

Albert Outler and The Theological Study Commission on Doctrine and Doctrinal Standards
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On August 30, 1968 Albert Outler sent a letter to Dr. Robert Thornburg of First Methodist Church, Peoria, Illinois. The first paragraph runs as follows.

Three separate, recent conversations about the Theological Study Commission have complicated my picture of it. Two of the bishops who were in on the nomination have, separately, volunteered the information that my name being placed first on the list of members was tantamount to a tacit nomination as chairman. That both of them made the same point suggested the unworthy thought that this expectation may be somewhat more widespread, in which case, my not being elected chairman would have negative connotations in some quarters where they could prove embarrassing. One of the bishops made another obvious point: that they were counting on my role as chairman in presenting the work of the Commission to the Council (we've no bishops at all in our group, you know) and to the church at large.¹

This is vintage Outler writing as a Cadillac politician, positioning himself to take on one of the most important roles in his rich and fascinating life as a United Methodist. His throwaway line in the parenthesis is an interesting sidebar on the role of bishops in American Methodism (they are not expected to participate in theological deliberations); however, my interest is in the light this letter throws on Outler. We see here the characteristic public humility, the insightful reading of Methodist politics, and his own readiness to take on one of the most difficult responsibilities that could have been asked of a theologian in the nineteen sixties. He goes on in the rest of the letter to identify deftly conditions of service where he describes the kind of people who would run the administrative side of the work and who would be involved in the Drafting Committee. The one person he wanted as vice-chairman was Judge Tom Reavely, a member of the Texas Supreme Court. So it came to be that Outler in due course was elected to chair the Theological Study Commission.

My aim in this short paper is modest. I want initially to sketch a preliminary overview of some of the crucial issues at stake and Outler's role in resolving them. With that in hand I want to explore some of the ecclesiastical and theological issues that the Commission adopts, assuming that Outler was in fact the prime architect of what came to be The United Methodist Church at its inception in the late sixties and early seventies. I will finish with a brief commentary on the significance of my observations for understanding the current crisis in The United Methodist Church. I leave it to historians to provide the full-scale narrative that the work of Outler and the Commission deserves as a pivotal episode in the history of United Methodism.²

The background developments in North American culture clearly deserve a mention. The late sixties were a tumultuous period. Leaving aside the possible impact of events in Paris in 1968, we can name the turmoil generated by the Vietnam war, the racial unrest, the student movement, the early expressions of feminist liberation, the revolt against the mores of the post-

¹ Letter to Dr. Robert Thornburg in the Outler archives at Bridwell Library, Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University.

² There is more than enough for a doctoral dissertation on this theme.

war period, the deep distrust of government that emerged, and the sexual revolution. Perhaps it was not the best of times to be called on to sort through the future of the new church that was formed with the merger between the Methodist Episcopal Church and the Evangelical United Brethren in 1968 in Dallas. On the other hand, churches do not get to choose when they have to tackle the internal challenges that befall them; the crowbar of events does not allow such romantic delusions.³

The more salient consideration, however, is the internal theological developments within twentieth century Methodism. By the late nineteenth century Methodists had been forced to face the fascinating intellectual concerns that emerged to call into question the traditional Christian claims embedded in Methodism. Consider the following catalogue of challenges: the development and application of historical investigation to scripture and to standard, inherited doctrines of scripture; the fresh queries about authority and the epistemology of theology represented by the appeal to religious experience as the proper, if not exclusive warrant for Christian theology as a whole; the deployment of new forms of philosophical speculation worked out in German idealism and imported to Methodism by Border Parker Bowne; the challenge of evolution to traditional interpretations of Genesis and traditional theories about the nature of human agents; the massive social dislocation and suffering related to the effects of urbanization, industrialism, and immigration; and the salient attraction of new forms of revivalism expressed in the Holiness movement and in the later transposition to Pentecostalism. Putting the issue sharply, Methodism as an aspirational player on the wider cultural and international scene, could not simply continue theologically with business as usual. It had the institutional and cultural resources, represented especially by its universities and colleges, both to identify and tackle the challenges that were clearly visible to any candid observer.

One way to read the twentieth century narrative of Methodist theology is to see it as involving a concerted effort to find a way forward once it was acknowledged that neither Wesley nor the doctrinal commitments represented by The Articles of Religion were no longer seen as adequate expressions of ecclesial doctrines in the wake of modernity as that developed in the nineteenth century. Thus, Methodist theologians were wont to turn to Schliermacher and his successors, to Process philosophy, to Barth, to Bultmann, to Bonhoeffer to the Niebuhr brothers, to revisionary forms of Fundamentalism represented by Karl F. H. Henry, to Thomas Altizer and the Death of God movement, and to initial forms of Liberation theology as the way forward. At one level this represents as an anarchic, kaleidoscopic range of options; at another level, it represents a remarkable fecundity of theological imagination and ingenuity. What it meant for Outler and his team was that the prospects of reaching agreement were grim in the extreme. It is a mark of his political genius and intellectual dexterity that he managed to produce a report that was passed by a ninety-seven percent majority in the General Conference of 1972. My own judgement is that Outler and the favor in which he was held were crucial to holding United Methodism together during and after the critical period of its inception.

We are now in a position to identify the crisis that faced the Commission on Theology. It can be expressed in a variety of ways. How were United Methodists to find a solution to the problem of radical theological diversity in its ranks? How were United Methodists to reconcile the constitutional requirements on canonical doctrine with the existing canonical doctrines and with the actual working doctrines spread across the church? How was the United Methodist

³ There were in fact significant developments on two other fronts that clearly caught Outler's attention: The Commission on Structures, and the Commission on Social Principles. The deliberations of the latter commission are especially salient, as we shall see later.

Church to revise its canonical doctrines in the light of the incompatible network of doctrines now embodied in the life and work of the church as a whole?⁴ This network of issues takes us, of course, to the deep challenges facing Christian theology in the modern period. What makes the issue especially interesting is the fact that a significant global church decided to take on these challenges directly not just at an academic level but at an ecclesial level. Perhaps it is useful to put the issue positively and simply as the problem of updating the canonical doctrines of The United Methodist Church. This, I propose, is the primary issue the Commission faced when it began its work. Moreover, I do not hesitate to say that this is a problem that is nothing less than a *Grundlagenkrise*, a dilemma that goes to the very foundations of our spiritual, ecclesial, and intellectual life together.⁵

With this in place we can identify several secondary issues in the neighborhood. Consider first the problem of bringing together The Articles of Religion and The Confession of Faith without triggering a constitutional amendment. This was solved in 1968 by the simple device of deeming that their content of the latter did not contradict the content of the former. This is understandably seen as finessing the issue in the interests of unity.⁶ Then, second, there was the problem of actually identifying the constitutional standards of doctrine as determined originally in 1808. Did these standards include Wesley's *Sermons* and *Explanatory Notes on the New Testament*?⁷ Third, there was the problem of how to handle the anti-Catholic material in the Articles of Religion. Given the United Methodist enthusiasm for ecumenism, these were clearly an embarrassment.⁸

A fascinating letter to John Cobb provides an additional set of concerns that animated Outler in his leadership of the Commission. Cobb has accused Outler of being "tyrannical" in the way he was running the Commission. He wrote:

I felt again at Denver how fortunate the church is to have a man to head this commission who combines experience and wisdom in ecclesiastical politics with theological and historical erudition and insight. I shudder to think what such a commission might have done without you! If I did not feel that way I would have greatly resented your tyrannical domination of the commission and would try to fight it, but as it is, I really want to cooperate – although not without snide comments.⁹

Outler deftly replies to Cobb by owning the charge and then proceeding to identify a further raft of interesting challenges facing the commission. In turn they relate to the state of the audience envisaged, the importance of ecumenical approval, the need for an inspiring outcome, and the

⁴ Note the double incompatibility involved. First, the internal incompatibility of the various responses to the challenges thrown up by modernity; second, the incompatibility of many of these responses with the actual canonical doctrines adopted by The United Methodist Church.

⁵ I use here a technical term used by Walter Burkert to describe the challenge posed by the discovery of irrational numbers to standard Pythagorean mathematics. For a fascinating treatment of the relevant material see Erroll Morris, *The Ashtray (or the Man Who Denied Reality)* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2018), 82.

⁶ Later the differences were exploited to support the drive to pluralism as the hallmark of the United Methodist approach to doctrine.

⁷ And if it included the Sermons did it include all the sermons or a selection of the Sermons?

⁸ The issue was resolved by adding a footnote that insisted that the relevant polemical articles be interpreted in the light of our best ecumenical insights.

⁹ Letter from Cobb to Outler dated October 7, 1969.

danger represented by the bishops of the church. It is worth quoting his account of the motives for being tyrannical.

The first is my vivid awareness of the confused apperceptive mass in the minds of the primary audience (General Conference delegates, theological faculties, clergy and church folk generally) and the abundant danger that we will add to that confusion rather than help them to a new level of understanding and consensus. There is a torturous channel between the Scylla of dull reiteration of tradition and the Charybdis of rootless innovation that we have to navigate; we have an unstable “population” to lead towards consensus rather than con with a report they’ll “adopt” or “reject.”¹⁰

Another anxious concern of mine comes from the cloud of ecumenical witnesses surrounding us, who will judge our work by standards that are more exigent and sophisticated than those of our UMC folk generally. Their judgment that we had and had missed a crucial opportunity to add to the larger “catholic consensus” in the contemporary ecumenical community would embarrass me acutely – and I confess to you that I do not regard the entire personnel of our Commission as being especially ecumenically-minded, not at least in the area of doctrinal guidelines.¹¹

A third related concern comes from my historian’s experience of reconstructing and assessing the process of creed and catechism making in other contexts – and my dismay over the more recent experiments along this line.... In too many cases, the outcome has been uninspired and uninspiring (either too “traditional” or too “contemporary”), drafted in committee rhetoric and not up to the best of any individuals that I know were involved in the process. I wouldn’t like to appear in somebody’s deprecating footnote as having a major role in a major theological event in UMC history that turned out badly (or even just blandly).¹²

My strongest push to tyranny, though, comes from a certain knowledge that a powerful group within the Council of Bishops is waiting in the wings, expecting (almost hoping) that we’ll come up with something unacceptable or unedifying – whereupon, they and the Council can come forward to exercise the *magisterium ecclesiae* with which they’ve invested all along! This is one of the chief reasons why none of the bishops was appointed to our Commission; they will bear no responsibility for our work and can act more freely in the sequel – just as the EUB bishops did in preparing their “Confession” in 1962!¹³

These are extremely interesting comments, not least on the light it throws on Outler’s relation to Cobb, on Outler’s attitude to the role of bishops of the day, and on explaining how it was that Outler came to be the chief architect and indeed writer of the

¹⁰ Letter from Outler to Cobb dated October 20, 1969.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

final report.¹⁴ Aside from the particular challenges Outler enumerates here, we are already given clear hints that the problem of adequate updating is very much on his mind in his efforts to control what was to develop within the Commission. He clearly aims to have a consensus document that will avoid the extremes of being too traditional or too contemporary; that will be ecumenically valuable; and that will intellectually pass muster (it is to be ‘truly creditable’ and ‘outstanding’). He has his sights on the *Grundlagenkrisis* I noted earlier.

The content of the mandate given by General Conference clearly assumes the problem of updating that I am proposing was the primary preoccupation of the Commission.

To study Part II of the Plan of Union and other pertinent references in the Discipline and in the history of doctrine in the Methodist and Evangelical United Brethren Churches and to bring to the next General Conference a progress report concerning “Doctrine and Doctrinal Standards in the United Methodist Church.” If the Commission deems it advisable, it may undertake the preparation of a contemporary formulation of doctrine and belief, in supplementation to all antecedent formulations. In its work, the Commission shall collaborate with the Social Principles Study Commission...and in all its formulations, it shall give due attention to the integrity of theological and ethical concerns in the Wesleyan tradition.¹⁵

On first blush, it looks as if the Commission might well come up with “a contemporary formulation of doctrine and belief”. Indeed, in an early announcement from Bishop Eugene Frank, the Commission is identified as “The Creedal Study Commission”. From the outset, it is clear that this way of identifying the Commission was dropped and the more general title of “The Theological Study Commission on Doctrine and Doctrinal Standards” was adopted.¹⁶ However, it is clear from the record that Outler was totally opposed to any new creedal statement both on grounds of principle and of expediency.¹⁷ So we already have in hand one option that might have been taken to deal with the problem of the updating of official doctrine: the Commission could have tried its hand at writing a new creed and adding it to the existing standards of doctrine. Given the state of affairs in both academic and church circles, namely, the radical diversity of belief and potential practice, this was clearly not a live option. Another option noted by John Cobb was the model of the Dutch Catechism.¹⁸ This was a new catechism brought out by the

¹⁴ In the archives, the original draft in Outler’s hand makes clear that he took the lead in producing the report. Moreover, the internal drive for felicity of expression if not intended depth of content bears all the marks of Outler’s versatile mind.

¹⁵ Daily Christian Advocate, 235.

¹⁶ It would be fascinating to know how Bishop Frank came to use this title in an official document that listed the elected members of the Commission. Outler laments the continued use of the term “Creedal Study Commission” in a letter to Bishop Frank, dated September 3, 1968. He notes that the name-change occurred at the General Conference in Dallas in 1968 and that a new job-description was given to it. So clearly Bishop Frank was not up to speed on what had happened or had forgotten what had happened.

¹⁷ Outler makes this very clear in a letter to Bishop Frank dated September 3, 1968. It is also very clear from a letter to John Cobb who ventured that the Commission might indeed come up with a theological statement that would, among other things, provide inspiration for fresh theological work within The United Methodist Church. See letter from Outler to Cobb dated November 18, 1969.

¹⁸ John Cobb, “A New Creed for United Methodism?”, 6; available in the Outler archives.

Catholic Church in the Netherlands in 1966 aimed at providing a fresh statement of Christian belief. *Time Magazine* described it as “a lively, undogmatic compendium of doctrine that reflects the most recent radical insights of theologians and scripture scholars”.¹⁹ Given the content of the prevailing standards of doctrine (they were, as I have already noted, robustly traditional), it is hard to see how the option to develop a catechism like the Dutch Catechism would not have been received as radically revisionist in orientation, and thus subject to constitutional, academic, and popular resistance. More to the point, this would have been the functional equivalent of a new creed subject to the same difficulty just noted with respect to the adoption of new creed.

A carefully prepared preview of the solution to be eventually adopted can be found in the Interim Report delivered to the church as a whole in 1970. I shall be succinct in describing the crucial features and elements in play. Taking the features first, what stands out initially is the historical orientation driving the work of the Commission. Enormous effort went into working through the original writings of John Wesley and the content and context of the Articles of Religion and Confession of Faith. A second feature is more theological in that there was a heavy emphasis on negative evaluations not so much of Wesley as of the Articles of Religion and the Confession of Faith. We might call this an exercise in substantive doctrinal criticism. A third feature is the effort to provide a detailed survey of the problems facing the theologians of the day and the varied attempts to address the designated problems. We might usefully refer to this as an exercise in the history of contemporary ideas, an exercise in the neighborhood of historical analysis but one which is too close to the history to be counted truly historical in nature.

It is worth dwelling for a moment on the material that shows up. The most important material is available in a booklet circulated widely in the church and presented as an interim report of the Commission. All members of the United Methodist Church were invited to engage if only at a distance in the work of the Commission. The report falls into four sections.²⁰ The first part sought to deal with “the problem of doctrine and doctrinal standards in the United Methodist Church”.²¹ It has thirteen units which begin with “Our Rootage in the Christian Tradition” and ends with “The Problem of Updating our Doctrinal Heritage”.²² This section is essentially historical in orientation and ends with a clear rejection of a new creed or the model of the Dutch Catechism as the way forward in dealing with the issue of updating our doctrinal commitments.²³ The gist of the argument is that while Methodism did have various doctrinal standards (*Sermons, Explanatory Notes, Articles, and Confession*), their content and reception show that they operated as stimuli to theological reflection across the originating churches and as loose boundaries that provided minimal constraint on doctrinal development and innovation.

The second section (identified as Part I of the report) set out a catalogue of perennial doctrinal issues. There are no less than fourteen topics, each of which is explored deftly if briefly. They are worth listing in full: What is the Gospel; Salvation as Individual and Corporate; Salvation as Present and Future; The Role of Man in Salvation; God’s Mercy and Justice; Freedom and Discipline; The Religious and the Ethical; The Decisiveness of Jesus and the

¹⁹ Time, December 1, 1967.

²⁰ There is a certain awkwardness in the formatting in that three separate documents are melded together.

²¹ Journal of the 1970 General Conference, 904.

²² In between we have eleven sections: “The Wesleyan Concept of Authority”, “The Model Deed” and the Methodist Standards of Doctrine”, “The Gist of the Wesleyan Doctrine in Sermons and Notes”, “The Doctrinal Standards in American Methodism”, “The Evangelicals and United Brethren”, “The United Brethren ‘Confession’”, “Anomalies and Confusion in the UMC”, and “The Recovery of our ‘Common History’”.

²³ The use of the term “heritage” already hints at where the Commission is headed, that is, to a historizing of the actual doctrinal commitments of the UMC.

Universality of God; The Sectarian and the Catholic Conception of the Church; Bible and Tradition; Reason and Revelation; The Deity and Humanity of Christ; and The Problem of Evil.

The third section (identified as Part Two), sets forth a list of “Contemporary Challenges to Historic Doctrine”.²⁴ This time the list is down to twelve: “The Problem of Authority”, “The Breakdown of Traditional Community”, “Religious Pluralism”, “The Ending of White Supremacy”, “Secularity”, “Modern World Views”, “The Problem of Supernaturalism”, “The Eclipse of God”, “The Historical Consciousness”, “The Primacy of Psychology”, “The Rejection of the Christian Ideal”, and “Man’s Alienation from Nature”. The section ends with a warning that the preceding list is neither definitive nor exhaustive.

Taken together these two sections add up to no less than a list of twenty-six problems deserving attention in the church as a whole as it engages in theological study and reflection. The overall impression is twofold. First, the prevailing standards of doctrines, especially the Articles and Confession are essentially *passé*, if not detrimental, to the kind of fresh thinking that is needed. Putting the issue in conventional terms, they represent an old orthodoxy that is no longer viable. “Our fathers spoke of God against a background of orthodox faith which has been decimated by controversy and formalism.”²⁵ Second, it was highly unlikely that either the Commission or the church would find adequate solutions to the problems identified. Clearly it would require a multi-volume *summa* to tackle the issues involved; even to think of achieving this would be utopian in the extreme.

As a sample of how deep the Commission was prepared to go in naming and potentially resolving the potential questions posed, consider the final comments in the unit on “The Eclipse of God”. Noting that belief in God may be limited in the future to a religious ghetto, the Interim Report continues:

In this situation, might it be necessary for the church to consider formulating its message in a way that does not pre-suppose belief in God? This possibility is being explored consciously by those who (despite their personal belief) realize that “God-language” turns many hearers off. Worship of God is sometimes transformed into celebration of communal experience and ideals. Although the church could hardly approve atheism, its practice seems to accommodate itself more and more to the eclipse of God.

Theologians are forced to consider with radical seriousness, therefore, whether belief in God might be a dispensable item for Christian faith. On this point they are deeply divided. For our part we think it is not dispensable and that we must sacrifice “relevance” if need be to make clear that we are ultimately concerned with a more than human reality. But we must recognize that often before when theologians have drawn the line in this way events have proved them wrong! Perhaps we will find that the word “God” is so freighted with meanings that are completely misunderstood that it must be abandoned in favor of some other.²⁶

The fourth and final section takes us into a radical change of style; we are given “From Our Heritage to a New Quest: A Sermonic Experiment”. It is tempting to treat this as a pious

²⁴ Journal of the 1970 General Conference, 923.

²⁵ Ibid. 963.

²⁶ Ibid. 954.

afterthought; this would be a radical mistake, for it represents a sophisticated preview of where the Commission was headed. The very inclusion of the genre of sermon is illuminating. It signals a predisposition to appeal to Wesley's *Sermons* as a standard of doctrine and thus softens up the reader for a spiritually focused but dynamic reception and development of doctrine that uses Wesley's *Sermons* as the authentic bearer of Methodist doctrine and identity.²⁷ The Introduction sets out the problem of the contemporary failure to find a meaningful way of life, which is the sermon's way of providing a relevant reading of the meaning of salvation. Put sharply, salvation is seen as a pious way of speaking of salvation as essentially related to the "great movement for humanizing".²⁸ The next step, beyond, a neat summary of updated Trinitarian language, is to focus on salvation thus understood as the form of this special concern for full humanity/salvation. Here the move to make Wesley's *Sermons* rather than the Articles or Confession as the heartbeat of Methodist theology is used to undermine any notion of determinate doctrine practiced, say, in a more confessional mode. The goal is not to develop a specific canonical doctrine. "The single aim [of] our theology is to communicate to all of God's children the power of His love, so that it is personally felt and actively expressed in self-discipline and social righteousness."²⁹

It is hard to see how this can be achieved without actually articulating some scheme of doctrine, so it is no surprise that the next section provides a theatrical riff on the sweep of Methodist theology, starting with God, the doctrine of grace, the nature of faith, and the great themes of justification, assurance, and sanctification. The goal, however, is not simply to repeat past formulae but to engage in honest translation from then to now. To this end the sermon circles back to the theme of full humanity, providing a vision of growth that latches on to the relevant historical material on sanctification as a process rather than a perfected product. All this is an effort to sum up a core of United Methodism's theological heritage; a summary which clearly commits Methodism to a very specific raft of doctrinal themes and their person-relative updating. We have moved from form to content.

What remains is to tackle the issue of sources and norms of our theological work wherever and however it may be formulated across the face of the church. The crucial questions are these: "By what authority, from what sources, did the fathers of our heritage decide what they should believe? By what appeal should we today decide in disputed matters?"³⁰ The answer supplied is now all too familiar:

Wesley gave us interacting scales to weigh our faith. The order of these sources is important: first, scripture itself; then the historical interpretation of scripture which we shall call "tradition"; then individual experience.³¹

Thus, the last part of the sermon provides an overview on how these sources and norms are to be construed if we are to be true to our way doing theology in the United Methodist tradition.

²⁷²⁷ The importance of having the *Sermons* as official standards of doctrine shows up in the heated debate initiated by Richard Heitzenrater when he argues they should be treated as a kind of midrash on the Articles; absent the *Sermons*, Outler's project is in real danger, for he needs them, for example, to secure the position of the Quadrilateral in his account of Wesleyan and Methodist theology.

²⁸ Ibid. 960.

²⁹ Ibid. 962.

³⁰ Ibid. 967

³¹ Ibid. 967

I have dealt with this Interim Report at length not just because of its intrinsic interest, nor simply because it highlights the careful way in which the Commission alerted the church as to where it was headed, but because it is clearly the boiler-plate for the final report that was approved by General Conference. It would be tedious in the extreme to repeat what shows up there other than to note the layout of the material as a whole. Thus, we have sections on our doctrinal heritage, on our doctrinal history, on the actual standards (Articles, Confession, etc.), and on our theological task. These are now taught across the board in The United Methodist Church. They bear from beginning to end the footprint of Albert Outler. Anyone familiar with the corpus of his work will spot the inimitable content and style. To be sure, they are not merely the product of his pen. He brilliantly orchestrated a church-wide discussion; he drew on a wealth of written and oral material presented during the Commission meetings; he worked behind the scenes to secure the results he wanted; he conciliated critics;³² and in the end, he saw the work of the Commission adopted by a whopping majority at the General Conference in Atlanta in 1972.

Outler clearly identified the work of the Commission as an exercise in theological and ecclesial renewal. So, in this final section I want to step back and provide my own assessment of this pivotal turning point in the history of Methodism. There are other tasks that could be executed, like, looking in more detail at the nuts and bolts of the actual working of the Commission, or tracing the reception and minor changes that occurred since 1972. My aim at this stage of deliberation is bolder and more controversial. I have reluctantly come to the conclusion that the work of the Commission and its adoption by The United Methodist Church has been a disaster. Indeed, the current crisis that has befallen us is in part the natural outcome of the decisions taken up in 1972. Getting clear on these matters is what now lies before us.

In moving towards this strong conclusion, I do not want to be misunderstood. Thus, I have long believed that without Outler it was not likely that United Methodism would have been able to hold together as it tackled the *Grundlagenkrise* that all churches in the West have experienced in the nineteenth and twentieth century. Moreover, while my own encounter and experience with Outler is a mixed bag, I have nothing but affection for him as a person and nothing but respect for the intellectual giant that he was. Overall, he was a total delight to know; he was a worthy critic and opponent in theological dispute; he could take as good as he gave in hand-to-hand theological combat. Furthermore, as I shall note later, he came to change his mind quite radically, although this is not generally known; it is surely the mark of a true academic at least to admit the mistakes made even if they cannot be corrected later in life. Finally, I owe Outler my own re-owning of the Methodist tradition, even though my diagnoses of our problems and solutions are radically different from his. It was listening to a cassette set of his lectures while in bed with the flu, that I found my way to a whole new appreciation of Wesley's life and work. His historical ruminations on Wesley's context, his canny way of making the initially archaic themes of Wesley come alive, and, his magnificent edition of the *Sermons*; these are landmark elements in my own appropriation of Wesley.

Let me make haste by noting two features of Outler's work in the Commission that can be set aside. First, following the work of Richard Heitzenrater, I am skeptical about the claim that Wesley's *Sermons* and *Explanatory Notes* were ever adopted as the canonical doctrines of Methodism in 1808 or thereafter. These were effectively shoe-horned into the *Book of Discipline* in 1968. This was pivotal for Outler for it allowed him to wax eloquently on his particular

³² Outler cleverly found a way to contain what he perceived as a disastrous departure from the primacy of scripture in the articulation of the Quadrilateral as developed and argued by John Cobb. See the letter to Professor Mack Stokes dated February 18, 1971.

reading of Wesley and to sideline the Articles and Confession in his account of United Methodist doctrine. Second, I am convinced that the adoption of the report of the Commission on Theological Study in 1972 was unconstitutional, in that it involved a radical change in the doctrinal commitments of United Methodism. To be fair to Outler, he wanted the Report to be more than a legislative enactment; but this was denied him in Conference deliberations. However, *de facto* he actually brought about a radical change in the official doctrinal commitments of United Methodism. Set these two observations aside.

Now for the more salient issues. First, I agree that the wider challenge facing United Methodism was daunting in the extreme. I further agree, that theologians cannot dodge the issues that have been raised in the West over the last two hundred years. However, it is laughable to think that United Methodism and its theologians could actually solve the problem they set for themselves. To extend this exercise to all in United Methodism is intellectual insanity. Thus, I think that the whole exercise was flawed from the beginning; it was an exercise that in its very nature has to be left to the academy and to the university. In a way, this was recognized by the Commission; the list of twenty-six perennial and contemporary problems might be parceled out to a research team with an unlimited budget and unlimited time. To think that any could be solved in the course of four years (if ever) is utopian in the extreme.

Given that they could not be solved, then the problem and the solution had to be finessed by intellectual sleight of hand. In broad terms, what was developed was a Liberal Protestant framing of the issues and a Liberal Protestant solution. Put succinctly, this meant a historizing of the canonical commitments of the church (ancient, Reformed, and Wesleyan), an effort to identify a core set of theological themes updated by at best a network of theologians and lay-folk headed by Outler, and a school-boy exercise in the epistemology of theology represented by the Quadrilateral of scripture, tradition, reason, and experience.³³ The latter has been rattled off as a methodological mantra that was not only imprecise in its formulation but radically confused in its inability to distinguish between sources and norms in Christian theology. Here I must be brutal and blunt. What we got was effectively the theology and epistemology of Albert Outler, who deftly managed to get both imposed on the church as a whole. We had effectively a new founding of Methodism and a new founder, Albert Outler.

There are ironies and incoherences galore wrapped up in this development.

First, Outler was very worried about the role of academic theologians in the work of the Commission. He suggested that they be seen as experts, pretty much advising the Commission and the church as a whole. Technically, he was correct, for in the end the General Conference was the final leg in the process of adoption. However, once we look below the bonnet, it is clear that Outler himself was no mere expert; his person-relative historical, theological, and philosophical footprints were all over the final result. He was not just an expert giving advise; he was chairing the doctrinal seminar constituted by The United Methodist Church in such a way as to have the first and last word on what could be said.

Second, while the Commission called again and again for open-ended innovation and development in theology, it is clear that there was no open-endedness as far as the Quadrilateral is concerned. Hence, one very badly constructed epistemology of theology was (and is) now the

³³ Included in the Outler archives there is a paper, edited by Paul Minear and dated 1963, sub-titled “Tradition and Traditions” and titled “Faith and Order findings”. Echoes of this paper show up again and again in Outler’s oeuvre. Given Outler’s role in Faith and Order deliberations it is impossible here to trace any kind of lineage or influence. However, it is clear that Outler’s interpretation of the history of doctrine and of the church shows up in this remarkable document.

hallmark of United Methodist theology.³⁴ In stark terms, given even minimal work in epistemology, this proposal is the equivalent of a literal reading of Genesis in the wake of the best historical and exegetical materials now available. That it has been coopted by theologians outside United Methodism makes it no less intellectually embarrassing; there is no safety in numbers here. Moreover, the whole idea of finding unity in epistemology is not just spiritually debilitating but will also lead to endless division in the Body of Christ. We live by bread and wine not morsels invented in the philosophy department, where consensus has never been available on contested issues. We can surely understand someone who is prepared to die, say, for the doctrine of the incarnation; it would be daft to even think of dying for the Quadrilateral.

Third, and most important, while the Report advances the cause of pluralism in doctrine, it is patently clear that it was profoundly exclusionary; and that in at least two respects.

First, pluralism is itself a partisan position to adopt as an ecclesial project. By its very nature, it requires that those who reject pluralism as an ecclesial project must be excluded from the circle of inclusion. Hence those who hold and argue that the church should commit to an explicitly confessional position on doctrine have to be rejected from the United Methodist fold. Outler masked this by railing against past Christian orthodoxy; by introducing misleading contrasts (United Methodism is conciliar and not confessional; it is dynamic not static; it is homiletical rather than juridical); and by generally demeaning anyone who might argue for the retention of the deep faith of church in its classical and Wesleyan formulations. All this fitted with his hostility to the great dogmatic tradition of Methodist theology in the nineteenth century; this was effectively demonized and marginalized in his hang-glider review of the Methodist theological heritage.

Second, it is fascinating that when it came to the moral teaching of the church as developed in the Commission on Social Concerns, Outler totally abandoned pluralism and energetically worked to ensure that a traditional vision of sexual intimacy and marriage were adopted by the church. This was no mere casual affair, for the mandate to the Commission on the study of theology included a requirement that the work of the Commission on Social Principles be correlated with (if not subordinate to) the theological and ethical reflections of the Commission on the study of theology.

The details in this instance are worth noting. In a long letter to Judge Tom Reavely Outler censured the Commission on Social Principles. He identified four areas that involved “glaring faults”³⁵:

My own list of these items (the specific issues of the report) would run to four at a minimum: 1. Its faulty theology; its failure to ground its exhortations and imperatives in the Gospel, or to distinguish the Christian social ethic from other social and political nostrums. 2. Human sexuality. Here are three gaping defects: a. it waffles on the question of monogamous marriage; b. it talks about sex without a concomitant stress on love and fidelity; and c. it opens the way for homosexuals into the ordained clergy of the UMC, par cum pari. 3. Drugs. Here

³⁴ Outler’s oral report to the General Conference makes it patently clear that he saw the work of the Commission as supplying an epistemology of theology. “The better way [in contrast to writing a new creed], we came to believe, was to strike for a new understanding of the rock-bottom problem of norm and norms in theology and ethics, and then try for a clear vision of our doctrinal heritage as a resource in reformulating our contemporary “theological task” within valid guidelines.” See “An Oral Report to the General Conference,” 5.

³⁵ Letter to The Honorable Tom Reavley dated March 29, 1972.

their distinction between “harmful drugs,” on the one hand, and “alcohol and marijuana,” on the other, is fallacious, on both medical and moral grounds. Besides, lumping alcohol and marijuana together (as if they were both the same, physiologically and psychologically), is dangerously misleading – as the pharmacologists I’ve checked with agree. 4. Universal pacifism. Without coming out clear and clean, this Statement (page 13, ln 28) commits the UMC to a radical, unilateral pacifism (we reject all wars...). To be sure there are inconsistencies here, in suppositions elsewhere that wars will continue and that Methodists are involved in the “war system”. But the language of the statement can be interpreted as rejecting even wars of self-defense, or any resistance to international tyrannies of any sort. To condemn all war – and with it, to condemn all men and nations who ever have resorted to war, or ever may for any cause – is a radical departure from all our Methodist traditions and anything resembling a complete or balanced Christian social ethic.

Outler proceeded to outline a four-point plan to stop “the Ward-Bosley-Moon bulldozer in the Committee”.³⁶ In order, these were: to have an alternative statement drafted at University Park United Methodist Church, Dallas;³⁷ to pitch for significant revisions; to make plans for a successor-commission to work on a successfully revised version; and failing these, to have a minority report plus a plan for further commission work to be adopted at General Conference. Outside the efforts proposed to Judge Reavely, Outler took pains to solicit the help of Paul Ramsey of Princeton University to undermine the challenge the preliminary proposals of the Commission on sexual morality and family. It is clear from these observations that Outler was totally opposed to pluralism when it came to sexual morality, so much so that there is sufficient evidence in the record supplied by his biographer Bob Parrott to claim that he would have resigned from The United Methodist Church if his views had been rejected.³⁸ These are fascinating developments, but my aim here is to record one more instance of radical incoherence in his vision of pluralism as worked out in the Commission on the study of theology.

I have been candid in my assessment of the work of the Commission and of Outler, its chair. As noted, I consider the outcome a disaster from a theological and epistemological point of view. To be sure, we can try to bind up the wounds of Outler and his colleagues; we can relocate them sympathetically in their context and note that if we were there we would have acted no differently. Moreover, there is a time and place to lay out the genuine insights and even the illumination that the mistakes make possible. Perhaps there was no way forward, given the context and circumstances. Maybe the Commission and church simply overreached, even though we can still admire the boldness and self-confidence on display. Moreover, churches and political institutions can survive (and have survived) despite the incoherent principles they formally profess. I certainly do not think that United Methodism is finished, for despite the Liberal Protestant cast of its doctrinal commitments since 1972, it should no longer be seen as one more North American version of mainline, Liberal Protestantism. It is a global church with a cast of Liberal Protestant and Progressive bishops and leaders in control in North America; yet

³⁶ Outler is here pejoratively referring to the crucial movers and shakers in the Commission on Social Principles.

³⁷ It is hard not to believe that Outler was not intimately involved in the work that went into this alternative.

³⁸ See Bob W. Parrott, Albert C. Outler, *The Gifted Dilettante* (Anderson, Indiana: Bristol Books, 1999), 399-406.

its polity makes it difficult for them to impose their views at General Conference.³⁹ Only time will tell how things fall out in the future.

Yet we can surely see recent developments more accurately when we look back at the work of the Commission between 1968 and 1972. It is not enough to see the current crisis as merely driven by various factions, hell bent on imposing their views on the church as a whole. This misses the tragic dimensions of our history. To use a hackneyed metaphor, the chickens are coming home to roost. Or to change the metaphor, the seeds of self-destruction were well and truly sown in 1972. On the one hand, the church adopted a radically pluralistic vision of theological and doctrinal development; this set the platform for substantial changes down the road that have been readily taken up by various groups since then. On the other, the church rejected pluralism when it came to the controversial issues related to human sexuality. This line has been championed again and again at General Conferences by conservative networks and delegates. This internal contradiction (tension is much too weak a description) has not been noted much less resolved. Both sides can legitimately lay claim to the legacy of Outler. This contradiction is now front and center and sits on the agenda for the special General Conference in St. Louis in February 2019. The stakes are high and the politics intense; only the fainthearted and the historically ill-informed would expect anything less.

As to the later developments in the life and thought of Albert Outler, I have elsewhere argued that he changed his mind.⁴⁰ In the late nineteen seventies, after the General Conference of 1976, I had a conversation with him in Seattle about the decision to look again at what was agreed in 1972. He was not a happy observer. He noted two things. First, the church had not really looked at its doctrine for one hundred and fifty years between 1808 and 1972; the decisions taken in 1972 should be left in place for another one hundred and fifty years. Second, without referring to himself, he made it clear that the church simply did not have the intellectual heft or leadership to tackle the issues all over again. As he asked rhetorically, “And who would they get to do the work that was needed?” I took it to mean that there was no one of his caliber to do the work, but this may be an unfair interpretation of his demeanor and comments. In any case, Outler did indeed come to see that things did not work out as he had envisaged, even to the point where he suggested that they should have left the *Book of Discipline* alone as it stood after 1968 and thus leave the church to do the best it could with its official doctrinal commitments. In this he was deferring to one theologian in United Methodism whom he clearly considered his peer, namely Robert Cushman of Duke University.⁴¹ I am off on another chapter in the life and work of Outler; sufficient unto the day are the questions thereof.

³⁹ Outler’s canny comments on the danger of a group of bishops seizing the opportunity to exercise a bogus form of magisterium is all too visible in the current missteps related to the Commission on the Way Forward.

⁴⁰ In “United Methodism, Ecumenism, and Ecclesiology”, unpublished. However, I do not want to exaggerate how far he departed from the deep intellectual and theological structures that governed his thinking from very early in his career.

⁴¹ “The commission had urged the Conference to provide some sort of meaningful follow-up, with a view to an ongoing process of cumulative development and quadrennial revision. This would have been consonant with our notion of a traditional church. Next to nothing of this sort happened. Our wisest critic, Professor Cushman, found it distressingly imprecise and vulnerable to misinterpretation; he turned out to be right. By and large, it just sat there. In 1976, Professor Cushman petitioned the General Conference for it to revert to its older form on an uninterpreted text of foundation documents, with all of the historical and theological excursus omitted. That would have shattered the dream of that new church in quest of cumulative doctrinal consensus. But now with that dream faded, one can see the exasperated wisdom embedded in Cushman’s proposal.” See “Sermon 44: Through a Glass Darkly,” in Albert Outler *The Churchman* (Anderson, Indiana: Bristol Books, 1995), 464, edited by Bob Parrott.