of Christian living. Certainly, our heritage is firmly grounded in Scriptural doctrines and carefully nurtured through theological reflection. We try to provide leadership that has appropriate gifts; we look toward having a sound rationale for our organization. But as with Wesley, we are most concerned with the “fruits” of our endeavors; we measure success by how well

God's mission has been implemented in the lives of individuals and communities within our sphere of influence.<sup>29</sup>

---

*"Practical divinity" has become a favorite, if not carefully defined, way of describing the Methodist way of understanding and implementing Christianity.*

---

Being a Methodist means that being a Christian makes a difference in the way one lives. Praxis has become a watchword for many Methodist theologians who try to translate Wesley's pragmatic approach into the contemporary scene—"practical divinity" has become a favorite, if not carefully defined, way of describing the Methodist way of understanding and implementing Christianity. As long as the followers of Wesley continue to see themselves as agents of change and hope within God's transforming mission in the world, Methodism will thrive as a dynamic part of the Body of Christ.

In the end, it seems to me that Christian *faithfulness* might be seen as a person or an institution exhibiting fullness of faith—faith being understood (as Wesley borrowed the idea from the Book of Homilies) as a *sure trust and confidence* that Christ died for my sins; i.e., living a life that is demonstrably based on the fundamental principle that the *presence/power of God* (grace) has transformed your life with a doubtless confidence in fearless love for God and neighbor.

In order to "exercise the presence of God," as Wesley prescribed, we must be open to the work of the Spirit in our midst. We must also see ourselves as channels of God's grace (divine presence and power) active in the world. As a church as well as a movement, Methodism has always been most effective, and will continue to be most effective, when it realizes that its goal is to help realize the Great Commandment in human existence: to love God and love neighbor.

---

*Methodism can perhaps be best understood itself as a means of grace*

---

Methodism can perhaps be best understood itself as a means of grace that presents opportunities for people (individually and corporately) to experience the power and pres-

ence of God in their lives, enlightening them, judging them, liberating them, empowering them, sustaining them, comforting them, and transforming them into disciples of Christ to help establish the Kingdom of God. If that could be the model upon which we proceed into the twenty-first century, then *Deo gratia*.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

---

1. At the beginning of his paper, Dr. Heitzenrater calls attention to the ways that many people have become interested in the genealogy of their families “as a means of trying to understand themselves in the present.” He goes on to suggest that something like this also has been happening in the Methodist family of Christianity. For the past two generations, United Methodists have been looking back to John Wesley and the people called Methodists as they have wrestled with problems of denominational identity and missional purpose. In what ways do you think this is true of the members of your congregation? If you do not think that the people of your local United Methodist church regard their Wesleyan heritage in the way that Heitzenrater suggests, then how would you describe their orientation to the history of our church?
2. Richard Heitzenrater describes several ways in which United Methodists and other Christians have used “. . . the past with varying degrees of authority for understanding the present or designing the future—using the tradition as either (1) normatively prescriptive, (2) significantly instructive, (3) somewhat supportive, or (4) simply suggestive.” In describing these ways of engaging the Wesleyan heritage as a usable past, Heitzenrater provides several examples for each of these patterns of using the Methodist tradition. Which of his examples did you find most striking? Which examples raised questions for you? Which of these uses of the Methodist tradition have you encountered in the Indiana Conference of the United Methodist Church?
3. As Dr. Heitzenrater helpfully reminds his readers: “Some elements of the Methodist tradition that were originally prescriptive can be understood as more helpful if understood within this ‘instructive’ level of application.” He lists the General Rules as an instance of this (page 9). In the past, some United Methodists have argued that the *disuse* of the General Rules is a key instance of Methodist neglect of the Wesleyan heritage. Recently, however, Reuben Job’s book *Three Simple Rules* has provided a new context for reading and using the General Rules. It is not uncommon for annual conferences and local churches to employ the three rules—“*Do no harm. . . Do good. . . and stay in love with God*”—for the purpose of clarifying personal spiritual disciplines. What do you think about this contemporary attempt to re-appropriate one of the treasures of early Methodism?
4. In Richard Heitzenrater’s judgment, “One of the most exciting developments of recent years is the recognition that the faithful passing on of a tradition entails *creative appropriation* of the old principles in a new context.” On page 12, Heitzenrater goes on to identify four “stages” in the development on his own field of Wesley studies. Are there ways that you and your congregation have benefited from the development of scholarship about the life and work of John Wesley and the people called Methodists?
5. At the end of his paper, Prof. Heitzenrater states that he thinks that Methodism “can best be understood . . . as a means of grace that presents opportunities for people (individually and corporately) to experience the power and presence of God in their lives . . . .” In what ways does this ring true to you and the people of your congregation?

## ENDNOTES

---

- 1 The one exception could easily have done so, but the author chose to make no references to any work prior to 1982, much less to Wesley or the Bible.
- 2 Different approaches to the authority of the tradition is not unlike the spectrum of hermeneutical approaches to the authority of Scripture.
- 3 This list was suggested by Prof. Rex Matthews at a session of the 2008 meeting of the Wesleyan Studies Working Group at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion in Chicago. The list as given here omits the non-positive approaches, which would look at past tradition as either neutrally irrelevant or negatively destructive ('downright bad for your theological health'). We will not spend time discussing them here.
- 4 James Russell Lowell, "Once to Every Man and Nation" in *Boston Courier* (Dec. 11, 1845). Many people have forgotten that Lowell wrote this poem as an anti-slavery protest against the Mexican War of 1845, fearing that the annexation of Texas into the United States would increase the extent of slave-holding lands.
- 5 See Heitzenrater, "Unity, Liberty, Charity" in the Wesleyan Heritage," in Messer and Abraham, eds., *Unity, Liberty, and Charity*, 29-45.
- 6 The High Court of New Zealand recently determined that a decision by the President of Conference that a position of the church did not contradict the Sermons or Notes was a satisfactory determination by the church, regardless of any historical or theological evidence to the contrary as presented in court.
- 7 Such as in the United Methodist Church, which includes the former Evangelical United Brethren *Confession of Faith* as a constitutionally protected standard of doctrine as a result of the 1968 union.
- 8 See Ted Campbell, "The Myth of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral," in Thomas A. Langford, ed., *Doctrine and Theology in the United Methodist Church* (Nashville: Kingswood, 1995).
- 9 See Wesley's *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament* (London: Bowyer, 1755), notes for 1 Cor, 14:34, Rev. 13:1, and his letter to Thomas Tattershall, Nov. 13, 1785.
- 10 Although Wesley strongly opposed theological indifference or latitudinarianism, he noted in 1783, "It is the glory of the people called Methodists that they condemn none for their opinions or modes of worship. They think and let think" (letter to Mrs. Howton, Oct. 3, 1783); see also his Journal entry for Sunday, May 18, 1788—insofar as he knew, the Methodists were the only "religious society under heaven" that did not require prospective members to subscribe to a set of beliefs.
- 11 *The Principles of a Methodist Farther Explained* (1746), VI.4.
- 12 See for instance his letter to Samuel Walker, Sept. 3, 1756, insisting that a "frequent change" of preachers is the best method.
- 13 E.g., Sermon 18, "The Marks of the New Birth," III.3.
- 14 See Donald E. Messer and William J. Abraham, eds., *Unity, Liberty, and Charity: Building Bridges Under Icy Waters* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 30-34.
- 15 For instance, *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church* (2008), Part II, Section 3.

- 16 From the early days of the movement and throughout his life, Wesley suggested that these three rules did not represent the fullest outline of spirituality or true religion, but in the 1740s he codified them in the General Rules as the basic expectations for persons who were pressing on toward salvation.
- 17 Preface (§5), *Sermons on Several Occasions* (1746).
- 18 *Minutes of the Methodist Conferences* (London, Mason, 1862), 518-19.
- 19 Under the general category of “acquired talents’” Wesley listed a wide range of areas in which one should become conversant. In the 1745 Minutes, he listed both a program of reading and a list of books that should be kept in the preaching houses at London, Bristol, and Newcastle (*Minutes*, 29).
- 20 See Russell Richey, Dennis Campbell, and William Lawrence, eds., *Connectionalism* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 23-38.
- 21 This effort avoids the pitfalls of “invented traditions,” as explained in E. J. Hobsbawn and O. T. Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: University Press, 1983).
- 22 See Preface, *Sermons on Several Occasions* (1746), §§ 8-9.
- 23 Several recent titles from Epworth Press and in the Kingswood Books series from Abingdon Press exhibit the new and exciting possibilities of Stage Four.
- 24 “Large” *Minutes* (1780 and 1789), answer to Qu. 48 (numbered 44 in 1770 and 1772; unnumbered in 1763), 252-53.
- 25 Article XIX, “Articles of Religion,” *The Book of Common Prayer*.
- 26 For example, see William B. McClain, “The Appeal of Methodism to Black Americans,” ch. 4 in *Black People in the Methodist Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), 19-37, and Tik-Wah Wong, “Why John Wesley in the 21st Century?” ch. 1 of “Eschatological Living in John Wesley’s Theology” (Ph.D. Dissertation, Melbourne College of Divinity, Victoria, Australia, 2008), 1-4.
- 27 These two quotations from the earliest conference minutes are subsequently imbedded in every edition of the “Large” Minutes, 446-47, and 494-95 (from “Rules of a Helper”).
- 28 See Wesley’s Sermons 35-36 on “The Law Established by Faith.”
- 29 See for instance the historic question asked from Wesley’s day (1746) of every person who has felt the call to ministry: “Have they gifts (as well as grace) for the work? . . . Have they fruit?” *Minutes*, 564-65.
- 30 See Thomas A. Langford, *Practical Divinity*, 2nd edn., 2 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998).



## FOREWORD

---

The invitation to re-appropriate the treasures of the Wesleyan theological tradition “for such a time as this” is daunting; the call to engage the wider ecumenical heritage of the Christian faith even more so, especially as that engagement stimulates further conversation and explores the critical aspects of identity and mission for renewal. As such, renewal is never easy but always worth our best in time and energy.

William J. Abraham’s provocative presentation on the “pitfalls and promises” of renewal in the Methodism represents such a call to re-appropriate the treasures of the Wesleyan tradition. It is a critical voice in a wide and much-needed conversation about the Church’s mission and about the current crisis in the United Methodist Church. It is a proposal that goes to the heart of the matter: the work of renewal is not for the faint in heart!

And yet, according to Professor Abraham, as a vital re-appropriation of early Christianity, United Methodism stands in a unique position on the ecclesiastical map: United Methodism represents a “third ecclesial option” as it looks to the Holy Spirit as “the ultimate guarantor of its identity and mission, of its public faithfulness and spiritual authenticity, and as the source of all the treasures of the divine life bequeathed to God’s people in their formation in the Son.” As Abraham states, United Methodism is a “full-blooded expression” of primitive Christianity and, as such, provides a life-giving force in the world today.

William Abraham’s presentation on renewal in Methodism is one in a series of presentations on the Wesleyan theological tradition in the life of the Indiana Conference. It is a series that is part of the work of the Wesleyan Connexion Project of the Board of Ordained Ministry and the Wesleyan Theologian of the Indiana Conference. It is a pleasure to share in printed form Dr. Abraham’s presentation that was given at the University of Indianapolis on October 19, 2010.

—*Andrew D. Kinsey*

“TRY IT, YOU’LL LIKE IT!”

## THE PROMISES AND PITFALLS OF RENEWAL IN THE METHODIST TRADITION

*By William J. Abraham*

---

### *Introduction*

The work of renewal is not for the fainthearted! If you want an easy life, try something else. Sell insurance, make a fortune on Wall Street, be a nurse, join the navy, become a politician, become a comedian, take up the banjo. Just stay away from church work; and run for the first exit when you hear the word ‘renewal.’ Things are always difficult in renewal because renewal presupposes that something has gone wrong in the life of the church. Renewal assumes a time when things are screwed up. Congregations become dysfunctional. Boards and agencies wander off the farm and develop a life of their own. Bishops lose the plot. Seminaries become a source of confusion rather than illumination. Theologians become a menace to themselves and to the church. Denominations divide into factions and then split. Pastors lose their first love. The sheep drink of the wells of salvation, and then trample it underfoot; or they graze in green pastures and then systematically deprive other sheep access to the grass; some sheep turn into goats. Trying to fix problems like these is not for the fainthearted.

Transforming a denomination which has gone off the rails is virtually impossible. Yet United Methodists think they can transform the world! Our mission statement now calls for the making of disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. Ponder that egregious effort to improve on the mission statement of Jesus Christ for his people. I would be content if United Methodists could clean up the shenanigans that surround General Conference. I would be

satisfied if they would reign in the arrogance of those bishops who patronizingly dismiss the voice of the church as whole. I would break out into song if they could fix a few dying congregations. I would be tempted to break open a bottle of Australian wine if they would make a few genuine disciples here and there. I would eat my Australian cowboy hat if they would transform United Methodism! Renewal is not for the faint of heart!

---

*We are either part of the solution to the many challenges we face, or we are ourselves part of the problem*

---

Renewal is the only game in town for the church in our day and generation. So let’s get over it and get on with it! We have no other option given the time and place we have been given by providence. We are either part of the solution to the many challenges we face, or we are ourselves part of the problem. So let’s vote for renewal. Try it, you’ll like it!

Before we go any further let’s stop and note what renewal is not, or at least let’s pay attention to some obvious confusion, pitfalls, and dead-ends.

Renewal is not whining about the state of the church. Criticism comes easy; we can all do it without much prompting. Those with a strong ‘J’ on the Myers-Briggs scale are most prone to this; this is one of their peculiar temptations and vices. Whatever the case, we will never fix the problems we face if all we have to offer is negative criticism. I know lots of folk who are verbally committed to renewal, but as soon as serious constructive options are put on the table, they are so

used to criticizing that immediately they can find two reasons why any proposed solution will not work. Over time this disposition is disastrous for renewal. A profound pessimism and melancholy takes over, so that nothing really gets done. The critics eventually turn on their fellow critics, causing contention and division within the ranks of renewalists. Think of what happened after the Reformation, when one group fell upon each other, with the Lutherans literally drowning the Anabaptists. Eventually the critics become pretty unbearable, miserable in themselves and a menace to others. So people turn away and vow that they will have nothing to do with renewal.

Nor is renewal strictly a matter of reform. Renewal may be achieved through reform but one can have all sorts of reform without renewal. For example, we could reform the way we run General Conference. We could insist there be no orchestrated demonstrations on the floor of General Conference as happened twice now with the help or collusion of various bishops. I know one wonderful bishop who thinks this is a form of therapy for those who fail to get their way. She thinks that this will be a means of healing for those who are so adolescent or so ideological that they cannot act like normal adults when they fail to convince the body as a whole. We could reform the way we do business by insisting on proper order in the house. But this would not be renewal. It would be a matter of restoring proper order and insisting that the primary work of the General Conference be that of ecclesial legislation, proper oversight, and the like. We could have all that and still be as dead as a dodo. The same applies to schemes to add another layer of national conferences. We could have more or less layers of conferencing and there be no renewal.

Nor is renewal a matter of throwing slogans at problems. We all know what they are: “the extreme center,” or “rethink church,” or “give me that old time religion,” or “fix the seminaries for the way the seminaries go the church goes,” or “elect better bishops for the way the episcopate goes the way the church goes.” These are forms of hocus pocus; they are seeking the ends without the means; they are forms of

self-deception. The core problem is that they do not get to the critical issue of causation. Now, slogans are either good or bad as a form of public relations; and bad public relations can ruin efforts at renewal. But slogans are not going to fix anything.

Nor is renewal a matter of wobbling back and forth between Methodism and some other ecclesial ideal. This is a serious temptation. Once you begin to see problems in United Methodism, it is easy to lose your nerve and start looking over the fences and seeing what else is out there. We then reach for this or that element that looks good and simply export it back to into United Methodism. When we broach this subject, there is one minor option and there are two big options lurking down the road. The minor option is the Anabaptist tradition. The bigger options are Pentecostalism and Roman Catholicism. I will leave aside the Anabaptist tradition, but say a brief word about the other two.

First, Pentecostalism is the most important renewal movement of the modern period; it is our own brainchild and grandchild for the most part; and we need to pay careful attention to it. But taken in the round it is a mess. A week ago I had dinner with one of my colleagues in the Center for Philosophy of Religion. He was brought up in Pentecostalism; he was educated at a United Methodist college; he did his philosophical training on the work of Thomas Reid; and he is currently involved in research on the Lisbon earthquake and on evolutionary psychology as applied to religion. As I listened to his story I was not in the least surprised that he was a functional atheist and agnostic.

---

*The imperatives of renewal are logically related to the indicatives of identity.*

---

He had been intellectually and spiritually abused in the sense that he had been schooled in a form of Fundamentalism that was saturated by the intellectual shenanigans of Dispensationalism and was given no access to a robust, healthy version of Christianity. Now this touches a raw nerve for me,

not because I ever believed the tissue of heretical nonsense represented by Dispensationalism, but because it was invented in Dublin in the 1830s and because my own University Press has made a fortune selling old and new editions of the Scofield Bible. Pentecostalism is riddled with this nonsense; it has thus far singularly failed to tackle the theological issues its own existence evokes; and it is a disaster as far as the content of catechesis is concerned. There is a deep relationship between Pentecostalism and Methodism which we have not begun to ponder from an ecclesial point of view. I will come back to this issue shortly. But in the end we are going to have to make up our minds as to who we are as United Methodists and stay the course. The imperatives of renewal are logically related to the indicatives of identity.

The other big option is Roman Catholicism. We know that is a very serious option in the United States, not least because in the United States even Roman Catholics are Protestants. Roman Catholicism is a radically different ballgame, say, in Ireland, where the complete and utter moral failure in the church in protecting its weakest members—its children—is a horrendous scandal. Here in the USA things are totally different spiritually, intellectually, and even theologically. For example, Roman Catholicism has superb universities like Notre Dame. For my own work I do not hesitate to say that is probably the best in the world, bar none. It has the kind of really healthy diversity where the claims of the tradition, especially of the work of Thomas Aquinas, have to be taken seriously; so the kind of liberation theology, for example, that emerges is far more open to criticism and conversation than the kind that I am used to in United Methodism. Moreover, for the most part, Roman Catholicism here is generally not afraid to stand and bear the offense of the Gospel; it expects and therefore it can handle hostility. Whereas the best way to describe United Methodism is this: We are so afraid of being kicked in the ditch that we jump into it at the first sign of trouble. I could continue to catalogue the great strengths of Roman Catholicism. However, what everybody must face is simply this: Roman Catholicism bet the store on the teaching *magisterium* and papal infallibil-

ity as the solution to the problems thrown up modernity and, most especially, by Liberal Protestantism. It has bet the store on an elaborate epistemology and thus tried to provide solace to those poor souls who are smitten with a certain kind of intellectual anxiety. The most searing description of what this can look like that I have ever seen comes from the pen of the distinguished English historian, Professor Trevor Roper (Lord Dacre).

How well one knows the face of certain converts to Catholicism—that smooth exhausted look, burnt out and yet at rest, as of a motorist who, after many mishaps and mounting insurance-premiums, has at last decided to drive himself no more, and having found a chauffeur with excellent references, resigns himself to safer travel in a cushioned backseat.<sup>3</sup>

The description of the typical contemporary evangelical or mainline Protestant convert to Roman Catholicism in the United States would be different. It would be laced with either that cheerful optimism or that persistent pessimist, its twin sister, which are such a hallmark of North Americans. But no one should be fooled. To go to Rome is to bet the store on the pope as the final arbiter of the interpretation of scripture; and if that is your source of anxiety, then do not think for one moment that you have resolved that problem. You have simply made one solution—the solution to a problem in epistemology—the hallmark of Christianity. I happen to think this is to make two big mistakes not one: it is a mistake as an epistemology of theology, and it is a mistake as a matter of canonical practice. However, these are not my main points. My point is that moving to Roman Catholicism is not a solution to the challenges of renewal; it abandons the quest for renewal in despair. But that is not the end of the matter: it simply relocates the challenges of renewal to the Roman Catholic version of the church; and it offers the totally illusory hope of an easy ride in a fancy limousine with a cushioned backset. Renewal will not come either by leaving for Rome or by borrowing bits and pieces from it cafeteria style.<sup>4</sup>

If you are going to tackle the challenges of renewal, you and I will have to make up your mind about who we are and

what we are. Again, the imperatives of renewal are in part driven by the indicatives of identity. Renewal involves critical reflection on the various challenges we face and a serious effort at meeting them in a realistic and effective manner.

The dynamics of renewal are simple: we face up to where we are and what we are by realistic descriptions of the challenges we face; we discern accurate diagnoses of what has gone wrong; and we reach for truly effective prescriptions on how to put things right. If you take away nothing else, take away those three words: realistic descriptions, accurate diagnoses, and effective prescriptions. We must look ourselves and our church fair and square in the face. No flinching, no excuses, no papering over the cracks with euphemisms. We must think hard about diagnoses. What has really gone wrong here? What agencies, actors, systems, policies, procedures, practices have become dysfunctional? We must equally think long and hard on what prescriptions will be effective. What changes, what practices, what kind of refocus, what agents and agencies, what policies, what resources, and the like, will really make a difference in the short-term and in the long-term?

Note that these are not Liberal or Conservative issues. These are not Modern or Postmodern issues. These are not Liberationist issues or Status-quo issues. We need all hands on deck for this kind of work. Friends need to take counsel with friends; and enemies need to listen carefully to their enemies within and without their tribal connections within United Methodism. We need to look outside our borders across the board to neighboring churches and movements. We should scour the global world, without looking to this or that group as a labor-saving device, for renewal cannot be fixed by doing our theology by geography or by reducing it to biological identity. We have to go back into our own history and see where things really went wrong, a process that may well take us back to Wesley himself. We need to harvest whatever new insights that have emerged in the recent generations. In all of this we need to be utterly dependent on the Holy Spirit and the means of grace.

The difficulties can arise all the down the line. We can misread our situation; we can get the diagnosis wrong; and we can come up with wrong medicine or apply it in the wrong way at the wrong time.

---

*The work of renewal is demanding.*

---

So if you are one of those who thought there was a big bang solution to the problems we face, think again! You believe in magic not in creation! You believe in hocus pocus. You are a hocus pocus Christian!

The work of renewal is demanding. It will meet with setbacks at every turn; there will be friction among its practitioners; it attracts its own band of stupid do-gooders, pious idiots, and genuine cranks; it has its own pathology. Above all it is cross-generational. Your task and mine is to see that the conversation is launched, that we hammer away at description, diagnosis, and prescription, that we make progress on one or two fronts, that we get the ball rolling in the right direction. The problems we face did not arise all at once. As my mother would say, they did not suddenly come up the river in a cabbage head. They are the fruit of missteps, mistaken policies, broken promises, institutional sin, and much inadequate theological reflection across the generations. The problems we face will not be fixed overnight or all at once. Solutions will require patient cross-generational cooperation. So let's vote not just for renewal but for effective, cross-generational, long-haul renewal.

Given these observations, there are strict limits on what I can achieve here today. I am not here to offer some grand theory of renewal. Nor can I really enter into the various challenges that you face in your own life and in your situation.

---

*We can think of renewal as personal, as congregational, and as connectional.*

---

The genre I am already using is that of provocative analysis and commentary. My goal is to get you to think through for

yourself what renewal might look like and to encourage you in renewal. I now want to switch to another genre, that of testimony. If these modest methods and efforts disappoint you, I can only repeat the advice once given by Winston Churchill: “If you are going through hell keep going.”

Let us now come a little closer to our target. We can think of renewal as personal, as congregational, and as connectional.

### *The Personal*

We need a good balance of exercises: in the classical disciplines of the church (Bible study, prayer, the sacraments, fellowship), in hands on ministry, in significant theological reflection. These will all be person relative.

In the case of the first of these (the classical disciplines): I have bought myself a new Bible (the Jerusalem Version) and am reading it right through with an eye on the activity of God. I also show up in church even when I am not teaching! I seek out lively fellowship. My biggest challenge, however, is prayer.

In the second of these (hands on ministry): I go once a year to teach for a week in Costa Rica; I go twice a year to a new church start in Romania. Getting there is hard on the body, but the results are palpable. It takes me out of the United States and into other lands with other versions of Methodism, with different challenges and an earthy enthusiasm that is a tonic to my soul.

On the third of these (theological reflection): I have plunged into a massive project on divine agency and divine action that is going to take four to five years. This emerged because I am fortunate to have a sabbatical year at Notre Dame. The move there has been explosive: I originally planned a short book; I now have three volumes in mind. Most of my academic work will now fit in and around this even though I have several other projects in play. Each of us needs to find a good balance of spiritual exercises.

### *The Congregational*

Because most of my life is spent in the academy, this is not my immediate context for ministry. When I am in Dallas, however, I generally teach three large Bible study groups

a week: two in my home church in Highland Park United Methodist Church on Sundays and one in the Church of the Incarnation on Wednesdays. In the latter I follow the Episcopal lectionary; in Highland Park I work my way through a book, taking a solid unit at a time. Interestingly, I find that United Methodists cannot handle the lectionary. I tried using it (it meant one less preparation) but it simply did not work. One man simply could not handle the problem of bringing all the readings together, even though I made sure the readings were integrated as a single lesson.

The reason why I do this work is simple: It is scripture (not theories about scripture) that are critical for the life of the church on a weekly basis. I cannot see a local church being a healthy church without this. This means we have to work at the teaching involved on a week-in, week-out basis.

Alongside this we need to provide opportunities to learn the general doctrinal heritage of the church as represented by the creeds and our canonical doctrines.<sup>5</sup>

We also need to find a way to teach the canonical sermons of Wesley. They are pivotal for the grounding of our people in the faith of our tradition. They are in fact a handbook of spiritual direction. They divide nicely into a group that deals with becoming a Christian, a group covering being a Christian, and a group covering the challenges of staying a Christian. I am experimenting with this at the moment, working with a pilot project led by laity back in Texas. This is an enormous challenge, involving an effort to make Wesley's English accessible. I am not at all sure this will work! First signs are mixed!

I am having better success with folk working through my book, *Wesley for Armchair Theologians*. I provide a simple student guide and a teacher crib sheet.<sup>6</sup>

The aim here is to have informal exercises in catechesis that transmit the Wesleyan material in substance rather than through slogans.

These sorts of courses need to be supplemented with teaching sessions that deal with contemporary issues. Here, I have found Adam Hamilton's series on world religions exceptionally helpful. I do not have to do too much preparation.

I can use Hamilton's fine presentations as a foil for getting at contemporary issues. Without this kind of exercise, folks think that we are a bunch of old fogies, living in the past, and irrelevant to the present. The trick is to make the tradition live by relating it head on to contemporary issues.<sup>7</sup>

This should be accompanied by hands-on ministry in the local community and abroad. On the latter front, I deliberately take folks with me to Romania. I have also done this in Kazakhstan and in Nepal. The effect has been absolutely life changing, not just in the short-term but permanently. These are extremely costly undertakings in terms of finance and personal energy. They can easily be nerve wrecking. The big issue here is in part the introduction of our people to the volatile, energetic, complex forms of Christianity that are burgeoning outside the West. I hammer this home in my teaching as well.

All these represent instantiations of Methodism at its best: immersion in scripture, immersion in the specific doctrines of the church, putting folks in situations where they have to trust God and where they get a glimpse of what Methodism once was like, even though there are significant changes. The treasures are living practices and a radical dependence on the Holy Spirit. In a way this was what our forbear denominations embodied.

Some churches do not want any of this. They want a place to be religious, meet their friends, socialize with acquaintances, and ultimately be buried. They do not want the Gospel in any serious mode, they are obsessed with survival and meeting the budget, and they are going to die. God simply hands them over to their passions, desires, and autonomy. And we cannot do a thing about it, but bear with them the wrath of God, as Christ did. It is romantic and foolish to expect renewal in these circumstances. It is a terrible thing to fall into the hands of the living God; but even in judgment God has not forgotten us; and even then we will be the instruments of providence.

### *The Connectional*

Things get a lot more difficult at this level, whether we move up to the Annual Conference or the General Conference.

My platitude at the level is: Do what we can and let it be. What any of us can do is severely limited! Here, I will simply supply a laundry list.

- We find time to go to connectional meetings.
- We elect good representatives at General Conference.
- We elect good bishops.
- We become informed through all the channels available to us what is happening in the wider church.
- We develop petitions that improve our canon law.
- We curb the corruption of power, committees, offices, and agencies.
- We seek to restore proper order in the practices of the presiding officers, and members.
- We insist that the General Conference stick to its proper tasks of legislation and oversight and get rid of all the extraneous flim-flam and entertainment that bishops insist on introducing.
- We provide real space for theological reflection and prayer.
- We get rid of unnecessary red tape and bureaucracy.
- We work for proposals that will really fulfill the mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ and we find ways to recover and renew our denominational identity for generations to come.<sup>8</sup>

---

*The United Methodist Church should reposition itself on the map of Christianity.*

---

### *Identity*

I want to finish with a general suggestion about our identity. At this point I am switching back to analysis and commentary. My proposal is this: the United Methodist Church should reposition itself on the map of Christianity. I have already said why this issue is relevant. Renewal depends on a vision of who we are and what we are; again, the imperatives are intimately related to the indicative. It requires that we

understand our ecclesial identity and that we resolutely seek to embody that identity as best we can.

I shall state the issue robustly and provocatively and then I am going to express the operational implications of what I am proposing both negatively and positively.

The United Methodist Church belongs historically in a third incarnation of primitive or early or ancient Christianity that is genuinely different from both its Catholic and Protestant siblings and that deserves a fresh and full implementation in our own day and generation.

To make this clear let me draw attention to the relevant contrasting position I reject. United Methodism is decidedly not a Catholic Christianity in its classical forms as represented by Roman Catholicism or Eastern Orthodoxy; and it is not a form of magisterial Protestantism whether Lutheran, Anglican, Reformed, Anabaptist, or Baptist. Nor is it some amalgam of these strung together as represented by such deceptive terms as catholic evangelicalism, or Protestantism with a Catholic face, or revivalism with an Eastern Orthodox update, or the so-called Wesleyan quadrilateral dressed up in ecclesial costume, or a spiritual movement that exemplifies a balance between personal piety and social activism, or some vague group committed to the extreme center.

---

*The United Methodist Church represents a third ecclesiological option in the appropriation of early Christianity.*

---

Least of all are we a cult of John Wesley. All of the amalgam proposals are really non-starters as serious ecclesial options; at best they are ways of describing a movement rather than a serious church. Initially, there are really two, and only two, big options in our understanding of the church, the Catholic and Magisterial Protestantism.

The United Methodist Church represents a third ecclesiological option in the appropriation of early Christianity. The first option is a Catholic version of Christianity where the emphasis falls on purity of institutional identity, on the privileging of hierarchical epistemic authority, and on an exclusivist vision of sacramental realism.

---

*United Methodism . . . looks to the Holy Spirit as the only ultimate guarantor of ecclesial identity, of spiritual authenticity, and of public faithfulness, and as the source of all the treasures of the divine life bequeathed to God's people in their formation in the Son.*

---

It is represented by Eastern Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism, and their smaller offshoots. The second option is a version of Magisterial Protestantism where the emphasis falls on biblical authority, on purity of various ecclesiastical polities, on justification by grace alone through faith alone, and on a narrow vision of divine sovereignty. Here, the paradigm case is Reformed Christianity in all its many varieties. The first bets the store on contested institutional continuity, fullness of spiritual resources, and pristine epistemic authority; the second bets the store on an exclusive vision of biblical authority and purity; the amalgam option bets the store on clever slogans driven by political acumen and historical musings. United Methodism, if it is true to its own ecclesial identity, bets the store on none of these, but looks to the Holy Spirit as the only ultimate guarantor of ecclesial identity, of spiritual authenticity, and of public faithfulness, and as the source of all the treasures of the divine life bequeathed to God's people in their formation in the Son.

Put more succinctly: United Methodism is an expression of a third ecclesial option which is thoroughly Trinitarian in orientation but which looks to the Third Article, to the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of Life, as the originating, sustaining, directing, and authenticating source of true Christianity. If we were to reduce it to a slogan it would run something akin to Irenaeus's famous remark: "For where the Church is, there is the Spirit of God; and where the Spirit of God is, there is the Church and every kind of grace" (*Adversus Haereses*: 3, 24, 1). As a third option, we honor both Catholicism and Magisterial Protestantism, but we ultimately stand with monasticism, mysticism, pietism, revivalism, and the saner forms of Pentecostalism as the bearers of the deepest life of the Church, the life of God himself in the soul of

humankind, fully incarnate in Jesus Christ the Son, and fully present now through the inimitable working of the good and life-giving Holy Spirit.

It is important to observe the numbers. There are in the region of seventy seven million Christians who trace their lineage to John Wesley and the eighteenth-century Evangelical Awakening. If you add to this Pentecostalism as the most important offspring of Methodism—something of an adolescent and contrarian offspring (to be sure)—then taken together we constitute an extraordinarily important expression of the Christian faith that is alive and well, and that has a pivotal role to play in the future fortunes of Christianity. We belong more with the Christianity of the Global South or with that of contemporary China than we do with Roman Catholicism or with the many varieties of the Reformed tradition. We are part of a vital re-appropriation of early Christianity that can hold its own in any reckoning of the proper identity of Christianity across the centuries.<sup>9</sup>

Now let me identify the practical implications of this thesis. Negatively, it is time we stopped playing second fiddle to other versions of Christianity. It is time to cease and desist the lamenting over our marginal status, our humble and accidental origins, our lack of intellectual sophistication, and our spiritual deficit as measured by hostile critics. It is time we stopped lusting after other versions of Christianity and apologizing for what we are, vices and all. Let me put it bluntly in the language of the late Albert Outler: we need to resist the temptation to think that we are *une eglise manqué*, an ecclesiastical crock.<sup>10</sup>

Positively, we need to stand up and affirm what we have been and who we are. We are and have been one of the genuine tribes of Israel; we are a legitimate, full-blooded expression of primitive Christianity; we claim full membership in the Holy Spirit in the Body of Christ; we have a responsibility both to our Father in God, John Wesley, and to his varied offspring across the world, to step out in faith and make the world once again our parish; we carry within us as our birthright the DNA of the most vibrant and growing (and yes—chaotic) incarnation of primitive Christianity in

the world today.<sup>11</sup> We need to start believing in ourselves as church, as a permanent expression of the Christian faith for the foreseeable future.

Renewal requires that we think and act at many levels: the personal, the congregational, and the connectional. It also requires that we develop a big picture of who we are as a church. I think the time is ripe to stand up and take our place in the world as a church established by the Holy Spirit to bring honor and glory to the Father through our unceasing service and obedience to the Son.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

---

1. At the beginning of his paper, Professor Abraham states that “transforming a denomination which has gone off the rails is virtually impossible. Yet United Methodists think they can transform the world.” Do you agree with Professor Abraham’s assessment that it is virtually impossible to transform a denomination? Explain. What about transforming the world? (See opening paragraphs on page 21.)
2. Dr. Abraham describes what renewal is and what renewal is not. How would you describe the work of renewal? What do you believe Abraham means when he says renewal is not for the faint in heart? Do you agree or disagree with his observation? (See opening paragraphs on page 21.)
3. What do you think about Professor Abraham’s statement that Pentecostalism is the most important renewal movement in the church of the modern period? (page 22)
4. What do think Professor Abraham means when he says that “the imperatives of renewal are logically related to the indicatives of identity?” (page 22)
5. Professor Abraham notes that there are three key aspects of renewal: realistic description, accurate diagnosis, and effective prescription. Do you think Abraham has offered a realistic description of the United Methodist Church’s current state, along with an accurate diagnosis and effective prescription? (page 24)
6. What do you think Professor Abraham means when he says that the work of renewal will require a great deal of “cross-generational” cooperation? How do you see this getting played out in the church today? How might we need to change how we share in ministry? (page 24)
7. Professor Abraham speaks of how there are multiple levels of renewal in the church: personal, congregational, and connectional. How do you see (or not see) renewal happening on these levels? How are you practicing renewal in your personal life? In your congregation? At the connectional level (e.g., Annual Conference, General Church, Boards and Agencies, etc.). What frustrations and disappointments come with the work of renewal? What joys and excitements come as well? (pages 25–26)
8. What does Professor Abraham’s proposal mean to you that “the United Methodist Church should reposition itself on the map of Christianity,” that is, that it represents a “third option” on the ecclesial landscape? What might it mean in terms of how United Methodists understand and see themselves to view it as a third option? In relation to Roman Catholicism and Magisterial Protestantism? How might this effect ministry in a local church? What might this mean in terms of world mission and evangelism? (pages 26–27)

9. How might Professor Abraham's thesis that "United Methodism looks to the Holy Spirit as the only ultimate guarantor of ecclesial identity, of spiritual authenticity, and of public faithfulness" effect how the church carries out the mission of making disciples for Jesus Christ? (See section on identity, pages 26–27.)
10. What strengths do you see in Professor Abraham's proposal on renewal? What questions would you still want Professor Abraham to answer?

## ENDNOTES

---

- 1 For a fuller discussion of Abraham's understanding of Christian renewal, see William J. Abraham, *The Logic of Renewal* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2003).
- 2 For an excellent discussion of the historical relationship between Methodism and Pentecostalism see Donald W. Dayton, *The Theological Roots of Pentecostalism* (Metuchen: Scarecrow, 1987).
- 3 David Womersley, "Connoisseur of Fraud." Review of Adam Sisman, *Hugh Trevor-Roper: The Biography*. 25 Sept. 2010. <http://www.standpointmag.co.uk/node/3300/full>
- 4 For other recent and stimulating perspectives on the relationship between Protestantism and Roman Catholicism, see Gerald W. Schlabbach, *Unlearning Protestantism: Sustaining Christian Community in an Unstable Age* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2010); and James R. Payton Jr., *Getting the Reformation Wrong: Correcting Some Misunderstanding* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2010).
- 5 See William J. Abraham, *Waking from Doctrinal Amnesia: The Healing of Doctrine in The United Methodist Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995).
- 6 See William J. Abraham, *Wesley for Armchair Theologians* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2005).
- 7 See Adam Hamilton, *Christianity and World Religions: Wrestling With Questions People Ask* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005). Hamilton's resource is readily available from Cokesbury in Nashville.
- 8 One of the proposals on the table for United Methodists is titled "The Call to Action." Visit [www.umc.org](http://www.umc.org) for the full text.
- 9 Others have made statements similar to Abraham's with respect to the positioning of Methodism on the ecclesial map and Methodist ecclesiology. In *Where Resident Aliens Live*, Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon write: "Methodism is never really at home ecclesially. We are not particularly Protestant, nor are we particularly Catholic. Accordingly, Methodism only makes sense as a people longing for unity through the discovery of meeting one another as people disciplined by Christ" (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), p. 104. The whole issue of ecclesiology, or the doctrine of the church, remains a major topic of reflection in the United Methodist Church. Abraham's proposal is one of many in this regard. Questions of renewal, of course, cannot ignore ecclesiology.
- 10 Outler's statement can be found in his famous essay "Do Methodists Have a Doctrine of the Church?" in *The Wesleyan Theological Heritage: Essays of Albert C. Outler*, Thomas C. Oden & Leicester R. Longden, eds. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991), p. 224.
- 11 For a fascinating argument about the chaotic nature of the Methodist tradition or the "constitutional" instability of the Wesleyan legacy, see Donald W. Dayton, "Good News to the Poor: The Methodist Experience after Wesley" in *From the Margins: A Celebration of the Theological Work of Donald W. Dayton*, Christian T. Collins Winn, ed. (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2007), p. 87.



Wesleyan  
Conne~~X~~ion  
Project

*A clergy leadership formation program of the  
Indiana Conference of the United Methodist Church*