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working groups

REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE, WORLD METHODIST COUNCIL

From the Working Group on "Contemporary
Methodist Theology and Doctrinal Concerns," of
the Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological
Studies, July 26-August 7, 1987

Ted Runyon, Norman Young, Co-convenors

We have taken as one of our main tasks the formulation of a Methodist theological response to the World Council of Churches Project, "Confessing the Apostolic Faith Today." This project seeks a common recognition of the apostolic faith as expressed in the most commonly used creed from the period of the undivided church, the Nicene Creed, looking toward a common confession of apostolic faith as a basis for Christian unity today. The churches' confession of faith is apostolic in a double sense: it has its origin in the apostolic testimony, and through it we affirm the mission to which the church is called in the present age.

The first stage of this project is the explication of the Nicene Creed, which became our agenda. This involved critical reflection on the Creed from the perspective of Methodist theological emphases (as summarized, for example, in point seven of the Jerusalem/Nairobi Statement) to determine the extent to which the Creed gives adequate expression to those doctrines we affirm as important to the

biblical and apostolic witness, and to identify those points at which key Methodist concerns are not expressed adequately in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan formulations. These affirmations and concerns follow.

We wish to recommend to the Executive Committee of the World Methodist Council full cooperation with the Apostolic Faith project and encouragement to member churches to participate in the process we have found to be most rewarding. Through this process we have come to a greater appreciation of the riches of faith contained in the ancient Creed which speak to the present day, and we have become aware of other aspects of biblical and apostolic witness, of Methodist tradition and of contemporary experience, not explicit in the Creed which need to be included in our common confession.

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comment

*We seek more than just a prescriptive opinion.
Life and thought: the substance and the
method: the quest for the truth of our time.
The Oxford Institute of Methodist Studies*

This issue of *OXFORDnotes* inaugurates a new method of production, which, if successful, will not be very noticeable to the reader. It will, however, allow for better service and save the editors a great deal of time. Our primary dependence, of course, is not upon technology, but upon those of you who write for us. We look forward to the remaining Working Group reports, and hope that you will continue to keep us informed as to important developments in your area of interest and your part of the globe. We are also open to other suggestions from our readers.

R. Heitzenrater

As an aid to further dialogue of the World Methodist Council with member churches and with Faith and Order, we would like to report on the central points that emerged in our systematic consideration of the creed from the perspective of our Methodist tradition(s).

1. It became clear that the various Methodist traditions do indeed confess the basic faith articulated in the Nicene Creed. While some of our traditions have not made a practice of confessing the creed per se, they have given expression to this faith in their hymnody, preaching spirituality, and life in mission to the world.

2. As a tradition born out of the corporate Christian discipleship of Methodist societies and classes, we found the corporate form of the confession ("we believe") profoundly appropriate, especially when balanced with the complementary expression of personal faith and responsibility ("I believe") in the ancient baptismal confession, the Apostles' Creed.

3. Repeatedly in our discussion we came to appreciate, and felt the need constantly to reemphasize, the inter-relation of the three persons of the Trinity. Only in this way were we able to avoid distorted views of such issues as the nature of God's omnipotence, the effects of Christ's death or the goal of the Spirit's renewal of human life.

4. Occasionally we encountered aspects of the particular formulations of the Creed, as it confessed the faith in its fourth-century context, that are in tension with modern scientific and philosophical understandings of the nature of reality. This led us to reaffirm Wesley's conviction that the basic Christian witness must be both authentic to Scripture and credible to human experience and reason. Thus we believe that any adequate explication of the Nicene Creed for our contemporary setting can and must elucidate such doctrines as the creation of heaven and earth, the birth, resurrection and ascension of Christ and session at the right hand of the Father in a manner that makes their contemporary relevance clear, and which avoids distortions such as those occasioned by gender-specific language about God.

5. On a characteristically Wesleyan note, we found ourselves compelled to emphasize that the Christian faith which is confessed must be both the faith which believes (*fides qua creditur*) and the faith which is believed (*fides quae creditur*). The very

necessary task of clarifying the "content" of our common Christian faith must never be allowed to obscure the necessity of the relational event of faith, both individually and corporately. Wesley's polemic against "dead orthodoxy" was against faith defined as adherence to the form without the renewing activity of the Spirit which gives substance to the form.

6. Finally, our on-going dialogue with the Creed and each other helped us to discern even more clearly what might constitute a characteristically Wesleyan perspective on the common Christian faith. Wesley's approach to doctrinal definition was always informed by the practical question: How will this doctrinal interpretation advance or hinder Christian discipleship? Thus he sought to understand and proclaim Christian salvation in such a way that it was clearly and undeniably a gift from God (we cannot save ourselves), yet always a gift which both empowers and expects human response (God will not save us without ourselves). So Wesley held together key doctrinal elements such as justification and sanctification which are frequently allowed to fall apart. This fundamental concern to hold in tension the primacy of grace and human responsibility contributed significantly to our determination of the following more specific points which we believe represent an authentically Methodist perspective on explicating the Apostolic faith through the Nicene Creed.

I

1. "We" believe, emphasizes the corporate nature of the confession of faith (and thus exemplified Wesley's dictum that "the Gospel of Christ knows no religion, but social; no holiness, but social holiness") and the communal matrix within which the faith of the individual arises. It is also important to recognize that the body is made up of individuals who need to take personal responsibility for affirming and declaring their faith. This has implications for ethics, vocation and worship.

2. "Father Almighty". The same God who, in the first article, is confessed as all powerful in creation is, in the second, confessed as incarnate in the Son, suffering with humanity, perfected in weakness, renouncing power so that the Kingdom might come on God's terms rather than the world's. The almighty God empowers, but does not overpower,

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working groups

CURRENT BIBLICAL STUDY AND METHODIST TEACHING

A report from the Working Group on "Biblical Studies" based on the fragmentary notes and recollections of one co-convenor

Phyllis Bird

As a group having no previous identity within the Institute and composed largely of members, including myself, with no previous experience of Oxford meetings, Group I devoted its attention to a broad range of topics and issues, all relating, however, to the basic question of the relationship of current biblical scholarship to Methodist/Wesleyan tradition. Discussion within the group was shaped largely by papers submitted by members and was marked by diversity of interests, positions and perspectives. Though no attempt was made to achieve consensus, the interaction within the group and the recurrence of a number of common themes and concerns served over the course of the Institute to foster a sense of identity and purpose in the group which found expression in our concluding evaluation and proposals for future Institutes.

The underlying issue in all our discussion was the role of the Bible and biblical scholarship in Methodist teaching, and more broadly in the church's theological and pastoral work. Addressed at times directly, in historical and contemporary perspective, and at times indirectly, through consideration of specific cases or problems, it was focused in our final session as a question about the purposes and goals of a separate Working Group on the Bible within the Institute and about the relationship of such a group to other groups and the plenary sessions.

It is important to note in describing the work of the group that its members included non-biblical specialists as well as professional biblical scholars and teachers and represented persons in a variety of ministerial and teaching roles with varied profes-

sional training and commitments. As a consequence, our understanding of "teaching" was a broad one shaped by pastoral and missional concerns as well as more narrowly theoretical or academic interests. While I wish to express my conviction that the Oxford Institute needs to be, or become, a forum where biblical scholars within the Methodist/Wesleyan tradition can feel challenged and rewarded in the contribution of their work, I want also to testify to the value of professional diversity in the membership of the Working Groups. A further type of diversity that contributed significantly to the group and that is one of the unique resources of the Institute was the diversity of perspectives and life experiences related to different ethnic, cultural, national-political, economic, and denominational, backgrounds. In regard to this important diversity, I lament the absence of any African member in the group (particularly in light of the vital role played by the Bible, and especially the Old Testament, in African theology) and the small representation of Asian, Latin American and Eastern European members. I must also record my disappointment over the striking underrepresentation of women. As the sole Methodist woman in Group I, I am especially grateful for the presence of two other women made possible through ecumenical arrangements.

The first paper considered by the group was by Bruce Birch: "Biblical Theology: Issues in Authority and Hermeneutics," a paper written originally for the Bicentennial of the United Methodist Church in 1984, presenting an analysis of the place of the Bible in American Methodism with an attempt to identify major issues of interpretation and authority in that particular historical and cultural setting. Invited responses from members with different national and cultural perspectives (Sweden, Chile, Jamaica and East Germany) were intended to open the group discussion and help to identify major issues for further consideration during the Institute. Several factors contributed to a frustration of that design and inhibited the broad discussion intended: a late start (we spent most of our initial session on introductions, an essential part of the group process); a scheduling change that directed most of our second session to interchange with the plenary speaker, C. K. Barrett (which proved to be lively and

productive in opening up discussion but interrupted our engagement with Birch's paper); and finally the fact that we had not yet developed a sense of identity as a group and were uncertain as to what was expected and how to interact.

In our next session we shifted to a different format, treating in joint discussion two papers concerning the status and role of the Bible as a source and norm for Methodist/Wesleyan theology with particular attention to the "Wesleyan quadrilateral" as formulated in the present UM Discipline (Par. 69, "Our Theological Task") and its proposed revision. The two authors, Peder Borgen and David Lull, agreed in prior consultation to address a short set of questions to the group, focusing the issues they wished to have discussed, and then invite the other members to enter into direct discussion with them.

Lull's paper, "Liberation and Feminist Biblical Hermeneutics and the Renewal of the Mission Church in the Wesleyan Tradition," shifted attention from its originally intended focus to a critique of the proposed revision of the Theological Guidelines in recognition of the need to address the more basic issue of the nature of biblical authority. Lull argued that in place of the independence, or interdependence, of Scripture, tradition, experience and reason recognized in the present statement, the new formulation limits reason and experience to the function of hermeneutical tools and does not recognize them as sources in their own right for theological reflection. His questions to the group were: (1) Is the only faithfully Wesleyan theology a biblical hermeneutical theology? (2) If so, must it be a hermeneutic of consent? He did not ask whether Wesley would agree because in his view Wesley is not normative.

Borgen's paper, "Biblical Authority and the Authenticity of the Church in Relationship to Auxiliary Keys Such as Reason, Experience, and Social Context," grew out of the Methodist-Lutheran dialogue and began with Wesley, not with the intention of copying him but of attempting to do in our time what Wesley did in his, working along the same lines as Wesley and on the same presuppositions. Borgen argued that Scripture alone can provide the norm for faith, noting however that Scripture itself must be judged by its soteriological center. He identified three questions for group discussion: (1) How

are we to understand Article IV of the Confession of Faith in its statement that "the Bible contains all things necessary for salvation"? (Does it rule out later revelation? Should we think of a hierarchy of revelation within Scripture?) (2) How do we reconcile the seemingly conflicting statements of John Wesley concerning our inability to know God by "natural understanding" (Sermon 44 on "Original Sin") and concerning prevenient grace (cf. Bultmann's "preunderstanding")? (3) What is the relationship between those aspects of salvation that are universal and the concrete working out of that salvation in particular situations?

In the time allotted we were only able to make a beginning on the issues raised by the two papers. Many of them re-emerged, however, in the discussion of subsequent papers, and the main points were re-articulated and opened to wider discussion in the joint session with Group VI (see below). The key questions in the ongoing debate initiated by these papers were: (1) How is the "primacy" of Scripture to be understood? (2) More particularly, are tradition, experience and reason to be understood as having only an ancillary or interpretive function? (3) How should Wesley's understanding (and practice?) inform or determine contemporary Methodist/Wesleyan approaches to Scripture?

Subsequent group sessions continued the practice of open discussion following a short restatement of the main points by the author, with the co-conveners alternating in the chair. The discussion was generally lively, broad-based and often wide-ranging, lacking in formal resolution, but not without substantial agreement on many issues. I want to record here my personal appreciation for the spirit of the group, which fostered broad engagement and vigorous debate, including critical dissent, without polarization.

The general discussion of biblical authority and hermeneutics continued with papers by Walter Klaiber ("Is There a Methodist Exegesis?") and Karl-Heinz Hecke (on the use and authority of the Old Testament in Methodist teaching) [for convenience I have adopted the simpler designation "Methodist," with which members of our group felt comfortable]. For Klaiber the primary question was: How does experience in a particular tradition (Methodism) help the exegete in understanding the

Bible historically (analogy of experience)? A particular Methodist accent may be seen, he suggested, in its emphasis on experience (a kind of "post-understanding") as a hermeneutical tool. It is in this rather than in particular doctrinal positions that Klaiber sees a possible Methodist contribution to contemporary biblical criticism, which must attempt to be ecumenical and confessionally neutral. Discussion focused on the relationship between text and situation, emphasizing movement back and forth. A parallel was noted in Corinthians in its cycling between specific situation and general formulation. The question was asked whether the text has an objective meaning; it was suggested that the norm should be located in the questions asked, not in the answers given.

Hecke's paper centered on the statement of Article VI of the Confession that "The Old Testament is not contrary to the New" and that "in the Old ... Testament everlasting life is offered ... by Christ." Hecke questioned whether this does not wrongly "baptize" a Jewish document, appropriating it for its own (Christian) uses. The discussion turned to the question of canon (one or two?) with general consensus that the OT/Hebrew scriptures have integrity within the Christian canon but with differing understandings of the particular nature of the OT's contribution to Christian understanding (as background to the NT, or Christ event; as independent witness; or even as counter witness to the NT [in Black theology]). An implicit conclusion was that the statement contained in the Confession was formulated with a particular historical situation in mind and is therefore of limited value (perhaps even misleading) in determining how Methodists today should understand the relationship between the Testaments.

With the paper of Lars Svanberg, "The Charismatic Challenge," we turned attention to particular cases of contemporary interpretation and use of the Bible. Svanberg's paper reflected a parish setting and personal experience that prompted him to examine the NT understanding of charisma as a means of determining the proper role and expression of charisma in the church. Sound exegesis and word study, he suggested, could help correct distortions in the contemporary charismatic movement, while deepening appreciation of its fundamental claims.

Discussion pointed to common social and psychological factors in ancient and modern incidences of charismatic activity, noted a neglected link with the sacramental life, and suggested limits to the role that exegesis can play.

Tom Hoyt raised the issue of a trans-denominational, and even trans-faith, perspective in biblical interpretation in his paper, "Biblical Hermeneutics, Christian and African-American: Presuppositions Undergirding a Black Biblical Hermeneutic." His main points, recapitulated and elaborated in seven questions, included the following: consideration of the advantages and disadvantages of seeking an organizing principle (in this case, liberation theology) in the Bible; emphasis on the role of context and experience in interpretation with attention to the communal experience of Black suffering as decisive for Black hermeneutics--an identification that goes beyond the church as the context of interpretation; attention to the role of aural knowing in Black (and popular) Bible knowledge; consideration of story as a means of creating and breaking down world views; and recognition of "demythologizing" as a fundamental element in Black response to White-dominated Bible interpretation. (Black slaves, deprived of their native languages and cultures and dependent on the language-world of others, had to develop a world-view of their own. The Bible, the gift of White "masters," helped them to construct that world view. But in their appropriation of it, the Black church practiced a form of demythologizing, reading behind and often against the dominant White interpretation.) The discussion directed attention to the wholeness of Scripture in Black exegesis; pointed to unrecognized or unresolved tensions between themes and processes identified as determinative (liberation and reconciliation; analogy to one's own experience as positive appropriation alongside demythologizing); raised the question of how conflicts in experience and understanding are to be resolved; asked in what way the canon is to be understood as normative (noting that it is both the record of faithfulness and failures); and argued for a more positive linkage of emphases on community and justice with creation and eschatology.

Sharon Ringe assessed the common ground and the disjunctions between liberation and feminist

hermeneutics in her paper, "Reading from Context to Context: Contributions of a Feminist Hermeneutic to Theologies of Liberation," arguing that the character of the Bible as an androcentric witness of faith required women to read behind the texts rather than seek a hermeneutical key in some canon within the canon (such as texts that deal with the poor, or the Exodus theme). While there is no single feminist hermeneutic, feminist interpreters are for the most part pressed by their experience of patriarchy to a more radical critique of the alienating power of the Bible than other liberation theologians. Feminist interpreters, Ringe noted, stress dialogue in their approach to the biblical traditions and trust for women's own experience as a locus of revelation. The discussion treated questions of methodology, the biblical characterization of women and how to evaluate "positive" as well as negative portrayals, the validity--and appeal--of the concept of "love patriarchy," and the need for feminist biblical scholars to relate to sisters inside and outside the church. (They must address, on the one hand, a church that does not yet fully acknowledge the problematic in the linkage of biblical authority and patriarchy and, on the other, feminists who reject the Bible in toto, viewing it as an irredeemable source and continuing tool of patriarchal oppression.)

Dagoberto Ramirez directed attention in his paper, "Doing Theology in a Popular Context (Mk 4:1-34)," to the question of how we teach the Bible, with particular attention to the "pueblo" ("people," often with the sense of the poor or those without formal education). His questions to the group drew parallels with Wesley: (1) Who and where was the "pueblo" in the time of John Wesley? How did he teach and preach to them? (2) Who and where is the "pueblo" in our time? In the First World and the Third World? How can we as biblical scholars use biblical criticism, a tool Wesley did not have, in a creative way in our teaching and preaching? Using the parable of the sower in Mark 4 as an example, Ramirez argued that the parable is a form of teaching particularly suited for communicating with the people, suggesting a dialogical style of learning and teaching that has affinity for aural and experience-oriented learning. The discussion treated such issues as how parables communicate with reference

to in-groups and out-groups and the failure of the hearers to understand, and noted parallels, illuminated by Form Criticism, between the life situations of the groups addressed by the Markan text in its several redaction stages and contemporary life situations.

In a discussion led by C.P. Minnick, who had been coordinator of the two-year study by the UMC Council of Bishops that resulted in the bishops' Pastoral Letter and Foundation Document, "In Defense of Creation," the group considered the ways in which biblical sources and biblical scholarship informed this example of church teaching related to a particular, urgent contemporary moral issue. Minnick described the process of study and consultation and the aim to create a prophetic and pastoral understanding. He then opened discussion by addressing two criticisms of the document's "failure in theology" (by Paul Ramsey and Stanley Hauerwas). The discussion focused on the use of the concept and term "shalom" as the undergirding theological concept informing the argument (a contribution of group member Bruce Birch in what was recognized as a salutary, but rare, involvement of a biblical scholar in church deliberation of a contemporary ethical issue). One question concerned the place in the document, and in the framers' thinking, of a theology of justice in relation to the theology of creation.

A final discussion session, led by myself, was devoted to sharing experiences and concerns about the content, manner and amount of biblical study in Methodist seminaries and other institutions training persons for ordained Methodist ministry. The shared reports showed that despite considerable variation in quantity and level of work, a critical approach appears to be the rule everywhere, accompanied, however, in varying forms and degrees by attention to devotional, pastoral and homiletic uses of Scripture. While there was considerable testimony to students' initial difficulty with the critical approach, the method was affirmed by all as essential and constructive when properly introduced and used. The most striking disparity and the most disturbing finding of the comparative reporting was the low status of biblical study in U.S. seminaries, whose requirements in Bible (7-12% of the total course load) constitute less than half of the norm elsewhere

(22-40%). The minimal expectations of UM seminary students, which include no requirements for biblical languages, appear to correlate with attitudes in the American church (UMC) concerning the role and responsibilities of the ordained minister and the place of biblical scholarship. These attitudes are exhibited, among other ways, in active discouragement of ministerial candidates from studying biblical languages, disinterest on the part of the denomination's publishing house in the work of many of the denomination's biblical scholars (including some of the most productive and creative), and a general failure of the church to involve biblical scholars as consultants in its deliberations of ethical and theological issues. At the same time, it was noted, a new interest and emphasis on biblical literacy and the use of the Bible is being expressed and fostered at the local church level by new curricula and programs of adult Bible study, without significant involvement of UM biblical scholars.

Three joint sessions were held with other Working Groups. In the meeting with Group VI (Contemporary Methodist Theology and Doctrinal Consensus) the papers of Borgen and Lull served as the focus of discussion. Borgen restated his main points as follows: (1) Since God is at work in human life, there are elements of revelation in human life (reason and experience). Due to sin, however, humans lack criteria for determining truth. (2) The scriptures (understood as the witness to Christ) contain all things necessary to salvation. (3) The Bible has independent and primary authority; other sources have auxiliary authority, dependent on and derived from Scripture. Lull argued that when Christians reflect theologically, the four sources recognized by the quadrilateral are always involved and intertwined. He focused his interest in two questions: (1) What do we mean by the "primacy" of Scripture? How do we construe Scripture--as prescriptions for Christian life, or as foundation story of which we are a part but which is ever new--and how does it authorize doctrine or ethics? (2) Why should anyone's (even a Methodist judicator's) construal of "the primacy of Scripture" be regarded as "normative" for Methodists? The discussion called attention, among other things, to the complexity of Scripture and of the notion of center in Scripture. It was also noted that the formula-

tion of the "quadrilateral" gives a false notion of alignment and comparability to authorities of different types and functions.

The discussion with Group II (Wesley Studies) was based on the joint consideration of a previously discussed paper from each group. Klaiber's paper was selected from Group I and Scott Jones' paper, "John Wesley's Doctrine of Scriptural Authority," from Group II. Jones began with two qualifications of Wesley's notion of Scripture alone as source and norm noting (1) his recognition of other authorities and (2) his use of hyperbole. Jones also observed that Wesley had no concept of "tradition" as such (he appealed rather to primitive Christianity and the Church of England) and understood reason as a faculty that could be corrupted. Klaiber summarized his paper by emphasizing the role of experience in exegesis, asking whether this might not be a distinctive Methodist contribution. We need an analogous experience, he suggested, in order to understand the experience of the early church. Discussion of the two papers centered in the question of how and whether Wesley's understanding of Scripture could help us today. Wesley's exegesis, it was generally agreed, must be understood in the context of his time (his questions, his view of Scripture, and the methods available to him). The authority of Scripture is a different question for us than for Wesley. To the question, "Who is a qualified interpreter of Scripture--in Wesley's view and in contemporary understanding?" two criteria were suggested: (1) willingness to see the content of Scripture in its own time and (2) consent aimed at incorporating the message of Scripture in one's own life.

The joint session with Group V (Methodist Evangelism and Doctrine) was structured around the exegetical paper prepared for Group V by William Abraham, "The Gospel and Eschatology," which was read to the combined groups for discussion. Because I had to miss the end of that session, I am regretfully unable to summarize the discussion.

The concluding group session was devoted to evaluation of the group's experience and suggestions for future Institutes. There was general sentiment in favor of fewer papers and tighter organization of the group work, with more extended discussion and deeper penetration of issues, in part through prepared responses. Desire was expressed

for a more limited and focused topic and more exegetical work, preferably in relation to the general topic of the Institute (such as, "the poor," or in the formulation proposed by our group, "Poverty, Wealth, Biblical Faith and Wesleyan Tradition"). Two ways of selecting texts for examination were suggested: (1) texts relating to distinctively Methodist theological topics, such as holiness or prevenient grace (treated in either a historical or constructive approach), and (2) texts that address major issues facing the church today.

The desire for more focused exegetical work led to the question of how the biblical group should relate to the other Working Groups and/or how biblical scholars and scholarship could be more fully integrated into the work of the Institute as a whole. We saw a need to enable biblical scholarship to contribute to the general theme of the Institute in a manner that would guide and inform discussion from the outset (perhaps in papers prepared before the Institute) and not simply in inter-group dialogue at the end of the end of the Institute (though we found the joint discussions productive). At the same time, we felt a need, at least in the next meeting of the Institute, to maintain a separate group concerned especially with biblical scholarship in relation to Methodist theology.

Several factors underlie this need: the relative isolation of Methodist biblical scholars, especially in regions where Methodists are a tiny minority; the uncertainty or unclarity of many Methodist biblical scholars about their identity and role as teachers of the church; and the attendant need to explore the ways in which Methodist affiliation may shape or lay claims upon a scholar's work, as well as the ways in which biblical scholarship may correct traditional practice and belief. Note was made of the absence of many major biblical scholars of Methodist affiliation (and the total absence of British biblical scholars, outside the plenary sessions). Is this because they feel they have nothing to say to the Institute, or will not be heard? Is it a result of conflicting demands, timing, or the length of the Institute? The contribution of younger scholars in this session is especially appreciated. It is hoped that their participation will open the way to others to participate more fully.

Attention was also given to time allotments,

timing and physical arrangements. Where serious exegesis is expected, it must be done prior to the meeting; and if it is to be examined critically at the Institute, provisions need to be made for such work, involving adequate light, table or desk space, and reference volumes. Advanced planning is essential in order to make the best use of the time together at the Institute.

The following recommendations represent points of general consensus in our suggestions for future Institutes:

1. That a Working Group on the Bible be planned for the next Institute with the number of sessions reduced (to 8-10) and the work focused in discussion of a small number (perhaps no more than 4 or 5) major papers distributed ahead of time; discussion of the papers would include both prearranged responses (commissioned and volunteered) and responses arising out of the interchange during the Institute.

2. That biblical input into the general theme of the Institute be represented in the plenary sessions and possibly in documents distributed to all members (e.g., identifying biblical sources and perspectives).

3. That opportunity be provided for sustained cross-disciplinary discussion in groups meeting throughout the Institute that would complement the disciplinary or interest-based groups. Such groups might be scheduled following the plenary session, thereby enabling fuller integration of the plenary addresses into the on-going work of the Institute.

4. That dialogue between biblical scholars and others be encouraged by requesting non-biblical scholars to respond to the work of their biblical colleagues (and vice versa).

Projects suggested for continuing work of the Group between Institutes were:

1. Compiling a list of Methodist biblical scholars (we often do not know who the Methodists are among our colleagues in the guild).

2. Exchange of papers and publications relevant to questions of biblical scholarship and Methodist theology.

3. Compiling a bibliography of biblical scholarship relating to issues addressed by the Institute or calling for a response from the church.

As a means of maintaining communication

among members of the group and as a means of contributing to the general work of the Institute and its awareness of biblical issues and perspectives, we agreed to contribute a column to *OXFORDnotes* on a regular basis which Alan Padgett offered to edit. Members are encouraged to send him relevant bibliographies, notes and essays.

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the creatures.

3. The purpose of God in creation is not addressed in the Creed. Our common confession should witness to the unmerited love of God overflowing in the gift of creation.

4. The human response to God's gift, expressed in stewardship and responsible caring for the whole created order in the face of ecological crises, should be emphasized.

5. Belief in God as "maker" needs to be explicated in such a way as to take account of contemporary scientific and cosmological understandings.

II

1. Affirming the second article of the Creed from a Methodist angle of vision, we wish to highlight the soteriological focus of the Incarnation: "For us (men) and for our salvation" (we recommend that current ecumenical translation work provide an adequately inclusive text).

2. In explicating the Creed, we are concerned:

a. That the practical, liberating and saving importance of the human life and ministry of Jesus, not now spelled out by the Creed, be emphasized along with his death and resurrection.

b. That the human condition of "fallenness," which is presupposed but not explicit in the Creed, be elaborated. Since we fail to make God and the Kingdom the aim of our lives we are far from the image of God; all human enterprises and our very existence are corrupted by this false orientation. It is this condition which is confronted and overcome in the Second Adam, whose purpose is to restore humanity to the image of God.

c. That the particularity of the Incarnation in Jesus of Nazareth--a finite, male human being, with his social location in first-century Palestinian Judaism--be held together in unity with his univer-

sal redemptive significance for persons of every gender, race and social situation.

d. That the Creed be interpreted as open to a variety of theories of the Atonement, no one of which can exhaust the full meaning of Christ's death. "For our sake" is not to be interpreted, therefore, as a simple substitution of his obedience for our disobedience, but as a death which brings new life and direction to humanity as we participate in the saving power which comes to expression in that death.

e. That "in accordance with the scriptures" be explicated in such a way as to relate the authority of Christ to the witness both of the Hebrew Scriptures and the early Christian narratives which contain the testimony of the women and other disciples.

f. That "seated at the right hand of the Father" be interpreted not as Christ's absence from the world in his exaltation but as his authority and presence with us in prayer and the means of grace. His divine exaltation always includes his identification with human existence and suffering.

g. That word and sacrament be seen as both Christ's gift of himself in personal relationship with the believer and the proclamation and representation of the Incarnation and Atonement as divine cosmic event.

h. That the Kingdom be understood not simply as future but as dawning in the present in the first fruits of the Spirit as the proleptic gifts and signs of renewal promised to all creation. Participating by grace in this foretaste, Christians are emboldened to hope, pray and work for the power of the Kingdom to penetrate every aspect of human existence. The saving work of Christ is therefore seen as directed not just toward the individual but toward the structures of this world and the entire cosmos.

III

Our consideration of the third article of the Creed centered on the following affirmations and concerns:

1. We affirm strongly the focus on the Holy Spirit as the "Lord and giver of life." The variety arising within and developing from the Methodist tradition (including such movements as the holiness, pentecostal and charismatic) has helped us to see the multi-faceted nature of the life the Spirit gives. It is a life of freedom from the condemnation of sin.

It is a life of graciously empowered deliverance from the practice of sin and transformation into the likeness of Christ. It is a life of justice and wholeness restored to human social orders. And, ultimately, it is the recreation of the entire created order in accord with the saving will of God.

2. A specific concern of the Methodist tradition is the constant awareness of the dynamic and teleological character of the Christian life. The Spirit's gifts are ever new and never exhausted. The goal of forgiveness is to bring us into a new relationship with God which results in a process of transformation. There is a fundamental and purposeful connection between God's creating grace, prevenient grace, justifying grace and sanctifying grace. They are one, both in their divine source and in their aim.

3. We would also suggest that the nature of life in the Spirit can be illuminated by an exposition of the gifts and fruit of the Spirit. These both manifest clearly the goal toward which the Spirit's vivifying work in our lives and our world is directed, and serve to upbuild the body of Christ in unity for ministry and mission.

4. A feature of the Methodist heritage is the doctrine of assurance, understood as the witness of the Spirit whereby we are enabled to call God, "Abba, Father," and "the Spirit bears witness with our spirit that we are the children of God." This was viewed by Wesley as "the common privilege of believers," though not essential to salvation. Explication of the third article should include discussion of ways Christians can be conscious of the power and presence of the divine, as well as honest consideration of the role of doubt and temptation in the life of faith.

5. The historical practice of the Methodist tradition has been to use the Western form of the Nicene Creed which includes the filioque. This practice is grounded more in precedent than in a consciously developed theological conviction. Thus we would strongly support the current theological discussion that has reopened this issue which continues to separate the Western and Eastern Christian traditions. We regret the actions on the part of the Western church which led to this division. In such discussion we would hope to see two of our fundamental concerns addressed. On the one hand, we

would want to make clear the full divinity and activity of the Holy Spirit, rejecting any suggestions of a subordination of the Spirit to the Father and/or the Son. On the other hand, we would want to stress as clearly as possible the fundamental unity of the work of the three persons of the Godhead. The life which the Spirit gives is always a life oriented to growth in Christlikeness, to the glory of God the Father. These concerns should be noted, whatever form of the Creed is used.

We would urge the World Methodist Council to encourage member churches to review the filioque issue, wherever possible in consultation with churches of the Eastern tradition, and take it into consideration when revising liturgies and worship resources.

6. We affirm unreservedly the four classic signs of the church. Methodism claims and cherishes its place in the holy catholic church, which is the body of Christ. Begun originally as a mission and renewal movement within the church, not as a denomination, Methodism is committed to ecumenical efforts to realize more concretely the imperative expressed in the confession of oneness, holiness, catholicity and apostolicity. The teleological character of the four marks of the church should be made clear in the explication of the Creed. These are not merely qualities which the church possesses "in God's eyes" despite the fragmented, sinful, parochial and rootless character of our present experience. Rather, they are articulations of the purpose and goal for which the Holy Spirit is already at work among us in transforming power.

7. We affirm the emphasis of the Creed on the one baptism for the forgiveness of sins. This is in tune with major elements of the Methodist tradition and reminds us of the inappropriateness of so-called rebaptism. Most Methodist churches baptize both the infant children of Christian parents and those who are able to answer for themselves. Baptism is "in faith and for faith," whether this be the faith of the covenant community in which the individual is nurtured and trained for personal commitment and vocational responsibilities, or the entrance into the covenant community and body of Christ by one hitherto outside it. In both instances, baptism is the beginning of a process of discipleship. As such it is regenerating, but the form is never to be apart from

the power. Baptism is the true sign of new life offered in the Spirit, but this gracious gift must be received and lived out for God's purposes in baptism to be achieved.

8. We find it particularly fitting that the Creed ends on an eschatological note, for it is our Christian hope that brings the entire Christian faith into its ultimate focus (teleos). One concern here is that the Creed not be interpreted in an exclusively otherworldly way. The future for which we hope casts light upon the present in two important respects: it functions as a critique, making us dissatisfied with the current state of things and quickening our aspirations and actions for justice and peace; and it serves as a foretaste in faith of that inheritance which is laid up for us with the saints. In the hymns of the Wesleys, eternal life is a recurrent theme, providing instruction in "the art of dying" and anticipatory participation in the communion of saints, which begins here below and is fulfilled when the last enemy, death, is overcome. This dual emphasis on critique of the present age and proleptic participation in the age to come must be maintained if the will of the triune God is to be "done on earth as it is in heaven."

organizations

ABSTRACTS OF PAPERS PRESENTED TO THE ANNUAL MEETING OF THE WESLEYAN STUDIES WORKING GROUP OF THE AMERICAN ACADEMY OF RELIGION

Annual Meeting, December 1987, Boston

"The Strangeness of Wesley's Warming," James D. Nelson, United Theological Seminary.

This paper proposes to analyze the character and significance of John Wesley's religious experience at the meeting in Aldersgate Street during Pentecost week of 1738. That "conversion" will be reconstructed and interpreted in the context of Wesley's own life and thought as well as in the light of historic and modern conceptions of such experiences and their significance.

The slogan, "I felt my heart strangely warmed," will be subjected to a primarily theological, rather than psychological, interpretation. The "strangeness" involved is understood as the source rather than the singularity of the "warming," its alien cause rather than its oddity.

The experience itself will be analyzed and interpreted from several perspectives: (1) It will be placed within the context of Wesley's own spiritual development and related to other of his religious experiences. (2) It will be placed within the context of Wesley's own theoretical and functional religious psychology and anthropology. (3) It will be connected with his concept of workings of divine grace, particularly his understanding of faith. (4) Finally, this event will be examined as to its function in Wesley's soteriological scheme.

Having thus described and classified this experience in Wesley's context, it will be placed in the broader context of Christian theological and religious tradition and evaluated in the light of present-day understandings of conversion and faith development. By means of this process a deeper and clearer understanding of this notorious event will be sought.

"Behind the Scenes at Aldersgate: Mediators of the Faith and John Wesley's Conversion," Sandra Mattaei Aikens, School of Theology at Claremont.

John Wesley was an astute observer of human behavior, including his own. Shortly after the Aldersgate experience, Wesley wrote an illuminating account of the events in his spiritual pilgrimage that led up to the "heartwarming" (May, 1738). Each paragraph of his account depicted formative experiences in Wesley's life from early childhood to Aldersgate. One can see in the narrative how significant relationships influenced John Wesley's Aldersgate conversion. The purpose of this study is to observe and analyze these relationships.

The importance of mentors, or faith mediators, in Wesley's conversion and his own role as faith mediator are at the heart of this study. Two methods are used: (1) a review of the historical work concerning Wesley's relationships with mentors and his own role as a spiritual guide; (2) an analysis of this



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historical work based on data from Aiken's research on the impact of interpersonal relationships on growth in faith. Aikens uncovered some patterns in the dynamics of faith-mentoring having to do with the context, content and functions of influential relationships. These patterns are used to analyze the dynamics of faith-mentoring in the significant relationships which were part of John Wesley's conversion experience.

The uniqueness of this study is its contribution to the budding literature on the dynamic interplay between contemporary research and John Wesley's work. The Wesleyan tradition of faith mediation can shed light on contemporary discussions of the role of significant relationships in faith formation. Likewise, contemporary research can offer new approaches to interpreting the historical data on mediators of the faith and John Wesley's conversion.

(More AAR abstracts will be presented in the next issue of OXFORDnotes)



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