Understandings of Ecclesiology in United Methodism

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United Methodism defines itself and exhibits its ecclesial sensibilities with four books. Two of these, the Bible and *Hymnal*, one finds in the pew and in the homes of the Methodist faithful. The other two, *The Book of Discipline* and *The Book of Worship*, one finds in the studies of ministers or in church libraries[1]Each characterizes or shapes the church, albeit in a distinct way. All are important. Each works for and works itself into the drama of the church's daily life[2]. The *Discipline* and *Book of Worship* function off stage, so to speak, but determine how the play unfolds, who acts, and what instructions to follow. Bible and *Hymnbook* script Methodist life together. The latter scripts rituals from birth to death, norms Sunday morning worship, structures the weekly praise of God, specifies the Psalms to read and the hymns to sing. The former--studied downstairs by all ages in Sunday school, always read upstairs and now frequently fulsomely in accordance with the uniform lections--scripts life lived in Christ. The four books, Scripture, hymnbook, discipline, and book of worship, define how United Methodists do church[3]. In "practicing" church, Methodists have in their own way lived out what the church more generally has held to be important ecclesial understandings. I shall attempt to take note of those at first mention with **bolding**, marking key Wesleyan or Methodist ecclesial notions in the same manner, thereby identifying how and where Methodism imbeds its ecclesiology in its practices and as guided by these books.

I. FOUNDATIONS

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[1]The full titles are *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church, 2000* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2000); *The United Methodist Book of Worship* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1992) and *The United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989)The first is revised and a new version published after each General Conference, typically quadrennially.

[2]See Karen B. Westerfield Tucker, *American Methodist Worship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

[3]For an effort to set out standards of United Methodist doctrine by their official level of authority, see Scott J. Jones, *United Methodist Doctrine: The Extreme Center* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 43-56Jones distinguishes ten texts that fall into three levelsFirst are the constitutional standards, which include items embraced in the *Discipline* (Constitution, Articles, Confession and General Rules) plus infrequently used but official standards, Wesley's "Standard Sermons" and *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament*At a second level he places contemporary statements, namely other parts of the *Discipline* and the wonderful but rarely used *Book of Resolutions*At the third level he locates *Hymnal* and *Book of Worship* which he terms liturgyIn his formulations, he recognizes the degrees of authority represented but draws on all three levelsFor a simpler schema, compare Ted A. Campbell, *Methodist Doctrine: The Essentials* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), "Appendix 2," 116-22See also Thomas C. Oden, *Doctrinal Standards in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Francis Asbury Press of Zondervan Publishing House, 1988)The discussion that follows addresses the issues they raise.

Wesley's Transmittal

Each of these books John Wesley conveyed to the little North American Methodist movement and conveyed at the point of the movement's becoming church. His "Large Minutes," the governing instrument of the British movement, constituted the basis of the first *Discipline*[4]. Compiled out of the decisions of the "governing" conferences of Wesley with his preachers, the "Large Minutes" and the American versions thereof, the *Discipline*, provided quasi-constitution for the reformist Methodist movement, specified its distinctive practices and gatherings, and outlined its ministerial tasks and duties. Appended to the *Discipline* (in its first, 1785 edition) were *A Collection of Psalms and Hymns for the Lord's Day*[5]. *A Pocket Hymnbook* appeared the next year, one in a long series of hymn books for the Methodist people. The Wesleys had selected verse from Charles and structured and organized the collection to guide the faithful in the way of salvation[6]Rich in Scriptural citation and allusion,[7] it put Biblical motif and Wesleyan doctrine on Methodist lips. It began with hymns entreating the sinner to turn to God and followed with several sections posing the consequences of one's action, either with God in heaven or in death and hell. A second part contrasted formal and inward religion. In a third part, the Wesleys located hymns evocative of repentance, conviction, conversion and perseverance. Part four, the longest with ten sections, exhibited 261 hymns for Christians struggling towards perfection. The final part featured hymns for Methodist societies and classes.

The *Book of Common Prayer* [BCP] was dear to the Wesleys and John had edited and digested it into the *Sunday Service of the Methodists in North America*. Despite the latter's apparently restrictive title, it provided a full set of rituals--morning prayer, evening prayer, weekday litany, Sunday service, eucharist, two baptismal rites, marriage, and orders for communion of the sick, burial and ordination services for deacons, elders and superintendents. It also included a brief lectionary and twenty-four Articles of Religion, excerpted from Anglicanism's Thirty-Nine[8].

A letter from Wesley conveyed these documents and authorized the establishment of the new church. Addressed to the two bishop-(superintendent-)-designees and their brethren, "To Dr.

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[4]*Minutes of Several Conversations Between the Rev, Thomas Coke, LL. D., the Rev. Francis Asbury and others, at a Conference, Begun in Baltimore, in the State of Maryland, on Monday, the 27th of December, in the Year 1784* (Philadelphia: Charles Cist, 1785)For the text of the first Discipline in parallel columns with the "Large Minutes" see Jno. J. Tigert, *A Constitutional History of American Episcopal Methodism*, 3rd. ed. (Nashville: Publishing House of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1908), 532-602.

[5]See Carlton R. Young, *Companion to The United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 94-95.

[6]See *The Works of John Wesley*, 7, *A Collection of Hymns for the use of the People called Methodists*, ed. Franz Hildebrandt and Oliver A. Beckerlegge, with the assistance of James Dale (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1983)Unless otherwise indicated, reference is to this critical edition begun as "The Oxford Edition of the Works of John Wesley," continued as "The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley" by Abingdon Press, 1984-The series began with Oxford, 1975-83.

[7]. To some extent, it would function for Methodists as the *Book of Common Prayer* (BCP) did for Anglicans.

[8]*John Wesley's Sunday Service of the Methodists in North America*, with an introduction by James F. White (Nashville: Quarterly Review, 1984).

COKE, Mr. ASBURY, and our Brethren in NORTH AMERICA," it instructed the young church: "They are now at full liberty, simply to follow the Scriptures and the Primitive Church."[9] The injunction to follow Scripture was hardly needed but it did effectively found the new church with the fourth book.

With Scripture, hymnbook, discipline, and book of worship, Wesley made provision for the movement that would call itself the Methodist Episcopal Church. By reference, inclusion, and allusion these books pointed to other standards, Twenty-five Articles of Religion (adapted from the Thirty-Nine and one added to the twenty-four that Wesley had isolated), Wesley's *Sermons*, his *Notes on the New Testament*, and the General Rules, a set of injunctions and disciplines by which Methodists might hold themselves and one another accountable for the ethical life and chart their way towards the knowledge and love of God (practices largely echoed in the *Discipline*). These standards also figured (and figure) in the definition of Methodism and of the Methodist way of life, but they tended to be less the day-to-day, week-to-week, traveling companions for Methodists in their pilgrim's progress. Scripture, hymnbook, discipline, and book of worship were made to travel.

The Books and their Ecclesial Import

Two points about these books and their ecclesiological import should be registered. First, one can draw a rough correspondence between the four and the putative Wesleyan quadrilateral--*Scripture, experience, reason* and *tradition*[10]To be sure, we might rightly connect each of the books with all parts of the quadrilateral, as we will illustrate in the paragraph immediately below. But each book had, as well, a special force with respect to one of these Methodist epistemological impulses. Second, the four pulled early American Methodism in ecclesially different directions, one might say, in one of two opposing ecclesiological directions. Each book, its primary quadrilateral association, and its early ecclesial significance deserve remark.

The hymnal normed *experience*, providing poetic scripts for the Methodists to follow towards perfection. Its phrasing, images, themes, and organization captured and charted the ups and downs of the pilgrim's progress from the first stirrings of grace in the sinful soul through to the blessing of holiness. Though the hymnal featured the **"evangelical doctrines,"** its verse comprehended the range of Christian experience, the whole task of the church, and the full catholic creedal witness. Rich in scriptural citation and allusion, offering the tradition's doctrinal consensus, and ordering the Christian walk in a rational though poetic style, the hymnal, like the

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[9]. Russell E. Richey, Kenneth E. Rowe and Jean Miller Schmidt, *The Methodist Experience in America: A Sourcebook*, II (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 1784a, 72Hereinafter this volume is abbreviated MEA.

[10]See Ted A. Campbell, "The 'Wesleyan Quadrilateral': The Story of a Modern Methodist Myth," and Albert C. Outler, "The Wesleyan Quadrilateral--In John Wesley," in Thomas A. Langford, ed., *Doctrine and Theology in The United Methodist Church* (Nashville: Kingswood Books/Abingdon Press, 1991), 154-61 and 75-88; W. Stephen Gunter et al., *Wesley and the Quadrilateral: Renewing the Conversation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997); Scott J. Jones, *John Wesley's Conception and Use of Scripture* (Nashville: Kingswood Books/Abingdon Press, 1995); Scott J. Jones, *United Methodist Doctrine: The Extreme Center*; and Walter Klaiber and Manfred Marquardt, *Living Grace: An Outline of United Methodist Theology*, translated and adapted by J. Steven O'Malley and Ulrike R. M. Guthrie (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 17-92.

other books, could be and should be recognized as evidencing all parts of the quadrilateral[11]. Most Methodists would have missed the hymnal's epistemological or methodological quadrilateral complexity[12]. For them it fed experience--the quiet private devotion and the fervid communal song. And it did so with exacting attention to Arminian doctrines predicated upon **free grace**, the goal of **holiness**, and the resources of Wesleyan spirituality or, as Methodists would have then put it, **piety** and discipline.

The *Discipline*, and the various authoritative texts which it included or referenced, gathered Methodist experience and belief, individual and collective, into *reason*ed order. If the *Discipline* can be said to have exhibited the *reason* aspect of the quadrilateral, it did so in a peculiar Wesleyan fashion, indeed in an American Wesleyan fashion. The *Discipline* offered a practical reason; an ordered rule of life--individual and corporate--; a set of regimens or "**disciplines**" for life in the kingdom; and the structures, offices, polices and procedures by which to follow those dictates[13]This was not reason in the mode of John Locke and his Age of Reason colleagues, nor that of Thomas Aquinas and the great tradition of scholasticism, nor even that of John Wesley himself who could address *An Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion* and *A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion*. No this was a practical reason that American Methodists referenced when in 1787 they refashioned their version of the "Large Minutes," now termed *A Form of Discipline . . . Arranged under proper Heads, and Methodized in a more acceptable and easy Manner*. The "rationality" of the *Discipline* would only increase over time, in no small part, the product of Methodism's rapid growth, consequent structural complexity, problem-solving and missional diversification.

The *Discipline*, like the "Large Minutes," set forth the ordered life for the people, including what Wesley specified as the instituted **means of grace: prayer, searching the scriptures, the Lord's Supper, fasting** and **Christian conference**. By the latter, he meant conversation about the good life not the structures of governance. The *Discipline*, however, supplied the latter as well, outlining the responsibilities and prerogatives of each of the connectional level, and of several ministerial offices: **bishops, presiding elders, traveling elders, traveling deacons, local preachers, exhorters, stewards** and **class leaders**. Here was the three-fold ministry augmented by the distinctively Wesleyan offices all **connected** as essential cogs in a missional system. The first four offices itinerated broadly. The latter four more locally.

These two books, hymnal and *Discipline*, one for the believer's purse, the other for the preacher's saddle bag, pulled towards a discrete Wesleyan identity, perhaps one might say, inward or more accurately "connectionally." They provided Methodists a Wesleyan grammar for the Christian life, a Wesleyan missional ecclesiology[14]. The 1787 *Discipline* made that missional ecclesial assertion explicitly, in defining Methodist **purpose**:

Of the Rise of Methodism (so called) in Europe and America.

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[11]See the scriptural annotations, the rubrics and indexes, and the theological acuity clearly evident in *The Works of John Wesley*, 7, *A Collection of Hymns for the use of the People called Methodists*.

[12]The quadrilateral as a construct does not come into Methodist usage until the late twentieth century.

[13]I owe this formulation to my colleague, Thomas Frank.

[14]For an overview of Wesley's theology and theological development accenting its missional and salvific character, see Kenneth J. Collins, *John Wesley: A Theological Journal* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003).

> Quest. 1. What was the Rise of Methodism, so called, in Europe?
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> Answ. In 1729, two young Men, reading the Bible, saw they could not be saved without Holiness, followed after it, and incited others so to do. In 1737, they saw likewise, that Men are justified before they are sanctified: but still Holiness was their Object. God then thrust them out, to raise an holy People.
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> ...
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> Quest. 3. What may we reasonably believe to be God's Design, in raising up the Preachers called Methodists?
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> Answ. To reform the Continent, and spread scripture Holiness over these Lands. As a Proof hereof, we have seen in the Course of fifteen Years a great a glorious Work of God, from New-York through the Jersies, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Virginia, North and South Carolina, even to Georgia.[15]

"**To reform the continent and spread scripture holiness over these lands**" refined John Wesley's purposive formulation for the American context. This mantra, despite its inward pull, did not yield a sectarian spirit--though such claims have occasionally been made--but instead an **evangelical or missionary connectionalism** or **denominationalism**. No sectarians, Methodists did not withdraw from a sinful world but sought to transform it. They would transform it revivalistically, by bringing in the sheaves and in witnessing against sins, individual and social. And what would they transform? Note their ambitions, hardly those of a sect but instead quite impressive territorial or geographical ambitions, indicated above in the church's commitment to reform the entire continent. They began, moreover, with a passion to take on what has been the most intractable American dilemma, that of race. They began with a commitment to African Americans and their freedom[16].

Methodists undertook such transformative endeavor with Wesley's methods--the class-quarterly meeting-conference structure; exacting disciplines for both members and preachers; an elaborate schema of local and **itinerant ministries**; and Wesley-like **itinerant general superintendents (bishops)** with powers to appoint preachers to circuits or stations[17]. These

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[15]. *Form of Discipline, for the Ministers, Preachers, and Members of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America* (New York: W. Ross, 1787), 3. Compare the earlier (1784) formulation, lacking the second assertion, actually lacking points (2) and (3) of Methodist purpose, in the first *Discipline*, in Tigert, *Constitutional History*, 535.

[16]On early Methodism's antislavery witness and the retreat therefrom, see A. Gregory Schneider, *The Way of the Cross Leads Home: The Domestication of American Methodism* (Bloomington and lndianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993); Christine Leigh Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997); John H. Wigger, *Taking Heaven by Storm: Methodism and the Rise of Popular Christianity in America* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); Cynthia Lynn Lyerly, *Methodism and the Southern Mind, 1770-1810* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); Dee E. Andrews, *Religion and the Revolution: The Rise of the Methodists in the Greater Middle Atlantic, 1760-1800* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); Donald G. Mathews, *Religion in the Old South* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1977); H. Shelton Smith, *In His Image, But . . .: Racism in Southern Religion, 1780-1910* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1972); and my *Early American Methodism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991).

[17]One gets a nice overview of the Methodist missionary system through the day-to-day activities, the scenes described, and the instructions of its itinerant apostle and chief bishop, Francis AsburyFor the day-to-dayness of missionary itinerancy, see all three volumes of *The Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury*,

practices, sung about in Wesleyan verse and performed in the directives of the *Discipline*, implicitly carried an ecclesiology, a **missionary** and **connectional** conception of the church. But as practices, as practical or experimental divinity, Methodism's gatherings, rituals, offices and strategies did not yield very clear and concise theory[18]. Methodists became better at doing church than articulating an ecclesiology. Here and there one can find statements or discussions out of which a more formal **missionary** and **connectional** ecclesiology might have developed. (Only in recent years have Methodists pursued that project.)

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If hymnbook and *Discipline* produced an implicit expansive missional denominationalism, Bible (*Scripture*) and *Sunday Service* (*tradition*) claimed Wesley's Anglican heritage and proclaimed Methodism's **catholic identity**. They pulled outward, ecumenically. Although early Methodists may have been insecure in and frequently unclear about this ecumenical identity, it nevertheless defined the movement. It was there by received tradition and by continued practice.

The *Sunday Service* provided the Methodist Episcopal Church with the rights and rites for their middle name. Instructing the Americans of its dependence on the BCP, Wesley asserted in the preface to the *Sunday Service*:

> I believe there is no LITURGY in the World, either in ancient or modern language, which breathes more of a solid scriptural, rational Piety, than the COMMONPRAYER of the CHURCH of ENGLAND. .

Wesley conceded that he had shortened the Supper, omitted a few sentences from Baptism and Burial, and dropped some holy days and psalms[19]. But far more impressive than the abridgements and omissions was Wesley's preservation of the substance and structure of the BCP[20]

Appropriately, those gathered in 1784 at the organizing Christmas Conference decided to

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ed. Elmer T. Clark, 3 vols. (London and Nashville: Epworth Press & Abingdon Press, 1958).

This work is cited hereinafter as JLFA

For a recent review of Asbury at the center of Methodism's missionary system, see Darius L. Salter, *America's Bishop: The Life of Francis Asbury* (Nappanee, IN: Francis Asbury Press of Evangel Publishing House, 2003).

[18]On this dimension to Wesleyan theology, see Robert E. Cushman, *John Wesley's Experimental Divinity: Studies in Methodist Doctrinal Standards* (Nashville: Kingswood Books/Abingdon, 1989); Thomas A. Langford, *Practical Divinity: Theology in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1983); Scott J. Jones, *United Methodist Doctrine: The Extreme Center* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), pp. 61, 71-77, 241-97); Kenneth J. Collins, *A Real Christian: The Life of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999).

[19]*Sunday Service*, p. A 1White's "Introduction" and "Notes" provide more extensive documentation of Wesley's changes to the BCP.

[20]One may most easily visualize the changes and yet the integrity of the liturgies in Nolan B. Harmon's *The Rites and Ritual of Episcopal Methodism* (Nashville: Publishing House of the M.E. Church, South, 1926)In separate sections on the Eucharist, Infant Baptism, Adult Baptism, Matrimony, Burial and The Ordinal, Harmon puts into six parallel columns across two pages: Ancient Sources, The 1661 Prayer Book, Wesley's Sunday Service, 1844 ME Ritual, 1922 MECS Ritual, and 1924 ME Ritual.

call their new ecclesial entity, the Methodist **Episcopal** Church, a name that they patented before the Protestant Episcopals did. They communed to Cranmerian cadences for **eucharist** and **baptized** with the Triune formula. They ordained **deacons, elders and bishops** with ritual little altered from the BCP and lived into Anglicanism's **threefold ministry**. Although they could not claim apostolic succession and early and often found themselves defending the legitimacy of their orders, Methodist Episcopals nevertheless sustained **an orderly laying-on of hands** from John Wesley onwards. Methodists did diverge from Anglicanism in positing that bishops were **not a third order**, a stance occasioned if not necessitated by John Wesley's extra-ordinary venture in ordaining Thomas Coke who then ordained Asbury. Asbury's refusal to accept elevation to the episcopacy solely on Wesley's appointment and insistence that the American preachers be invited to assent, established the principle that **bishops be elected in conference**[21].

Methodist formal definitions of the church and sacraments remained those in the BCP, the (Anglican) **articles** and the **creeds**. The church manifested itself in **faithful congregations where the pure Word was preached and the Sacraments administered according to Christ's ordinance**. The church defined itself with the classic "notes" or "marks"--**one, holy, catholic, and apostolic**. Church by the book! So, in providing this book, these books, Wesley intended to anchor the American branch of his movement liturgically in the church to which he remained loyal. This was, to reiterate, a church that deserved its middle name. It sustained its continuity with the *tradition* of its birth.

To be sure, Methodists did not exhibit much of what later would be deemed Anglican practice and polity. However, their patterns were rather more in accord with what had been the actual practice of those colonial Anglicans who, with the Wesleys, had worried about the ethical and spiritual estate of the land and who had, in many instances, found common cause with the Methodist preachers up until 1784. Indeed, the Devereux Jarratt's experienced Methodist organization as a separate church as a violation of what had been, they thought, a Wesleyan covenant to work together for the reformation of the Church.[22]

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The American Methodists sustained John Wesley's immersion in Scripture, aided in the understanding thereof by his *Explanatory Notes on the New Testament*, an American edition of

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[21]. For the first sustained defense of Methodist ecclesiology, ministry and episcopacy, see the annotated *Discipline* produced by bishops Thomas Coke and Francis Asbury, *The Doctrines and Disciplines of the Methodist Episcopal Church, in America* (Philadelphia: Henry Tuckniss, 1798) and excerpts in Richey, Rowe and Schmidt, MEA, II, 1798■Wesley■s ministry laid the essential foundation of what became the Methodist style of episcopacy, and in many ways that foundation has remained intact in America,■ Gerald F. Moede, ■Bishops in the Methodist Tradition: Historical Perspectives,■ *Episcopacy: Lutheran-United Methodist Dialogue II*, ed. Jack M .Tuel and Roger W. Fjeld (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1991), 52-69, 58For an overview and assessment of the office, see James E. Kirby, *The Episcopacy in American Methodism* (Nashville: Kingswood Books/Abingdon Press, 2000); Thomas Edward Frank, *Polity, Practice and the Mission of The United Methodist Church*, Updated edition (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 229-53; and Norman Woods Spellmann, *The General Superintendency in American Methodism, 1784-1870*, Ph.D. Dissertation, Yale University, April 1961.

[22]. See *The Life of the Reverend Devereux Jarratt*, foreword by David L. Holmes, series editor Barbara Brown Zikmund (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1995; first published 1806), especially Letter II, penned in 1794, pp. 47-78 and particularly 61-70.

which they published as early as 1791[23]. Wesley had instructed the American Methodists in 1783:

> Let all of you be determined to abide by the Methodist doctrine and discipline, published in the four volumes of *Sermons* and the *Notes upon the New Testament*, together with the Large Minutes of conference.[24]

The Americans, particularly the preachers were perhaps even more than Wesley himself *homo unius libri*, people of one book[25]. They lived with it, inscribed it on their hearts, guided their lives by its examples, teaching and precepts. The preachers preached from it, frequently multiple times a day, often leaving in their journals little more than the notation of the text usedWhen for reasons of distance or weather, they wanted for a congregation and opportunity to expound the Word, they would note that as a "dumb day."

And they understood their movement, their ministry, their ecclesial order as biblically scripted. They were and remained particularly conscious of the grounding of itinerancy in scripture. It was, they believed, the pattern of Jesus himself and of the apostles. To that theme, Bishop Asbury returned again and again, insisting that both Methodist bishops and preachers adhered to the **apostolic, itinerant plan of ministry**. In parting instructions to his junior bishop, William McKendree, Asbury insisted that they like the apostles of the Bible were "apostolic bishops" for like they, "we have both planted and watered, and do water still."[26] He explained

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[23]Early American editions of John Wesley's *Explanatory notes upon the New Testament*, included:
Philadelphia : Printed by Joseph Crukshank, sold by John Dickins, No. 43, Fourth-Street, near the corner of Race-Street, 1791;
A 2 volume version published by Ezekiel Cooper and John Wilson, William C. Robinson, printer, 1806;
Published by Daniel Hitt and Thomas Ware, for the Methodist Connection in the United States, John C. Totten, printer, 1812;
Published by J. Soule and T. Mason, for the Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States, Abraham Paul, printer, 1818;
New-York: Published by T. Mason and G. Lane, for the Methodist Episcopal Church, at the Conference Office, J. Collord, printer, 1837;
New-York: Published by T. Mason and G. Lane, for the Methodist Episcopal Church, at the Conference Office, J. Collord, printer, 1839;
New York: Published by G. Lane & P.P. Sandford, for the Methodist Episcopal Church, at the Conference Office, J. Collord, printer, 1844.

[24]. John Telford, ed., *The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley*, 8 vols. (London: Epworth, 1931), 7: 191; Nathan Bangs, *A History of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, 4 vols., 12th edition (New York: Carlton & Porter, 1860), I: 148. For the case for the continued authority of the *Notes*, see Oden, *Doctrinal Standards in the Wesleyan Tradition*, 15-68. The sales of the *Notes* must have been primarily to the preachers as they were minuscule in comparison to the movement of other Methodist books, particularly the hymnals. See midwestern sales records in William Warren Sweet, ed., *Religion on the American Frontier. 1783-1840*, IV, *The Methodists: A Collection of Source Materials* (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, Inc. 1964; originally published by the University of Chicago, 1946), 698-706.

[25]For Wesley's self-identification, see *The Works of John Wesley*, I: 105, the Preface to the 1746 edition of *Sermons on Several Occasions* and *The Works of John Wesley*, 3: 504On Wesley's understanding and use of Scripture, see Jones, *John Wesley's Conception and Use of Scripture*.

[26]. August 5, 1813, "A Valedictory Address to William McKendree," JLFA, 3: 475-92, 475, 480. Several pages into the address, Asbury began to appeal by extensive citation to Thomas Haweis' *History of the Church of Christ,* on the basis of which he posited the apostolic character of Methodist episcopacy.

that it was the Methodists who had recovered the apostolic plan of ministry:

> This leads me to conclude that there were no local bishops until the second century; that the apostles, in service, were bishops, and that those who were ordained in the second century mistook their calling when they became local and should have followed those bright examples in the apostolic age.
> ....
> It is my confirmed opinion that the apostles acted both as bishops and traveling superintendents in planting and watering, ruling and ordering the whole connection; and that they did not ordain any local bishops,
> ....
> My dear bishop, it is the traveling apostolic order and ministry that is found in our very constitution. No man among us can locate without order or forfeit his official standing. No preacher is stationary more than two years; no presiding elder more than four years, and the constitution will remove them; and all are moveable at the pleasure of the superintendent whenever he may find it necessary for the good of the cause.

Methodism's immersion in Scripture did not distinguish it from other Pietist movements and its appreciation thereof did not distinguish it from Protestants generally. Indeed, Methodists knew themselves to be a movement united in common endeavor with all who lived and loved Scripture. This unitive impulse, in its earliest North American expression, one might term "evangelical" rather than "catholic." Among the groups with whom Methodists experienced the greatest commonality were the United Brethren and Evangelical Alliance, two groups with roots in Reformed-Mennonite and Lutheran Pietism respectively, with their own distinctive evangelical-Reformation ecclesiology and with a strong confessional orientation. They shared much with the Methodists, including a unitive spirit, and over time grew even closer, eventually combining with one another and later with the Methodists to form United MethodismThat union, as we will note below, connected the new church with the major branches of the Protestant Reformation, with its diverse ecclesial principles, and with a confession of faith, occasionally updated, with a clear articulation of the classic "notes" of the church.

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The two unitive commitments, one Anglican, the other Pietist, tugged the Methodist Episcopal Church in different directions--either back towards their English roots or forward into the Protestant endeavor to Christianize America--though the difference in the two options would become more marked as one of the two referents or poles itself moved (as the Protestant Episcopal Church gravitated away from the shared evangelicalism). Initially both Scripture and *Sunday Service* situated the distinctive Wesleyan ecclesial patterns and the energetic, competitive Methodist itinerant ministries within shared Protestant visions of the church.[27]

II. TRANSFORMATIONS

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[27]. For recent efforts to review Methodist ecclesiology, typically with reference to its Wesleyan foundations and their catholic import, see Ted A. Campbell, *Methodist Doctrine: The Essentials* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999) 64-79; Scott J. Jones, *United Methodist Doctrine: The Extreme Center*, 241-74; Walter Klaiber and Manfred Marquardt, *Living Grace: An Outline of United Methodist Theology*, section 4, 311-417; and Theodore Runyon, *The New Creation: John Wesley's Theology Today* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998).

The Quadrilateral: A Literary Evolution?

Over the course of two centuries, Methodism's four books, Methodist ecclesial sensibilities, and the service thereunto that the several books rendered underwent interesting and significant shifts. Tradition suffered in the rough and tumble of evangelistic, frontier oriented, camp-meeting-dominated Methodism. That trend surfaced early, in the Methodist decision to abandon its book of worship, the *Sunday Service of the Methodists in North America*. Jesse Lee explained why in his early, first person narrative of the American church, *A Short History of the Methodists*.

> [T]he prayer book, as revised by Mr. Wesley, was introduced among us; and in the large towns, and in some country places, our preachers read prayers on the Lord's day: and in some cases the preachers read part of the morning service on Wednesdays and Fridays. But some of the preachers who had been long accustomed to prayer extempore, were unwilling to adopt this new plan. Being fully satisfied that they could pray better, and with more devotion while their eyes were shut, than they could with their eyes open. After a few years the prayer book was laid aside, and has never been used since in public worship.[28]

As Lee noted, revivalistic evangelicalism trumped the prayer book. At times and in places, Methodism behaved like a continuous camp meeting. And the camp meeting did suit Methodist polity--Methodist practice of church--quite nicely. Routinely in the nineteenth century, Methodists placed in a camp meeting their warm weather quarterly meeting[29]. By locating in a camp meeting the circuit's--the local church unit's--official or business meeting Methodists embraced albeit informally a revivalistic modality of being church. Experience, conversion, revivalism thus upstaged tradition.

However, Methodist Episcopals did not, could not, give up rituals for the Supper, Baptism, ordination, marriage. Indeed, though the *Sunday Service*, as book for pocket and pew, did not define Methodism's devotional life, the several services, typically and as appropriate, would be enacted at the high point of the church's worship calendar, the two day quarterly meeting. And when camp meetings emerged, as I have already noted, Methodists located the quarterly meeting there, the Lord's Supper being one of its high water marks[30]. Whether two days in colder weather or elongated into a week or more in a summer camp meeting, the **quarterly meeting** functioned as an enacted or dramatized BCP for MethodistsThere the entire array of officers would gather, including the bishops if they were anyway close. There the circuit did its business. It exercised discipline, including conducting trials if necessary. It collected "quarterage" to supply the common salary for all the traveling ministers. It licensed or renewed licenses to preach, made recommendations about ordination, and filled local offices. That was Saturday

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[28]. (Baltimore: Magill and Clime, 1810; Facsimile edition, Rutland, VT: Academy Books, 1974), 340.

[29]The placement of camp meeting in quarterly meeting can be seen in the quarterly meeting records reproduced in Sweet, ed., *The Methodists: A Collection of Source Materials*I have explored the relation between camp meeting and quarterly meeting in *The Methodist Conference in America: A History* (Nashville: Kingswood Books/Abingdon Press, 1996) and in *Early American Methodism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991).

[30]See *The Methodist Conference in America: A History*, *Early American Methodism*, and Lester Ruth, *A Little Heaven Below: Worship at Early American Methodist Quarterly Meetings* (Nashville: Kingswood Books/Abingdon Press, 2000).

agenda. Sunday wedded rituals of the BCP to distinctive Methodist practices. They day opened with **love feast**, restricted to members, followed by preaching, the Lord's Supper, more preaching, baptisms if indicated, memorials when required. In the quarterly meeting Methodism was most fully church, offering to those gathered the preached word, the sacraments and discipline or order.

Over the course of the nineteenth century, Methodism freed stations from its circuits, appointed educated preachers to those congregations, built substantial churches to house the middle class populations that filled its urban pews, and increasingly edged its way into the Protestant establishment. Such "improvements" spawned protests, various movements that hoisted a holiness banner and/or defended the camp meeting to recall Methodism back to its commitment to the marginalized. Schisms took some of the protesters out of the church but others remained to voice complaints as Methodism gained in respectability and in its interest in more formalized worship.

Methodists tracked Anglican reforms and kept up-to-date versions of the ritual available to preachers in the quadrennially produced *Discipline*[31]. On the popular level and over the course of the nineteenth century, Methodists gradually reclaimed traditions that had been important to the Wesleys, including liturgical practices and entire services that could hardly be managed without a published order in congregant's hands much less with preacher's eyes shut. This reclamation went on more in the urban and upscale congregations than in rural areas but was modeled for all preachers in annual conferences. In 1905 the Methodist Episcopal Church and the Episcopal Church, South formalized that trend by including both an "Order of Worship" and a Psalter in the jointly published *Methodist Hymnal*[32]. And in 1945, the new Methodist Church [MC] (uniting in 1939 the Methodist Episcopal Church [MEC], the Methodist Episcopal Church, South [MECS] and the Methodist Protestant Church [MPC]), revisited Wesley's recrafting or remodeling of the BCP. *The Book of Worship for Church and Home* provided a BCP-like full set of services. A sequel *Book of Worship* appeared in 1965 and *The United Methodist Book of Worship* in 1992[33]. With each of these successive liturgical efforts, save this most recent, Methodism reasserted its connection to the BCP and enriched its sense of tradition as mediated through Anglicanism.

Bible, *Discipline*, Hymnbook

Scripture, reason and experience--and their literary expressions of Bible, *Discipline* and hymnbook--found an easier path into the life of the young Methodist movement and into its ecclesial sensibilities. Wesley had exhorted his preachers and people to read and had made ample provision for their reading in his many publications. The American Methodists carried on that program, even under frontier conditions. They created a surrogate Wesley, in the person and office of Book Agent, who took responsibility for an aggressive publishing and distributing campaign of popular literature and eventually serials. Preachers functioned as regional sales representatives for the publishing enterprise. Colporteurs they were, with responsibilities to push the product, handle sales, collect and forward receipts, and in every way cultivate the reading and

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[31]See Karen B. Westerfield Tucker, *American Methodist Worship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

[32]Young, *Companion to The United Methodist Hymnal*, 112-13.

[33]See Tucker, *American Methodist Worship*, 3-30.

buying habit[34]. They kept a percentage of the profit, in some instances, substantially augmenting what was otherwise a meager annual salary[35]. Available records indicate significant sales of catechisms, pious memoirs, spiritual guides, Bibles, hymnals and *Discipline*s and much more modest sales of weightier items whether by Wesley or his theological successors. In one particularly profitable year (1814), Benjamin Lakin sold 1314 items. Hymnals constituted 413 of that total, *Discipline*s 505[36]. So the Methodist movement put pocket hymnals and mass produced Bibles into the laps of the people. The preachers, if not all the laity, had carried a third book, the *Discipline*. Their saddle bags reputedly came with Bible, hymnbook and *Discipline*.

The canon of Scripture, of course, did not change nor, one might argue, has Methodism's effort to be faithful to it. The modes of that fidelity have evolved, taken on complexity, found institutional niches, but nevertheless sustained the twofold commitments inherited from Wesley. He wanted his people and preachers to be students of the Bible. From the laity he expected daily reading, the small group (class) for study and prayer, hymns and sermons for interpretation and personal witness through testimony in the Love Feast. He expected the same from the preachers but also careful study of his commentary, *Notes on the New Testament*, drawn from what he regarded as the best scholarship of the day and formally defined touchstone of orthodoxy.

On the popular level, today's United Methodists have Disciple Bible plus an incredible array of other adult Biblical resources from the United Methodist Publishing House (Cokesbury and Abingdon). Cokesbury makes similar provision for all other age groups. The clergy typically own the *Interpreter's Bible* and are acquiring the *New Interpreter's Bible*. Or if the IB and NIB are not to taste, Abingdon features several other commentaries itself and its distributing arm, Cokesbury, offers series from other publishers as well. The digitally inclined can discover the incredible array of United Methodist Biblical resources through the Publishing House and other denominational agencies--Biblical guides, commentaries and devotional materials. Between the days of class meeting and *Notes on the New Testament* and today's Disciple Bible and *New Interpreter's Bible* lie almost two centuries of Methodist leadership in the Sunday School as a medium for popular instruction and of Methodist endeavor to stay current with Biblical scholarship. Over that period Methodists had lived into the ecumenical promise of Scripture, becoming a denomination that spanned the center of American Protestantism from moderate evangelicalism to progressive liberalism.

Both hymnals and *Discipline*s have undergone dramatic changes since leaving John Wesley's hand. Initially, the *Discipline*,[37] titled to reflect "The Large Minutes" from which it derived--"Minutes of Several Conversations Between The Rev. Thomas Coke, LL.D. The Rev. Francis Asbury And Others . . . Composing a Form of Discipline For the Ministers, Preachers and Other Members of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America"--functioned as a guide to corporate Christian life. It served the gathered community as the hymnal served the individual believer, as rules for the pilgrim's progress. It really did disciplineThough addressed to the

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[34]See James Penn Pilkington and Walter Newton Vernon, Jr., *The United Methodist Publishing House: A History*, 2 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1968 and 1989).

[35]For an illustration of this point and documents which sustain the argument of this paragraph, see Sweet, ed. *The Methodists: A Collection of Source Materials*, 1946), 709, 680-709.

[36]*Ibid.*, 706.

[37]. Tigert, *Constitutional History*, 463, 533. Tigert examined the titles and contents of the early *Disciplines* in Appendix I, 463-76.

preachers, through them it instructed the faithful as well concerning dress, behavior, intermarriage, slavery, distilled beverages, means of grace, devotional practices, life together, and belief in short, the way of salvation. Initially an action pamphlet, the *Discipline* grew gradually as Methodist expansion required enhancements to the simple missional imperatives inherited from Wesley and as the church saw reason to specify more clearly its belief, structures, authority and governanceIn 1788, 1789 and 1790, the church annexed to the *Discipline* "some other useful Pieces," Arminian essays by Wesley against Calvinist doctrines of predestination and unconditional perseverance and others explaining Christian perfection and baptismIn 1792, Methodists signaled the purpose the *Discipline* play in setting forth reasoned belief by retitling it *The Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church*.

Over time much of the explicitly doctrinal content of the *Discipline* eroded or to be more precise was "outsourced," specified as authoritative but separately published. This change in Methodism's BOOK, sometimes interpreted as the church's loss of theological fiber, might better be construed as the consequence of ecclesial maturation. Ecclesial maturation led to a sharper constitutional awareness, most notably in the General Conference of 1808, which passed **"Restrictive Rules**" protecting Methodist **doctrine, conference structure, episcopacy and "General Rules**."[38] Ecclesial maturation led to the rapid growth of a publication empire which produced or reproduced theological as well as devotional, historical and instructional materials in abundance. Ecclesial maturation led to ever greater organizational complexity and therefore required much greater Disciplinary specificity and precision[39].

For a variety of reasons, then, the *Discipline*, over time, kept doctrine to a minimum and let polity flourish. In 1972, as we will note below, consequent to the uniting of the Evangelical United Brethren and the Methodists and the challenge of putting together confessional and doctrinal traditions that drew on the Anglican, Calvinist, Lutheran and Anabaptist Reformations, a Theological Commission brought in and General Conference adopted a rich theological apparatus. Revised in 1988 (and referenced below), this Disciplinary apparatus now plays a decisive role in orienting the church, and particularly those undergoing the ordination process, towards United Methodist doctrine and theology as witness to the church's apostolic and catholic faith.[40]

American Methodists began with an hymnal filled with Charles Wesley's verse, a poetic guide to the via salutis, the way of salvation. In the latest hymnal, that of 1989, only 7% of the hymns come from Charles (52 of 734). Successive hymnals have seen a steady erosion of Wesley's hymns. Or to put it more constructively, successive hymnals have made increasing space for hymns expressive of the religious impulses of the day and/or the larger Christian witness. However, almost from the start, American Methodist leaders, like their British counterparts, struggled to keep the faithful faithfully signing Charles's hymns. The first American-generated hymnbook, the *Pocket Hymn Book* of 1786, drew on hymnals by Robert Spence as well as by the Wesleys[41]. Soon music reflecting the African American experience, camp meetings and revivals, singing schools and the Sunday school competed with that bearing the Wesleyan imprimatur. Hymnals capturing these religious impulses appeared quickly. As early as 1801, *A Collection of*

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[38]. MEA, II, 1808.

[39]Richey, *Methodist Conference in America*, traces this evolution.

[40]. For exploration of the 1972 statement and its 1988 revision, see Langford, ed., *Doctrine and Theology in The United Methodist Church*.

[41]Young, *Companion to The United Methodist Hymnal*, 97-108.

Hymns and Spiritual Songs Selected from Various Authors by Richard Allen, African Minister appeared. Camp meeting hymnals appeared soon thereafter and thereafter the official or authorized hymnals, which appeared regularly (for the MEC: 1786, 1802, 1808, 1821, 1836, 1849, 1878, 1905) contended with a variety of popular alternatives[42]. Worship wars are hardly new.[43]

III. UNITED METHODISM

A New Church

In 1968, The United Methodist Church [UMC] was created, bringing together The Evangelical United Brethren Church [EUB] and The Methodist Church [MC], and uniting into one the heritage and traditions that had informed the Evangelical Association, the United Brethren, the Methodist Protestants and the two Episcopal Methodisms. The first two of these had united with one another in 1946, the latter three with each other in 1939[44]. The '68 union connected the new church with the major branches of and **diverse ecclesial principles of the Protestant Reformation**, through the UB with the Anabaptist and Reformed, through the EA with the Lutheran, through the Methodists with the Anglican reformations. The larger question of how the new church brought into harmony the practices, policies and polity of these several denomination impulses lies beyond the scope of this enquiry. Here we do need to take note of the doctrinal, specifically ecclesiological, challenge represented in this union. In 1968, the uniting conference and UMC *Discipline* cared for the challenge by positing the congruence of doctrine of the two predecessor churches and of the most terse expressions thereof, the EUB "Confession of Faith" and the Methodist "Articles of Religion." Not content to leave it there, General Conference established a "Theological Study Commission" with a broad mandate, including the possibility of "a contemporary formulation of doctrine and belief."[45]

The Commission chose not to craft a new confession, creed or set of articles but instead to embrace the EUB **Confession** and Methodist **Articles** within a long Disciplinary doctrinal-theological disquisition. Revised in 1988, this section now constitutes Part II of the *Discipline*, "Doctrinal Standards and Our Theological Task." Accordingly, Part I of the *Discipline*, the Constitution, continues both Articles and Confession (Para 3, Article III) and revises the "Restrictive Rules" to protect both statements of belief. The Constitution also includes important ecclesial and ecumenical affirmations, as we note below. However, it is this Part II, which governs the reception and interpretation of these two standards, the General Rules and Wesley's *Sermons*

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[42]For the stemma of MEC, MECS, MPC and MC hymnals, see Young, *Companion to The United Methodist Hymnal*, 94-95; for EUB, 81-82See also MEA, II, 29-30.

[43]. See Thomas G. Long, *Beyond the Worship Wars: Building Vital and Faithful Worship* (N.P.: the Alban Institute, 2001).

[44]. For the terse, official narrative of this union and the histories behind it, see *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church, 2000*, 9-20, 50-59.

[45]. Albert C. Outler, "Introduction to the Report of the 1968-72 Theological Study Commission," in Langford, ed., *Doctrine and Theology in The United Methodist Church*, 20-25. The entire volume, on which this discussion draws, attends to the 1972 Commission and 1988 Committee and the resultant doctrinal-theological disciplinary sections. See also Frank, *Polity, Practice and the Mission of The United Methodist Church*, 141-57.

and *Notes on the New Testament*, which figures most prominently in United Methodist ecclesial understanding. One section, Para 101, treats "Our Doctrinal Heritage," covering "Our Common Heritage as Christians," "Basic Christian Affirmations," "Our Distinctive Heritage as United Methodists," "Distinctive Wesleyan Emphases," "Doctrine and Discipline in the Christian Life," and "General Rules and Social Principles." The following section, Para 102, attends to "Our Doctrinal History." Then follow the standards, Articles, Confession and General Rules, reproduced in full, and declaratory statements indicating where the authoritative *Sermons* and *Notes* may be acquired. Having identified and ordered Methodist doctrine, the *Discipline* in a fourth section, Para 104, "Our Theological Task," sets forth guidelines for drawing on doctrine in the church's efforts to think theologically. Important now in Methodism's practice of theology and especially in ordination processes, this section posits a distinction between doctrine and theology, sets forth characteristics of United Methodism's theological task, describes the quadrilateral and its hermeneutics, identifies challenges to theology, and concludes with a discussion of the church's ecumenical commitment.[46]

United Methodism's Four Books

"Doctrinal Standards and Our Theological Task," a feature of *Disciplines* since 1972, sets forth distinctively Methodist and Wesleyan belief vigorously and clearly. It does so within an explicitly ecclesiological, indeed an ecclesiologically ecumenical, framework, a point we exhibit in some detail in a separate section below. This conjoining of the Wesleyan and the ecumenical represents an important development, not a surprising development, perhaps, but nevertheless an important development. Not surprising given Methodism's investment in the ecumenical enterprise nor because as we have noted, the other specifically Methodist books, hymnal and book of worship, in addition to discipline,[47] have also shifted in that ecumenical direction.

The current *Hymnal* gathers the best of the church's praise, whether recent or ancient. Supplementary volumes have followed so as to capture the "The Faith We Sing" and "Global Praise" of the church, the best of its music, the best of its verse. The *Hymnal* also features the liturgies used commonly in congregational life, reflecting as we note below, the ecumenical liturgical consensus. In addition, United Methodists understand the two sacraments, Baptism and the Lord's Supper, as rites for the whole church--Baptism, inherently ecumenical, and Eucharist, so now nuanced, often with the Wesleyan gloss that it is a converting ordinance[48].

The two books, then, that had once looked inward and towards a distinctively Wesleyan identity--the *Discipline* and *Hymnal*--now sustain that identity within a clearly catholic context.

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[46]. See the final section below on the ecclesiological and ecumenically ecclesiological import of the *Discipline*.

[47]. *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church, 2000*, *The United Methodist Book of Worship*, 1992, and *The United Methodist Hymnal*, 1989.

[48]United Methodists divide as to whether the "open table" extends universally or to the baptizedSee E. Byron Anderson, *The Meaning of Holy Communion in The United Methodist Church* (Nashville: GBOD/Discipleship Resources, 2000); Gayle Carlton Felton, *This Gift of Water: The Practice and Theology of Baptism among Methodists in America* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, c1992); ----, *By Water and the Spirit: Making Connections for Identity and Ministry*, The Christian Initiation Series (Nashville: GBOD/Discipleship Resources, 2003); also on web at http://www.gbod.org/worship/articles/water_spirit/; ----, "The Holy Mystery: A United Methodist Understanding of Holy Communion," Holy Communion Study Committee; Lester Ruth, *A Little Heaven Below.*

Insofar as these two books retain their function as the quadrilateral principles of reason and experience, respectively, they point now as do Scripture and tradition, towards Wesleyan or Methodist belief as within the faith confessed commonly across Christianity.

The United Methodist Book of Worship also repositions its witness to Methodism's tradition(s) within an ecumenical context. Eucharist can still be celebrated with the beautiful phrases of Archbishop Cranmer, but that liturgy, setting IV, now functions as an alternative in *Book of Worship* (and in *Hymnal)*, as also in BCP. The *Book of Worship* no longer orients Methodism exclusively towards its Anglican past but rather more broadly to the catholic tradition generally or perhaps one might say to the Anglican-Methodist reception of the catholic tradition. From beginning to end, from its initial setting out "The Basic Pattern of Worship" to its concluding rites for missionaries and deaconesses, the *Book of Worship* draws into United Methodist life the best liturgical wisdom and practices of the twentieth century liturgical and ecumenical movementsThe witness of the BCP remains but now surrounded by worship patterns reflective of the great tradition of the church and its global expression today.

The *Book of Worship* does still function as an indicator of the place of tradition, in its widest sense, in United Methodist life. Some areas of the denomination and some congregations have become liturgically self-conscious to a remarkable extent. In such places worship draws significantly and imaginatively on *The Book of Worship*. There congregations experience the church year, the lectionary, the rich array of special services, a high degree of liturgical self-awareness and albs and stoles. The trend is sufficiently prominent as to have worried Thomas Langford who complained that a once preaching church had become a liturgical church[49]. Still, large sectors of United Methodism function out of lower church paradigms, in some cases now re-energized with the so-called "contemporary" styles of worship and music and a church-growth ecclesiology *The Book of Worship* continues therefore, as ecclesial touchstone and provides one clue to United Methodism's ecclesial self-understanding. Its use signals orientation towards ecclesial self-understanding and catholicity predicated on the long Christian tradition. Its non-use often signals investment rather in more evangelical, missional and present-oriented forms of Christian unity.

Scripture functions, one might argue, in Methodist/Wesleyan understanding, to orient believers towards the common witness of the church and the unity realized and promised in Christ. And such an affirmation and a direction clearly inform United Methodist scholarly and devotional attention the Bible. The clear commitment, within sectors of United Methodism, to hold together critical scholarship and piety--nicely epitomized in "Disciple" and *The New Interpreter's Bible*, both products of The United Methodist Publishing House--orients this fundamental or primary epistemological criterion, one might insist, towards the other three aspects of the quadrilateral, a point that the *Discipline* itself makes explicitly[50].

Counterpoint

However, the ecumenical convergence represented in current versions of Methodism's four books does not command the loyalty and adherence of the entire church. The culture wars ignited within North American society generally blaze as well across United Methodism. They blaze especially brightly over Scripture and its relation to other authorities. A conservative or

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[49]Langford enunciated such claims several times in conversation or discussion.

[50]*The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church, 2000*, 78-79.

evangelical wing of Methodism--actually comprising diverse religious impulses, but achieving some unity through allegiances to a single seminary, an alternative missionary society, separate presses, collaborative media and web sites, distinctive funding mechanisms, an entity that behaves like the congregation for the propagation of the faith, and a common insistence on a closed creed as well as closed canon--reads the Bible as yielding quite fixed doctrines[51]. Scripture, this sector of Methodism seems to suggest, speaks univocally and once-and-for-all-times. So, Scripture and Scripture alone should settle matters deemed doctrinal, like abortion and homosexuality, insist spokespersons in this camp.

Experience, reason and tradition, thereby lose their capacity to function interactively and transmissively with respect to Scripture, and to bear forth and address the inspired Word to specific times and contexts. Only Scripture can be inspired. Some in this wing of United Methodism, not surprisingly, have little use of the notion of a quadrilateral, even in its post 1988 version with the guarantees of the primacy of Scripture: "Scripture is the primary source and criterion for Christian doctrine." This camp tends to pit Scripture against other authorities. It offers a new modality of Wesleyan inwardness, a loyalty to the Wesley of one book, the Bible. And it permits, if not actually encouraging, a disuse of the other books. Particularly where energized by church growth or mega-church doctrine, it prefers powerpointed contemporary worship over *The Book of Worship*, the praise chorus over the *Hymnal*, and congregational prerogative over the connectional structures and processes which the *Discipline* describes and prescribesThe *Discipline* as a law book, however, this wing of United Methodism finds still serviceable, indeed, vital in the war they wage for Methodism's soul. Still one could say, this wing pits the one book, the Bible, over against the other three.

One detects in this conservative-evangelical Methodist stance a somewhat different ecclesiology than that represented in the current versions of the four books, different than that I am positing as ecumenical Methodism, different than that outlined immediately below. This wing of the church certainly claims the Wesleyan missional emphasis, indeed, it makes mission, understood as disciple-making, the primary, even sole task and purpose of the church, a conviction recently legislated into the *Discipline*. It leavens mission not with the "Christ the transformer of culture" spirit that has been a hallmark of American Methodism but with a "Christ against culture" spirit for which it can certainly find some precedent in Wesley. It does so in the conviction that in so doing it, rather than ecumenical United Methodism is the more faithful to Wesley. Accordingly it launches a critique, sometimes quite harsh, against the agencies and leadership of United Methodism. And it does so convinced that the "missional" rather than the "catholic" requires the church's energy and focus in today's world. Its spirit is non-catholic and its style non-connectional. Or to be more generous, it reserves its catholicity for counterpart conservative wings of other denominations and in concert with them builds its own connectional structures. And, like the larger evangelicalism so suffused with Calvinist practice, it has begun to put a premium on the creedal and confessional shibboleths.

IV. MISSIONAL ECCLESIOLOGY

The Official Stance

In its official stance, Methodism's four books continue, in their own way, to sustain indebtedness to John Wesley--the Wesleyan commitment perhaps more salient post-1968 than

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[51]See Leon Howell, *United Methodism @ Risk: A Wake-up Call*, Study Guide by Bishop C. Dale White and The Rev. Scott Campbell (Kingston, NY: Information Project for United Methodists, 2003).

before--but the important yet diverse heritages mediated through the EUB have helped reduce the distance or tension between that Wesleyan ecclesial self-understanding and that oriented towards the larger Christian witness. And in lessening that tension or achieving the new balance, the four books function, where they are all used, with some degree of harmony. Their harmony owes to the long-term developments to which we have alluded, rather than the formal enunciation of a quadrilateral hermeneutic or epistemology. Nevertheless, the quadrilateral, tersely described in Disciplines since 1972, provides United Methodists a language with which to grasp and explain this common focus. And, in various ways, the *Discipline* has become more explicit about Methodism's doctrinal commitments.

Discipline: Catholic Spirit

After 1968 and especially after 1972, the new church imbedded within the *Discipline* expressions of a catholic spirit and pointers towards an ecumenical ecclesiology, understanding the bringing together of traditions representing the major strands of the Protestant Reformation as opportunity for still greater unity. That ecumenical, unitive or catholic commitment defines United Methodism--in its structure, policy and program, indeed, in its very Constitution--in the following ways.

> The Preamble to the Constitution (Part I) situates the newly constituted church within the universal church.
>
> Article III of the Constitution incorporates and Articles I and II of the Restrictive Rules protect the Articles of Religion, John Wesley's adaptation of the Thirty-nine Articles and the Confession of Faith, from the Evangelical United Brethren Church, thereby defining the church in classic Reformation terms (Articles) and claiming its classic marks or notes, "one, holy, apostolic and catholic" (Confession).
>
> Article IV of the Constitution on the "Inclusiveness of the Church" proclaims The United Methodist Church "a part of the church universal" and commits it to overcoming all those forces and factors which divide the human family.
>
> Article VI of the Constitution on "Ecumenical Relations" affirms "As part of the church universal, The United Methodist Church believes the Lord of the church is calling Christians everywhere to strive toward unity. . . ."

The ecumenical, unitive or catholic commitment, United Methodism also builds into its structure, policy and program elsewhere in the *Discipline*--in particular:

> "Our Doctrinal Heritage" in Part II locates United Methodism within the "common heritage with Christians of every age and nation" and sets out "Basic Christian Affirmations" which United Methodists confess with all Christians.
>
> This statement concludes that "With other Christians, we declare the essential oneness of the church in Christ Jesus." It illustrates that ground of and commitment to unity, affirming, "This rich heritage of shared Christian belief finds expression in our hymnody and liturgies. Our unity is affirmed in the historic creeds as we confess one holy, catholic, and apostolic church. It is also experienced in joint ventures of ministry and in various forms of ecumenical cooperation.
> . . . "Our avowed ecumenical commitment as United Methodists is to gather our own doctrinal emphases into the larger Christian unity, there to be made more meaningful in a

richer whole."

"Our Doctrinal History" begins by insisting that the church's constitutive traditions "understood themselves as standing in the central stream of Christian spirituality and doctrine," characterizes the church's vocation as "catholic spirit," and concludes by positing the recovery, updating and reinvigorating of "our distinctive doctrinal heritage--catholic, evangelical, and reformed--as essential to both evangelism and ecumenical dialogue.

"Our Theological Task" ends with a section on "Ecumenical Commitment" insisting that "Christian unity is not an option" but is mandated theologically, biblically and practically "a gift to be received and expressed."
"The Ministry of All Christians," Part III of the *Discipline*, evokes the ecumenical consensus of Vatican II, COCU, BEM that all baptized are called to ministry. Appropriately it situates important United Methodist rubrics--the Journey of a Connectional People, Servant Ministry, Servant Leadership, Called to Inclusiveness, and the Fulfillment of Ministry Through The United Methodist Church--within the narration of the longer and larger story of God's covenantal initiatives and of the Church's mission.

Part V, Chapter One, "The Local Church," in framing the church's global mission makes provision for cooperative parishes and ecumenical shared ministries.

The rubric on "Church Membership," para 214, states "The United Methodist Church is a part of the holy catholic (universal) church, as we confess in the Apostles Creed." The next paragraph affirms "A member of any local United Methodist church is a member of the denomination and the catholic (universal) church."

The episcopal or superintending office is assigned a number of tasks, among them, "to seek and be a sign of the unity of the faith" and "to exercise the discipline of the whole Church" (para 404) and specifically "To provide liaison and leadership in the quest for Christian unity in ministry, mission, and structure and in the search for strengthened relationships with other living faith communities" (para 414).

The General Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns, and its corresponding boards or officers on jurisdictional, conference, district, and congregational levels, are charged explicitly to exercise "ecumenical leadership" towards Christian unity and dialogue with others faiths, cultures and ideologies.

The *Discipline* acknowledges UMC membership explicitly in several "Interdenominational Agencies"--World Methodist Council, the Consultation on Church Union (COCU), the National Council of Churches, the World Council of Churches, the Commission on Pan-Methodist Cooperation and the American Bible Society--and assigns UMC leadership therein to the bishops and GCCUIC leadership (para 2401).

United Methodism's formal commitments to unity and catholicity set impressive standards and directions and accord with the role United Methodism and its predecessor denominations have exercised within the ecumenical movement. Methodism has been a major ecumenical player. At this writing, Methodists head both the National and World Council of Churches. In the past, Methodists have played leadership roles in COCU, indeed, in many unitive efforts at regional, national and global levels. Over recent decades, United Methodism has invested much in bi-lateral

dialogues, as for instance, the one for which this essay is crafted[52]. The catholic language of the *Discipline*, the prominence of Methodists in ecumenical endeavor, and the clear commitment of the church's leadership to dialogue give the appearance of ecclesiological single-mindedness and coherence. In actual practice, various kinds of unities beckon the church, United Methodists work on different fronts, the genuine laborers for unity and catholicity remain few, the church at all levels voices more commitment than it proves willing to honor, some within the denomination express open hostility to ecumenical efforts and many remain absolutely oblivious to investments long made. And the important tension with which the denomination began, a tension lived out by John and Charles Wesley, the ecclesiological tension between the church's catholic and its missional self-understanding remains present, if lessened in intensity. That tension can sometimes be obscured, forgotten, neglected, overlooked in ecumenical conversation in Methodist self-representation--in efforts to mirror our conversational partners or as a stratagem towards unity. The ecclesiological tension should not be obscured. It constitutes an important gift of Methodism to the large church.

Discipline: Missional Commitment

The missional understanding of the church remains prominent in the two books where it has been most salient from the start, in *Discipline* and *Hymnal*. Both nicely exhibit the tension, now both sides of the tension, within which United Methodism does church. The unitive side of this tension we have described above. The missional is equally prominent

The *Discipline* devotes four paragraphs of the "Preamble" to the church's unity, but affirms in a fifth, "The church of Jesus Christ exists in and for the world, and its very dividedness is a hindrance to its mission in that world." The "Restrictive Rules" continue the protection to Methodism's distinctive, missional understanding of episcopacy or superintendency, as itinerant and general in character. Several articles within the Constitution delineate the nature and tasks of the conferences of United Methodism and Para 31 identifies the annual conference as "the basic body in the Church." In so defining the church connectionally and at that level which admits into ordained ministry, at which ordination occurs, and from which ministries proceed and ministers sent, United Methodism sustains Wesley's missional ecclesiology. The *Discipline* treats the understanding and tasks of ministry that flow from this ecclesiology later. But from this definition flow Methodism's distinctive itinerant and appointive commitments. Part II on "Doctrinal Standards and Our Theological Task," as we have noted, accent Wesleyan practical, soteriological and missional emphases within the shared catholic heritage.

The missional understanding becomes more marked in Part III, "The Ministry of All Christians," subtitled "The Mission and Ministry of the Church." Para 120. *The Mission* proclaims

> The mission of the Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ. Local churches provide the most significant arena through which disciple-making occurs.

The "Rationale for our Mission," immediately following, begins:

> The mission of the Church it to make disciples of Jesus Christ by proclaiming the good news of God's grace and thus seeking the fulfillment of God's reign and realm in the

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[52]On Methodist participation in the various ecumenical conversations, see Geoffrey Wainwright, *Methodists in Dialog* (Nashville: Kingswood Books/Abingdon Press, 1995).

> world. The fulfillment of God's reign and realm in the world is the vision Scripture holds before us.

The phrasing attempts to hold justification and justice, evangelism and social transformation, in tension, but the adequate development of the latter missional emphasis really is to be found in the next major Disciplinary section, Part IV[53]Part III does set the mood by reference to and exegesis of Matthew 28:19-20. As of the 1996 *Discipline*, III also enunciates a theme of servant ministry and servant leadership. That calling figures prominently in the office of the permanent deacon but belongs also to the laity and is added as well to that of the elder and therefore of bishops. The full implications of and an adequate theology for servanthood need to be more fully developed especially since the church made this missional addition, a fourth, to the traditional three--word, sacrament and order[54].

Another section in III, para 138, declares the church to be "Called to Inclusiveness." That mission of the church, to be agent and anticipatory of the kingdom and of the redemption of the world, the *Discipline* develops quite fully in Part IV, "Social Principles," pp. 95-122. This long treatise recalls early Methodism's social witness (including antislavery), notes the 1908 elaboration and adoption by the MEC of a social creed (other predecessor denominations following later) and develops United Methodism's contemporary social commitments under six rubrics, "The Natural World," "The Nurturing Community," "The Social Community," "The Economic Community," "The Political Community," and "The World Community." The principles are to guide United Methodist attitudes and practices with respect to the world outside the church. They also apply within, touching matters of marriage, divorce, sexuality, family violence, sexual harassment, abortion, care at the end of life, and suicide. More fully developed stances on both internal and external concerns, General Conference has chosen to locate in a now huge, quadrennially produced tome, *The Book of Resolutions*. One might wish that this could be added as a fifth book defining United Methodism and exhibiting its ecclesial sensibilities. However, despite its official status, United Methodist laity and clergy seemingly make little use of it. Fortunately, they are more likely to heed the injunction that appears with the "Social Creed" in the *Discipline* that the creed be available to the people and used in Sunday worship. A variant of the creed appears in the *Hymnal* to be used as an affirmation of faith.

The *Discipline* continues efforts to balance evangelism and social concern, mission and catholicity in the balance of what has now become a long book. Part V on "Organization and Administration," for instance, begins the treatment on "The Local Church" with successive paragraphs, the first of which affirms definitionally, "The **local church** provides the most significant arena through which disciple-making occurs." The next paragraph, treating the local church's function, declares, "The church of Jesus Christ exists in and for the world. It is primarily at the level of the local church that the church encounters the world."

The United Methodist Hymnal achieves the same balance, the balance at least in part explaining its wildly successful introduction and congregational adoption. It retains the favorites derived from Methodism's revivalistic and holiness past, like Fanny Crosby's "Pass Me Not, O Gentle Savior," "Blessed Assurance," "I am Thine, O Lord," and "Rescue the Perishing." It

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[53]However, as the "Counterpoint" discussion indicates, not all United Methodists hold these two aspects togetherThe more progressive wing of the church believes that the conservatives slight justice and social transformationThe conservative wing believes that the progressives slight justification and evangelism.

[54]On issues and problems related to this concept, see Frank, *Polity, Practice and the Mission of The United Methodist Church*, 162-68.

includes social gospel hymns by Harry Emerson Fosdick and Frank Mason North, civil rights songs, and verse from across the world. Alongside Methodism's missional anthems can be found chants ancient and modern, from the Community of Taize or Byzantium[55]. Like the *Discipline*, the *Hymnal* invites United Methodists to claim their distinctive voice but to sound it loudly for the church catholic.

Conclusion

United Methodism's four books define it and exhibit its ecclesial sensibilities, To only two of them, the Bible and *Hymnal*, would most United Methodists have ready access. The other two, *The Book of Discipline* and *The Book of Worship*, some Methodists would have never seen. Nevertheless, each can and I think should work for and work itself into the drama of the church's daily life. The *Discipline* and *Book of Worship* function off stage determining how the play unfolds, who acts, and what instructions to follow. Bible and *Hymnbook* script Methodist life together.

For present life together, especially life in congregations, the four books, where effectively used, orient Methodists towards the Word, mediate United Methodism's traditions, including particularly its Wesleyan heritage, offer experiential expressions of the faith once delivered, and order belief and practice accordingly. The books evidence United Methodism's actual use of quadrilateral ways of knowing Christ and being Christ-like. They also show, in their convergence, a convergence clearer now than in earlier days, how the four-fold epistemology or hermeneutic yields a common focus. And the common focus in the four books orients United Methodism to the classic marks or notes of the church--its **oneness**, its **holiness**, its **catholicity** and its **apostolicity**. Methodism nuances those marks in its own distinctive fashion as connectional, disciplined, ecumenical, missional. Its books claim those Wesleyan nuances or understandings but point as well towards the received ecclesiological doctrines of catholic Christianity.

In these four books, the catholic and missional, the high liturgical and fervid evangelical that the Wesleys held so curiously together come again into tension. The four books beckon United Methodists who press to one extreme or the other to reclaim balance and live our distinctive witness. Scripture, hymnbook, discipline, and book of worship, define how United Methodists do church. Ecclesiology in its most familiar doctrinal form this may not be. But in structure and practice, in office and program, United Methodists nevertheless live faithfully into the ecumenical ecclesial consensus, adding thereunto what they affirm to be an apostolic commitment to mission. Methodists offer a **via** salutis to augment the tradition's ordo salutis and an ecclesiological **via** to augment the tradition's ecclesiological ordo.[56]

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[55]Young, *Companion to The United Methodist Hymnal*.

[56]See Jones, *United Methodist Doctrine: The Extreme Center*, 246-70 and Campbell, *Methodist Doctrine: The Essentials*,64-79.