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# IN OBJECTION TO ERROR: A WESLEYAN REFLECTION ON THE REGRETTABLE STATE OF THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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IN OBJECTION TO ERROR:  
A WESLEYAN REFLECTION ON THE REGRETTABLE STATE OF THE UNITED  
METHODIST CHURCH

An Essay Submitted to  
The Office of Graduate Studies  
College of Arts and Sciences  
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in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of  
Master of Arts

By  
Charles Stehlik  
2019

The essay of Charles Stehlik is hereby accepted:

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30 August 2019

Date

I certify that this is the original document:

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Author – Charles Stehlik

30 August 2019

Date

## **DEDICATION**

For Carolyn Patrice Cacho-Bowman, friend and mentor, with whom I frequently and lovingly disagree.

For the members of my church family, of all sexual orientations, in whom I see the face of Christ.

For HM3 Bobby Stewart and HM3 Bryan M<sup>c</sup>Wreath, friends and shipmates, who kept alive in me the spirit of conversation and fellowship.

And for Sonoko, my wife and rock, and the woman who motivates me always to be a better man. All this is yours.

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## PREFACE

Like many Christians, we Methodists enter the faith through baptism's door. The covenant, made before the congregation and marked by water, seals the new Christian to partnership with God. The ceremony reads:

On behalf of the whole Church, I ask you:

Do you renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness,  
reject the evil powers of this world,  
and repent of your sin?

**I do.**

Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you  
to resist evil, injustice, and oppression  
in whatever forms they present themselves?

**I do.**

Do you confess Jesus Christ as your Savior,  
put your whole trust in his grace,  
and promise to serve him as your Lord,  
in union with the Church which Christ has opened  
to people of all ages, nations, and races?

**I do.<sup>1</sup>**

When the forms of injustice and oppression present themselves within the structures of the Church, the Christian's duty is to make use of our God-given powers to resist.

Let none suggest that I am not a biblical Christian. Like John Wesley before me, I affirm that it is through God's revelation inspired through human hearts and hands that we

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<sup>1</sup> Discipleship Ministries, "The Baptismal Covenant I"; <http://umcdiscipleship.org/resources/the-baptismal-covenant-t>.

may become a part of our Redeemer's earthly ecclesial body. I further affirm, in accordance with the baptismal covenant, that oppressive misuse of Scripture is an evil that we are obligated to remedy. It is to this end that I now write. May God add a blessing to the words in these pages and to the meditations of our hearts and minds.

## INTRODUCTION

The United Methodist Church (UMC) faces fresh challenges with the recent special session of the General Conference. An argument nominally about human sexuality threatens our denomination's nominal unity—the UMC may soon schism as a result of its inability to reach a consensus on this issue. Analyses demonstrate that the disagreement, while taking the particular form of human sexuality, is rather a question of theological language—Methodists today talk past each other with arguments framed by different presuppositions about the theological task. This disagreement has not *produced* a rift in the church. Rather, it has *exposed* a longstanding division already within. And, the imminent schism need only occur if one errantly presupposes that consensus is a necessary element of unity. In this way, the problem's very framing has helped the crisis to endure and grow.

The following analyses will explain the hermeneutical differences that underpin the question of human sexuality in the United Methodist Church. The reflection begins with an explanation, using scientific facts and epistemological principles, of the human need for well-founded and intentional hermeneutics. From here, conversation turns to an abbreviated introduction to John Wesley. Wesley's own hermeneutical process, the *Wesleyan Quadrilateral*, then follows at length. The section ends with an exploration of the general tenor of Scripture.

The middle section of this essay includes four specialized chapters, each adopting the position of one of the four elements of the Quadrilateral in a manner relevant to the church's trouble. These include Scriptural exegesis, scientific exposition of human reason, a personal testimonial, and an historical reflection on primitive and recent Christendom.

The final section discusses the breadth of sexual expression in the natural and human worlds before moving to a specific explanation of the function of sexuality in human relations and personhood building. This prepares readers for discussion of the recent General Conference and the state of Methodism in the global and local spheres, before concluding with a spirited set of recommendations to members of the United Methodist Church.

Our shared road is a long one, and we travelers upon it suffer more for its pronounced disrepair. If we are to work together and remain united, we will need to rejuvenate Methodist infrastructure so as to allow for mutual, smooth, journeying. Those who say that we cannot walk two or more abreast in fellowship are incorrect. That there is only room for one “right” mode of Christian expression is a lie whose consequence is mistreatment of God’s beloved children.

## OUR ESTRANGEMENT, OURSELVES: THE NEED FOR INTENTIONAL HERMENEUTICS

Humans are relational creatures. We relate both to our environments and to other humans in ways that shape our very identities. An example from genetics and our studies of personality will serve. Personality traits are difficult to list exhaustively, but consensus suggests the “Big 5” are openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism. Humans express each of these five along a continuum. Each of these traits is genetically influenced—we each have, for example, a genetic predisposition toward some degree of extraversion.

Our environments further influence our expression of these traits—a young person encouraged to socialize safely can become more extraverted than her or his genes might otherwise promote. A helpful starting observation is that genes “limit developmental paths and outcomes.” The process called *canalization* is the way that genes themselves influence the way that a given person, even from the earliest developmental stages, will have different phenotypic outcomes from another within the same environment, given her or his genetics. The different roads that we may take, developmentally, are largely predetermined by genetics—but choice of road, even among a finite selection, remains open to individual and environmental factors.<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, we find moderate ( $r \geq .5$ ) to strong ( $r \geq .7$ ) heritability between many of the qualities that we depend on fundamentally—from general intelligence (.52), to sociability

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<sup>2</sup> Robert S. Feldman, *Child Development* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson, 2019), 60–61.

(.64), and anxiety (.70).<sup>3</sup> There exists exceptional evidence that the *direction* into which our personalities and dispositions are launched is determined at birth. Although choice and practice may alter this course by degrees, the general trajectory is irreversible.

The preceding nature-nurture observation is elementary and does not do us much good. It is, nevertheless, foundational. The further, much more helpful finding that the psychological sciences have provided, however, recognizes that humans also self-select or modify their environments such as to satisfy and reinforce existing genetic dispositions. A young person genetically predisposed to introversion, then, will often find quiet places in which to practice and strengthen that introversion. Developmental psychologists call this phenomenon “niche-picking.”<sup>4</sup> In other words, humans co-create themselves with their world, choosing experiences that allow them to become more themselves. The very task of becoming oneself is dialectical in nature.

Our identity’s contingency on this dialectic with the environment is not our only relational task. We are not merely creatures in a world, but social creatures in a social world. The great task of adolescence is identity achievement—a task that does not always end happily. Alternative statuses include: moratorium—delayed resolution that may later resolve in one of the other three statuses; foreclosure—acceptance of an identity provided from an outside source without achieving one of one’s own; and diffusion—indecisive, ungrounded, and directionless identity lacking a coherent sense of self.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Feldman, *Child Development*, 69.

<sup>4</sup> Feldman, *Child Development*, 63.

<sup>5</sup> Laura E. Berk, *Exploring Lifespan Development* (Boston: Pearson, 2018), 331.

Helpfully, the sort of identity status into which one settles greatly influences his or her outlook on life. For example, “foreclosed individuals display a dogmatic, inflexible cognitive style, internalizing the values and beliefs of parents and others without deliberate evaluation and resisting information that threatens their position.”<sup>6</sup> Initial beliefs about the world, likewise, predict the sort of resolution that one will find, as, “adolescents who tend to assume that absolute truth is always attainable tend to be foreclosed” and “young people who are curious, open-minded, rational, and persistent in the face of obstacles, are likely to be in a state of moratorium or identity achievement.”<sup>7</sup>

Adolescents pursue (or don’t) identity achievement under the influence of their parents, peer group, culture, and communities.<sup>8</sup> The task of becoming oneself is a matter involving numerous interacting spheres of influence, from the genetic and cellular levels up to the local influences of global politics, including all things in between. Without uncountably many relationships, there can be no self.

A concrete example will help to deliver this point in a useful way. Johari’s window is a tool that crops up often in treatment groups.<sup>9</sup> Its simple concept is one that easily expresses the need that one has for others in the task of self-understanding. Johari’s window goes as follows: there are those things that you know about yourself, and those things that you don’t know about yourself. And, there are those things that other people know about

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<sup>6</sup> Berk, *Exploring Lifespan Development*, 332.

<sup>7</sup> Berk, *Exploring Lifespan Development*, 332.

<sup>8</sup> Berk, *Exploring Lifespan Development*, 332.

<sup>9</sup> Joseph Luft and Harry Ingham, “The Johari Window: A Graphic Model of Awareness in Interpersonal Relations,” *NLT Reading Book for Human Relations Training* (Arlington, VA: National Training Laboratories Institute, 1982), 32–34.

you, and those things that they don't. Lastly, there are some things about you that you don't know, but other people do, and some things about you that neither you nor others know. It all fits nicely onto a 2x2 grid.

I was recently reminded of the usefulness of Johari's window during a discussion with a friend. In looking for a way to manage a family emergency, this friend cautioned me to seek feedback from my wife. "She knows you as a husband in ways that you don't know yourself," he rightly observed. Indeed, we can fill in the blanks with all manner of human relations. You, dear reader, are a friend to some, a child to others, an enemy, perhaps, to others yet. You may attend worship or have children. In each different particular relationship you tend, the other knows you in ways exclusive to others in your life.

An analogy is helpful here. Imagine showing a child the moon for the first time. One might use words like "moon," "circle," and "yellow" to get the point across. One is more likely, though, to lift the child to a window and point. The finger (or words like "yellow") are not the moon—they are indicators helpful in communicating the moon's location. It is the relationships between the finger and the moon that helps the child to find the moon. One can expand the analogy to recognize that the presence of multiple fingers, each from a different vantage, can make finding the moon easier. Just as I needed my friend to remind me of a truth I knew, and I relied on my wife to partner in good decision-making, so too do we all need diverse vantages to make sense of our shared experience.

We are fundamentally estranged from most forms of knowledge. Although there certainly exist *a priori* truths, such as facts about triangles, the very structures of our existence preclude immediacy of knowledge of contingent, *a posteriori* truths. We do not

have *a priori* knowledge of the moon. Yet the existence of many different sorts of fingers directing moonward help us to know it well—tide tables and astronauts, telescopes and textbooks, all contribute to the census of moon facts that humankind shares. We should be deeply distrustful of moon claims which purport to eschew reliable indicators.

A more concrete example follows: Greenness does not exist in the world. Light from the sun may strike a leaf, which absorbs all of the light excepting that travelling at a wavelength between 520–560 nanometers.<sup>10</sup> *That* light bounces off the leaf, maintaining that wavelength, and enters a person’s eye, is inverted by the lens, and travels through the pupil. There, it activates cones within the eye, producing a two-dimensional and upside-down image.<sup>11</sup> The cones there receive that light energy and translate it into electrical energy.<sup>12</sup>

That electrical message travels to the back of the brain, where the striate cortex in the occipital lobe renders a (still upside-down) image<sup>13</sup>—now distorted with magnification of the focused-upon portion of the visual field and diminishment of the periphery.<sup>14</sup> The image then separates and travels in two paths: that information designating *what* the object is travels through the lower part of the brain, and the information regarding *where* it is travels through the topmost part.<sup>15</sup> This distinct information separately travels to different,

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<sup>10</sup> Bruce E. Goldstein and James R. Brockmole, *Sensation and Perception* (Boston: Cengage Learning, 2017): 31.

<sup>11</sup> Goldstein and Brockmole, *Sensation and Perception*, 22.

<sup>12</sup> Goldstein and Brockmole, *Sensation and Perception*, 55–57.

<sup>13</sup> Goldstein and Brockmole, *Sensation and Perception*, 74–75.

<sup>14</sup> Goldstein and Brockmole, *Sensation and Perception*, 76.

<sup>15</sup> Goldstein and Brockmole, *Sensation and Perception*, 80.

dedicated structures of the brain, each able to handle distinct tasks—see, for example, the fusiform face area, which allows us to recognize faces.<sup>16</sup>

This sophisticated process of image processing and rendering continues in many other ways so as to produce, from light, a coherent set of perceptions intelligible to the human perceiver. In this way, the hardware with which we were entrusted co-creates our world with the world itself. Whether one is a materialist, asserting that these sensory experiences are part of the world, or a dualist, maintaining that there is a difference between mind-like things and material things, is irrelevant here. In either scenario, the human body's task of experiencing stimuli requires that the body manipulate those stimuli so as to make them intelligible to the mind.

Even high degrees of fidelity, which many of us seem to experience, come with changes; for example, I do not experience light at a wavelength between 520–560 nanometers, I experience *greenness*. Claims of objective knowledge of contingent truths must be tempered by precise language. Rightly, the claim that “the leaf is green” is shorthand for “the image of a leaf that my sophisticated brain and sensory system created out of light has endowed me with an experience of ‘green.’” In this way, we see that every experience is mediated first by an unconscious and automatic process akin to a hermeneutic.

This is not to claim, of course, that the experience is useless. I quite enjoy looking at leaves, and I further manage to navigate our shared world with the help of this and similar

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<sup>16</sup> Goldstein and Brockmole, *Sensation and Perception*, 83.

sophisticated systems. My father is colorblind and, although he has been known to enjoy leaves, we know that he does not experience greenness in the same way that I do. Light traveling at that wavelength is *experientially different* for him. Nevertheless, our hermeneutics are not useless. Far from useless, these methods are the means through which we can engage our world! This long discourse is necessary, though, to illustrate that *the sort of hermeneutic at play will influence the reality that a person experiences*, and to this fact we must be acutely aware.

It is sometimes said that positing a fundamental estrangement, which includes the recognition that one is likewise estranged from one's dearest loved ones, leads to unacceptable consequences. It indeed can be a lonely recognition that all that I know of my wife is a product of my senses—but how dear she becomes when I recognize that we love one another even across this gulf!

One's attitude toward this estrangement determines the value that one finds in it, and it is my hope that others come to accept the bittersweet dearness that comes with such a recognition. Regardless, however, it does not serve to believe or disbelieve a position based on the consequences of that position. We desire to believe true things, as best we can, and thus should adopt positions based on good arguments and evidence.

Some of our hermeneutics, like our sensory systems, are things that we cannot control. Nevertheless, awareness of these hermeneutics is helpful. In the case of colorblindness, my father is aware of the condition and chooses clothing with the help of loved ones (or sometimes makes peace with the understanding that he clashes, to no detriment to *his* experience of his clothing). Knowing that he is colorblind allows him to

conduct his life differently than I must. Some hermeneutics, however, can be built and refined. For example, there are those who, finding fault in their vision, improve it with eyeglasses. The cigar shop ethic, discussed later, is such a hermeneutic that can be discovered and improved upon. Having learned that mode of interaction allows me to engage meaningfully with people to whom I might otherwise be unable.

There is no such thing, in any case, as the *absence* of a hermeneutic. This is a meaningful distinction regarding types of knowledge that bears examining, particularly to redress the tendency of certain members of the Christian family to make erroneous claims about objective reality. However one approaches the desire to understand God, self, or world, one always does so, implicitly or explicitly, through a perceptual lens that is dialectical with the object in question. Good lenses make for higher perceptual fidelity and greater scope of engagement across the gulf of estrangement.

Humans interact with and make sense of ourselves and our world, then, with the use of hermeneutics. Excepting mathematical truths, all knowledge claims include reliance on induction. One can put together assumptions and manipulate them deductively, certainly, but so long as these assumptions belong to facts about the world, they come birthed, consciously or otherwise, from a set of faith claims. This is why careful inspection and application of hermeneutics is so important: because we desire to believe true things, and we have an infinite gulf of incertitude to bridge, we must devote ourselves to burnishing ever-clearer lenses with which to examine whatever object is in question.

And, indeed, our efforts yield fruit! The sciences have given us engineering and medicine, and from them the human miracles of flight and vaccines. We have an abundance

of moon facts. Historical study gives us rich understanding of events in the past which contributes to our understanding of ourselves now. Theological enquiry, in its many forms ranging from biblical studies, systematics, and ethics, all refine and put to work sophisticated methodical languages in efforts to achieve a measure of truth. The psychological sciences, to which I appealed above for the purpose of *establishing* fundamental estrangement, are indeed among our many efforts to overcome the same.

Surely, of course, none is sufficient unto itself. Biology, as discussed above, instructs psychology, which itself is inadequate to the task of building airplanes. That each hermeneutic has its limitations is evidence of our need for so many of them—each is a different finger pointing upward, and through diversity we can discern points of intersection between the pointing fingers' paths, discovering reliable truth-claims.

Theology's task, which is weightier than the others because it seeks understanding of the infinite rather than knowledge of temporal truths, must appeal to the works of all other disciplines. Our work must include cross-paradigmatic integration and analysis. Recognition of plurality of thought in the world does not diminish our identity. Just as young persons can assume a stance within relativistic thinking, so too can the Christian affirmation of identity in Christ be enriched, rather than jeopardized, by cultivating in ourselves the *Logos* that Christ's earthly office and ongoing work embodies. Fear of plurality and expanded understanding is not the mark of sound faith, but rather a signifier of a faith that cannot withstand the Christ himself.

## A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO WESLEY

Any discussion of Methodism's theology must begin with its roots. Without such societies as the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (SPCK, 1698) and the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (1701), each with the aim of refining morality within community and through education, John Wesley would have had no model for his similar organization in Oxford.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, it was John's personal quest for holiness which drove the movement from its earliest days in the 1720s until his death in 1791.

Plainly, it was the voluntary gathering of affluent English persons for the purpose of conducting purity tests on one another that set the stage for Methodism to exist in the first place. Even as Methodism expanded to include diversity of economic classes, corporate holiness remained a priority for Wesley and the movement's members. To this end, he regularly administered tickets to members, attainable only after recurring examinations of character, which were required for attendance of meetings.<sup>18</sup>

While we may no longer share similar methods, honest reflection on our past bears recognition that the desire for corporate and personal holiness was one of our earliest motivators. That our early identity included such a priority is a fact from which we must not detach our attention. Indeed, even as improved understanding of ourselves within a Christian context has allowed us to re-evaluate biblical holiness claims,<sup>19</sup> holiness remains a priority for the Methodist movement. What is most important is the continuing heritage

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<sup>17</sup> Richard P. Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2013), 26.

<sup>18</sup> Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, 135.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. divorce, women as clergy, dietary laws.

of corporate holiness that Methodists maintain, as exhibited in such documents as our *Social Principles*. Christ-like becoming is an interpersonal affair.

Holiness was not the only source of our identity, however. Methodists also quickly advanced the cause of merciful works. “The Oxford Methodists in the early 1730’s,” Richard Heitzenrater writes, “nearly all university men, spent a good deal of their time, money, and energy in a ministry of mercy to the poor—educating the children in the workhouses, taking food to the needy, and providing wool and other materials from which people could make clothes and other durable goods to wear or sell.”<sup>20</sup> Methodists also ministered to those imprisoned,<sup>21</sup> those condemned to death, and those gathered to witness the executions.<sup>22</sup>

A third early and key element of our identity included scholasticism—indeed, Methodism’s 1729 emergence from Oxford University followed from John Wesley’s turning toward ordination in 1725 and subsequent earnest reading of Pietism.<sup>23</sup> This 1729 band of students “met together for study, prayer, and religious conversation, attended the Sacrament [Holy Communion] regularly, and kept track of their lives by daily notations in a diary.”<sup>24</sup> Reading was a habit that John nurtured and maintained his entire life, and one

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<sup>20</sup> Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, 137.

<sup>21</sup> Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, 46.

<sup>22</sup> Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, 137.

<sup>23</sup> Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, 39.

<sup>24</sup> Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, 43.

he later demanded of his itinerant ministers. He would later write, engaging in complaints he often heard,<sup>25</sup>

‘But I read *only* the Bible.’ Then you ought to teach others to read only the Bible, and, by parity of reason, to *hear* only the Bible. But if so, you need preach no more. Just so said George Bell. And What is the Fruit? Why, now he neither reads the Bible nor anything else.

This is rank enthusiasm. If you need no book but the Bible, you are got above St. Paul. He wanted others, too. ‘Bring the books,’ says he, ‘but especially the parchments....’

‘But I have no taste for reading.’ Contract a taste for it by use, or return to your trade.

‘But different men have different tastes.’ Therefore some may read less than others; but none should read less than this [five hours a day].<sup>26</sup>

‘But I have no books.’ I will give each of you, as fast as you will read them, books to the value of five pounds.

The coordinated efforts of academics, fellowship, rigor, and piety testify to the interaction in Wesley’s approach between daily habits and community accountability. These stringently-adopted personal habits, combining together study, service, and holiness, direct attention to Wesley’s understandings of justification, assurance, and perfection.

For much of his life, John Wesley hungered for a litmus test that ensured his own salvation—what he called *assurance*. Heitzenrater describes an early event in John’s life

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<sup>25</sup> John Wesley, *The Works of Wesley*, Vol. 5 (Grand Rapids, MI: Francis Asbury, 1986), 223.

<sup>26</sup> Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, 254.

which introduced these pains, and which set the course for much of his works and theological inquiry. Funded in part by the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (SPCK), John departed England for Georgia in 1735. Shipboard life, and the raging storms encountered on the journey, taught John that “he was afraid to die, he was unwilling to die, and he was ashamed to admit it.”<sup>27</sup> Perceiving this as evidence of his own internal lack of faith, John Wesley bore witness to the calm with which German travelers continued to sing hymns in contrast to the panic borne by the English.<sup>28</sup>

The yearning for assurance of salvation, to which the German calm testified and which Wesley found lacking in himself, inspired him to undertake a new religious quest. At this point in his life, John conflated assurance and faith as one faculty. Upon his return to England, Wesley befriended the Lutheran Peter Böhler. Previously, Wesley believed that his lack of assurance stemmed from too little faith. His friendship and discussions with Böhler altered this belief, such that Wesley soon asserted that, rather than a matter of degrees, faith is a plain matter of having or not having.<sup>29</sup>

As Wesley matured, however, with sensitive attention to his own internal phenomena, he came to recognize that he had attained a *measure* of assurance. Likewise, he found that he could distinguish between faith and assurance as separate entities. These distinctions were the fruits of years of reflection and doubt. Encounters with diverse people, followed by internal reflection and prayer, helped Wesley to clarify his beliefs.

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<sup>27</sup> Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, 65.

<sup>28</sup> Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, 65.

<sup>29</sup> Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, 84–85.

Using the lens of Wesley's personal spiritual quest allows us insight into the process we now call the Wesleyan quadrilateral. Situating this quadrilateral within the context of Wesley's personal odyssey—his faith which sought understanding—allows us to recognize his hermeneutic as an active and relational endeavor.

## THE QUADRILATERAL: WESLEY'S HERMENEUTIC

John Wesley did not share my radical skepticism, nor do I intend to misrepresent him as such. He did, however, share in the core lesson of the first chapter: one cannot read the Bible without a hermeneutic. This should not be interpreted as a challenge to try! It is, rather, a recognition that any interaction with Scripture includes an interpretive process, intentional or not. Wesley's position was that one ought to be *intentional* in one's hermeneutic.

We must explicitly recognize Wesley's incorporation of deep learning into the fabric of his life. Indeed,

Wesley ... was manifestly a man of many books with a wide range of learning who used these other books as both sources and authorities. Wesley was committed to the authority of Scripture, but his professed allegiance to *sola Scriptura* was more complicated than it first appears.<sup>30</sup>

Doubtless, Scripture was central to Wesley's theology. Again doubtless, Scripture was the chief authority to which Wesley appealed in matters of salvation and ethics. He did not, however, appeal to Scripture as an authority which could be read alone. Maddox clarifies that, "in reality, Wesley interpreted the Protestant *sola Scriptura* to mean that Scripture is the *primary*, rather than exclusive, Christian authority."<sup>31</sup> Far from a Lutheran-styled

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<sup>30</sup> Scott J. Jones, *John Wesley's Conception and Use of Scripture*, (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1995): 62.

<sup>31</sup> Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology*, (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1994): 37.

approach to direct reading of the Bible, Wesley recognized that interpretation was an active and creative process.

It would be a mistake to confuse Wesley's prolific use of Scripture in doctrinal materials with naïve biblicism. He lived during the beginnings of the critical study of Scripture and was exposed to its methods and results during his training at Oxford. He was convinced of the value of reading Scripture in its original languages. He understood the issues of textual criticism, using the best available Greek text for his own translation of the New Testament. And, he drew upon respected biblical scholarship in his preparing both his *Explanatory Notes Upon the Old Testament* and his *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament*.<sup>32</sup>

Maddox continues, "in fact, one of Wesley's most frequent objections to opponents' exegetical claims was that they contradicted the 'whole tenor and scope of Scripture.'"<sup>33</sup> We must qualify claims of Scripture's centrality with the wholly Wesleyan understanding that Scripture, while central, relies upon a hermeneutic. This hermeneutic, in turn, rests on conception of Scripture as a coherent unit.

Scripture's tenor and scope is a question discussed at length later, as such an exploration warrants more exegesis. By way of foreshadowing, it helps to assert that Wesley recognized this scope to have included the influences of the human authors through whom God worked. God's inspired Word contains the mark of human hands.

While Wesley generally used dictation imagery in describing the inspiration of Scripture, he recognized the evidences of human deliberation and

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<sup>32</sup> Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 37.

<sup>33</sup> Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 38.

participation in the process. As such, though he clearly considered Scripture to be an infallible, or totally reliable, guide for Christian life and belief, it is doubtful that he should be characterized as an inerrantist in the contemporary sense of the term.<sup>34</sup>

This sentiment echoes many expressed by the global church. Because of Wesley's recognition of need for a hermeneutic, and in partnership with his great learning, the hermeneutic he demonstrated throughout his life engaged his day's top minds in humanities, the fruits of scientific progress, and unending study. Seeking understanding of God's Word takes work! Scripture is the first among what we now call the Wesleyan Quadrilateral—a hermeneutical process including Scripture, reason, experience, and tradition. Although Wesley himself never used the word, Albert Outler<sup>35</sup> and subsequent Wesleyan scholars identified these four sources as the means through which Wesley made sense of his faith.

With Scripture as the centerpiece of Wesley's theology, and reason, experience, and tradition as his three means of Scriptural interpretation, we must recognize that these three means occupied different positions of value and frequency in Wesley's hermeneutical method. John Wesley counted reason as chief among his three interpreters of Scripture. Indeed, "following Scripture, reason was the criterion that Wesley invoked most often in defending a belief or practice as authentically Christian," Maddox writes. Continuing with our recognition that the quadrilateral is a modern construct,<sup>36</sup> we should recognize that the

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<sup>34</sup> Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 38.

<sup>35</sup> John Wesley and Albert C. Outler, *John Wesley* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964).

<sup>36</sup> Although Wesley made us of, and discussed, all of the elements of what we now call the Quadrilateral, it was Albert Outler, a twentieth-century theologian, who first coined the term. We should be

line between reason and Scripture is, if not fine, then certainly blurred. Maddox continues, “in fact, it was more typical for him to refer to Scripture and reason conjoined than to Scripture alone.”<sup>37</sup>

Thorsen discusses Wesley’s recurrent insistence that Christianity is reasonable—indeed, although Wesley was often accused of enthusiasm, he maintained throughout his life that Christianity and reason were complementary rather than contradictory.<sup>38</sup> The union of reason and Scripture in Wesley’s demonstrates the high position this complementarity played in his theology.

Far, then, from evading reason, Wesley recognized Christians as persons with a divine mandate to participate in it. Our spiritual form in the *Imago Dei* demands it: “Wesley considered human reasoning an essential part of that original constitution along with humankind’s political and moral capabilities.” That is, Thorsen writes, “Wesley identified reason as an essential element of humanhood with which we could continue to grow in God’s image.”<sup>39</sup>

Although sin has diminished our capacities, reason included, these capacities nevertheless persist. Thorsen continues,

Reason is a unique gift from God, and God graciously continues to permit reason to function in significant ways even though sin reigns in the moral

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aware that Wesley never verbalized his hermeneutic in this way. Further, as we will see, Wesley’s use of words like “reason” and “experience” carried technical meanings distinct from today’s common use.

<sup>37</sup> Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 40.

<sup>38</sup> Don Thorsen, *The Wesleyan Quadrilateral: Scripture, Tradition, Reason & Experience as a Model of Evangelical Theology*, (Lexington, KY: Emeth, 2005): 174.

<sup>39</sup> Thorsen, *The Wesleyan Quadrilateral*, 170.

character of people. Our rational capabilities fall short of God’s infinite reasoning, yet they remain largely intact despite this.<sup>40</sup>

Here, then, we see a meaningful distinction—there exist *degrees* of reasonableness. Humans possess a lesser degree than does God, and recognition of this fact should humble us. We are not without help, though, as the Paraclete serves to perfect our reason. Indeed, “one of the Spirit’s functions to which he refers several times is to guide the believer. This extends to a relationship with reason as well.”<sup>41</sup>

Wesley engaged with historical epistemological discourse. There were those, following Plato, who posited that pure reason was sufficient for knowledge. According to some of Wesley’s predecessors, such as René Descartes, pure reason could make strong metaphysical claims. Others, such as John Locke, disagreed. “Central to both of these influences [Aristotle and the Enlightenment] was the denial that reason was the primal *source* of knowledge, whether through innate ideas or by deduction from indubitable principles.”<sup>42</sup> Wesley sided with the latter.

An academic, John Wesley learned—and later taught—logic at Oxford University. He was deeply familiar with the varieties of logical exploration. Further, as an academic existing in a particular time and place, Wesley participated in and drew from contemporary dialogue. Thorsen observes that, “Wesley’s familiarity with Enlightenment philosophy is evident in his affirming much of the empirical philosophy of John Locke, who dominated

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<sup>40</sup> Thorsen, *The Wesleyan Quadrilateral*, 170.

<sup>41</sup> Jones, *John Wesley’s Conception and Use of Scripture*, 79.

<sup>42</sup> Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 40.

the intellectual climate of early eighteenth-century England.”<sup>43</sup> Although Wesley’s reasoning style purportedly supported clear distinctions and categories and uncomplicated logical structures—”plain truth for plain people.—common sense,”<sup>44</sup> readers will soon observe that what Wesley *said* about reason and the *manner in which he conducted it* are deeply different things,

Wesley shared Locke’s critical stance toward claims of reason’s grasp of unassailable knowledge: one could be sufficiently certain to *act or believe* so long as both the evidence and one’s application of logical rules were both good—but this certitude exists along a spectrum of degrees rather than as a binary. Indeed, this is not unlike what we call *faith*. Thorsen goes on to note that Wesley “defined logic as a proper use of inductive and deductive reasoning and accurate evidence.”<sup>45</sup> The challenge, of course, is verifying the accuracy of one’s evidence in order to make more reliable knowledge claims. Wesley was not naive to this challenge, as we will soon see.

Meanwhile, though, we use our reasoning to note a distinction—where is it that reason ends and experience begins? Thorsen’s excellent exploration of the Quadrilateral includes the works of the sciences among his discussion of Wesley’s use of reason—that is, inductive experimentation is a source of sufficiently compelling certitude. Other authors argue, however, that this overlap stretches too far—experience feeds reason, but the two remain distinct. Maddox explains that “experience was the source of knowledge. Reason,

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<sup>43</sup> Thorsen, *The Wesleyan Quadrilateral*, 171.

<sup>44</sup> Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 41.

<sup>45</sup> Thorsen, *The Wesleyan Quadrilateral*, 196.

by contrast, was a processor of knowledge, organizing and drawing inferences from the input of experience.”<sup>46</sup>

It follows from this ambiguity between reason and experience, then, that experience follows closely behind reason in Wesley’s hermeneutic. Appealing to Maddox, we can persist through this ambiguity to make a clarifying distinction. Reason is that set of operations with which we systematically process our experiences, and reason is only as useful as the goodness of experiences and the soundness of the formal application of rules. One could not, as Descartes attempted, make claims about God through pure reason. Indeed, Descartes’ keystone *cogito* is arguably an appeal to his own experience of thinking! If reason is the engine, then experience is the fuel.

While affirming the utility of reason and the need for experience, Wesley’s recognition of human error and diminished rational capacity caused his “sympathy [to] lay with those [writers] who emphasized how little we humans are capable of knowing or comprehending about the being and attributes of God.”<sup>47</sup> Reason is useful, yes, and a gift, certainly, but one which we misuse when we reach too highly on our own. Making God-claims in positivistic form allows humans to make *ridiculous* God claims—what we would now call onto-theological errors.

Nevertheless, Wesley did not argue for radical skepticism. Here, too, he followed Locke. Far from holding the “extreme skeptical positions of later empiricists,” Locke affirmed the usefulness of human experience to inform claims about oneself and the world.

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<sup>46</sup> Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 40.

<sup>47</sup> Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 49.

This is, in terms of consistency, a bit problematic. Thorsen recognizes that “later empiricists such as David Hume criticized Locke for not taking his empirical psychology to its logical conclusion of subjectivism.” It is more helpful, here, to recognize *what* Wesley believed than to impose criticisms of his hermeneutic—Thorsen continues to observe that “if we think of Locke as a radical empiricist, we will forget that he made room for God to communicate with people through the extraordinary means of revelation and miracles.”<sup>48</sup>

Quite the opposite of this skepticism, Wesley affirmed belief that humans could make knowledge claims about their *relationship* with God. While sensitive to the limits of human senses and human reason, Wesley asserted two helpful modes to overcome our gap. The first helpful faculty was his assertion that we contain a set of spiritual senses, through which God can communicate with us regarding matters of conscience and assurance. “He was convinced,” Maddox writes, “that God had entered into meaningful communication with us. For this to happen, God must be willing to condescend to our limited capacities.”<sup>49</sup> There exists space in Wesley’s hermeneutic for inward experience of one’s relationship with God.

This condescension takes place with “senses of faith,”<sup>50</sup> those spiritual senses such as our recognition of assurance. Wesley likened, by way of analogy, the epistemological character of the spiritual senses to that of the physical senses. The senses of faith, when

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<sup>48</sup> Thorsen, *The Wesleyan Quadrilateral*, 179.

<sup>49</sup> Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 49.

<sup>50</sup> Thorsen, *The Wesleyan Quadrilateral*, 182–83.

renewed by the Spirit, equipped believers to recognize the effects of their relationship with God. Nevertheless, there existed limitations on the usefulness of these spiritual senses.

The best example of the usefulness of the senses of faith involves the relation of the believer to the Holy Spirit. For Wesley, faith, which he recognized exists within degrees, relates to one's experience of *assurance*, which manifests as a gift of the Spirit. "Wesley equated the Holy Spirit with God's gracious empowering Presence restored through Christ"<sup>51</sup> The Spirit, like all of God, is personal.<sup>52</sup> It follows, then, that the senses of faith manifest in deeply personal ways. Maddox continues,

Wesley found 'inspiration' a congenial summary term for the Holy Spirit's work because it preserved the personal, responsive nature of God's Presence in human life. When we respond to the pardoning love of God offered in Christ, we experience a deepened participation of the Divine Presence in our lives through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. As we continue to respond within this deepening participation we are progressively empowered and guided in transforming our sin-warped nature (i.e., sanctification).<sup>53</sup>

Our *recognition* of the divine Presence may, as a function of our finite and estranged nature, ebb and flow. Nevertheless, the Presence itself never withdraws.<sup>54</sup> Indeed, Wesley's pronounced experience of assurance at Aldersgate eventually receded in its magnitude. Grace was indeed perceptible—however, Wesley further recognized that not "every

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<sup>51</sup> Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 121.

<sup>52</sup> Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 120.

<sup>53</sup> Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 122.

<sup>54</sup> Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 127.

instance of God's gracious work in our lives [would] be perceptible, only that some crucial instances typically are."<sup>55</sup>

This recognition of the spiritual senses' occasional fitness to perceive the *effects* of God's work in our lives helps to clarify this meaningful distinction. We are equipped, through the Spirit's work, to sometimes sense God's work. As with all of our senses, however, our spiritual senses are nevertheless imperfect and thus limited in their abilities. For claims about God's *nature*, however, we must move from experience back to a second, *rational*, faculty.

The second helpful faculty was demonstrated above by way of the analogy of spiritual and physical senses. Drawing from the works of Peter Browne, Wesley recognized the utility of *analogy* when discussing God. Browne

insisted that there were also instances where our human language did express a significant correspondence to God's reality. These were "analogies," which could be rendered at least minimally adequate for describing God by removing all distortions of human imperfection and maximizing all that is true and valued in human existence. The resulting conceptions were far from definitive of God. Even so, Browne contended that—used cautiously—they could be appropriate indicators of God's perfections.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 128–29.

<sup>56</sup> Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 50.

Here, Wesley expands the use of reason beyond induction and deduction to include analogy; useful for directing, rather than grasping, higher, analogy allows for a greater epistemological scope while evading positivist shortcomings.

Maddox discusses the possibility that Wesley was what we would now call a natural theologian. Certainly, Wesley rejected the possibility of definitive theological claims through reason alone. Nevertheless, “Wesley endorsed a type of natural theology,”<sup>57</sup> given his recurrent appeals to the created world, “from molecular to stellar.”<sup>58</sup> Who can look at the atom or the firmament and, having faith already in the Creator, fail to grow in wonder at the Almighty through regard of creation? If such people exist, they are to be pitied. Rather than use of natural theology as *proof* of biblical truths, Maddox argues that Wesley’s use of the natural world could *strengthen* one’s faith by “showing how [faith claims] ‘make sense’ of broadly-accepted human knowledge.”<sup>59</sup> Reason is a tool that can support, rather than diminish, faith.

Concurring, here, and expanding on the thought, Thorsen writes that reason could then extort for us, as Wesley said, not the absolute or final truth of Christianity, but truth that we may consider sufficiently reasonable or probable. Such truth provides the greatest degree of certainty that is rationally possible, given the fact that all human knowledge begins with sense-experience and reflection on that experience.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 35.

<sup>58</sup> Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 35.

<sup>59</sup> Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 35.

<sup>60</sup> Thorsen, *The Wesleyan Quadrilateral*, 180.

Therefore, Thorsen observes,

Wesley affirmed the descriptive method of science and did not expect to attain knowledge of things beyond experience, that is, beyond our various capacities for sense-experience or reflection on that experience. However, our physical senses are limited in terms of what they may know beyond our experience of the empirical world. Wesley emphasized these limitations in order to make way for his interpretation of faith.<sup>61</sup>

Reason is the imperfect engine fueled by imperfect knowledge, which is gleaned by the imperfect physical and spiritual senses. We can refine both our fuel and our engine by improving our modes of knowing, which Wesley expanded to include the use of analogy.

Wesley's use of the analogy between the physical and spiritual senses served more as a heuristic clue or tool for our religious understanding than a final statement concerning the nature of things.<sup>62</sup> "Reason, which is ultimately a gift from God, serves as a guide, especially in understanding Scripture."<sup>63</sup> The sciences, then, are rational modes of gaining better experience, and facts about the world are the sciences' fruits.

Tradition follows as one of Wesley's modes of gleaning knowledge and understanding. His use of tradition is different from his use of experience and reason, however. Whereas reason enjoyed relative parity with Scripture, and even the line between reason and experience is sometimes uncertain, tradition fell in a subordinate position to

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<sup>61</sup> Thorsen, *The Wesleyan Quadrilateral*, 182.

<sup>62</sup> Thorsen, *The Wesleyan Quadrilateral*, 185.

<sup>63</sup> Thorsen, *The Wesleyan Quadrilateral*, 196.

both. While tradition was useful of scriptural interpretation and for establishing precedent, Wesley recognized great disparity in the usefulness of different eras in Christian tradition.

Greatly favoring the ante-Nicene period, Wesley believed that Constantine's influence marked the beginning of Christianity's sharp and ongoing decline.<sup>64</sup> Wesley idealized the period preceding 325 AD as a "heart religion,"<sup>65</sup> an "age of golden days"<sup>66</sup> in which Christians were nearer, spiritually, to the true faith intended by God.

This does not mean that the earliest Christians were better equipped with true doctrine. Indeed, Thorsen observes, "despite tradition's importance, Wesley definitely did not consider tradition either inspired or infallible.... For this reason he was very careful in his selection and application of church tradition."<sup>67</sup> His preference for early "primitive Fathers" included such leaders and thinkers as Origen, Justin Martyr, and Cyprian.<sup>68</sup>

The use of these early Christian's thoughts found its best fit not in doctrine, but in helping determine the manner of discerning doctrine and setting the tone for Christian community. Here, Wesley follows the Anglican movement. Thorsen observes that:

Anglicans saw themselves in a unique situation compared with the Continental Reformers. They [Anglicans] sought to recover and preserve *conciliar truths* [emphasis mine] of Christian antiquity while avoiding the

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<sup>64</sup> Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 43.

<sup>65</sup> Thorsen, *The Wesleyan Quadrilateral*, 152.

<sup>66</sup> Thorsen, *The Wesleyan Quadrilateral*, 154.

<sup>67</sup> Thorsen, *The Wesleyan Quadrilateral*, 154.

<sup>68</sup> Thorsen, *The Wesleyan Quadrilateral*, 155.

potential extremes of Roman Catholic authoritarianism and the doctrinal anarchy of Protestantism.<sup>69</sup>

Primitive Christianity, for Wesley, is helpful in that its study can direct the tone of Christian interrelation in one's own time.

And, indeed, Wesley set throughout his life an ecumenical tone of tolerance amid diversity of opinion. Thorsen notes that "to Wesley, a unity of doctrinal opinions was less important than a clear conscience with regard to a unity of love as a basis for ecumenism."<sup>70</sup> Contrary to the explicit anti-Catholic policies of England's Act of Toleration, Wesley affirmed even the salvation of Catholics. Thorsen notes that

Wesley's open 'Letter to a Roman Catholic' proves that he had a spirit of religious toleration and ecumenism uncommon in his time. He allowed a great deal of theological flexibility and chose not to quibble over diverse opinions on nonessential aspects of the Christian faith.<sup>71</sup>

Wesley derives this ecumenical spirit from his understanding of the church. Jones explains that

Wesley's own definition of the Church [of England] differed from the hierarchy's emphasis on church order. He consistently defined the essence of the Church as its liturgy, articles, and homilies, and not its order or episcopacy.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Thorsen, *The Wesleyan Quadrilateral*, 156.

<sup>70</sup> Thorsen, *The Wesleyan Quadrilateral*, 161.

<sup>71</sup> Thorsen, *The Wesleyan Quadrilateral*, 159.

<sup>72</sup> Jones, *John Wesley's Conception and Use of Scripture*, 91.

Ecclesial structures were, for Wesley, temporal phenomena acting as expressions of the Church in a given time. Indeed, Jones continues, “Wesley was clear that he regarded the Church of England as an authority, but one that ranked after the primitive church.”<sup>73</sup> Wesley’s shift of understanding of the nature of the church, which allowed him to collaborate with Moravians and Calvinists while affirming the Christianity of Catholics, followed from his appeals to his idealized understanding of the early church.

Primitive Christianity nevertheless fell as a lesser faculty in Wesley’s hermeneutic than the other parts of the quadrilateral.<sup>74</sup> Christian history’s breadth and diversity requires intentional study and discernment. Reason was therefore the “medium between Scripture and tradition,”<sup>75</sup> that which allows us to use the past to interpret the Bible.

We must explicitly recognize Wesley’s incorporation of deep learning into the fabric of his life; it is only through this recognition that we can appreciate Wesley’s application of his hermeneutic in interpretation of Scripture. Further, when the fruits of the sciences seemed to conflict with a plain reading of Scripture, Wesley rejected neither scientific truths nor God’s Word, but instead sought to interpret the Word according to these new findings. Jones, for example, observes that Wesley accepted the heliocentric model.<sup>76</sup>

The significance lies in the fact that for Wesley, scientific truth about the heavens is not dependent on scriptural authority. Further, in the places

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<sup>73</sup> Jones, *John Wesley’s Conception and Use of Scripture*, 93.

<sup>74</sup> Jones, *John Wesley’s Conception and Use of Scripture*, 81.

<sup>75</sup> Thorsen, *The Wesleyan Quadrilateral*, 170.

<sup>76</sup> Jones, *John Wesley’s Conception and Use of Scripture*, 75.

where Scripture makes claims about the world that science has disproved, it is Scripture that is to be reinterpreted in a nonliteral manner.<sup>77</sup>

Based on our established understanding that Wesley regarded the works of science as propellant for greater faith and understanding, we of Jesuit learning can find fellowship with him in his hermeneutical inclusion of reason and experience as indispensable in theological inquiry.

Use of reason and Scripture together requires some finesse. Reason, after all, cannot upend Scripture. It can, however, illuminate it. We humans are not alone in this endeavor. For just as all of our imperfect reason is God-given, so too do we have the gift of the Paraclete to guide this reason. Jones helpfully notes that “one of the Spirit’s functions to which he refers several times is to guide the believer. This extends to a relationship with reason as well.”<sup>78</sup>

Although Wesley did “not yet understand that scientific conclusions bring the biblical world picture into serious question,”<sup>79</sup> he certainly acknowledged that there were those who would misuse reason to upend faith. Wesley wrote of alternatives to discarding Scripture, acknowledging that “‘tis true, if the literal sense of these Scriptures were absurd, and apparently contrary to reason, then we should be obliged not to interpret them according to the letter, but to look out for a looser meaning.”<sup>80</sup>

Wesley thus included space for rational interpretation. Indeed, Jones observes that

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<sup>77</sup> Jones, *John Wesley’s Conception and Use of Scripture*, 76.

<sup>78</sup> Jones, *John Wesley’s Conception and Use of Scripture*, 79.

<sup>79</sup> Jones, *John Wesley’s Conception and Use of Scripture*, 75.

<sup>80</sup> Jones, *John Wesley’s Conception and Use of Scripture*, 79.

It is reason based on experience that must decide whether something is absurd or not. This gives reason a role in interpreting Scripture. Conceivably, Wesley is prepared to adjust many things in the Scripture to modern scientific discoveries.<sup>81</sup>

He continues with a caution on the bounds of reason, writing,

the ability of reason to discover an absurdity in Scripture, then, is limited to two specific areas. First, matters of fact to which experience and natural science testify can supersede the literal sense of Scripture. Second, where the Scripture appears to contradict itself, reason sees the conflict and determines that it must be resolved. Outside of these two areas, reason is not allowed to contradict the Bible.<sup>82</sup>

Far from using reason to upend Scripture, then, Wesley uses reason's relationship with experience and tradition to *explain* Scripture. It is helpful, here, that Wesley recognized that Scripture could *appear* self-contradictory.

Wesley framed this seeming self-contradiction as a misunderstanding of the nature of Scripture. Jones writes that "there can be no doubt that Wesley believes Scripture to be a unitary, coherent whole."<sup>83</sup> Rather than a collection of conflicting narratives, the biblical narrative itself is a unit. From this understanding, Wesley spoke of the *general tenor* of Scripture as the arching theme that connects the Bible into a whole. "It seems clear that, for Wesley, the whole tenor of a text points to the general meaning of that text, which is

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<sup>81</sup> Jones, *John Wesley's Conception and Use of Scripture*, 79–80.

<sup>82</sup> Jones, *John Wesley's Conception and Use of Scripture*, 80.

<sup>83</sup> Jones, *John Wesley's Conception and Use of Scripture*, 43.

yet capable of including parts that might be ‘misconstrued’ another way.”<sup>84</sup> Scripture’s holistic tenor can make Scripture more intelligible.

Wesley taught that Scripture is to be interpreted through the lens of reason, experience, and tradition. Scripture, further, cannot be dissected piecemeal, but must be interpreted through its own general tenor. While enjoying a place of primacy, the Word of God’s *kerygma* is not self-evident without the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, which God demonstrates that He endows through the believing community. It is only through the use of these many faculties that we are able to engage Scripture and discern its tenor.

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<sup>84</sup> Jones, *John Wesley’s Conception and Use of Scripture*, 44.

## ON THE TENOR OF SCRIPTURE

Discerning Scripture's tenor is the keystone of all biblical study and the fruit of the Wesleyan hermeneutic—one cannot make sense of any biblical claim without engaging the whole Bible. This tenor, further, relies on analogy. For Wesley, the general tenor of Scripture teaches the analogy of faith: the system of doctrine whose content is the order of salvation and whose function is to serve as a normative guide and limit for theology and as a rule for interpretation.<sup>85</sup> Scripture is evidence of God's many communications of Godself to humans—it is a collection of relational revelation for soteriological ends. Its tenor is just that. Analogies, such as Wesley's analogy of faith, are themselves both communicative and relational.

Jesus, the Christ, is an incarnate example of God's self-revelation of God's relational nature. Consider John 1:1-2: "In the beginning, the Word existed. The Word was with God, and the Word was God. He existed in the beginning with God." What we now translate as "Word" is the philosophically and theologically-charged Greek word, *Logos*., *Logos* is God's creative and rational element. Further, this with-ness described in this verse is non-trivial. Consider, also, Genesis 1:26:

Then Elohim said, 'Let us make ha 'adam in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth, and over the earth itself.'

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<sup>85</sup> Jones, *John Wesley's Conception and Use of Scripture*, 49.

The multiplicity of God’s nature expressed in both John 1 and Genesis 1 is evident. Just as Nicene-affirming Christians affirm a triune God, so too does our early Scriptural evidence and John’s reflections on the relationship between Logos and Theos indicate a fundamentally relational nature of the Creator. This characteristic is well-argued as constitutive a part of the image in which we are created. “*Ha ‘adam*,” meaning “earthling,” is not the name of our male progenitor. Rather, it is the name for the yet-undivided, God-imagined creation given dominion over the earth.<sup>86</sup>

I do not mean to reduce to positivism the mystery of faith—only to recognize that, like all good God language, the mystery of the Trinity is a useful metaphor, made more clear with Scripture, which can teach us a bit of what it means to be made “in the image of God.” Just as God exists relationally with Godself, and just as God’s nature is creative and rational, so too must our *Imago Dei* include relationship and creative reason. The very tenor of God’s revelatory relationship with humankind evidences God’s personal and interpersonal nature. The incarnation of God’s rational, creative element, who participated in our human condition and built relationships with other humans, demonstrates the indispensability of relationship to our proper nature. Salvation is an interpersonal endeavor.

It is with this understanding that we now engage intentionally with Wesley’s quadrilateral. The following chapters will engage Scripture, reason, experience, and tradition in hopes of discerning a better understanding of the challenges the Methodist church now faces.

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<sup>86</sup> Noah Bickart, “Rabbis on Sex and Gender.” Lecture, John Carroll University, University Heights, OH, February 4, 2019.

## PENTECOST: COMMUNITY AND SPIRIT

This section visits two Scriptural stories, bearing to one another both similarities and points of profound divergence. The first is the Pentecost event; the second, Babel. For each, I will conduct an exegetical analysis that draws upon historical knowledge and biblical scholars. Following these analyses, I will discuss the relationship that the two stories have with one another. From this, the discussion will explore a Scriptural lesson regarding community relations that previous chapters have already touched upon and which later chapters will rely.

The Pentecost event established God's endowment of the Spirit upon the church, commissioning it to depart and do works in the world, presented in Acts 2:1–13. Exegesis of these verses is instrumental in exploring the role of the church, its self-relation, and its relation to God.

Acts was written by Luke, also the author of the third gospel, a Gentile convert to the Jesus movement. By varying accounts, and non-exclusively, Luke was an historian, *litterateur*, and theologian. Luke's argumentative styles suggests likelihood of the specialized training called *progymnasmata* common to rhetoricians in the Greco-Roman world.<sup>87</sup>

Luke's use of Gentile rhetoric and depiction of Jesus as the universal Messiah sets the foundation for the movement from Israel (in the third Gospel) to the wider Mediterranean world (in Acts). Acts presents an account of early Christianity's formation

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<sup>87</sup> Mikeal Carl Parsons, *Acts* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2008), 9.

and works, expressed such as to appeal to a wider audience. The original audience, Mikeal Parsons contends, would have had at least an implicit understanding of Luke's rhetorical techniques in order to meaningfully process and respond to these techniques.<sup>88</sup> Luke wrote to a "general Christian audience"<sup>89</sup> rather than to any specific "Lukan" community. Although, as with the third gospel, Luke writes here with a special leaning toward a Gentile audience, his content contains topics familiar to a Jewish audience as well.<sup>90</sup> Acts is a continuation of the Gospel according to Luke, a sequel that shifts focus from the en-Spirited work of Jesus to the work of the early church, who likewise received the Spirit.

Acts represents a new composite genre that includes elements of biography, epic, novel, and historiography. Telling the story of the early church in Jesus' absence, it represents a new developmental stage in humankind's walk with God. Scholarly consensus is that it is a foundational document for early Christianity.

Understanding Acts as a foundational or charter document for the Christian community—that is, as a document that seeks to establish the identity of its constituency as legitimate and true heirs of Moses within the larger panoply of ancient Greco-Roman religions and philosophies—requires it to be read in conversation. That conversation must include not just one other genre of literature but rather all those documents that share or contest its field of vision, regardless of generic designation.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Parsons, *Acts*, 19.

<sup>89</sup> Parsons, *Acts*, 20.

<sup>90</sup> Parsons, *Acts*, 68.

<sup>91</sup> Parsons, *Acts*, 15.

Situating the pericope in question in the larger narrative is useful. Acts 1:15–26 describes the casting of lots to replace, with Matthias, the vacancy among the Twelve left by Judas. Acts 1:26 concludes this business with a series of short conjunctions— “And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles.” Verse 2:1 picks up the story after a passage of time—“When the day of Pentecost had come”—and shifts to a new subject. These temporal and topical shifts are accompanied by a shift in location—not gathered in “that place,” but “gathered in one place.” These changes in time, topic, and location clearly mark the start of a new pericope.

The use of the word “now” in verse 2:4 may suggest the beginning of a new pericope, but the immediate relation of the subsequent verses (e.g., 2:6) to the beginning verses in chapter 2 suggest a continuation of the same pericope. The focus moves from the Twelve to the multitudes who flock at the sound of the Spirit. The pericope thus includes both the initial filling of the space the gathered disciples occupied and the effects of the Spirit on the multitudes. Further, there is not a good place to divide this pericope after the multitudes’ entrance until Peter begins to speak. Luke presents 2:1–13 as an account of events and reactions to those events—from bewilderment (2:6) to sneering (2:13). Peter’s speech beginning at 2:14 is a different form from the preceding unit. As 2:1–13 is distinct, temporally, thematically, and spatially from the preceding, and as subdivisions detract rather than contribute to understanding of the pericope, and as 2:14 begins a new literary form, Acts 2:1–13 is best regarded as a complete pericope distinct from the preceding and subsequent units.

This pericope occurs very early in Acts. The first half of the book, in which 2:1–13 falls, takes place in Jerusalem following Jesus’ death. This portion of Acts reviews the formation and subsequent persecution of the early church, and readies the audience for Paul’s conversion and subsequent mission. Contrary to the Lukan ascent from Bethany, shortly after Jesus’ resurrection, in Luke 24:50–53, Jesus in Acts remains with the disciples for forty days after the resurrection (1:3) and departs near to Bethany.<sup>92</sup>

In Acts 1:8, Jesus prophesies several things which will come to pass throughout the course of the narrative; the promise of the Holy Spirit during Pentecost is the first to manifest. Pentecost follows Jesus’ prophetic promises and the re-formation of the Twelve. Following the outpouring of the spirit, first onto the disciples and then onto the gathered multitude, Peter addresses the crowd with an explanation of events (2:14–36), appealing to Hebrew scripture and proclaiming fulfillment of Joel’s prophecy (Joel 2:17-21; 24-28), and an exhortation to repentance and baptism in Jesus’ name, with promise of the Holy Spirit as a fruit of baptism (2:37–38). In Luke’s account, the Pentecost event sets into motion mass conversion, characterized especially by healing (3:1–10; 4:12–16), prayer (4:23–31), and common sharing (4:32–37).

Pentecost represents God’s outpouring of the Spirit on the community of Jesus followers. It introduced the Spirit, a long-time actor in human-divine relations, to the Christian community. This fresh outpouring into a transformed community followed Jesus’ life and resurrection. Jesus lived, died, and rose as a human. Having stayed in risen form

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<sup>92</sup> C. K. Barrett, *Acts 1–14* (London: T&T Clark, 1994), 84.

with the female and male disciples for forty days, giving them instruction, Jesus departed heavenward.

The Spirit came upon the gathered disciples, among whom were the Twelve, during the harvest festival of Pentecost. It arrived from heaven, downward, clamorously as wind. After, it appeared as tongues<sup>93</sup> of fire. When these divided “tongues” rested on the gathered disciples, each spoke ably in the different languages. Nearby, other diaspora Jews were likewise gathered in Jerusalem for the harvest festival. At the great clamor, the multitudes gathered and witnessed the disciples speaking in tongues—and heard her or his native language present in the clamor.

This speech, though in other languages, still identifiably came out of Galilean mouths. The *New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary* observes that

The Jewish auditors, amazed and perplexed, recognize the community’s familiar Galilean dialect. The language of the Spirit is not communicated with perfect or heavenly diction, free from the marks of human identity; it is the language of particular human groups, spoken in their idiom. God works in collaboration with real people—people who are filled with the Spirit to work on God’s behalf in their own world.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> There exist connections here to other verses in the Hebrew Scripture. Barrett mentions that, “with a ‘chariot of fire and horses of fire,’ Elijah ‘ascended in a whirlwind to heaven’ (2 Kings 2:11b). “Tongues of fire” also appear in the book of Isaiah, as well as the Jewish apocalyptic book of 1 Enoch. These references certainly rely on established manifestations of God’s power on earth. Of special note is Moses’ indwelling on the mountaintop with God in Exodus 24:15–18, which includes both fire imagery and, again, forty days of community with the divine.

<sup>94</sup> Leander E. Keck, *The New Interpreters Bible Commentary*, Vol. IX, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2015), 58.

These members of the early church, as vessels of the Spirit and Christ's appointed servants on earth, retained their individual ethnic and personal identities. They embodied the divine task in human ways that were interpretable to the variety of humans gathered in one place. Barrett observes that "the church from the beginning, though at the beginning located only in Jerusalem, is in principle a universal society in which universal communication is possible."<sup>95</sup>

The preparation of the disciples for the Pentecost mirrors Jesus's baptism in water and recognition by the Spirit (Luke 3:21–22) and his subsequent temptation in the wilderness (Luke 4:1–13), in that they spent forty days of instruction followed by the Pentecost event and Peter's exhortation to baptism. This reversal suggests a new divine relationship with the gathered believers—they experienced Christ-like touchstones in an order specific to their own experience. God is present here in ways very similar to the presence established with earlier persons appointed for great work. Distinctions are likewise worth noting: rather than Moses' climbing upward, God provides verticality in Acts. It is Jesus who moves up, and the Spirit who comes down—and later, the apostles who move *out*.

Associations to Pauline texts are harder to make. Speaking in tongues is certainly a topic which Paul discusses (1 Cor 12–14), however Barrett argues that the presentation of this charism in Acts is different than its presentation in Paul's epistles. Whereas Paul's discussion of speaking in tongues and the interpretation of said tongues are each distinct

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<sup>95</sup> Barrett, *Acts 1–14*, 108.

spiritual gifts, Barrett asserts that “Luke appears in this narrative to understand the gift of tongues to mean the ability to speak in a variety of foreign languages, intelligible to those with the appropriate linguistic background.”<sup>96</sup>

The *Commentary* helps to clarify this distinction further, observing that the key difference is between competing purposes. According to Pauline teaching, the gifts of the Spirit are used to empower Christian ministry to other believers for the purpose of Christian formation. Thus, the Pauline meaning of glossolalia denotes a special language given to few believers by the Spirit to edify the entire congregation—a purpose quite different from that of Luke.<sup>97</sup>

Luke’s different use from Paul’s use of glossolalia may be an intentional departure, or it may not. Nevertheless, this different use indicates a different purpose for this event. Although Luke’s familiarity with Paul’s writings is uncertain, Parsons notes that there exist similarities between the Lukan Paul and that from Paul’s writings in Acts’ second half.<sup>98</sup> If Luke was duly familiar, then the intentionality of this departure is a bold theological claim. Rather than a charism used in Christian gatherings requiring interpretation—that is, one side of a two-fold charism of revelation and interpretation—the Spirit’s expression here establishes the connection of a pluralistic society of believers *in the language of the multitudes*.

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<sup>96</sup> Barrett, *Acts 1–14*, 109.

<sup>97</sup> Keck, *The New Interpreters Bible Commentary*, Volume IX, 55.

<sup>98</sup> Parsons, *Acts*, 16.

Therefore, God demonstrates a special relationship with Christ-followers on earth, to whom the Spirit is first endowed, and does so within the context of these representatives' fellowship with one another. It is only after the gift of the Spirit to the people who knew Jesus, personally, that the multitudes arrive, and it is through each member of the diaspora's hearing her or his native tongue in the disciple's voice that the Spirit bears testimony to the church's boundary-dissolving character.

This testimony is not apparent, however, to the gathered crowd. Some hear only gibberish, and presume the disciples drunk. Others are astonished, but do not understand the significance of the event. Peter, the redeemed human who is like and unlike the betraying Judas just discussed and replaced, makes use of Scripture such as to "cut to the heart" (Acts 2:37) of those jeering, resulting in repentance and baptism. In this way, glossolalia *is* consistent with some of the Pauline flavor, in that the meaning of the event required interpretation from one with the appropriate spiritual gift.

Then, the important elements, here, are: God's working a miracle upon the disciples; the magnetism of that event to attract a great diversity of souls who had already gathered nearby; the extension of that miracle's effects to include those newly present; their bewilderment or skepticism; the need for Peter's use of scripture to explain the event to those gathered. All these elements combine to move those affected to accept Baptism. Following this, they join the movement in self-abnegating and community-affirming ways. God moves down and through the Christ-followers, and through these the Spirit works to diminish boundaries.

## BABEL: COMMUNITY WITHOUT SPIRIT

Contrast this with the events of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1–9). Babel follows the Noahide narrative and subsequent genealogy. Following the flood, Noah and his sons received the blessing and command to “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth” (Gen 9:1). Whereas the flood and following genealogy are of Priestly source,<sup>99</sup> the story of the Tower is of Yahwist origin.<sup>100</sup> Genesis’ editors saw fit to place these sources in proximity to one another.

Further, the first eleven chapters of Genesis belong to what Claus Westermann call the *primeval events*, a set of pre-historical stories preceding the patriarchal story.<sup>101</sup> Westermann writes, “accordingly, chs. 1–11 of Genesis must be regarded as a separate element of the Pentateuch, that is, as a relatively self-contained unity, and not primarily as a part of ‘Genesis.’ It is a relatively late component.”<sup>102</sup> The final pericopes in Genesis 11 (11:10–26, 27–32) are also genealogical, and link the primeval events to the patriarchal story. Babel is the final primeval story, and its catastrophic collapse and subsequent dispersing of humankind readies Genesis’ narrative for the story of Israel. Whereas the patriarchal story is the story of a people, the primeval events tells of God’s relationship to *all people*. Westermann explains,

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<sup>99</sup> Claus Westermann and John J. Scullion, *Genesis 1–11: A Commentary* (London: SPCK, 1984), 596.

<sup>100</sup> Westermann and Scullion, *Genesis 1–11*, 540.

<sup>101</sup> Westermann and Scullion, *Genesis 1–11*, 1–2.

<sup>102</sup> Westermann and Scullion, *Genesis 1–11*, 2.

The significance of the first eleven chapters of the Bible is that they bring God into relationship with everything that is. They are not only an introduction to the history of the people of God that begins in Gen 12, but also put it into a perspective that embraces all that exists, from the stars to the grass to the trees, from the one man whom God asks ‘Where are you?’ to the most distant peoples of the then known world.<sup>103</sup>

It is with this understanding, which relates well to what we have identified as Scripture’s general tenor, that enables us to study the story of Babel and relate it to Pentecost.

Genesis 11:1 begins with language. “Now the whole earth had one language and the same words.” (Gen 11:1) To this unity of language, there is combined implicit unity of horizontal movement. “And as they migrated from the east, they came upon a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there” (Gen 11:2). All of the people moved from the same direction to the same place. This movement soon shifts upward—“Then they said, ‘Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth’” (Gen 11:4).

Genesis 11:4 combines notable elements. First, it includes a desire to make one’s own name—to furnish a human identity through human means. This desire is tied to a human rejection of the Noahide covenant from Genesis 9:1—the desire to make one’s own name is a prophylaxis against dispersion. Humans were not to loiter together in Shinar, “but to be fruitful and multiply, abound on the earth and multiply in it” (Gen 9:7). The

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<sup>103</sup> Westermann and Scullion, *Genesis 1–11*, 569.

Lord's response follows the people's argument, and it begins with God's movement downward (Gen 11:5). Speaking again in the first-person plural, God said, "Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another's speech" (Gen 11:7).

It is not through a catastrophic collapse, as is sometimes depicted, but through an abortive abdication of the project, that the city meets its end. Babel does not fall. Rather, humans find themselves organizationally ill-equipped to complete their monument to themselves. No longer of one language, they can no longer collaborate. "So the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city" (Gen 11:8). This departure from the human project of uniform, *upward* movement scatters humankind *across* the globe in accordance with God's design.

The motifs of movement and language in both the Pentecost and the Babel stories should by now be clear. Both stories include community, horizontal and vertical movement, and language. A comparison of each motif serves our exegesis.

Babel's community was, literally, monolithic. All move together, reason together, and work together toward the same self-selected goal. The gathered Jews and Christ-followers in Jerusalem were heterogenous, each of different languages and, while gathered for the same Jewish festival, of different regional origins. Further, they were not initially gathered in the same community space. Whereas Christ's disciples were together in one room, the multitudes were, presumably, separately gathered in different places throughout the city. Else, how could they have gathered?

The Jews in Acts moved horizontally across the globe to gather in Jerusalem. Likewise, God did not interrupt humankind's horizontal movement into Shinar, but rather their upward movement later in the story. So, too, does God move downward to affect the desired change in human tongues. Compare this to Acts, wherein Jesus moves upward before the Spirit moves down. Consider, too, the angels' rebuke of those looking upward in search of the risen Christ (Acts 1:7–8). Verticality is, primarily, a divine task. Those instances of human verticality in Acts are limited ones—Peter stands up to address the believers (Acts 1:15) and with the other eleven stands to address the Pentecost crowd (Acts 2:14).

The divinely-affected language changes in Babel and Pentecost, as with above discussion of Jesus and the disciples' education and Spirit-endowment, are mirroring events that include the mirror-like quality of reversal. In Babel, all begin by speaking the same language and end by speaking different languages.

Acts takes this motif and moves beyond a simple binary. *Many* languages are spoken by those gathered before the Spirit moves, and *many* languages are spoken after. The qualitative difference is that the Spirit's movement allows each person to *understand* one another. As noted above, further, this mutual understanding does not efface the national identities, or even rightly the dialects, of those speaking and being understood. God, in Babel, interrupted humankind's verticality by interrupting their homogeneity, thus sending them on their way to fulfill the Noahide covenant. The Pentecost event provided a means for community and improved horizontality *within heterogeneity*, allowing humans to fulfill new work by spreading the Gospel through the world.

This is the lesson of these two pericopes, within Scripture's general tenor. Community is not wrong—indeed, it is a human need. But community which attempts to homogenize and reach heavenward through human means is community which neglects our horizontal human work. The human need for verticality is not one that we have the means to fulfill—but we should not worry, for it has been fulfilled. En-Spirited community, therefore, is evidenced by common understanding—the ability to hear one another despite unshared languages. This common understanding, likewise, is the means through which we collaborate to fulfill our Christian work with the Spirit's aid.

## REASON: ADJUSTING EXPECTATIONS

While he was making this defense, Festus exclaimed, “You are out of your mind, Paul! Too much learning is driving you insane!” (Acts 26:24)

The use of reason, inductive and deductive alike, contains a set of different cognitive skills that developmental psychologist Jean Piaget called “operations.”<sup>104</sup> There exist many different types of operations, each requiring practice and constitutional aptitude, but for our purposes it serves only to express examples so as to allow us to extract evidence-based direction for process improvement within the United Methodist Church. Although we have recognized the value that Wesley placed on “common sense” reason, later scientific progress has equipped us to discuss diversity of rational expression and aptitude within humans. Just as Wesley recognized that humans possess the gift of reason to a lesser degree than God’s perfect reason, so too can we extend that recognition to disparities within human experience. And, just as Wesley drew from and engaged his era’s intellectual discourse, so too can we make use of the academy’s findings to refine the Wesleyan method.

The work of Jean Piaget remains the benchmark by which we measure human cognitive development. There exist stages previous to those discussed herein; I begin with adolescence for its salience to our discussion. By early adolescence, Piaget noted, humans enter the formal operational stage of cognitive development. It is here that they have the potential, contrary to the concrete thought of childhood, to develop abstract and scientific

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<sup>104</sup> Jean Piaget and Inhelder Bärbel, *The Psychology of the Child* (New York: Basic Books, 1969), 8.

processes. Such processes include hypothetico-deductive reasoning, whereby people develop and test questions about the world, and propositional thought, whereby they can “evaluate logical propositions without referring to real-world circumstances.”<sup>105</sup> A healthy and well-trained adolescent will begin to use the scientific method and propositional logic—both foundational skills used in inductive and deductive reasoning, respectively.

Important to note, development of these capacities is situation-dependent and not generalized—that is, people are better at using formal operations that they have practiced. Post-Piagetian researchers have discovered that successful use of operations is culturally-dependent—members of tribal societies do less-well, for example, on tests of propositional thought than do adolescents in industrialized societies, who in turn perform less well than do adolescents within the same society with more years of formal education.<sup>106</sup> Just as individual physical, social, and emotional development all rely on a complicated interaction of biology, environment, and other humans, so too does cognitive development necessitate scaffolding from outside the self in order to flourish.

Despite the strengths of their newfound cognitive capacities, those in the early stages of formal operational thought have limitations. Piaget “observed that adolescents prefer an idealistic, internally consistent perspective on the world to one that is vague, contradictory, and adapted to particular circumstances.”<sup>107</sup> Adolescents have a low tolerance for complicated worldviews and those worldviews which affirm uncertainty. In

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<sup>105</sup> Berk, *Exploring Lifespan Development*, 315.

<sup>106</sup> Berk, *Exploring Lifespan Development*, 316.

<sup>107</sup> Berk, *Exploring Lifespan Development*, 370.

this way, higher-order faculties like analogy, dialectical thought, and integration of conflicting paradigms continue to elude them. Fortunately, as observed, training and age can allow some people to move past this stage.

Formal education is developmentally useful in that it can guide learners into refined categories of epistemic cognition. Ideally, college students move from dualistic thinking, which presupposes attainable objective truth and is prone to appeals to authority, to relativistic thinking, which views “all knowledge as embedded in a framework of thought.”<sup>108</sup> Some individuals move onto a third mode of thought, commitment within relativistic thinking, which tries to “formulate a more personally satisfying perspective that synthesizes contradictions.” Those who attain commitment within relativistic thinking “actively seek differing perspectives to deepen their knowledge and understanding and to clarify the basis for their own personal perspective.”<sup>109</sup>

Post-Piagetian psychologists have identified estimates of stage acquisitions among populations in developed countries.

The term ‘postformal’ has been used to characterize stages of behavior that are more advanced in stage than those behaviors found in the most complex stage discussed by Inhelder and Piaget (1958). Best estimates suggest that this last-named stage, formal operations, may be characteristic of about 30–40% of the adult population in developed countries. In Western developed countries, some public high school students may use formal thought in some of their course work or life in general. In college-preparatory courses in both

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<sup>108</sup> Berk, *Exploring Lifespan Development*, 370.

<sup>109</sup> Berk, *Exploring Lifespan Development*, 371.

public and private high schools, some students may employ the first stage of postformal thought.<sup>110</sup>

Although countries like America raise no higher than 40% of our population to attainment of formal operational thought, even this small proportion is unequally distributed among vocations. Commons and Ross continue,

In developed-country settings, formal stage tasks will be the highest performed by a significant proportion of adults in business, service, and educational sectors. Our estimates range up to 70% of adults with formal thought as their highest stage of performance in those sectors. The task demands of many other sectors do not require postformal complexity (e.g., manual labor, cleaning, transport, clerical tasks, farm labor). In less developed countries, formal stage task performance appears in much smaller proportions. Most, rather, attain the concrete operational stage, which is well-suited to tasks in the physical world.<sup>111</sup>

That is to say, people with the potential to grow only do so to the level occupationally expected of them.

The implication is that postformal thought is performed by a minority of any population, which we estimate as about 20% in the G8 countries (Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States). Much of twenty-first-century life in a global village actually demands much greater proportions and distributions of postformal thought because many crucial task demands exceed the capacities of formal thought. This is rarely recognized. More often, people assume that everyone

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<sup>110</sup> Michael Lamport Commons and Sara Nora Ross, "What Postformal Thought Is, and Why It Matters," *World Futures* 64 (2008): 321–29; here 322.

<sup>111</sup> Commons and Ross, "What Postformal Thought Is, and Why It Matters," 322.

can, or should be able to, think the same way. Some people assume everyone can and should reason with basic logic (e.g., the if-then of “rational choice”) and that it is enough. This article should disrupt such assumptions.<sup>112</sup>

This disparity in human cognitive experience compels us to depart from Wesley’s “common sense” hypothesis. Far from being common, even the tasks that we would expect of a well-formed adolescent are indeed executable by fewer than half of our population.

Further, post-Piagetian psychologists have refined our understanding of the varieties of cognitive development beyond formal thought—appropriately called “postformal” development. These stages are attained by increasingly few members of a developed country’s population. About 20% of a population is able to synthesize ideas from systems with abstract analogies at the “systematic 1 stage.” There,

people solve multivariate problems. Sometimes this involves discriminating the frameworks in which relationships between variables are embedded. The systems of relationships are formed out of relations among variables. Thus, the elements that are coordinated by systematic task actions are multiple relations among abstract order variables.<sup>113</sup>

Even fewer, 1–2%, can synthesize and affect systems themselves—those who do so operate at the “metasystematic stage,” where they can

act on systems. The systems are as described earlier. Such systems of relations are the objects of metasystematic tasks or actions. Metasystematic actions compare, contrast, transform, and synthesize systems. One can

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<sup>112</sup> Commons and Ross, “What Postformal Thought Is, and Why It Matters,” 322.

<sup>113</sup> Commons and Ross, “What Postformal Thought Is, and Why It Matters,” 325.

compare and contrast systems in terms of their properties, with a focus on the similarities and differences in each system's form, as well as constituent causal relations and actors within them.<sup>114</sup>

Commons and Ross also describe the existence of paradigmatic and cross-paradigmatic stages, which extend beyond the scope of this paper.

It will suffice to make explicit two observations. First, Wesley's reliance on common-sense reason overestimated the rational capacities of most humans. Second, Wesley's use of analogy and his integration of the sciences into his hermeneutic framework evidences at least systematic 1 thinking; further, his lasting impact on the Methodist movement, and integration of thought from Calvinist, Lutheran, and Anglican sources suggests metasytematic thought. However much he articulated a desire for common sense theology, John Wesley's actions demonstrated much more than that.

Having the evidence that the sciences have given us, we can certainly use this information to scaffold our members' intellectual development so that they may pursue their own personal developmental ceiling. Indeed, we ought to be interested in the self-actualization of our members, because their improvement is also our improvement. As the tide rises, so do all ships. As importantly, though, the United Methodist Church must make practical decisions about what can be reasonably be expected of different members of our congregations.

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<sup>114</sup> Commons and Ross, "What Postformal Thought Is, and Why It Matters," 325.

The question of human sexuality, as we will soon see, is one which necessitates scientific curiosity and openness to new evidence. As with all inquiry, it sometimes demands comfort with uncertainty combined with a willingness to act from a committed standpoint within relativistic thinking. These are high-order cognitive capacities that the majority of Americans are simply unequipped to undertake. This statement of facts is not to evaluate the worth of persons—far from it! We must, however, give due consideration to which assets we assign to which tasks. Our denomination is home to many gifted and talented singers, and I readily cede my spot in the choir to those who can carry a tune. It follows from analogy that we should select as voters those who contain the cognitive skillsets which theological questions demand, lest we give authority over the spiritual and social well-being of our most vulnerable to cognitive adolescents.

## EXPERIENCE: THE CIGAR SHOP ETHIC

Methodists have a liking of testimonials. I am no exception, and here share a set of personal experiences that help to explain a lesson learned over more than fourteen years of nicotine-fueled dialogue.

I spend a good deal of my free time in cigar shops, and have since I turned eighteen. As a young man in the sort of suburban sprawl reminiscent of Kevin Smith's filmography,<sup>115</sup> finding myself disaffected and needful of an intellectual outlet, I discovered a local, newly-opened lounge staffed and frequented by college students. As a high school senior, the option to read their reading assignments, engage in discussion, and have exposure to a world larger than I had previously imagined possible was a welcome opportunity. Upon moving to Columbus for my first try at college, I sought more shops in the city, this time populated by older persons of varying backgrounds and strengths. I soon discovered myself surrounded by uncle figures, each of them replete with wisdom and stories, and many of them willing to engage in discussion that took seriously my own fledgling attempts at understanding of the world.

It was in Columbus that several of these friends and I collaborated on a new men's group, the Craven Street Society, modeled after Ben Franklin's practice of Junto.<sup>116</sup> I was the group's youngest founding member. We met monthly to take turns presenting topics of interest (from the history of ink, peer mediation, and Harriet Tubman's biography).

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<sup>115</sup> Consider *Clerks* (1994), *Mallrats* (1995), and *Chasing Amy* (1997).

<sup>116</sup> A Junto is a regular meeting of persons with diverse trades for the purpose of discussing topics from different vantage points. See *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*.

Conversation, related directly or tangentially to the presentation, followed. Early members included a courier, a priest, a lawyer, a young banker, and a pipe maker. Our slogan we took from Proverbs 27:17: “As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another.” Our little community is still ongoing

Craven Street was a meeting wherein people of different backgrounds and minds gathered to approach questions from different angles, which allowed us to escape our own preconceived understandings and enter broader patterns of thought and fellowship. It was this fellowship of mentors that encouraged me to enlist in the Navy and persisted through my initial reluctance to the idea. Again, exposure to new people opened doors.

Other shops would follow—those in Chicago and Virginia, and the beloved “I’s Public Ale House” in Okinawa. In Cuba, forbidden from leaving base, we received gift boxes donated by cigar distributors and huddled in fellowship around picnic tables near our quarters, setting aside our rank for a time. Now, I frequent Cousin’s in Woodmere, where much of this essay is written and where I have built new friendships. In each, I discovered the potential for a certain quality of relationship often missing in other venues.

This quality is one of relative parity, simultaneous consumption, and mutual goodwill. In many ways, this is not unlike a dinner table. It is often the case that I develop friendships with persons wholly different than myself—Trump supporters and socialists, lapsed Mormons, returned-to-the-faith Jews, and everything in between. Given the nature of the venue, it is uncommon for us to try to change one another’s minds. No seniority or obligation is held.

Nevertheless, few topics are off limits. I recently shared my own story of returning to Christianity with an agnostic of age comparable to my own, explicitly and implicitly without the desire to evangelize, and he responded to this baring by asking ever-more questions in an eager desire to understand. So, too, am I educated by those I meet, having met and picked the brains of everyone from insurance salespersons to medical doctors. The cigar-shop ethic emphasizes engaging others as subjects, developing relationships for mutual growth and understanding.

It is important to recognize that there is nothing essentially exclusive about this ethic. While I have given it a name tied to my discovery of this relational mode within a certain setting, the ethic of acceptance and fellowship with the other in community-transforming ways is not unique to these groups. Surely there is exclusion specific to *this* mode—nonsmokers do not seek out cigar shops, and the nature of a men’s group such as Craven Street precludes the participation of women. The essential character of the cigar shop ethic, nevertheless, is to at once *provide* a setting of openness while choosing an attitude of *engagement in* that setting, all the while *remaining open* to whomever enters the door. Although I learned and practice this ethic in a certain setting, nothing prevents others from pursuing the same in other settings, if only they knew it was an option. The cigar shop ethic belongs to the attainable realm of human experience.

These niche environments indeed attain a degree of acceptance within plurality. Therein, participants meet together as subjects and, despite differences in backgrounds and internal languages, find the motivation and community to understand one another. I am not naive to the recognition that tobacco use violates our Social Principles. This fact rather

delivers my point: If a community gathered in sin can be more Pentecostal than Babelonian, what excuse does the United Methodist Church have?

## **TRADITION: REGIONAL TEMPORAL EPISCOPAL AUTHORITY IN THE EARLY CHURCHES**

The very fact that we gather as Methodists, rather than as Anglicans, demonstrates a point of tension between Wesleyan theology and our own position. John Wesley had no intention of departing from the English church, and indeed those that he ordained as Superintendents were designated bishops by the conference rather than by a succession of the tradition's episcopate. We must recognize, then, that our very organizational and hierarchical polity, our social principles, our constitution, are all temporal phenomena.

We are not mere sprouts budding from the vine of historical precedent—although we are in part as much. We are also cuttings separated from earlier vines. Methodism's departure from the Church of England was a rebellious and identity-affirming act co-temporal with America's independence. Any complaints of rebelliousness we encounter today ought to keep in mind that our denomination's very origins participated in the separation from the Church of England, whose own origins date include separation from Rome's authority. If unquestioning subservience is a desirable value for some, they will find other denominations far more comfortable.

The history of Methodism is well-documented elsewhere. Indeed, that we appeal *now* to Wesley as an historical authority evidences our expanded understanding of history's parameters. Nevertheless, I intend to adopt a Wesleyan position which hearkens further back in time. Given Wesley's affinity for the ante-Nicene church, this chapter will explore the collegiate structure demonstrated by the primitive church.

It is good to begin with what Roger Haight, S.J., calls the *emerging church* of the first and second centuries. Haight observes that the collection of Christ-followers existed first in plurality—those to whom Jesus’ preached in Galilee, those introduced to the Gospel by the Hellenized Jews present at Pentecost, and those instructed by the Apostles after Pentecost. Whereas those collections of Christ-followers who were or were influenced by Jews often met at synagogues, Hellenic Christ-followers instead met in residences. Organizational structure between these remained loose or nonexistent for a short time.

Apostolate missionary activity soon sought to standardize doctrine and beliefs among this collection of churches—an undertaking met then and throughout all of history with varying degrees of success and failure. Offices emerged as a means of trans-regional collaboration and local governance. Haight observes that First Clement provides presbyters as one such early office, in this instance removed from their positions due to causing division.<sup>117</sup> Paul’s epistles rarely discuss such offices as the elder, although liken the gifts needed to fulfill such a role to charisms.<sup>118</sup> Pauline churches acted explicitly from an authoritative flow from God to the Apostle, from the Apostle to the Apostle’s helpers, and from there to local leadership.<sup>119</sup> This demonstrates a hierarchical flow of authority.

The Christ-followers did not always agree with the Apostles, nor the Apostles with one-another. The Council at Jerusalem (Acts 15:6–21) is an early example of Apostolate decision-making and the precursor to future ecumenical councils. Divided on the necessity

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<sup>117</sup> Roger Haight, *Christian Community in History*, vol. 1 (New York, Continuum, 2004), 84.

<sup>118</sup> Haight, *Christian Community in History*, I.121–22.

<sup>119</sup> Haight, *Christian Community in History*, I.1, I.78–79.

of Gentile adherence to Jewish Law, the Apostles discussed together to generate a unified way forward. James, the conservative proponent of law-adherence, made concessions. James' reasoning, while interesting, is outside the scope of this paper. Suffice to recognize that his view of the Law's value did not diminish! Rather, he was contented to compromise, arguing that the council should "write to [the Gentiles] to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled and from blood. (Acts 15:20)." The Jerusalem Council also handled the practical question of *who* was to deliver the letter (Acts 15:22).

This precedent is a valuable one. The Jerusalem Council affirmed the usefulness of collaboration for the sake of unity and evangelism. Further, it demonstrated its willingness to problem solve *decisively*, utilizing its authority as earthly representatives to manage evangelical and spiritual concerns. The gathering of church leaders for purposes of polity is nearly as old of a practice as Christianity itself! Indeed, other Christians would go on to continue this practice throughout the two millennia since.

Christianity's growth into the second and third century *Pre-Constantinian* church meant for new organizational modes. Haight writes that "by the end of the second century, Christian communities contained long-time-member families and enjoyed a constant influx of new members. By the end of the third century the church was no longer tiny groups huddling in large cities."<sup>120</sup> Geographically dispersed groups lacked central authority, instead meeting regionally in "a loose federated community."<sup>121</sup> Here, we see the

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<sup>120</sup> Haight, *Christian Community in History*, I.147.

<sup>121</sup> Haight, *Christian Community in History*, I.147.

beginnings of synods, wherein a region's bishops (likely akin to local pastors)<sup>122</sup> convened and collaborated.

This pre-Nicene era, marked heavily by intermittent periods of persecution, saw the formalization of church offices and the generation of new church writings. Ignatius asserted the existence of bishops, elders, and deacons; respectively, the pastor, the assistants, and the servants in the world.<sup>123</sup> Notably, Ignatius further affirms heavy authority for bishops. Given Christianity's dispersion, the threat of false teachings, and recurrent persecution, strong regional authority was indispensable. Irenaeus further argued for unity among churches, however differently they might conduct business, so long as they held correct beliefs.<sup>124</sup>

Tertullian of Carthage, another advocate for empowerment of bishops over laity, wrote influentially in ways formative to Cyprian. Cyprian affirmed that the church was "one in its source,"<sup>125</sup> and argued for regional authority of bishops. Whereas Ignatius argued for the necessity of a local bishop as the means of building an authentic local church, Cyprian extended this belief to argue that the church itself is "held together by the communion of bishops with one another."<sup>126</sup>

According to Ignatius, then, each church requires a bishop. According to Tertullian, these bishops are none at all without unity with one another. In this view, there is no

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<sup>122</sup> Haight, *Christian Community in History*, I.153.

<sup>123</sup> Haight, *Christian Community in History*, I.153.

<sup>124</sup> Haight, *Christian Community in History*, I.160.

<sup>125</sup> Haight, *Christian Community in History*, I.170.

<sup>126</sup> Haight, *Christian Community in History*, I.171.

Christian without a unified church. Here we see the development of tension between regional and catholic authority—a tension that the bishops Cyprian and Stephen would test in the third century. A baptismal controversy related to schismatic churches presented itself to these two bishops, and each disagreed in the manner that it should be handled.

Should a Christ-follower who had been baptized by a schismatic be baptized again? Cyprian, bishop of Carthage said yes. Stephen, bishop of Rome, said no. As with the precedent discussed at the Council at Jerusalem, the more conservative party, Cyprian, possessed a deep interest in the *holiness* of church members and a desire to perform spiritual business correctly. Cyprian’s position was that Stephen was deeply in error—about a Sacrament, no less! Cyprian had a greater interest, however, in the *wholeness* of the church itself—a wholeness that disaffiliation between bishops would damage!

Cyprian maintained communion with Stephen despite this disagreement, demonstrating collegiality among the bishops; each maintained communion with others while exerting control within his own region. The college could and did depose of members of its ranks—just as it could elect new members of the same.<sup>127</sup> Although the bishop of Rome enjoyed a special position among the college of bishops, he “does not possess direct jurisdictional authority over other churches in other provinces.”<sup>128</sup> By the end of the third century, then, regional bishops cooperated as a corporate body across geographical

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<sup>127</sup> Haight, *Christian Community in History*, I.185.

<sup>128</sup> Haight, *Christian Community in History*, I.185.

distance, each managing the affairs of his own jurisdiction while participating in the needs of the collective.

The tension between regional and catholic authority was by no means resolved. Interplay between local, secular, and greater ecclesial powers would erupt with Constantine and continue without cessation until the present day. However various and sundry its expression, a major point of tension in church history has always been locus of control. The ongoing question remains, “Where should control rest?” The precedent given by the Apostles suggests that human authority is not only possible but divinely authorized. The precedent given by Cyprian and Stephen suggests that there are limits to this authority’s scope—that either Cyprian or Stephen was in error was less relevant than maintaining collegial relations while respecting the boundaries of one another’s territory.

Sometimes, as with the papacy, control consolidated into one locus; in the tension between the local church and global ecclesial powers, sometimes the global powers gain an upper hand. The English Reformation and subsequent independence from Catholicism, from which Methodists are a descendent, positioned itself against this consolidation of global power into the papal office.

This independence called for articulation of a new understanding of the Church of England as it related to the global church. Authored by a collection of bishops in 1563, and authorized by parliament in 1571, the *Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion* represented a refinement of the Church of England’s self-understanding, expanding on previous such

attempts to codify beliefs and policy.<sup>129</sup> Within the Articles are references to congregational *fidelium*, a conciliarist description of the global church as a collection of the faithful from which different political expressions of Christianity may emerge.<sup>130</sup>

English theologian Richard Hooker, in his discussion of the Church of England in relation to the world church, “recognize[d] a pluralism in polity among the churches. All people need language to speak, but they do not need to speak the same language.”<sup>131</sup> That there exist many religious “languages” helps to give credibility to the English way of doing things. The Church of England’s political expression of Christianity included cooperation of religious and secular forces under the authority of both, combined within the monarch.

In this way, England’s approach was different from both Calvin’s and Luther’s. Whereas Luther sought cooperation between church and state with a collegiate attitude toward regional church relations, and Calvin sought integration between the work of civic orderliness and corporate church holiness, England further claimed that *other* expressions of Christianity may be fine in other places,<sup>132</sup> but the *English* way was to affirm religious and secular authority flowing alike from the Queen or King.

This movement was significant in that it helped to reimagine the nature of the church. There exists a global church, yes, but within this global church there also exist many different expressions of Christianity, each unique to its time and culture. The

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<sup>129</sup> Roger Haight, *Christian Community in History*, vol. 2 (New York, Continuum, 2005), 163.

<sup>130</sup> Haight, *Christian Community in History*, II.164.

<sup>131</sup> Haight, *Christian Community in History*, II.183.

<sup>132</sup> Haight, *Christian Community in History*, II.209.

Anglican rejection of a global authority therefore affirmed its borders and self-sovereignty, both in matters of church and state affairs. The Church of England is significant in that it was the first independent nation to assert its independent Christianity, casting off a globalizing control while affirming the Christian-hood of other expressions.

Our situation today is different in that the United Methodist Church is a global connection that shares one discipline. We continue to eschew centralized executive authority—remaining now, as before, without a pope. Nevertheless, we have embraced, intentionally or otherwise, a unifying congressional authority which diminishes the possibility for plurality of religious expression within that connection. Whether authority is centralized within the papal office or within a governing body, such as a General Conference, is immaterial. There is really only a difference in degree between one person directing all of Christendom and several hundred people directing all of a global denomination. Conferences are functionally similar to a pope in their consolidation of authority into one body, compelling homogeneity in doctrine with broad brush strokes.

This is problematic in that every Christian since the disciples has found something to be mistaken about—indeed, a major plot point in Mark was the inability of Jesus’ friends and followers to understand the Christ. They even knew the Anointed One on a personal level—we should not imagine that we, who do not, can fare better. The disadvantage of consolidated, homogenizing control is that everyone is going to be wrong in the same way. The advantage of pluralism is that we can, through collaboration between different vantage points, try to discern truth together.

This, I believe, is crucial to understanding Methodism's debates regarding human sexuality. One angle of the problem recognizes that it is not a matter of sexuality *per se*, but rather a matter of the scope of imposed uniformity within the UMC. The steady march of Christianity from the first century until now has produced a global denomination that struggles with many of Christianity's old challenges. The shift to the democratic process is a new embodiment of the tensions between regional and global authority, the power of bishops, and the distinction between laity and clergy—but these tensions remain, just as they always have. If not with the question of human sexuality, this debate would have instead manifested in the form of divorce, women in clergy positions, miscegenation, or any other “holiness” compelling agent of uniformity. Plenty of these are, from a literalist standpoint, unbiblical. Human sexuality is the topic, but the discussion itself is formally about control.

A certain subset of humans seems to always desire that centralized authority exist, and that this authority possess great powers of compulsion. If we are to learn from Cyprian and Stephen, and in doing so affirm our Anglican heritage, then we must instead affirm episcopal, regional authority in a collegial structure. We have bishops because the office is useful given the prerequisite of relative autonomy and regional authority; its use diminishes when we reduce that autonomy and efface the possibility of community within plurality.

## SEX! THE FACTS WITH WHICH WE MUST RECKON

I have previously established that scientific findings with which biblical passages disagree should spur the Wesleyan to seek alternative interpretations of those passages, guided by the Spirit and the general tenor of Scripture. It is not that science undermines Scripture—quite the opposite! Rather, science can teach us to better comprehend Scripture. It is in this spirit that I now survey some facts about our world.

Our own Professor, Rabbi Noah Bickart, recommended that one way of discerning what is “natural” for humans is by examining the behaviors of our close evolutionary cousins and in the natural world at large. Bickart is not alone in this recommendation; indeed, Aldo Poiani and A. F. Dixson, authors of *Animal Sexuality* agree with Bickart when they write,

Any attempt at understanding human homosexuality must also include a thorough analysis of same-sex sexual behaviour in the other primates. It is this comparative approach that can uncover those aspects that are common to all or some primates and those that are unique to any particular species.<sup>133</sup>

Wesley, as a natural theologian, provides space for this sort of discussion. Recall that, when the evidence of the sciences suggests a seeming-contradiction in Scripture, Wesley encouraged readers to search for a looser meaning in Scripture.

Sexuality is a complicated topic about which we, nevertheless, have through rigorous observation and experimentation acquired consistent truth claims. We will begin

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<sup>133</sup> Aldo Poiani and A. F. Dixson, *Animal Homosexuality: A Biosocial Perspective* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 381.

with a look at the natural world. For a God who, purportedly, finds homosexual behavior to be abhorrent, the Almighty certainly produced a great deal of it in the natural world. Humans have long been aware of this. Many species of primates, especially including our closer evolutionary cousins, perform same-sex sexual behavior:

The conclusion that homosexual behaviour is at least partly concerned with the ritualized expression of sexual patterns in a variety of social contexts is supported by studies of various Old World anthropoids.<sup>134</sup>

Against the speculation that this is a mere expression of social hierarchy, Poiani and Dixson continue:

It is not the case, however, that simplistic explanations such as ‘mounting = dominance; presenting = submission’ can adequately account for the functions of homosexual behaviour. Thus, it was shown many years ago that dominance hierarchies constructed by measuring agonistic relationships in groups of Old World monkeys do not necessarily correlate with hierarchies constructed from measurements of mounting behaviour in the same groups.<sup>135</sup>

That is to say, the dominance hypothesis is not a good explanation of homosexual behavior, especially given that this behavior seems to satisfy other social functions.

Animals perform same-sex sex acts for *pro-social* reasons. Indeed, animals in and out of captivity practice homosexual behavior such as to attain a degree of competence in the discipline. Further, and of special usefulness for our discussion, the spectrum of animal sexuality, even including homosexuality, often contains social and emotional components.

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<sup>134</sup> Poiani and Dixson, *Animal Homosexuality*, 389.

<sup>135</sup> Poiani and Dixson, *Animal Homosexuality*, 389.

Bonobo mitigate conflict with sex. Same-sex penguins adopt and raise neglected chicks.<sup>136</sup> Some male elephants bond for life.<sup>137</sup> For a species, such as ours, that knows the value of sex for reasons other than procreation, such as building strong relationships, for healing as a unit after a fight, for release, and for comfort in times of distress, we can recognize that sex, while including procreation, extends also to contain social and interpersonal elements.

Recognition of the prosocial and adaptive qualities of homosexual behavior within a population is key. Poiani and Dixson explain of homosexuality's helpfulness:

Perhaps one of the most interesting conclusions from animal behavior of the last 50 years is that adaptive social behavior often depends upon within-sex social bonds. In a great many well-known species, studied intensively over the last 30–50 years, the core social adaptations are same-sex bonding and affiliative behavior.<sup>138</sup>

Far from being unnatural or, in the case of dominance rituals, an expression of sin in the world, homosexual tendencies are both natural and beneficial. Rather than a bug in the natural order, homosexuality is a feature of reality that allows animals to build relationships and, at times, life-long partnerships.

We are, certainly, animals; more certainly, we are also more. Although discussion of the natural world can help us to recognize that same-sex sexual behavior is a natural

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<sup>136</sup> Nellie Bowles, "Male Penguins, and Baby Makes Three," *New York Times* (January 17, 2019, D1[L]); Gale General OneFile (accessed July 30, 2019). <http://link.galegroup.com/jcu.ohionet.org/apps/doc/A569857637/ITOF?u=ohlnk261&sid=ITOF&xid=cdb7da41>.

<sup>137</sup> Christopher Mims, "Gay Elephant' Is Just the Tip of the Iceberg," *Popular Science* (March 18, 2019); <https://www.popsci.com/scitech/article/2009-04/gay-elephant-just-tip-iceberg/>.

<sup>138</sup> Marc Beckoff and Jane Goodall, *Encyclopedia of Animal Behavior* (Westport: Greenwood, 2004), 925.

phenomenon, this generalized recognition can only take our discussion so far. Our discussion must therefore turn to the specifics of human sexuality. Although I will recurrently return to lessons from the natural world, this essay's intent remains to make these lessons useful in understanding human sexuality. We will begin with the prevalence of homosexual tendencies within our own species.

Discussions of prevalence must recognize a meaningful distinction between bimodal and unimodal orientations. Many humans possess bisexual capacities. Poiani and Dixson write, "bisexual sexual behaviour is far from uncommon in human populations, with estimates ranging from 1.8%–33% in men and 2.8%–65.4% in women. This suggests that the distribution of sexual orientations in most human populations is not bimodal."<sup>139</sup> Although most males and many females possess unimodal tendencies, there exist a large proportion who do not. Many humans possess the potential for attraction to their own sex. Females have greater individual variance in lifetime orientation and adaptability. The author writes, "with regard to women's homosexuality, it is becoming clear from various cross-cultural studies that women are more plastic than men in terms of their ability to undergo changes in sexual orientation throughout their lifetime. Diamond describes women's sexual orientation as more 'fluid' than that of men."<sup>140</sup>

There exist those who would point to the latter portion of the preceding quote, presuming vindication that homosexual behavior can be learned. The author of *Animal*

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<sup>139</sup> Poiani and Dixson, *Animal Homosexuality*, 6.

<sup>140</sup> Poiani and Dixson, *Animal Homosexuality*, 9.

*Sexuality* recognizes psychological correlational studies from the eighties which seem to suggest that homosexual behavior can be learned. Indeed, he writes,

This is not to say, however, that a homosexual orientation could not be ‘fine-tuned’ under the influence of learning or that classical or social conditioning are necessarily irrelevant in all cases.<sup>141</sup>

Poiani and Dixson continue, however,

but conditioning per se seems an unlikely mechanism to explain the bulk of cases of the ontogeny of same-sex sexual behaviour in humans and other vertebrates. As we have seen, same-sex sexual behaviour is a normal occurrence among the young of many social vertebrates and we could expect that the development of a heterosexual orientation would be buffered against the effects of those early experiences.<sup>142</sup>

Homosexual behavior is so common in the natural world, even among those species that exhibit enduring homosexual behavior but do not participate in sexual learning games or possess sophisticated societies,<sup>143</sup> that efforts to reduce its etiology in humans to a matter of learning or choice neglect the edifice of evidence in favor of a stunningly complex interrelation of the organism’s multiple interactive systems of pedigree and environment. The answer can only be made an easy one by simplifying the model so as to discard all evidence. In short, the learning or choice models of homosexuality are insufficiently supported. As we will see, *other* models fare far better.

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<sup>141</sup> Poiani and Dixson, *Animal Homosexuality*, 145.

<sup>142</sup> Poiani and Dixson, *Animal Homosexuality*, 145.

<sup>143</sup> Like most birds. See Poiani and Dixson, *Animal Homosexuality*, 134–36.

Although Poiani and Dixson recognize that, especially given our evolutionary background, the breadth of human sexual expression is wider than currently practiced, they also recognize that there exist humans who do not experience such breadth. Whereas many humans of both sexes have the potential for fluidity of sexual expression across their lifespan, there exist some who are rigidly exclusive in their attraction to one sex.

Much more problematic, however, is the existence of that small percentage of men and women who are attracted exclusively, or almost exclusively, to members of the same sex. These are the individuals who consistently rate themselves as 5 or 6 on the Kinsey scale.<sup>144</sup> Cross-cultural studies indicate that perhaps 2%–3% of men rate themselves in this way, whilst the percentage of lesbians is typically lower.<sup>145</sup>

That is, some humans simply have inflexible homosexual orientations. It may appear that Poiani and Dixson's numbers are self-contradictory here—this is not the case. As we have seen, women enjoy greater plasticity in sexual orientation than do men, and thus demonstrate a greater frequency of bisexual behavior. There exist fewer reports of unimodal homosexual women, as distinguished from bimodal bisexual women, than of unimodal homosexual men.

One may be tempted to suspect an error in reporting measures, here—and indeed such an error is conceivable. This distinction between unimodal and bimodal tendencies

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<sup>144</sup> The Kinsey Scale is a measure of sexual orientation on which a person may fall anywhere from 0 (entirely heterosexual) to 6 (entirely homosexual). See:

“The Kinsey Scale” Prevalance of Homosexuality study. Accessed September 1, 2019. <https://kinseyinstitute.org/research/publications/kinsey-scale.php>.

<sup>145</sup> Poiani and Dixson, *Animal Homosexuality*, 398.

opens the conversation to a helpful point: men and women often experience their sexuality differently from one another. Esteemed sexologist, Doctor Ruth Westheimer, helps to clarify this point. Westheimer notes in her *Encyclopedia of Sex* that:

While gay men are mostly comfortable about biological research, many lesbians are not. Some lesbians feel that their homosexuality is a choice, not a condition, and certainly not a biological impulse. Some maintain that they chose lesbianism for political reasons, as a way of rejecting patriarchal society.<sup>146</sup>

Scientific enquiry can certainly advance our understanding of the human condition. Nevertheless, we must exercise caution so that manner of our inquisitiveness does not colonially impose unwelcome presuppositions upon the communities we study.

Even with due diligence to cultural considerations, however, the fact remains that there exist some people of both sexes for whom sexual orientation is *not* a choice. Further, it is often evident early in a child's life, far before sexual maturation, that he or she has such a leaning. Poiani and Dixson continue from their earlier discourse, expressing the complicated nature of this etiology and our ongoing efforts to understand it. They write that there are

possible effects of neuroendocrine, genetic, birth order, and other mechanisms in the determination of homosexuality. These are some of the factors that could potentially account for the occurrence of pronounced homosexual (androphilic) preferences in men. However, postnatal environmental factors, as well as genetic and physiological factors, must be entwined in some way. LeVay (1993) states that 'The ultimate challenge

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<sup>146</sup> Poiani and Dixson, *Animal Homosexuality*, 139.

will be to establish how the genetic differences among individuals interact with environmental factors to produce the diversity that exists among us.’<sup>147</sup>

Although there exist many humans with bimodal tendencies, those with unimodal tendencies remain the majority.

Among unimodal humans, some maintain inflexible same-sex attraction. It is important to recognize that enduring homosexual attraction in humans may have a diversity of etiologies. Biological studies have explored birth order,<sup>148</sup> brain structure (as formed in-utero), hormones, and genetics.<sup>149</sup> Genetic studies have borne much fruit. Researchers have found that monozygotic twins have a higher concordance of sexual orientation than do dizygotic twins, who in turn have a higher concordance than do non-twin siblings.<sup>150</sup> Another study identified high proportions of homosexuality in males when a maternal uncle or brother was also a homosexual male,  $p < .01$ .<sup>151</sup> These studies are *observational*, meaning that they observe correlation between two variables without establishing causation.

Furthermore, experimental studies in animals have given evidence to support that variances in hormone exposure in early development are *causally connected with*, and not merely correlative with, future sexual behavior.<sup>152</sup> As Poiani and Dixson observe,

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<sup>147</sup> Poiani and Dixson, *Animal Homosexuality*, 398.

<sup>148</sup> Poiani and Dixson, *Animal Homosexuality*, 403.

<sup>149</sup> Ruth K. Westheimer, *Encyclopedia of Sex*, (New York: Continuum, 2000), 138–39.

<sup>150</sup> Westheimer, *Encyclopedia of Sex*, 139.

<sup>151</sup> Poiani and Dixson, *Animal Homosexuality*, 73.

<sup>152</sup> Poiani and Dixson, *Animal Homosexuality*, 103.

these experiments illustrate a theme that will recur in this book, which is that early development of sexual behaviour is under the combined control of genes, hormones and central nervous system, the last affecting and being also affected to variable degrees by learning processes.<sup>153</sup>

All life on earth, of which we humans are a part, is at the mercy of both its internal makeup, its physical, chemical, and biological interactions with its environment, and the influences of its environment upon the psyche.

Returning briefly to the natural world for guidance, we must pause to dispel the myth that humans are the only species which possesses same-sex pair bonds. Just as many birds do, so do at least some mammals. Poiani and Dixson explain,

one interesting reminder of the perils of taking the uniqueness of human sexuality for granted is the issue of exclusive homosexuality. Exclusive homosexuality has been traditionally described as a unique human trait, but it turns out that we actually share the trait with at least one other mammal species: *Ovis aries*.<sup>154</sup>

The plethora of animal sexual behavior *also* contains, as with sheep, examples of unimodal and enduring homosexual behavior. Our human “flock” is not even unique in this regard! Therefore, we see that the existence of unimodal homosexual humans is indeed a fact of nature with which we must reconcile ourselves. Reason and experience teach us as much. Our reading of the Bible must be influenced by the existence of these facts. Where there seems to be a contradiction between scientific facts and biblical verses, the Wesleyan

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<sup>153</sup> Poiani and Dixson, *Animal Homosexuality*, 103.

<sup>154</sup> Poiani and Dixson, *Animal Homosexuality*, 402.

approach is to look for a looser meaning in Scripture. We are so bound, if we are to rightly call ourselves “Methodists.”

**MORE ABOUT SEX! OUR INDISPENSABLE AND  
SUBJECTHOOD-AFFIRMING GIFT**

And everyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven;  
but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven.  
(Luke 12:10)

The great diversity of animal sexuality, which sometimes includes same-sex bonded pairs, is helpful in setting the stage for discussing human sexuality. We are, after all, animals—although, as creatures with sophisticated social networks, rich symbolic expressions, and deep affective and interpersonal capabilities, we are certainly not *only* animals. Just as there exist other animals, like sheep, who pair homosexually, so too are members of our own species inflexible in their same-sex alignment. As creatures made in God's image, we further possess an orientation toward the transcendent, the potential to wonder and to question, and, in virtue of our recognition of our own finitude, the corollary recognition of a yet-unpossessable infinite.

Human sexuality is, of course, in many ways different than animal sexuality. Many human cultures, including most in America, are mono-amorous; contrast this to our polygamous cousins, the apes. Whereas the *general* lesson from homosexual behavior in the wild is that same-sex behavior within a population is often an adaptive response, the *specific* lesson for humans is that we God-imaged creatures rely on sex as a means of socialization. There is no human subject without a community of other humans from which to draw subjecthood. The participation in our humanhood which allows us to self-actualize and seek God includes participation in human sexuality.

The above demonstrates that human sexual expression, while broad within the population, is for many individuals a very narrow experience. There exist some humans who *only* have homosexual tendencies—and these are tendencies which require expression! Efforts at conversion “therapy” are both demonstrably futile<sup>155</sup> and damaging.<sup>156</sup> Further, lesbian and gay persons experience higher rates of suicide, homelessness, and drug abuse, and are victims of bullying and assault at higher rates than the general population.<sup>157</sup> Causes of these bad outcomes include stigma, exclusion from in-groups, and oppressive laws and social mores. Not only do gay men and women, who exist, require intimacy and companionship, they exist as marginalized and vulnerable persons.

It is necessary, but not enough, that we work to spare pain—and indeed social mistreatment is injurious to the LGBTQ population. We ought to also be interested in self-actualization and completeness for all persons—and sexuality is part of personhood. We recognize that exercising one’s sexuality is indeed an avenue of becoming a person.

Sex and love are interconnected. Indeed, while surface affection can be felt for those for whom we lack deep emotional commitments, companionate love is an “art that needs to be practiced to improve one’s sharing of deepest affection and loyalty for another.”<sup>158</sup> Humans fear solitude, and it is through intimacy that we are able to overcome

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<sup>155</sup> Westheimer, *Encyclopedia of Sex*, 141.

<sup>156</sup> Christopher Romero, “Praying for Torture: Why the United Kingdom Should Ban Conversion Therapy.” *George Washington International Law Review* 51 (2009): 201–30.

<sup>157</sup> Eliason M. Haas, *et al.*, “Suicide and suicide risk in lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender populations: review and recommendations,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 58 (2010):10–51.

<sup>158</sup> Ruth K. Westheimer and Sanford Lopater, *Human Sexuality: A Psychosocial Perspective*, (Philadelphia: Lippincott Williams & Wilkins, 2005), 166.

this. Referencing Fromm, Westheimer and Lopater note that “erotic love involves a desire for temporary but complete and exclusive fusion with another person; it is the main route of real human intimacy.”<sup>159</sup> We must not forget that humans *recognize* our fundamental estrangement from one another. We know that we are alone and we fear loneliness—our finitude and seclusion are essential elements of our existence.

Surely, we need the different sorts of love—friends, family, and God—but it is through erotic expression that we attain solace from the otherwise insurmountable and pervasive knowledge that we are alone and separated by the great gulf characteristic of our temporal existence. Passion is one element of Robert Sternberg’s trifecta, including also intimacy and commitment, which allows for the cultivation of consummate love.<sup>160</sup> Further, sex allows a vehicle for the mutual vulnerability<sup>161</sup> that relationship growth relies upon to test and affirm mutual trust.<sup>162</sup> Subversions of trust, indeed, are the great threats to long-term relationships.<sup>163</sup>

It is through sexual expression, then, which includes physical sex acts, that a person gains with another person temporary reprieve from their mutual estrangement. It is further through sex that humans experience mutual vulnerability and, through this deep intimacy, grow in their relationship with one another. Applying Johari’s window from the chapter

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<sup>159</sup> Westheimer and Lopater, *Human Sexuality*, 167.

<sup>160</sup> Westheimer and Lopater, *Human Sexuality*, 175–76.

<sup>161</sup> Westheimer and Lopater, *Human Sexuality*, 177.

<sup>162</sup> Westheimer and Lopater, *Human Sexuality*, 188.

<sup>163</sup> Westheimer and Lopater, *Human Sexuality*, 188.

*Our Estrangement, Ourselves*, we can recognize that a trusted lover to whom one is monomorphously coupled possesses a unique and irreplaceable perspective.

There is more to know about any one human than any human, oneself included, can possibly know. The task of becoming a person includes accessing the myriad perspectives of countless other humans, and the perspective of a romantic partner is unique among all of these in the vulnerability and trust that such a partnership requires; humans are relational creatures, and humanhood demands interrelation.

It is true that Paul appears to disparage homosexuality (e.g. Rom 1:27). It is also true that we now know things that Paul did not know—namely, that the “natural relations” of which Paul speaks include, for some, homosexual relations. It is, further, a wholly Wesleyan practice to interpret Scripture with the help of the sciences, which affirm the natural existence of homosexuality, and within the general tenor of Scripture, which holds human interrelation as a sacred and necessary part of our God image.

If we become subjects through subjecthood-affirming relationships with other subjects, then it is through consummate love that we can, through sharing selfhood, grow and allow others to grow into persons. Sex, like reason, is a gift which allows us to reach outward from behind our veil of estrangement. To glibly deny others this gift is a deep spiritual sin. One of our institutional failures has been our inadequate communication of the soteriological jeopardy that some of our more conservative elements have placed themselves in through the barriers to relationships that they have constructed.

## THE FACTS OF THE CONFERENCES: OUR

### BABEL-ONIAN PENTECOST

Angels on the sideline,

Puzzled and amused.

Why did Father give these humans free will?

Now they're all confused.

Don't these talking monkeys know that

Eden has enough to go around?

Plenty in this holy garden, silly monkeys,

Where there's one you're bound to divide it.

Right in two.

Angels on the sideline,

Baffled and confused.

Father blessed them all with reason.

And this is what they choose.

And this is what they choose...

Repugnant is a creature

who would squander the ability to

lift an eye to heaven

conscious of his fleeting time here.<sup>164</sup>

Western Pennsylvania's Nancy Denardo, a delegate to the 2019 UMC Special General Conference, provides a quote that well illustrates the insurgence of non-Wesleyan hermeneutics into our body. "Friends," she said, "please stop sowing seeds of deceit. I'm

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<sup>164</sup> Tool, "Right in Two," Track 10, Tool Dissectional and Volcano Entertainment, released May 2, 2006.

truly sorry if the truth of the Gospel hurts anyone; I love you and I love you enough to tell you the truth.”<sup>165</sup>

As we have seen, the truth of the Gospel is a matter which requires the interpretation of Scripture’s general tenor through the lens of reason, experience, and tradition—that is, it requires as much if we are to call ourselves Methodists. It is the belief of many nominal Methodists today that the truth of the Gospel is attainable without such a hermeneutical aid. Indeed, the conferences evidence that our unity is threatened by our inability to understand one another. We are speaking *different hermeneutical languages*. The likely consequence is that we will scatter.

The truth of the gospel is something so immense and inscrutably mysterious that human efforts have, since the time of Jesus’ disciples, failed to fully grasp it. Even Jesus’ best friends and students failed, time and again, to understand him. Do we imagine that we are better off than they? We imperfect, finite things, who barely present as blips on the grand cosmic radar, have only ever made poor approximations of the Gospel’s truth, and to that end only through the mercy of the Spirit. The best option we have is to make mistakes in a *good direction*.<sup>166</sup> The relational tenor of Scripture can help to guide us.

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<sup>165</sup> United Methodist Insight, “Attempt to Revive One Church Plan Fails,” <https://um-insight.net/attempt-to-revive-one-church-plan-fails/>.

<sup>166</sup> A compliment originally given by a friend to a Japanese mathematician which ‘sums up’ the human capacity for good decision-making despite finitude and uncertainty.

“Quotation for the Week: Shimura.” *Degree of Freedom*, April 29, 2012. <https://strathmaths.wordpress.com/2012/05/14/quotation-for-the-week-shimura/>.

It serves to identify within Nancy's quote some of the adolescent cognitive values present in this common hermeneutic. Indeed, there *is* a hermeneutic at play. It is one which presumes the ready attainability of objective, immutable truth. It is a hermeneutic which resists the plurality of Christian expression to which the whole of church history, and indeed the primitive church itself, testifies. It is a hermeneutic which denies both the subjectivity of the human experience and the further ability to adopt a stance from within subjectivity. It is a hermeneutic which denies the *validity* of hermeneutics at all. It is not a very Wesleyan hermeneutic.

That there is no such thing as one normative human experience is a topic so far recurrently discussed. Into each interaction with another that we enter with another, we carry a subconscious expectation that the other has access to a paradigm which we take for granted and which, in all likelihood, the other does not share. Likewise, the other does the same! We think and communicate in disparate heuristic languages. The analogy drawn between the events of Babel and Pentecost allows us to see that any incidence of cross-hermeneutic communication—indeed, fellowship and community—is a miraculous event which we cannot make manifest of human means. Community itself is God-granted for the sake of God-work.

It is only with these understanding that we can make sense of the 2019 General Conference. Democracy is problematic in that it precariously rests on the will of popular votes. So, too, is authoritarianism problematic in that it hazards imposition of a uniform standard upon multitudes—a standard which may be deeply erroneous. Methodism attempts to have the best of both. This attempt instead has yielded the worst of both. Our

conferences include laity and clergy in equal measure, and it is through our conferences that we establish our constitution. Nevertheless, we remain episcopal. I posit that our denomination now suffers from a lack of right relationship between our egalitarian and hierarchical tendencies.

We have established that the diversity of human sexual experience and expression is both a natural, immutable mode of the human experience and one that humans rely upon to pursue their full humanhood. The question of human sexuality in the UMC is, again, only incidentally about sex. It is rather a difference in belief-producing hermeneutic, and not a difference in belief, *per se*, that has increased our tensions.

The United Methodist Church (UMC) holds general conferences every four years, with additional special general conferences as needed. Delegates to these conferences are elected by districts' aptly-named annual conferences, whose delegates are elected or appointed by churches and the district. Each type of conference requires even numbers of clergy, who attend by mandate, and laity, who while in theory might rotate often perennially hold onto positions as a mark of honor or trust within their given congregation.

In June 2019, I attended as an "at large" delegate to round out the numbers for the sake of parity between clergy and lay delegates at the East-Ohio Annual Conference. Beyond electing representatives to the general and judicial conferences, annual conferences also vote on petitions, which are actionable decisions made by the body to conduct regional concerns, and resolutions, which are expressions of the body's opinion, presented to the general conference, on a given issue that the general conference will discuss.

Three potential plans for moving forward were presented prior to the February General Conference. The *Traditional Plan*, which the conference promulgated, asserted a literal reading of Scripture, affirming exclusionary language and denying ordination or marriage to homosexual persons. This plan offers a means of exit for churches standing in disagreement with this decision. The traditional plan won with 53% of the votes. Another plan, the *One Church Plan*, allowed space for connectivity between churches of differing opinions on human sexuality—the pastor, in this plan, would have discretion to perform or deny weddings, and the bishop would have discretion to appoint pastors. The Council of Bishops supported the One Church Plan. The final plan, the *Connectional Plan*, sought to redistribute churches into progressive, traditional, and unifying conferences within the same denomination, each conference receiving increased individual powers in matters regarding ordination and marriage.

February’s General Conference reaffirmed and increased exclusionary language, such that persons who are “practicing and avowed homosexuals” remain barred from service as clergy. Further, clergy are prohibited from performing same-sex marriages. Rhetoric at the special conference in Missouri was heated. As is often the case in political events, each side authored slogans to rally support. One such, voiced by Rudolph Merab of Liberia, was that it is “better to be divided by truth than united in error.”<sup>167</sup> This, as we

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<sup>167</sup> “One Church Plan fails, Traditional Plan advances” (February 25, 2019); <https://www.minnesotaumc.org/newsdetail/one-church-plan-fails-traditional-plan-advances-12762388>.

have seen, is an opinion that does not reflect the historic reality that dates back even to Peter, Paul, and James.<sup>168</sup>

The UMC web page describing the events of the conference sees fit to recognize the damaging rhetoric that was used. It reads, “We acknowledge, however, that many LGBTQIA people, their loved ones and allies were hurt by the speeches, rhetoric and decisions of the General Conference. We pray for healing and forgiveness.”<sup>169</sup> And, indeed, the effects of this hurt have just begun.

The consequences of this rift are manifold. The Traditional Plan’s troubling inclusion of a call to “get thee out” to those congregations unwilling to toe the “traditionalist”<sup>170</sup> doctrine is unbecoming of the Wesleyan spirit of ecumenical connection. The disaffirmation of homosexual clergy and marriage undermines the already-challenging human tasks of community and person-building. Further, it denies the evidence of homosexuality’s normativity replete in our God-given natural world. What we face today is, without doubt, a long-established insurgence of counter-Methodist activity within our denomination that should have been addressed decades ago.

Our recent Annual Conference, which I attended as a voting delegate, demonstrated to me the heavy animosity and pain experienced by many, and the challenges each side has

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<sup>168</sup> I would invite literalist Christians, so often of a rural sort, to abstain from medium-rare steak and small game whose neck has been wrung. These are not biblically different from homosexual sex acts. See Acts 15:20.

<sup>169</sup> United Methodist Communications, “What Happened and What Didn’t at General Conference 2019,” The United Methodist Church, March 1, 2019, <http://www.umc.org/who-we-are/what-happened-and-what-didnt-at-general-conference-2019>.

<sup>170</sup> As we have seen, this is erroneously named.

in communicating with the other. One man, from a traditionally conservative district, stood up to a microphone early on the conference's first morning. In a sharp and angry tone, he asked whether we each of the hundreds of present candidates for the General and Judicial Conferences could, with a one-word answer, tell the gathered body whether they "believe in the Bible" or not. Put to a vote, his motion thankfully did not pass.

As with February's general conference, many votes were divided nearly equally—one resolution for the East Ohio Conference to "acknowledge the need for a healthy way forward that is characterized by dialogue, mutual respect and understanding" received a majority, however due to district rules could not pass without two-thirds. This resolution *did* include LGBTQ-affirming language, although this language did not seek to *impose* LGBTQ affirmation on non-affirming churches. Another resolution, reading as follows, fared similarly:

This resolution calls for the East Ohio Annual Conference 2020 General Conference delegation to work in favor of a structural realignment of the United Methodist Church that creates an expression of Wesleyan Methodism that allows both traditional and progressive understandings of LGBTQ+ Clergy and same-gender weddings to co-exist within the Church; and that the East Ohio Annual Conference notify the Council of Bishops that the stipulations of the Traditional Plan represent neither the spirit nor the practice of mutual love and shared mission of our annual conference.<sup>171</sup>

Attempts at allowing community within a plurality of thought were readily dismissed by the voting bodies—it is not enough that some churches are free to be conservative, they

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<sup>171</sup> East Ohio Annual Conference, "Resolutions 2019," <http://www.eocumc.com/eoac19/resolutions.html>.

further require that no progressive elements remain within the corporate body. We remain a divided church.

Some subtle lessons of our district's conference were deeply instructive to me. Some petitions to the body sought information and study for the sake of equipping future process improvement with facts to better guide decision-making. One such petition sought to create a committee for the purpose of studying sex offender laws in the United States, with the purpose of discerning the usefulness of these laws and providing recommendations to lawmakers. The petition did not seek to *change* laws, as a starting point. It merely sought to gather information so that the UMC could make informed decisions about its position. This author had hoped, perhaps from a position of privilege, that any resolution that called for more-informed decision making should be nearly automatic. This resolution indeed *did* pass—although barely and after vehement discussion. After two calls for votes by raising cards, the bishop required that the gathered body stand so that talliers could count. The very act of gathering information regarding a sensitive subject was, to nearly enough people, anathema.

Especially instructive was the manner in which people voted and were encouraged to vote. Each opposing political party—for that is what they are—distributed flyers and postcards to delegates as we filed into the great hall for the day's work. Each of these handouts contained names and voting numbers of candidates endorsed by the respective party. Volunteers of both parties flanked the entrances to distribute their materials.

The progressive movement, to which I aligned in voting, further texted updates with recommended candidates for a given vote. Each delegate was permitted to vote only within

their group, clergy or laity, and was permitted a maximum number of votes on a given ballot. This maximum decreased as the body achieved more nominees. Candidates required a certain percentage of a given vote to receive a nomination—in the event that nobody met that threshold, no nominations occurred during that round and the voting began anew after a hiatus for other business.

Although there were many qualified candidates who did not align themselves with either party, it should be unsurprising that none were nominated for the upcoming annual or judicial conferences. The majority of the body voted along party lines—at least sufficiently to meet the parties’ goals. Some people, of course, voted their conscience for the candidates that they personally believed were best. I am not eager to value-judge any such motivation of the conscience on moral grounds. Delegates certainly have a responsibility to do exactly that.

On practical grounds, however, it is helpful to recognize something that the Wesleyan Covenant Association (WCA) did very effectively.<sup>172</sup> Knowing this fact about humans—that we often assert individualism by going our own way—the WCA factored this knowledge into their voting recommendations. Rather than recommend that delegates devote their entire set of allotted votes in a given round to WCA candidates, the WCA only asked for a small number at a time. This ensured that all WCA and conservative-leaning

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<sup>172</sup>The WCA is a conservative collection of congregations. By their own description, “the Wesleyan Covenant Association connects Spirit-filled, orthodox churches of Wesleyan theology and their members” who organize for the purpose of “committing to the authority of Scripture and the Lordship of Jesus Christ.” Their website laments that “persistent and escalating disobedience to the order and discipline of our church has created anarchy.” The WCA represents a unified desire to homogenize the Methodist church under a literalist interpretation of Scripture; <http://www.wesleyancovenant.org/about-page/>.

moderate voters devoted the minimum-required number of votes on a ticket to WCA candidates while allowing expression of personal conscience for the rest of their vote. It further ensured that delegates voted for the *same* candidates on a given ticket, rather than across different tickets, allowing the WCA to attain for their nominees the minimum percentage faster. They effectively and repeatedly directed voters to a small target, which allowed them to earn more lay delegates than East Ohio Forward.<sup>173</sup>

The WCA was also very savvy in that its materials provided value to recipients—cards contained not only recommended voters, but also Bible verses (unrelated to the question of human sexuality!) and invitations to Bible study. While asking for very little (only a couple of votes from a ticket at a time), and providing more perceived good than was being requested, the WCA achieved a high degree of buy-in.<sup>174</sup> Focused, practical policy allowed a substantial win for the WCA in this annual conference.

Another interesting meeting, which I treasure as an instructive memory, took place during the week's recurrent rain showers. A friend from my church and I sat talking in his covered golf cart. As we did, a woman in her forties carrying a beautiful "Starry Night" umbrella recognized me from earlier in the day. I had stood up to speak to an issue, but was redirected for the sake of time, so she was curious about what I had to say.

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<sup>173</sup> East Ohio Forward is a combination of centrist and progressive persons in the East Ohio Conference who collaborate for a UMC united in plurality. By their description, "East Ohio Forward advocates for an expression of Wesleyan Methodism that allows both traditional and progressive understandings of LGBTQ+ Clergy and same-gender weddings to co-exist within the Church." Their website is a far less impressive one than the WCA's; <http://Eastohioforward.org/about>.

<sup>174</sup> My insurance-salesperson friend, Scott Zimmerman, described this strategy to me in one of our discussions at a cigar shop.

Our conversation quickly made clear, though, that this person was suffering real disaffirmation in her local church, having been replaced as piano player and shuffled aside in leadership and committee positions. It was also clear that she belonged to a church whose leadership aligned with WCA teaching. She was curious about other points of view, and this curiosity led her to ask about our views from a positivist position, but it was our compliment of her umbrella and our interest in her personal story that allowed us to meet her subjectively. Indeed, we were very affirming of her because it was clear that she needed it. Here is a person, belonging to an “opposing” congregation, who experiences marginalization at that congregation’s hands. I do not believe that she is a rarity. I rather wished that I could take her home to our island of misfit toys.<sup>175</sup>

Our task is not to change the WCA’s minds. Indeed, we cannot, as we speak different theological languages. Rather, our task is to reach using our shared, Spirit-given language to open the hearts of those, like our umbrella-carrying friend in a light summer shower, who have unmet and silent cries for fellowship and value in their own churches. Sadly, the current structures and *habitus* of the United Methodist Church are not conducive to this mission. It is prohibitively difficult to traverse cultural bounds, even within a relatively small geographic area.

One part of this is our reliance on licensed local pastors. Our discipline explicitly imposes itinerance upon our elders, taking a historical cue from early Methodist pastors’

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<sup>175</sup> Church of the Redeemer, UMC, is a small and aging congregation of dissenters, oddballs, and social misfits. We are situated near to the much larger—and much more mainline—Church of the Saviour. I love my Redeemer family dearly.

task of riding circuits on horseback. Wesley himself established itinerance, practicing it and demanding it of his preachers even until his advanced age. It is nevertheless now common for a local pastor to remain with one congregation, especially a small congregation, for years at a time. My own pastor, as well as another mutual pastor friend who has moved further toward ordination, both independently have noted that our denomination's shift from providing a "horse to a house" has served to stagnate views within congregations and solidify more-homogenous enclaves.

The challenge shared by both the Traditional and Connectional plans is that they opened a door for departure from unity. This should never have been an option. This challenge, however, is not auto-etiological, but is rather the result of efforts to homogenize our expression of faith across cultures. The Babel-onian expectation of a unified theological language capable of building an edifice heavenward is one which neglects the Pentecostal need of en-Spirited relation to provide verticality. By attempting to force all Methodists in our union to adopt non-essential dogmatics, we attempt to do God's work at the expense of our own.

And indeed, we do have work from which this attempt at imposing homogeneity detracts. The Special General Conference cost the church millions of dollars, and the trials we anticipate for violations of the Discipline will cost millions more. So, too, have we invested time and money in hundreds of Annual Conferences globally to discuss this issue that could have been better spent performing our Christian work in the world. Strangely, there is still world hunger. This is not good stewardship of our financial and human resources.

Part of this problem has been our failure to instruct Methodists the world over in Wesleyan interpretive styles. We have allowed to fester the mistaken belief that science and Scripture are at odds. We have not done a good job of teaching people the strengths and limitations of reason. We have not taught people that Wesley's use of *sola Scriptura* was vastly different than Luther's and Calvin's. We have not helped them to understand that a hermeneutic is a necessary and good thing. These are corporate failures that have endured for generations.

Another part of this problem has been our poorly established boundaries for power structures in the denomination. Each globalizing doctrine that is passed robs the episcopate of its authority. We have largely failed to confront the tension between local and global influence with which all of Christendom perennially been plagued. Our historical precedent, as Christians, has shown that there is strong merit to collegiate communion between regional churches. Our historical precedent, as Methodists, has affirmed a dual tension between representative and executive powers. These themes, which are foundational, have been poorly discussed in our recent proceedings.

**ON CHRISTIAN ACTION IN A BROKEN  
DENOMINATION**

Hide it under a bushel? No!  
I'm gonna let it shine!

What are we to do? The United Methodist Church is a worldwide organization containing rich assets in the form of buildings, summer camps, non-profit organizations, and highly-trained human resources. We possess ample means for introducing Christ to humankind. Further, we possess a rich history of polity, liturgy, and social justice. The current discussions among progressive elements in the church vary in their desire to remain or separate from the denomination. We should be deeply disinclined to sever fellowship from such an institution.

Why is it that Wesleyan, subject-affirming elements of the church should cede the institution to non-Wesleyan insurgents? Perhaps the question contains a tinge of pride. Yet, a greater part of this reluctance is also a recognition of duty to do so. Such a large and powerful organization, if left to its own caprice, can potentially do a great deal of harm to the world. Imagine such an institution after the exodus of its reasonable and subjecthood affirming people, emboldened at having forced out dissenters and now monolithic in thought. Onto whose attention would it turn its desire to dominate? Which easy target would follow? No, we must stay and resist.

It is true that resistance, in the form of clergy performing same-sex weddings, will be expensive. So, too, would such proceedings in the event of ordination of homosexual clergy. Nevertheless, resistance is an imperative in line with our Baptismal Covenant. Great portions of the denomination already exist as insular breeding grounds of unwelcome and

un-Wesleyan extremism. Shall we hand the whole thing off? It is only their occupation with our “disobedience” that stays their attention from moving to the next target.

There exist marginalized members of my own local church who remain in fellowship with the UMC. In these women and men, I see the face of Christ. I see their gifts of their money, talents, and time. I see the holiness of their union with their partners, and the good that their marriages do in their lives. I see the great gift of these married unions to our ecclesial body. I have, through reason and experience, an understanding that God shines through and uses these Christians to Methodism’s benefit. I have evidence from Wesleyan and ancient tradition that we have space to interpret the Bible in light of this understanding. And I see much missing in the persons seeking to diminish our unity and deny whole personhood to other Christians.

To this end, I know that we must remain and educate those in whom much reason and Spirit is imperfect. Surely, our Covenant calls us to fight injustice where it surfaces—and to this end we must advocate for and protect those who are marginalized based on their sexuality. But we further have the duty to fight the injustice that we are complicit in—our corporate failure to teach Methodists what it means to be a Methodist.

One young person at our Annual Conference, a high schooler selected as a youth delegate, expressed dissatisfaction and annoyance at the ongoing discussion of human sexuality. “I don’t know why we’re still talking about this,” she said. “This was settled in February, and as far as I can tell God made His will known.” This young person has need of better instruction if she is to be a future leader in the church. And, indeed, we must actively campaign to teach people better—this is not a problem that will pass with the

Boomers. We have done a poor job of expressing God's greatness, and continue indeed to do a poor job of it, if so many speak with certitude of God's will.

The challenge of democracy is that its presupposition that all are equal in worth is often misinterpreted as the notion that all opinions are equally valid. This is not the case. The very task of Christian perfection is one of becoming, as with a mathematical infinitesimal, ever closer to completeness without ever properly arriving. In accordance with the divine relational nature, we believe that God affects this perfection through community.

Just as we have failed in engineering a corporate value of scholastics, so too have we failed in selecting capable representatives. The fruits of our democratic process are only as rich as careful tending of the orchard allows. I fear that there may not be a good solution to this problem. The democratic process has failed as such a means of engagement. Although there exist resolutions pending for the upcoming General Conference to attempt to rescind some recent changes, our divided nature and recent precedent provide little room for hope that these resolutions will be successful. Democracy has become an engine of oppression.

*It is no longer time to await corporate permission to live out the Methodist mission.* Nor can we depend on the democratic process to rectify itself. The cancer in our institution has metastasized; organs no longer function as intended. Fortunately, there exist structures in the church which allow for meaningful engagement with this non-Wesleyan insurgence. These are the bishops, the clergy, and the laity.

The structure best-situated to assert helpful regional change, is the episcopate. Our regional executive authorities are now faced with the opportunity to make use of their office to model Christian behavior. They can do so by ordaining LGBTQ ministers. They now, also, have the opportunity to vocally speak in favor of the Wesleyan hermeneutic and the fruits of reason. Further, they have the opportunity to speak and act publicly in defense of those Methodists under their protection who the UMC Discipline has recurrently marginalized. Indeed, recent globalizing gambits have diminished the bishops' authority—and it is through action, and not through prayerful guidance, that they can reclaim it.

They who carry a crook must protect those in your flock from the wolves among us. There had ought to be education campaigns—not debates, which presume parity of opinions' value—but *instruction* for ordained clergy, licensed local pastors, and laity alike. Instruct all on the facts of the matter before us, and if we find a member of our body unequal to the task of understanding, relegate them to a lesser position.

Perhaps one need not be so heavy handed about the matter—some soft-touch methods do exist to lessen some of the persecutory activity. If idle hands are indeed the devil's playground, the free time that so many churches have had to invest in campaigning against homosexuality is evidence that they have not had enough to do. Simply redirecting their energy to ever-increasing service demands may make worlds of difference in reducing their efforts at oppression.

It may be that we find ourselves unable to keep churches open. I think of those conservative elements who are only Wesleyan in name. Perhaps they will drive out new pastors who challenge them with new ideas—this is not unheard of in Methodism. Perhaps

they will join other movements. One is welcome to debate the magnitude, if any, of this loss. Nevertheless, we have already demonstrated that we value *open* churches over *Methodist* churches. It is not too late to demonstrate a different preference. The bishop has the organizational authority to appoint pastors—and is thus is empowered to appoint *better pastors*.

Teach. Lead. You, of Peter's lineage, embody the office. It would help greatly were those who carry the crook to assume a position in favor—publicly—of the dignity of all humans and in favor of the harmony between sciences and Scripture. Certainly, we will lose people within our Conference. Likely, there will be political trouble for the bishop. Probably, we will ruffle feathers in other Conferences. This is irrelevant—our Baptismal duty is not to let those who are in the wrong feel at ease with our presence. Our duty is to resist injustice.

Clergy, too, have such opportunities. They may wed congregants of all sexual orientations. Surely, again, there will be trials—but they cannot try *all* of the progressive clergy. With a bishop whose public stance is one of refusal to send clergy to trial, clergy may yet transform a threat from afar into a positive and public demonstration of Wesleyanism. Even without as much, though, the use of Methodist funds to put ministers on trial will mean for fewer funds used in later persecutions. We must assume the church already compromised and dangerous. The institution is an enemy to God's kingdom. Allow it to lose resources as a result of its own rules. If we are to divide, then let us do so standing as Christians.

Our responsibility remains also to those many who have been led astray by bad actors, and also to those bad actors whose souls are in jeopardy from their divisive and oppressive deeds. Argument and reason will not suffice here. For the latter, it may be that we can only testify openly to the Gospel and its ability to save even them.

But we might, through community and behavior modeling, win over those middle-ground elements in conservative districts. Our denomination is split—but we do not need to win over *all* of the other side, and it seems to me that many of a “traditionalist” slant are so of a consequence of their environments. I think again of my umbrella-carrying friend. The human tendency toward enclave does not only belong only to conservative elements—many progressive churches are quite adept at insular living. If we are to reach those who can be reached, we must travel horizontally to where they are. This means leaving the comfort of same-thinking community.

We share a common language in service. It would be quite something to see conservative and progressive churches working together, building fellowship, and coming to know one another as subjects without breathing even a word about the Bible or human sexuality. We don't need to win them all to affirmation of homosexuality—this need not be a matter of inducing doctrine. One can be a Christian who is mistaken about a great number of things, and compelling right think is not a feasible goal. It may be enough to demonstrate to those who do not know that we are, indeed, Christ-affirming, biblical, and Spirit-endowed Christians—and that such Christians come in a great variety.

The intrigues of global ecclesial polity have manufactured a false dichotomy wherein all in our confessing members are expected to follow an unjust and un-Wesleyan

Discipline. This top-down ecclesiology is a threat that we may not survive; it certainly appears hopeless for United Methodism's unity. Perhaps, with intentional leadership and committed laity, we may yet turn the tide. If so, it must take place from the bottom, occupying a horizontal rather than vertical ecclesiology. The future of the United Methodist Church, however, is in the end the wrong priority to invest in. Through Christian, subject-affirming, community-building living, the United Methodist Church will either survive, or it won't. I would prefer to see how far faith can take us.

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