

**SEARCHING FOR UNITY:  
REVISITING THE DOCTRINAL STANDARDS**

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**AN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE ON OUR DOCTRINES**

My read of our two hundred and twenty-one year experiment at being a church is that Methodists in America have historically been unified at a practical level by heartfelt piety, a common polity and ethos, and a shared mission to “spread Scriptural holiness across the land,” whether by planting churches, building bureaucracies, starting colleges, or engaging various social evils as they emerge in the culture.<sup>1</sup> We have been an activist and busy people, starting projects and passing resolutions galore.

Our heyday was the nineteenth century, and after peaking as a percentage of national population we have been declining ever since. Our absolute numbers, however, continued to grow with our predecessor bodies, reaching a peak in the late 1960's, which since union have also declined. While there are isolated bright spots, at the present our driving momentum is gone and our church is in a season of introspection and reappraisal which at times degenerates into looking at fellow travelers and accusing them of not being faithful United Methodists. There is much dissension in the ranks. It is not a

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<sup>1</sup> For a treatment of American Methodist culture, its practices and implicit theology, see Russell E. Richey, et. al., *Marks of Methodism: Theology In Ecclesial Practice* (Nashville, TN: Abington, 2005). I agree with the authors that our theology and doctrine has historically been more implicit than explicit and more practical than theoretical. My point is that the usefulness and workability of such an arrangement is nearing an end and that *more of the same* will not address our current challenges. It is time to become more conscious of our doctrine and more explicit in our theology.

particularly pleasant or confident time to be United Methodist. But perhaps hidden in our situation is a new opportunity.

In his day John Wesley assumed the legacy and the luxury of a confessional state and a national church which involved a Christian king or queen as head of state, bishops in the House of Lords, doctrines officially subscribed by clergy, a unified liturgy and practice of sacraments in the Book of Common Prayer, a collection of approved Homilies to guide preaching, and episcopal oversight over a parish system, all with a vocal minority report thrown in from the Dissenters. He assumed these as background, then busied himself with training leaders and forming converts during the evangelical awakening. Wesley had one foot in the church, the other in the streets. The treasures of Christian truth were already in the storehouse of the church; Wesley wanted to get them out to a new and neglected market through innovative methods: e.g. field preaching, popular hymnody, and accountability groups among them.

Whatever the flaws of the Church of England (or of Methodism in our own day), there was much that was necessary that was firmly in place. Methodism under Wesley did not aspire to be a church in the full-blown sense; it was a specialized renewal movement within the church, what in our day would be called a *para-church* movement. So long as the mission progressed, careful attention to foundational doctrine, meaning the *Thirty-Nine Articles* of the Church of England, required little attention from the rank and file. It was there as an orthodox and Reformation foundation on which Wesley's teaching on grace and *the way of salvation* could be erected as a populist commentary, a sort of Wesleyan midrash on the foundational doctrines and faith of the church catholic which preceded him. It is a mistake of the first order to minimize what Wesley assumed and presumed from his Anglican doctrinal heritage. It provided the stable melody line on which Wesley played his harmonizations and inventions.

This two-tier image is a possible model for how the Standard Sermons and New Testament Notes of Wesley might best function within our own diverse array of Doctrinal Standards. Our Articles of Religion (a revised 16<sup>th</sup> century Anglican document) and The Confession of Faith (a mid-20th century modern restatement of essentials from the EUB tradition) are clearly primary and foundational as formal statements of key doctrinal headings and their development. The Sermons and Notes, on the other hand, highlight the biblical grounding and living proclamation of the doctrine of salvation which is our particular glory as the heirs of the Wesleyan revival; they have a different form and a different function than the Articles and the Confession. Wesley set up camp and did his best work in practical soteriology, the working out of the doctrine of the Christian life in his distinctive teachings on prevenient grace, conversion, Christian perfection, and assurance of the Spirit. He was not a systematic theologian in the technical sense, but behind him in the Thirty-Nine articles were all the topics that make up a systematic presentation.

It is hard to envision precisely how the Sermons and Notes would function as doctrinal standards in any juridical sense. Doctrinal materials are precise and concise; the Standard Sermons are vast in comparison. Doctrine is by design minimalist with every word carrying weight and freight; the Sermons are, by contrast, expansive and occasional. Doctrinal Standards are the results of a long and official process of discernment and formation by legitimated church bodies; the Sermons and Notes are the work of one man alone and therefore individual and idiosyncratic in the best sense.

The two volumes of the Anglican Homilies, which were Wesley's template, were examples of preaching collected and edited by Thomas Cranmer and later by John Jewel for clergy to have models to preach key themes of Protestant doctrine.<sup>2</sup> Their function was homiletical and exemplary, not dogmatic and juridical. Likewise, Wesley's Standard Sermons (in clear imitation of the Homilies) were for the edification of his readers and served as examples for the preachers of how to offer the distinctive Methodist emphases. Preaching was not limited to these sermons but had to include the same core theological themes which marked one as a faithful member of Mr. Wesley's connection. The Anglican tradition never made the Homilies a formal doctrinal standard alongside the Thirty-Nine Articles, nor a series of biblical notations authoritative. We in the larger Wesleyan tradition are, so far as I know, the only churches to make such Sermons and Notes official doctrine. They are the historical and particular format in which our distinctive teachings are embodied. To have only the Articles and Confession as standards would leave us with a brand of generic Protestantism and raise the issue of how pass on our Wesleyan distinctives. One way to solve the tension would be for the General Conference to decide that chargeable offenses on doctrine apply only to the Articles and Confession and not to the Sermons and Notes. This would, in effect, give us the two-tier system I discussed above.

It is not hard to conceive that a UM bishop or pastor could be charged with teaching a doctrinal error on the Trinity or Christology or for refusing to administer infant baptism; it is impossible to see how charges could be brought for denying a point of teaching in one or more of the Sermons or the Notes. The material is too large and diverse to function in the same normative way as the Articles and Confession. The Sermons and Notes are *in house* materials for Methodist folk which guarantee continuity with our founder and normative theologian and highlight our clan's contribution to the fuller development of the church's faith. And, while the General Rules are listed among the Doctrinal Standards, many of the specific prohibitions (though not the intent underlying them) are so dated as to nearly defy meaningful accountability. The Social

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas Oden, *Doctrinal Standards In The Wesleyan Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmanns, 1988), 36-37.

Principles epitomized in our Social Creed are a functional, though not historical and constitutional, replacement for The General Rules.<sup>3</sup>

The debate on the history behind the 1988 doctrinal revision still goes on behind the scenes as to whether the Sermons and Notes ought to have equal status with the Articles and Confession, with Richard Heitzenrater and William Abraham on one side and Thomas Oden, Bishop Scott Jones and the General Conference on the other.<sup>4</sup>

All value the Sermons and Notes, the question being: Should they be official Doctrinal Standards? Or should they have some lesser level of authority? But their current canonical status is not in doubt. The General Conference of 1988 (and each subsequent Discipline since) has stated our constitutionally protected Doctrinal Standards as consisting of five documents: The Articles of Religion, The Confession of Faith, The Standard Sermons of John Wesley, his Notes on the New Testament, and The General Rules.<sup>5</sup> How they are related to one another and what the principles are for a conversation among them has not yet been defined by the General Conference. We have identified and protected them; we have not yet decided what to do with them except admire them from a safe distance and assure our ecumenical partners that “we too have doctrine!”

A simplified historical review might go something like this: In the 1939 merger the healing of an ethical breach (separation over slavery) was the issue and not one of formal doctrine as both the Northern and Southern Churches held to the Articles of Religion. At the 1968 Methodist/EUB merger, the decision was made not to write a new creed or set of Articles but to place the Methodist Articles of Religion and EUB Confession of Faith side by side as complementary and to set them in a new interpretive framework that included the modern notion of *pluralism* and the innovative method of the quadrilateral.<sup>6</sup> The 1988 Doctrinal Commission and General Conference demoted

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<sup>3</sup> 2004 *Discipline*, para. 160-166, 95-124.

<sup>4</sup> See the relevant essays by Heitzenrater and Oden in Thomas A. Langford, editor, *Doctrine and Theology in the United Methodist Church* (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books/ Abington Press, 1991), also Bishop Scott Jones, *United Methodist Doctrine: The Extreme Center* (Nashville: Abington, 2002). In a recent unpublished essay, “The End of Wesleyan Theology,” Dr. William Abraham has spoken of how, in his estimation, the Sermons were “unconstitutionally shoehorned into the canonical material of the church in 1972.”

<sup>5</sup> *The Book of Discipline*, 2004, pp. 22, 27, 58 (On the Articles of Religion and Confession of Faith); 27 (On The General Rules); 58 (On Sermons and Notes).

<sup>6</sup> For a positive read, see Albert Outler, “Introduction to the Report of the 1969-1972 Theological Study Commission,” in Langford, *Doctrine and Theology*, 20-25; and

pluralism as an ideology, clarified that the quadrilateral was not an equilateral, and asserted the primacy of Scripture. There was also a clarification and declaration of the five documents that together constitute our Doctrinal Standards. But, and this is my point, having now clarified what our Standards are, and having placed them under the proper, overarching banner of Scriptural primacy, we have never explored them with any care. There they sit all dressed up and ignored, like a bride abandoned at the altar. I say it's time for a marriage.

“Plain truth for plain people” was an apt slogan of Wesley for his style of operations.<sup>7</sup> The Church of England was wholesale; Wesley was retail. He plundered the teaching resources of his heritage for the sake of the mission, and while there were tensions, we all know that he died a priest in the Church of England. Wesley was both a churchman and an ardent renewalist, and the tension between those two poles of faithfulness is with us to this very day. That we have only recently approved official teaching documents on baptism and the eucharist is an indicator just how far we been able to run on the energies of revival without clear sacramental teaching beyond the bare statements in the Articles and Confession.<sup>8</sup> That we are moving toward what the Confessing Movement intends is a deep and rich discussion of our doctrines (what they are and why they matter) is another indicator that we are having to attend to *the church side* of the polarity because our movemental qualities have at this point run their course to the point of exhaustion. Our momentum is gone.

It may be that by the grace of the Holy Spirit we can be redefined as an orthodox, mainline church with a keen sense of justice and a passion for missions and evangelism.<sup>9</sup>

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for a negative read, Ted Campbell, “The ‘Wesleyan Quadrilateral’: The Story of a Modern Methodist Myth,” 154-161 in the same volume.

<sup>7</sup> Albert C. Outler, editor, *The Works Of John Wesley, Volume I, Sermons 1-33* (Nashville, TN: Abington, 1994), 104.

<sup>8</sup> 2004 *Book of Resolutions*, On Baptism (857-875), On Eucharist (883-930). It is helpful to view our new sacramental teaching as an authoritative commentary by the General Conference on the sacramental statements in the Articles and Confession. It is possible to hang all sorts of commentary, once approved by the General Conference, on the bare skeleton of the Doctrinal Standards. Keeping them in The Book of Resolutions and not in the Discipline gives a sunset provision and requires that they be reexamined every eight years. They are the best we have, *for now*. The Social Principles can be construed as an expanded commentary on The General Rules where specific ethical practices are made explicit within the array of our Standards. But the Social Principles differ in that they are within the Discipline and thus carry a higher weight of authority in the ranking of our materials than the new sacramental materials.

<sup>9</sup> I take it as a grace that we have not seen fit, at least not yet, to march over the same precipice as the Episcopalians but have in fact pulled back a measure from the more

I think that would please Father John, and it might lead to a new wave of effective evangelism. If not, we know that God, as before, will continue to raise up new movements and denominations to get the work done.

### **A TIME FOR DOCTRINAL RENEWAL**

As much as it galls us and goes against our natural tendencies, and as much as it may appear as a distraction from *getting on with the work*, it is time for United Methodists to enter a season of explicit doctrinal clarification and exploration. This will be inevitably resisted by those who have grown addicted to church busyness, the latest quadrennial emphasis, or who naively believe that the next major bureaucratic reorganizational scheme (e.g. the Connectional Table) or church growth technique (e.g. postmodern worship) will get us back on track if only we are willing to try something new. Tinkering with the machinery or following the latest guru is not the answer. Our problems are not primarily bureaucratic or programmatic but theological and doctrinal. Our vision of God has become cloudy if not opaque. Secondary matters have edged out primary matters.

Never forget that renewal and para-church groups (Wesley included), exciting and focused as they may be, always presume the canonical commitments of the larger church which they critique. They do not reinvent the wheel; they only want to make sure it still rolls! As in Wesley's day, the church needs such movements to keep it on the cutting edge and to enable specialization in various ministry skills,<sup>10</sup> but these movements cannot survive for long without the rich intellectual, spiritual, liturgical, and even cultural resources of the larger church. Either they stay in a vital, if sometimes tense, relationship with their host, or they choose to separate and then must recreate the canonical heritage of the church on their own. This is precisely what happened when Methodism in America became a church in 1784. With each schism and then each subsequent merger, the canonical heritage must be re-owned at a new level. We have yet to carefully work out the implications of the 1968 union for United Methodist doctrine and teaching.

We have to admit here that the Roman Catholics have done a much better job of incorporating such movements than have we Protestants. They call them *orders*, and

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radical proposals of the so-called progressives. As the offices of the Anglican Mission in America are in my community, I have seen the results of the fracture up close with the local divisions it has caused among families and former friends.

<sup>10</sup> A prime example being the formation of The Mission Society for United Methodists which over the last two decades has recovered the skills of reaching unreached people groups in pioneer missions around the world, a skill that had nearly been lost by the Board of Global Ministries in their attention to other worthy issues in mission. That skill set is now back in the family waiting to enrich the denomination once it re-embraces the Great Commission as a priority.

each has a history of being raised up around a particular charismatic personality and then, through a process of sifting and discipline over time, seeking the blessing of the church and a place in the structure of its ongoing life.

In my own annual conference of South Carolina the excellent work of the Emmaus Movement has been held at arm's length by the conference leadership and not officially recognized or given credit for the deep work of renewal they have done, not least among which is a new appreciation for the doctrines of grace presented in the *way of salvation* talks and the recovery of a deep sacramental piety. When an average United Methodist goes off to an Emmaus weekend, they often come back lit up with the best our tradition has to offer. Emmaus is an adult confirmation class on steroids! Odd, isn't it, that we who were birthed in spiritual enthusiasm are now so suspicious of it? Same with the charismatic movement. There are legions of our pastors who have had encounters with the Holy Spirit and the Spirit's gifts that do not feel free talking about such with their colleagues or supervisors. The Methodist underground is alive and well.

My thesis is that Wesley's style of operations (i.e. assume the official doctrines and get busy with the practicalities) has also been characteristic of Methodism in America. Official doctrines are presumed but rarely examined while we go about the busyness and business of the church. Think of your own experience. When is the last time you heard a sermon on the Trinity that used the Articles/Confession as a way to structure the sermon? Or how about a reference to the Arian heresy that continues to haunt us to this day, as in the recent innovative doctrinal proposals of Bishop Sprague, who was ably refuted in public by his colleague Bishop Whitaker? That one bishop would break the code of silence and take on another in public over an issue of doctrine was heartening to those of us in the Confessing Movement who believe that public disputation at the highest level is not harmful but healthy for the church.

So long as there was the cohesion of a common piety, agreed upon moral standards, and a mission on which most could sign off, the benign neglect of doctrine was a workable arrangement that did not have much effect. We did not tend to what were thought peripheral theological issues but only to those doctrines most closely associated with our Methodist sub-specialization in the dynamics of salvation, namely repentance, faith, and holiness (what Wesley called the "porch" and "door" of religion, and the third, holiness, "religion itself"). Our pared-down, pragmatic faith was preached by revivalists, sung in hymnody, reinforced in class meetings through careful attention to progress in sanctification, and for a populist (and often anti-intellectual) American audience that was often enough to maintain minimal cohesion in the basics of the faith. The larger doctrinal deposit was there if needed, like medicine in the cabinet; but if the church is visibly healthy and busy with good works and new converts, we rarely go to the medicine chest because we are simply too busy keeping up. We have the appearance of health. We may even forget it's there, hidden and ignored somewhere in the front of our Discipline.

The Nicene Creed was recited at every Anglican eucharist, and as often as he took the sacrament Wesley recited the ancient symbol.<sup>11</sup> I frankly think he made a big mistake in excluding the Anglican Article on the Creeds when he edited the Thirty-Nine Articles down to twenty-four, but that is a discussion for another day.<sup>12</sup> His focus on Scripture and its language made him resistant to the non-biblical, philosophical language the later Creeds found necessary for theological precision, especially the terms *Persons* and *Trinity*; the damnation or anathema clauses also troubled him.<sup>13</sup> He did, however, send us here in America the Apostles' Creed along with the Sunday Service and a set of amended Articles, which gives us two points of official access to the credal tradition as a lens through which to read the Scriptures with the church across time.

The key technical terminology of the Nicene Creed is clearly echoed in the language of the Articles of Religion and Confession of Faith, especially the ones on God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit, even if the Nicene Creed itself is not formally included in the deposit and summary initially sent to America. That it is included in our current *Hymnal* (No. 880) before the two versions of the Apostle's Creed (No. 881) is a step in the right direction and gives us grounds for appeal. The more frequent use of the Nicene Creed in Sunday worship is encouraged, especially because of its long, ecumenical pedigree and its hammering away at the Arian heresy which ever lurks around the edges of the church undermining the Christology of the Articles and Confession. Jesus is not just the Son of God but God the Son and second person of the Holy Trinity become flesh in the Incarnation. The Apostle's Creed contains no explicit reference to pre-existence and thus leaves an opening than needs to be closed, and that was indeed closed later in the Nicene assertion that "...he *came down from heaven* and was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary." This affirmation leaves no doubt about the full identity of the one with whom we have to do.

The history of disputes in the early church shows that those eventually marked as heretics and thus outside the great tradition also have the same Bible but read it with

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<sup>11</sup> See the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer* available on the internet at [www.eskimo.com/~lhowell/bcp1662/](http://www.eskimo.com/~lhowell/bcp1662/) where I confirmed that the Nicene Creed was a standard part of the Holy Communion in Wesley's day.

<sup>12</sup> Article VIII. Of the Three Creeds. "The three Creeds, Nicene Creed, Athanasius' Creed, and that which is commonly called the Apostles' Creed, ought thoroughly to be received and believed; for they may be proved by most certain warrants of Holy Scripture." The American Episcopal version of this article omits the Athanasian Creed.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Oden, *Doctrinal Standards in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1988), 105.



different presuppositions.<sup>14</sup> Reading the Bible with the church across the ages through the lens of the Trinity and related doctrines is what ultimately distinguishes orthodox from heterodox faith. The same church that developed the New Testament Canon alongside the Old also worked out its vision of God and the key points of faith in the Nicene Creed which, apart from the disputed *filioque* clause in the article on the Holy Spirit, still stands as the best summary of the intellectual convictions of the patristic and undivided church.<sup>15</sup> The Church has a canon of Scripture and a canon of doctrines, chief among them the Holy Trinity and the Incarnation.<sup>16</sup>

But our situation has fundamentally changed. Acting like Wesley in his situation no longer works as well as it once did. Neglecting our explicit Doctrinal Standards is no longer helpful but positively harmful. Our unity is presently frayed and the focus of the mission harder than ever to maintain. All across Methodism during this season of Annual Conferences there are Bible studies and ordination sermons around the theme of church unity. So it was at the recent 2005 South Carolina Annual Conference. The Bible teacher was an pastor from Atlanta who spoke each morning about the biblical basis of unity from the Book of Ephesians. Across the nation proposals are being offered for how to keep us together and to pillory those who have raised difficult questions. The evangelical/orthodox side of the house is gaining new attention. Some think we have behaved badly. I do not agree.

The lasting legacy of our friend Dr. Bill Hinson may be that he dared to speak the unspeakable and broach the topic of *amicable separation*. Like a wise physician he accurately diagnosed the direction in which our church pathology was taking us and asked us to reconsider. He was right to name the elephant in the middle of the room, and for that word took hits from both his friends and his enemies. Then he died.

As United Methodists we have a chronic low grade fever and real pain in the vital organs. It is difficult to catch our breath between the hard political blows of General Conference battles. Like the current national debate on the Supreme Court, we know at this point that whoever controls the Judicial Council controls the church, at least at the level of law, because that is *de facto* our ultimate interpretive mechanism, in effect our magisterium and highest teaching office, not the bishops whose job it is and who on the whole have done an inadequate job of teaching and defending the faith. And the lack of

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<sup>14</sup> G.R. Evans, *A Brief History of Heresy* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003).

<sup>15</sup> For a survey treatment of the Holy Spirit in the Nicene Creed with attention to the disputed *filioque*, see Thomas Smail, "The Holy Spirit in the Holy Trinity," in Christopher Seitz, editor, *Nicene Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2001), 149-166.

<sup>16</sup> For the full argument, see William Abraham, *Canon And Criterion In Christian Theology* (Oxford, England: Oxford Press, 2002).

the one has led to an overemphasis on the other. Law runs in to fill the vacuum created by inadequate doctrinal teaching and creeping moral confusion. If the church will not guard the center, then it will have to spend much more time and money policing the legal boundaries which is both disruptive and expensive. It also increases the number of official and unofficial canon lawyers!

Bishops who will teach and defend the faith as defined in our Doctrinal Standards and as interpreted in our Discipline and official liturgies give the church a beacon to follow and some breathing room for serious discussion. In our polity they set the tone. There is nothing narrow about the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation, nothing right or left wing about salvation by grace through faith or the call to holiness. With some of our newer bishops who have the necessary academic training and who know the importance of communal teaching, we may have a chance for this central task to be recovered. Bishop Jones' book is a good beginning.<sup>17</sup> Orthodox convictions and intellectual courage are needed virtues for this task. So is an appetite for controversy and public disputation. A little leaven may raise the whole loaf.

This is why the Confessing Movement networked so effectively with other renewal organizations for episcopal elections in the Southeastern and South Central Jurisdictions in 2004. Other jurisdictions were not taken as seriously because of their allergic reaction to our doctrinal concerns. What we aimed at and got was a new and vocal minority voice among the bishops, one that was both intellectually and spiritually able to raise new questions and to defend the faith against the claims to fresh revelation which have become so common in recent years.<sup>18</sup> We now have a solid counterweight and intend to increase its heft in future elections. The monopoly of a few on the radical left and the many in the mushy, institutional middle has been broken.

Exciting days are ahead for the Council of Bishops, and my prayer is that they take their job as our chief teachers much more seriously and that they find a better way to draw on the expertise of our best theologians (everyone has their own list, including me!). Watching how the Roman Catholics carry out this task is very instructive. A bishop

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<sup>17</sup> Scott J. Jones, *United Methodist Doctrine: The Extreme Center* (Nashville, TN: Abington, 2002)

<sup>18</sup> There is nothing more instructive for United Methodists than following the current debate between ECUSA and the larger Anglican communion as evidenced in the Windsor report. To claim that the Holy Spirit is leading the church into new truth (i.e. that non-celibate homosexuals ought to be candidates for ordination and the episcopacy) that goes beyond the church's reading of Scripture through the precedent of tradition is in fact a radical claim to new revelation. It is their battles, and the theological clarity over divine revelation and Scripture that will emerge from it, that forecasts a possible future of United Methodism. Watching them fight it out may keep us from having to do the same.

surrounded by a retinue of first class thinkers for the sake of a faithful church is not a bad model.

There is nothing wrong with the episcopal letters of the recent past that dealt primarily with ethical issues. But what we need now are not just more appeals to *be better people and do a better job*. Moral exhortation (a Methodist speciality!) , whether on the care of creation or the needs of children or the nuclear arms race, has its place, but as a people my read is that we are positively weary of such. Episcopal exhorters most often come across as, ‘Why can’t you people just be better Christians? If you could only be as ethically sensitive and responsible as we bishops, then both the church and the world would be a much better place!’ Scolding is no substitute for careful instruction in the basics of Christian faith with a Wesleyan spin; this is what has been lacking in my estimation.

Back to our functioning magisterium. Canon law is a necessary but only a defensive means of grace; it is the way the church monitors its boundaries and maintains its inner integrity against rival claims and internal rebellion. It is our outermost perimeter of defense. But it presumes internal doctrinal cohesion and basic moral consensus, which we at present do not have except on paper.

This is why, at least for the foreseeable future and until we are able to clarify and re-receive our doctrinal heritage in earnest and come to a new level of moral agreement within our church culture, especially on the hot-button issues of homosexuality and abortion, these judicial elections every four years must be won by a coalition of centrists and conservatives. Our progressive opponents know this as well. One or two verdicts that went the wrong way on the homosexual issue and we would fracture as a church. Everyone knows that, the bishops included, whether they admit to it in public or not. We would tear in different ways than the Episcopalians because of the differing contours of our polity, but we would tear, and there would be no way to recover what we would lose. It would be a first class tragedy. Present canon law in the Discipline must hold, because if it does not hold, we will not get the privilege of the doctrinal discussion that is needed, It requires a certain amount of leisure and patience to be done properly.

The proposals for unity post-Hinson are multiple and quickly multiplying. I believe that there are substantive theological and ethical disagreements in our body that our tried-and-true methods and strategies will not address. More of the same means nothing changes. Among the most typical appeals (some of which I am deeply committed to) are:

- \* calls for a more fervent or biblical piety (the charismatic/evangelical option: *if only* we could only believe with more intensity), represented by Good News and Aldersgate Ministries;

- \* a new commitment to good works (the social action option: *if only* we could only get busy to recover the glory days of the civil rights movement when we were all prophets), represented by MFSA and The Board of Church and Society;
- \* a few more of *our kind* of bishops (the political option: *if only* we could stack the episcopal deck and weed out the jokers), represented by political pros of both camps;
- \* the newest business method (the management option: *if only* we could be more like the impressive efficiencies of business), represented by a bevy of church consultants and management gurus;
- \* a fresh sacramental theology (the liturgical option: *if only* we only had more smells and bells), represented by the *up the candle* crowd who shaped the baptismal and eucharistic studies;
- \* a new media campaign (the marketing option: *if only* we could get people's attention), represented by United Methodist Communications and their new ad campaign;
- \* another caucus group (the advocacy option: *if only* our voice was listened to by those in power), represented by whatever group currently feels left out and is willing to assume victim status and start whining;
- \* or turning down the screws of denominational loyalty (the institutional option: *if only* you will behave and tow the line and keep the money flowing and shut up), represented by the Bishops, District Superintendents and Conference staff who are increasingly nervous about declining revenues and positively *panicky* about the creeping sin of *localism*.

None of these, I believe, even the ones I support, will do what must be done. All have their place, but the symptoms point still elsewhere.

I was fascinated to read in the June 3, 2005 electronic edition of *Newscope* that a preliminary report was given to the new 60-Member Connectional Table from the bishops' task force on unity. Bishop John Hopkins of Ohio East spoke for the committee and said that the task force is seeking to discern "...the main thing that we are all so passionate about....," believing that "...if we can move on the main thing, some unity will occur as we become more intentional in working together." What in the world does that string of words mean? I have no idea. Bishop Hopkins then goes on to read the tradition

and offer a proposal for unity. “Historically,” he said, “the church’s unity has been as a Wesleyan group that combines Christian formation with personal and social holiness.”<sup>19</sup> The next sentence, however, gave the bishop away as a unreconstructed pietist and revivalist:

“The Connectional Table is saying rather than us trying to design a way to unify the church, how can we find a way to call forth that kind of passionate exuberance and thanksgiving that comes when one has been in a community of love and acceptance?”

In other words, “Let’s have a revival meeting, stir up pious feelings, and follow it up with small groups. If we can just get the feelings of love and acceptance and community back, everything will be fine.” Here the themes of revivalism and the therapeutic culture are joined. I’m not against these things in themselves, or against any of the other eight other strategies I poked fun at above. I have invested considerable time and money in three of four of my favorites. I just don’t think any of them go to the center of the issue at this time. Symptoms point in a different direction.

It is time to reopen the old medicine chest and submit ourselves to a course of divine therapy that goes against our historical habits. It is time for an infusion of explicitly doctrinal reflection and a season of spiritual and intellectual rehabilitation. This is not a quick cure. It is rather an act of deep, communal faith that to yield positive results requires the energies and illumination of the Holy Spirit received through prayer, fasting, and repentance. It is not self-help in the sense of a new technique we apply to ourselves. There is nothing new about it, and that is its primary value. This is about the virtue of fidelity and not the itch for innovation and relevance.

Our official teachings are not something recently invented; they are a legacy bestowed upon us. It is not a new technique that we need; it is the living truths of apostolic faith contained in our Doctrinal Standards as illumined by the light of God. But like most, I doubt we will consider the pain of the treatment until we consider the greater pain of continuing without it. We simply have too much institutional habit invested in our current mode of operations. But that is to rule out the Holy Spirit and the fact of divine surprises, which I do not want to do.

Our Doctrinal Standards embody a vision of God and the basic theological commitments we have as a people. Rather than go searching for unity in a technique or in a program, why not start at the very place where we already officially claim unity,

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<sup>19</sup> I would rather that cell groups and class meetings be seen as a prudential method of discipleship than as the basis of church unity which has to be grounded overtly in Jesus Christ and what the church claims about him.

which is in our assent to the Doctrinal Standards as guarded in the Constitution? They are an invitation to open the medicine chest and see what's there. Not to presume that we know what's there and dismiss them again but to carefully examine what they teach and the tissue of connections between them. Our Standards are a broad but bounded covering under which a generous orthodoxy may be recovered for the sake of unity and mission. In our maturing as a denomination (now only 37 years old since the 1968 merger and still an infant as churches go), it is time to blow the dust off the banked coals of our doctrines and see what holy fire is underneath.

Permit me a couplet: Theologies are many, doctrines are few; theologies often change, doctrines rarely do. This bit of poor poetry plays on the distinction between doctrine (from the Latin *doctrina* for teaching) and theology. Doctrine is the core teaching our church protects in the Constitution through the First and Fifth Restrictive Rules and the General Conference ruling of 1832 which protects them from easily being changed or amended.<sup>20</sup> Theology is the exploration of those teachings within the Wesleyan tradition across cultures and over time.

Other than John Wesley's Sermons and Notes (and perhaps Charles unofficially in the realm of hymnody), we have never canonized the work of a particular theologian, though we came close with Outler's creation of the quadrilateral, which was a brilliant move to hold the church together in a tumultuous time around an attractive but unworkable idea (doctrinal pluralism), an innovative method (the quadrilateral) and a personality (his own!) until we could get around to the real work of clarifying our Doctrinal Standards, which we did in the Hunt Commission and the 1988 Discipline.

For sixteen years, from 1972 to 1988, we wandered in a theological wasteland of official and unsustainable pluralism, treating the treasures as landmark documents (road signs past which we progress on the way to better things) instead of true, normative, and enforceable standards. If you want to see what happens when standards become landmarks and stay that way, look at the Episcopal Church which frankly admits that it has no enforceable doctrine and instead runs to its liturgy for some sort of residual, aesthetic cohesion.<sup>21</sup>

Official teaching officially matters for United Methodists. Though rarely enforced, clergy and laity may be charged with "dissemination of doctrines contrary to

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<sup>20</sup> Henry Wheeler, *History And Exposition Of The Twenty-Five Articles of Religion Of The Methodist Episcopal Church* (New York, NY: The Methodist Book Concern, 1908), xii.

<sup>21</sup> See the perceptive, and for United Methodists, prophetic articles of Phillip Turner, "The Episcopalian Preference," *First Things*, 137 (Nov. 2003), 28-33; "An Unworkable Theology," *First Things*, 154 (June/July 2005), 10-12.

the established standards of doctrine of the Church.”<sup>22</sup> Doctrine has a centering function (i.e. listing essentials: what truths the church cannot do without) and a boundary function (i.e. identifying what is outside sound teaching: what the church cannot tolerate). Alister McGrath puts it simply, “Doctrine makes truth claims.”<sup>23</sup> It says *Yes* to some beliefs and *No* to others.<sup>24</sup> Elders are asked at ordination if they accept and will defend our doctrine “against all doctrines contrary to God’s Holy Word.”<sup>25</sup> Both offense and defense are required. Indifference to official doctrine is not a faithful option for the ordained.

### **A PLACE TO BEGIN: WHAT WE TEACH ABOUT GOD**

According to the current *Book of Discipline*, the Doctrinal Standards of the UMC consist of five documents:

- 1) *The Articles of Religion* (AR),
- 2) *The Confession of Faith* (CF),
- 3) *John Wesley’s Standard Sermons* (SS),
- 4) his *Notes on the New Testament* (NNT), and
- 5) *The General Rules* (GR).

While all schematizations are open to critique because of their implicit suppositions, it is clear that our Doctrinal Standards fall into two natural groupings:

- 1) Those that are explicitly doctrinal in form and intent (AR, CF) and
- 2) Those that are pastoral and pragmatic in intent (SS, NNT, GR).

Our roots are in the early church with updates at the English Reformation and in the 18<sup>th</sup> century Wesleyan revival. My read is that there is a progression here as consensus Patristic and Reformation teaching (Articles/Confession) is offered in Wesleyan preaching (Sermons) and Bible study (Notes) for the sake of holy and accountable living (General Rules). Christian truth is meant to change lives in a worshiping, preaching, studying, and ethical community that is in continuity with the church catholic. It is through this cluster of documents understood as means of grace

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<sup>22</sup> 2004 *Discipline*, para. 2702, 719-720.

<sup>23</sup> *The Genesis of Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 37, also by the same author “Why Doctrine Is Inevitable- And A Good Thing Too!” *Theology Matters*, Vol. 10, No. 1, Jan/Feb. 2004, 1-5.

<sup>24</sup> Each of the Articles and Confession is a distillation of some particular historical and theological controversy. Some contain explicit renunciations, whereas in others it is implicit.

<sup>25</sup> *Book of Worship*, 676, 695.

through the discipline of doctrine that our denomination is recognized as part of the *one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church* (Nicene Creed) and maintains its identity and mission.

When it became clear after the Revolutionary War that the Americans would function separate from British Methodism, John Wesley edited *The Thirty-Nine Articles* of the Church of England down to twenty-four for the new church. An additional article was added to declare the loyalty of the Methodists to the new American government. Royalist and Calvinist elements were removed. Since 1784 *The Articles of Religion* have stood as a statement of our theological debt to the early church and the English Reformation. At our merger with the Evangelical United Brethren in 1968, their *Confession of Faith* was adopted alongside *The Articles* as of equal authority.<sup>26</sup> By General Conference action confirmed by the Judicial Council, both documents are judged to be without conflict and protected by the First Restrictive Rule.<sup>27</sup>

It was thought wise at the time not to edit the two documents together but to let each with its varied emphases stand together as complementary. This does not mean that at some future time we will find it necessary to do just that. As United Methodists we are forced by history to read the two documents in tandem and highlight their combined contribution to our canonical teaching. That we have yet to produce a full scale commentary on these two documents is an indicator of work still to be done. That the Standard Sermons and Notes are not available in a pair of volumes is an indicator that we are not taking our own Standards with enough gravity. I would love to see the day when such a set was presented to every elder at ordination when they formally take up the task as exponents and guardians of our tradition. Hand them a Bible, a Discipline, a Hymnal, and a set of the Sermons and Notes. Let them walk away with arms loaded! It is not the full catalog of Wesley's sermons that has authority as official doctrine but only the Standard Sermons whose precise number has yet to be clarified by historians and then adopted by the General Conference.<sup>28</sup> But let us, for a few minutes together, examine the

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<sup>26</sup> The only treatment of the Confession of Faith that I have been able to find is Stephen O'Malley, "The Distinctive Witness of the Evangelical United Brethren Confession of Faith in Comparison with the Methodist Articles of Religion," in Dennis Campbell, et. al., *Doctrines and Discipline* (Nashville, TN: Abington, 1999), 55-78.

<sup>27</sup> 2004 *Discipline*, para. 23, 27.

<sup>28</sup> Notice the weak and ultimately evasive statement under the heading "The Standard Sermons of John Wesley" (2004 *Discipline*, para. 103, 71) which mentions their frequent reprinting and then refers the readers to the new critical edition. The canonical question remains unanswered, How many of the Wesley sermons are Doctrinal Standards in the United Methodist Church? Is it the British 44 or the larger 53? We are still awaiting an answer from our historians and from the General Conference. The boundaries of what we claim to agree on are still unnecessarily fuzzy.



first article in the Articles and Confession and see just what's there. I think you will be surprised at the resources we uncover.

### **The Articles of Religion: Article 1- Of Faith in the Holy Trinity:**

There is but one living and true God, everlasting, without body or parts, of infinite power, wisdom, and goodness; the maker and preserver of all things, both visible and invisible. And in unity of this Godhead there are three persons, of one substance, power, and eternity—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.<sup>29</sup>

### **The Confession of Faith: Article 1- God:**

We believe in the one true, holy and living God, Eternal Spirit, who is Creator, Sovereign and Preserver of all things visible and invisible. He is infinite in power, wisdom, justice, goodness and love, and rules with gracious regard for the well-being and salvation of men, to the glory of his name. We believe the one God reveals himself as the Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, distinct but inseparable, eternally one in essence and power.<sup>30</sup>

Classic Christian faith in the Wesleyan family begins with a particular account of God that arises from a communal reflection on divine revelation preserved for the faithful in Scripture, which at its simplest is a list of approved books to be read in the liturgy. As Billy Abraham has taught us, Scripture is not a formal epistemological proposal or theory on how to secure knowledge (cf. the various theories on inerrancy which are *not found* in AR5//CF4 where the emphasis on Scriptural authority is soteriological<sup>31</sup>) but one of a varied array of means of grace necessary to a faithful church.<sup>32</sup>

Doctrine is a bold enterprise; it makes claims about God on behalf of the church and for the world. The early church confessed its faith in brief creeds (Apostles' and Nicene, *UM Hymnal* 881, 880) that outline the work of the Triune God from creation to consummation following the grand story of the Bible. Our eucharistic and baptismal prayers cover the same ground in a more open narrative format of prayer and recitation

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<sup>29</sup> 2004 *Discipline*, 59.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>31</sup> Kenneth Collins, *The Evangelical Moment* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2005), 70-78.

<sup>32</sup> See note No. 16 above. Also by the same author *The Logic of Renewal* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), especially Chapter 9, "Renewal and the Quest for Intellectual Integrity," 153-172.

before God. The Reformation churches cast their confessions in a series of Articles that presented the common ground and differences with Roman Catholic teaching. In his Sunday Service prepared for the Methodists in America, Wesley sent us both the Apostles' Creed and a list of revised Articles with the intent that his spiritual offspring continue in the apostolic faith. This cannot be historically disputed. That he revised the Articles alone without the aid of bishops, theologians, or a church council is a breathtaking act of hubris. At minimum it is a testimony to his considerable sense of authority regarding his American offspring.

Our teaching begins with Articles on God in two parts. First a statement of God's unity, then a statement that the one God lives in a Triune communion with proper names: *the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit*. This confession of unity and Trinity follows the structuring of the Bible into the Old and New Testaments. Christians confess that the God of Israel is further revealed in the incarnation of Jesus and in the person of the Holy Spirit. This requires the church to move beyond an inherited, simple monotheism to a complex, social monotheism. Not three gods but one God. Not an isolated unit but an interpersonal unity. Not a monad but a mystery of tri-personal communion. There are relationships of self-giving within God. Love is not only something God does but something God is: lover, beloved, and the bond of love between the two to use a medieval analogy.<sup>33</sup> Trinity is not an illusion but who the one God is. The Trinity of revelation is a lie if there is not behind it a Trinity in truth. Here the church states its most distinctive claim about the person and work of God.<sup>34</sup>

The initial confession of the one God establishes a basis for conversation with our spiritual parents (Judaism) and for critical engagement with Islam which offers a radically different account of divine revelation. All three faiths agree that *polytheism* (more than one god) is a philosophical and religious dead end that divides the human heart into multiple loyalties. There can be only one ultimate; ontological dualism is out; evil is not forever.

All three faiths make a clear distinction between the Creator and creation which rules out *pantheism* (that the world is an extension of God's being), a belief common to Eastern religions and much pop spirituality.<sup>35</sup> Since God is God and we are not, all talk

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<sup>33</sup> The weakness of this analogy is that, while attributing full personal characteristics to the Lover (the Father) and the Beloved (the Son), it reduces the Spirit to a *bond of love between them*, and thus to a subsidiary and functional status.

<sup>34</sup> For a recent treatment of the Trinity accessible to a popular audience, see John R. Tyson, *Who Is God in Three Persons* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2005).

<sup>35</sup> See James A. Herrick, *The Making Of The New Spirituality: The Eclipse of the Western Religious Tradition* (Downer's Grove, ILL: IVP, 2003) for an analysis and critique of the new pantheist spirituality.

of rediscovering our forgotten, inner divinity is ruled out from the start! Shirley McClain would have difficulty being a faithful United Methodist, except perhaps in California!

Notice that the two Articles begin in different ways, Article 1 with “There is...” and Confession 1 with “We confess....” The first is the assertion of a general truth claim, the second a communal confession echoing the opening phrase of the Nicene Creed. Together they teach that the UMC makes a confession which it claims is valid as a truth claim. On the most basic matters the church speaks with one voice. We move out of the holy huddle into the forum of public ideas and their defense. Doctrine is thus evangelism and apologetics from the start. In confessing the faith we offer and argue for a particular view of God.

**Article 1- Of Faith in the Holy Trinity** offers eleven attributes or perfections of God grounded in Scripture. They are:

- 1) God’s singular unity: God is one (Lt. *unus*) and without peer in a category all God’s own;<sup>36</sup>
- 2) God’s vitality (Lt. *vivus*): God is supremely alive and the origin of all life;
- 3) God’s veracity (Lt. *verus*): God’s nature is utterly truthful and cannot lie;
- 4) God’s eternity (Lt. *aeternus*): the everlasting God is without beginning or end;
- 5) God’s incorporeality (Lt. *incorporeus*): God is without a body like our own and thus beyond gender;
- 6) God’s indivisibility (Lt. *inpartibilis*): God cannot be divided into pieces or is separable;

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<sup>36</sup> On the Latin of the Thirty-Nine Articles, see W.H. Griffin Thomas, *Principles Of Theology: An Introduction To The Thirty-Nine Articles* (London, England: Church Book Room, 1963), 3.

- 7) God's omnipotence (Lt. *immensae potentiae*): the Almighty has all power necessary to accomplish the divine will;
- 8) God's omniscience (Lt. *immensae... sapientiae*): God is supremely wise, knowing all that may be known and is never surprised or caught off guard;
- 9) God's omni-benevolence (Lt. *immensae... bonitatis*): God's person and work surpass all human concepts of goodness;
- 10) God's creativity (Lt. *Creator et Conservator omnium, tum visibilium, tum invisibilium*): God is the maker of all things, not only the visible, but what is beyond sight, the invisible and angelic realms; God is not the creation but is transcendent and other than what is made. There is a basic discontinuity between what God has made and the God who made it.
- 11) God's preservation (Lt. *Conservator*): God upholds, conserves, actively preserves, and sustains creation. God is present to the creation and thus immanent to all God has made. God is the other (holy) who is ever near (love). Without the necessary tension between Creator and Preserver the church tends to Deism (an overly remote deity) or Pantheism (an overly absorbed deity).

Each of these divine excellencies can easily be referenced to multiple passages of Scripture.<sup>37</sup> Early versions of the Articles included the Coke and Asbury notes which sought to ground each of the Articles in particular Scriptural references.<sup>38</sup> It was an indicator to the infant American church from their first two bishops that Methodist doctrine was grounded in and organized from the testimony of the Bible to God.

AR1 includes both the positive and negative means of description: what God is (one, living, true, everlasting), what God is not (without body or parts) and those realms

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<sup>37</sup> See James Jefferson Davis, *Handbook Of Basic Bible Texts: Every Key Passage for the Study of Doctrine and Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984) for a listing of texts under the loci of systematic theology.

<sup>38</sup> Oden, *Doctrinal Standards*, 176ff.

in which God is utterly superior (omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent). They describe what God is in himself and also the work of God in creation.

**Article 1- Of God** from *The Confession of Faith* adds seven more attributes to bring the total to eighteen. All are from Scripture and do not pick up terminology from the philosophical tradition as in AR1:

- 12) God's holiness: God is other than creation and without sin or evil;<sup>39</sup>
- 13) God's form of life: God is eternal Spirit and not matter as we know it; this may be taken as a positive variation on the word *incorporeal* (No. 5 above).
- 14) God's sovereignty: God rules actively over all; nothing is outside divine oversight or unable to be used for divine purposes. God is not the author of evil but is always about to outwit evil and bring good from it.
- 15) God's righteousness: God is just and justified in all divine actions;
- 16) God's love: God is concerned for creation and for our welfare and acts to that end at high cost;
- 17) God's graciousness: God rules with kind regard for the well-being and salvation of all persons;
- 18) God's jealousy or praiseworthiness, "... to the glory of his name." The glorification of God in worship and life is the purpose of every creature and the path to life. Not to be rightly aligned to God through worship is not to have a future.

The Articles do not argue for these eighteen related characteristics; they are offered as a brief portrayal of the mysterious yet revealed God whose story is found in the Bible and lived out in the church. The God who remains beyond full comprehension has given insight into the divine nature and real knowledge of the divine purposes. No United Methodist can remain faithful and say, "We know little about God." Ours is a

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<sup>39</sup> Since these were, unlike the Thirty-Nine Articles, originally composed in English, no Latin is given.

substantial account waiting to be explored. Appeals to divine mystery have their place, but when used too early shut down a mature discussion of what God has in fact revealed about the divine nature. To only appeal to mystery is to leave us without divine revelation and finally with an incompetent deity who is unable to make the divine life known. Watch for this move among those who are nervous about the very existence of Doctrinal Standards and even more nervous when we begin to take them seriously.

The early church faced a spiritual and intellectual revolution. How do we now speak of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob who has shown up in Jesus, whose entire life is evidence of cooperation with the same Spirit that has now been poured out on the church in a manner we cannot deny? They were driven to speak of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit and to clarify the relations between them in the one God. What God had done opened up new vistas of who God was; God's actions reveal God's being.<sup>40</sup>

Unwilling to surrender monotheism and compromise with surrounding paganism, the early church created new language for what had to be confessed. What God reveals is a reflection of God's person. The three-personed revelation is not a mask behind which the one God hides; the persons of the Trinity are therefore not modes or phases within God.<sup>41</sup> God is forever a unified Triune communion. In Jesus the church deals with no less than God, and in the Holy Spirit the church is kept in living contact with the Father and the risen Lord. Items that were attributed to the one God (e.g. power and eternity) in the first sentence of AR1 are now attributed and distributed to the Father, the Son, and the Spirit in the second sentence of the same: "There is but one living and true God, *everlasting*, without body or parts, *of infinite power*.... And in unity of this Godhead there are three persons, of one substance, *power, and eternity*—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost."

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<sup>40</sup> For a recent book on the divine attributes, see Colin E. Gunton, *Act & Being* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002).

<sup>41</sup> The use of easy analogies for the Trinity often fails in this regard. The oft-used analogy that water may first be liquid, then a solid as ice, then a gas as steam is a modalistic model. God is not three forms of one substance but three irreducible persons in a single communion.

The language “of one substance” (Gk. *homoousious*, Lt. *ejusdem essentiae*) in AR1 and “eternally one in essence (Gk. *ousia*) and power” in CF1 reflects the language of the Nicene Creed as a protection against Arianism (that Jesus is the first of God’s creatures and not as fully God as the Father).<sup>42</sup> The early church was adamant; in Jesus we meet God the Father and God the Spirit. The language of “distinct but inseparable” in CF1 echoes the precise distinctions of the Chalcedonian creed.

Our liturgies and hymns are full of Trinitarian language. It is the grammar of our faith and the heart of our confession. In Jesus Christ we are invited to share in the life of the Triune God through the ministry of the Holy Spirit. This is the gospel given to the church. In Jesus the rule of the Father and the presence of the Spirit are made available to us in divine revelation, to be received through faith and lived out in the company of the church.

With these two initial statements on God the UMC places itself in the central stream of Christian confession and denies that other accounts of God have standing in the church. Church members, the ordained, and theologians may hold what is contrary to these statements but they may not teach them as Methodist teaching. United Methodists may believe many odd and diverse things, but this is what their church as a body confesses through its legitimate structures of discernment and discipline in the General Conference.

I here offer a brief catalog of the boundary function of these two statements about God. When the history of the Articles of Religion and Confession of Faith is carefully studied, including their antecedents in the Augsburg Confession and Thirty-Nine Articles, the boundary function of doctrine becomes even clearer. Our Standards are deliberately exclusionary of many alternative opinions about God:

1. Atheism (that there is no God) is denied; the church asserts, “There is... God,” and goes on to describe that God as supremely personal.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> For a defense of the *homoousious* as a Christian necessity, see Alan Torrance, “Being of One Substance with the Father,” in Seitz, *Nicene Christianity*, 49-61.

<sup>43</sup> The story of the decline of atheism as a viable philosophical and theological option has been well told by Alister McGrath, *The Twilight of Atheism* (New York: Doubleday, 2004).

2. Agnosticism (that God cannot be known and is not sufficiently revealed) is out. General revelation in creation and special revelation in Israel and in Christ offers reliable material for knowing this God once the threshold of faith in divine revelation is crossed.
3. Deism (that God is only an observer and not a continuing actor within history) is excluded. The transcendent creator is also the immanent preserver who in Jesus Christ could not be more deeply or radically involved.
4. Secular materialism and reductive naturalism (that the world accessible to science is all there is and all that can be claimed as knowledge) is ruled out by the confession that God made both the visible and invisible worlds. There is more to creation than meets the naked eye or the eye of the electron microscope or the Hubble telescope. The church interacts with both the visible and invisible realms and is not impressed by modern skepticism.
5. Adoptionism (that Jesus at some point became divine) is denied. Before and after incarnation he is *of one substance* with the Father and the Spirit in the one God.
6. That the Holy Spirit is an impersonal force and not a divine person is not to be taught. In the phrase *three persons* the Holy Spirit is fully included.
7. Unitarianism (that God is only one and not also three) is ruled out as inadequate. “And in the unity of this Godhead there are three persons...”
8. Marcionism (that the God of the Old Testament is not the Father of Jesus and creator of the world) is refuted in the claim that the Creator is also the Savior.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> For a recent article summarizing the errors of Marcion, Arius, and Pelagius as perpetual intellectual and spiritual temptations for the church, see Timothy George, “The Pattern of Christian Truth,” *First Things*, June/July 2005, 21-25.



9. Divine weakness (that God has not sufficient power to rule the world and bring about the kingdom) is denied. Essential dualism is out. There is no eternal standoff between good and evil or between God and anything else. However, a time-bound ethical dualism is apparent throughout Scripture; there are forces angelic and human that presently resist God's gracious will and will one day be overcome.<sup>45</sup>

All power belongs to God and is exercised in a way that is not contrary to God's nature or other attributes. God has delegated a measure of power to creation and to other creatures and does not undermine that grant. In this sense God is voluntarily self-limited, but even here has sufficient power and wisdom to bring about divine ends in spite of opposition. The ingenious God can always outflank and undermine opponents.

10. Individualism and Mysticism (that a person may come to a right knowledge of God apart from the confessing community) is not affirmed. It is the community of the church that is the response to divine revelation, and it is in the church that the truths of divine revelation are celebrated in liturgy, preserved in canon and creed, offered in evangelism and mission, and interpreted in art, architecture, and apologetics. To a person who claims to have come to faith all alone by reading the Bible, the church asks, "And just whose Bible is that? Who translated in and preserved it till you could read it and be saved? Come to worship on Sunday and find out about the people who read this Book together every week."
11. Subordinationism (that the Son and the Spirit are not full deity) is explicitly ruled out since the Son and the Spirit are *of one substance, power, and eternity* with the Father. Arianism is out.

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<sup>45</sup> On this particular point I have found the work of Gregory Boyd helpful, especially *Is God To Blame?* (Downer's Grove, ILL: IVP, 2003), Chapter 2, "Evil And The Blueprint," 41-60.

12. Mormonism (that the Father has a physical body like our own), is excluded. Though Mormonism developed in America after the formation of the Articles, it reflects an ancient error from the third century, the heresy of the Anthropomorphites who taught that God is in form as a man, made of matter with members like our own. In their Articles of Faith the Latter-Day Saints make this confession:

“Jesus Christ and the Father are two persons, in the same sense that John and Peter are two persons, possessing every organ, limb, and material part that man possesses. There is no other God in heaven but the God who has flesh and bones.”<sup>46</sup>

But we confess in AR1 that God is “without body or parts.” God is “Eternal Spirit” in the language of CF1.

13. Modalism (that behind the appearance of the Trinity is a deeper unity and that the persons of the Trinity are a series of masks so that the one God first became the Father, then the Son, then the Holy Spirit in succession) is denied. In the crude sense it means that in revelation God has lied to us about the divine nature. To change the baptismal liturgy and to name God as Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer to satisfy a caucus in the church is to lose the personal language of the Trinity and reduce God to a series of functions instead of an eternal communion of persons. To change the Trinitarian names is in fact to create a new and different religion altogether.

It is as important to know what our teaching denies as what it affirms. To the church is given the treasures of divine revelation beginning with the person of the one God and God’s revelation in history as Triune. It is time to crack open the first part of our Discipline and recover a robust and intellectually defensible faith that is not embarrassed by the word *doctrine*.

The purpose of the Confessing Movement is to highlight our received doctrines as United Methodists and to work for their renewed appropriation as one of the means of

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<sup>46</sup> As quoted in Wheeler, *History and Exposition*, 50.

spiritual and intellectual renewal. We refuse the popular myth that we are not a confessional church or that we do not have doctrines that can be clearly identified, articulated, and defended. What the church treasures, its bishops and pastors are pledged in ordination to uphold and defend. We resist the idea that our *ethos* or habitual way of doing things is more important than our formal commitments. Pride in our history or missional accomplishments is no substitute for doctrinal clarity and confessional boundaries. A more fervent piety (our Methodist default setting!) is no substitute either.

Empowered by the Holy Spirit, the Confessing Movement will boldly continue to reform and renew the United Methodist Church by embracing and advocating our doctrinal unity in Christ and our mission of making disciples.

This is a new tact for United Methodists, but I believe it is in the right direction. For a while it will feel awkward and a bit alien, like writing with the left hand instead of the right. What has been implicit must become explicit, and what was assumed must be clarified and displayed before the church and the world.

### **PROPOSALS FOR CONSIDERATION**

Some items to consider for action might include:

1. The appointment by the General Conference of a Standing Commission on Doctrine to make regular reports to the General Conference after the model of the 1988 report of the Hunt Commission.
2. The publication of an historical and theological commentary on the Articles of Religion and Confession of Faith. Such a text is needed for seminary education and for local church instruction.
3. A possible editing together and expansion of the Articles and Confession in a new document that would include an article on the Creeds.
4. The clarification of the exact number of the Standard Sermons and their official publication along with the Notes.

4. A quadrennial study of the Doctrinal Standards as a church-wide emphasis with appropriate support resources, video and otherwise.
5. Adult study materials on the Standard Sermons.
6. The reading, over time, of the Articles and Confession in our worship services.
7. The sponsorship of a yearly, or bi-yearly, gathering of UM theologians in America parallel to the Anglican S.E.A.D conferences (Scholars Engaged In Anglican Doctrine). They could begin with a series on the Articles and Confession.
8. Taking on the *filioque* controversy which would entail reopening our Doctrinal Standards and doctrine of God for emendation but which might be a great gift to the bogged-down ecumenical movement. We have been known for boldness before, why not here? Let's help the new Pope do the right thing and apologize to the East for our bad manners of changing the Creed without the assent of an ecumenical council!
9. Survey our seminaries and Boards of Ministry to ensure that when ordinands answer the required questions it is not a cursory event. What does it mean *to examine our doctrines and to believe that they are in harmony with the Holy Scriptures?* Is it sufficient merely to know where they are found?
10. Use the Articles as a basis for discussions with historically African American Methodists who have the same standards (AME, AMEZ, CME) and for serious dialog with our Holiness offspring that we continue to ignore (Nazarenes, Free Methodists, etc.)<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Ted Campbell's *Methodist Doctrine: The Essentials* (Nashville, TN: Abington, 1999) might serve as a starter text for this discussion.

I love our church, cherish its unity, support our doctrines, and welcome your critique and responses to my analysis and proposals. This paper does not represent the official stance of The Confessing Movement, only my own.

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