

THROUGH A GLASS DARKLY: OUR HISTORY SPEAKS TO OUR FUTURE

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It's always a joy to be back at Lake Junaluska amongst old friends and new ones, but it's something of a terror this morning because I know what the planning committee had in mind for this final assembly to which we are now supposed to look forward with soaring confidence and accustomed Methodist triumphalism. And I feel almost rude in feeling constrained to rescript this drama. It helps me to understand what Banquo's ghost did when he didn't have a banquet to haunt.

We have to begin with the distinction between Christian hope and human optimism. We have to recognize that one can speak of a thousand points of light, but that the other side of that metaphor is a darkened sky. We have to recognize that we United Methodists are a troubled church in a deeply troubled world. In the midst of unimaginable throes of change and turmoil on every part of the globe, now including the possibilities of pollution of the oceans. We have to understand that the tectonics of human history are shifting in ways that would be foolish to try to predict. So I speak to you through a glass darkly and, if you take the Pauline metaphor literally, into a mirror that is more iridescent than transparent.

Methodists come by their triumphalism naturally. The aging Wesley, modestly as he thought in his 84th year (which means he was older than I am), regarded the Methodist revival as unique among God's great works. In a sermon "Of Former Times," he says the Methodists increased from two, whatever that means, to hundreds, to thousands, to millions (that's several thousand), and we keep on forgetting that Methodism wasn't all that much of a mass movement, even in 1787. Still pursuing their one point, real religion (the love of God and man ruling all their tempers, words and actions), now says he, "I will be bold enough to say that such an event as this considered in all its circumstances has not been seen upon earth before since the time that St. John went to Abraham's bosom." American Methodists, and United Methodists later, took to this "more upbeat than thou" perspective like ducks to water. We still like our prophets particularly when they deplore things we deplore and lay off our own personal and collective hypocrisies. Obstreperous critics of Methodism, and particularly of Methodist polity, have not had a happy time of it from James O'Kelly to H. T. Maclin. Frustrated optimists turn fierce critics. The most upsparring denunciation of substandard Methodists that I know of appears not in Greene's *AntiMethodist Bibliography*, but in one of Wesley's own sermons just four months later than the one "Of Former Times," titled, "On

God's Vineyard," You'll have to look it up because the denunciation goes on and on and I have to get on myself. But he speaks of his exasperation with how the Methodists have turned out. And if he said this in 1787 you can imagine what he would say now. What you cannot imagine, or at least I can't, is how it would sound as an Episcopal Address in a General Conference. He says the Methodists have been blessed in unprecedented ways by God's providence and design and have turned out badly. He speaks of their prejudices, evil surmisings, censoriousness, judging and condemning one another, all totally subversive of that brotherly love which is the very badge of the Christian profession without which whosoever liveth is counted dead before every evil word and work, all direful fruits, not of the Holy Spirit, but of the "bottomless pit." The Methodist vineyard has brought forth self-indulgences of every kind. The vineyard brought forth such base groveling affections, such deep earthly mindedness as that of the poor heathens. That's us he is talking about.

Now for the other part of it. We know the Methodist story as one of phenomenal success from Aldersgate or before, to that "whenever" in the 20th century that one of us detects, and we have different dates for it, the tilt from a Methodism upward and outward bound toward a United Methodism turned back upon itself, preoccupied more with maintenance than mission except as an outflow of maintenance. Now I learned this success story in my parsonage home even when I was also realizing that my maverick WASP father and my Huguenot mother were not about to be carried to the skies on Methodist beds of ease. But it was also possible in those days, and I did it, to become a credentialed church historian in good schools with no requirements to do more than tuck a few stereotypical notions about Methodism into one's professional kit bag.

One reason for joining you in this congregation is to lend whatever encouragement an old man can to younger United Methodist Church historians that they should learn how to balance their loyalties to history, to general church history, to ecumenical church history and to denominational church history in the right order and with some kind of nontriumphalist methodology.

Now in my own case my concerns for this balance were generated almost by accident. My own first General Conference in 1956 split the traditional Methodist linkage between ordination and eucharistic celebration which I had thought was the ostensible rationale for whatever went on in 1784 and I do not profess to understand that. The next two General Conferences in '60 and '64 were largely bores except for the painful memories of our obvious bewilderment in the face of the awkward revolts by the youth groups and the Blacks who had suffered the outrages of the Central Jurisdiction and the hypocrisies of a self-styled inclusive church which wasn't.

Besides there were more exciting things happening elsewhere in my own world, in the dialogue between theologians and shrinks

(psychotherapists, psychiatrists, whatnot), in the ecumenical world from Lund to Montreal, from Evanston to New Delhi and above all in Rome in connection with Vatican II and in two projects aimed at reconnecting a shallow rooted Protestant liberalism with its classical fibrous root system in a "Library of Christian Classics" and a "Library of Protestant Thought."

It was out of this latter project that came the impulse for John Wesley to have a volume of his own to the quiet charity and open irony and satire of the other people in the committee. This in turn had something to do with the attempt in several quarters over the past quarter century to do for Wesley what was already being done better by Reformed Christians for Calvin and for Luther by the Lutherans. Now I would be the last man alive to sing small whatever progress has been made in Wesley studies across the past three decades. Given the circumstances, it has been impressive, at least to some. I am entitled, however, to notice how soft a thud was given off when the new edition of Wesley's sermons hit the United Methodist theological waterbed.

The half chapter of United Methodist Church history that I know well enough at first hand to qualify as an eye witness focuses on United Methodist fitful concerns with doctrine and doctrinal standards over the past three decades. For me this concern began with a collaboration with Bishop William C. Martin on his Episcopal Address to the Methodist General Conference in Denver in 1960. The heart of that address, or I would think so maybe, was an attempted summation of essential Christian doctrine and distinctive Methodist doctrine. It was approved of at Denver with what seemed to be some real enthusiasm and it planted the seed of an illusion in my mind that such a reception reflected a real, even if only latent, doctrinal concern amongst United Methodists generally. It has, therefore, taken me much too long to learn that United Methodists will vote for almost any kind of doctrinal statement provided only: 1) that it is not emotively offensive; and 2) that it promises to avoid or ease doctrinal contention. United Methodists love to argue, generally speaking, and we do it with verve and some impoliteness, but we leave doctrine alone as far as we can until it bothers us emotionally.

At the Christmas Conference Wesley's notional abridgment of the Thirty-nine Articles was received without demur even on the point of his excision of the Anglican Article VII, "of the Creeds." From 1808 to 1968 the Methodist Articles that are minimally doctrinal, explicitly anti-Calvinist, and anti-papal, and the General Rules that Wesley himself said were a danger if they turned moralistic had stood constitutionally protected in the Methodist *Disciplines* devoid of official interpretation. The consequence has been an invariant form of doctrine along with a widely variant development of doctrinal teaching. It is simply the fact that the majority of interpreters of the First Restrictive Rule from Abel Stevens to professors Oden, and now Cushman, have taken that rule in its ordinary rhetorical sense as a compound sentence with two conjunctive

clauses, the first stipulating the Articles, the second denoting Wesley's Sermons and Notes, at the least, as our present existing and established standards of doctrine, present and established as of 1808. This interpretation was carried over into the Plan of Union and since into the Doctrinal Statement of 1968.

In 1972 the Judicial Council mooted the issue with its decision that all doctrinal statements in the United Methodist *Discipline*, save only the Articles, Confession, and Rules, are legislative matters, subject to continue in force or apathy like Newton's First Law until acted upon by some subsequent General Conference, with or without a memory. This left us in 1968, or we so thought, with the Articles, the Sermons, the Notes, the Confession of Faith and General Rules as the corpus of our present existing and established standards of doctrine. These were doctrinal norms requiring religious assent and they bore up the weight of a considerable clog of irreconcilable interpretations on points theological, ethical, and political.

Methodism has been the most fissiparous of all mainline American traditions. It has also been the least disturbed about the diversity of doctrine and doctrinal statements and theology and theological reflection of all those churches. Now that situation has not changed, but now we are forbidden by episcopal mandate to use that awful "P" word, "pluralism," with reference to patent and palpable diversities that some people might think were actually plural. I once asked Bishop Paul Ellis about how free Free Methodists were and his reply was reflex, "We are at least as free as United Methodists are united."

Now the announced reasons for this episcopal interdiction were embarrassingly unsophisticated, the chief one being a perceived equivalence of pluralism and indifferentism. This, of course, is a lexical mistake and a logical eccentricity, but we will not stay to argue that out. The '72 Statement had made an explicit, but not emphatic, distinction between pluralism and indifferentism. We had realized that such a distinction was crucial, but had assumed that it was also commonplace. That was a fatal mistake. The distinction was promptly ignored by professional colleagues as readily as by corporate lawyers. And now I think I know why. The majority of United Methodists are doctorinally indifferent, just that. They may not know what Jude 3 means, but they know what they like. Give them normative articles from which the historic creeds have been deliberately excised and they go on using either old creeds with or without "descending into hell," with or without the "filioqué," as in the Lima liturgy. Give them an article on "birth-sin" and they construe or misconstrue this in Pelagian terms more psychological than biblical. In 1972 they voted to include Wesley's Sermons and Notes as our present existing established standards of doctrine. In 1988 they designated these same Sermons and Notes as "models of exposition." The '72 Statement was deliberately designed to

include the United Methodist evangelicals and other groups with their diverse, but doctrinal premises, into the intradenominational debate about Methodist doctrine and theology, excepting for purposes of debate only, the ill-informed distinction currently in vogue between doctrine and theology, which is to say between *doctrina* and *theologoumena*.

Now the evangelicals promptly pounced on the "P" word, but then they did not actually manage what they also were concerned about, another "P" word, "political" clout. Now we are rid of the first "P" word and they have not gotten the second "P" word. Some of us had seen the Christian future in the utopias of the '60's and '70's, in Woodstock, in black power, feminism, the peace movement, the death of God, liberation. Those were wonderful times, wild and exciting. There were others of us who had seen glimpses of the ecumenical Christian future, at New Delhi and Montreal and in the Second Vatican Council. Some of us in Faith and Order had worked for a decade on the recovery of an old idea of Christian living, namely tradition, which was a pneumatological view of the crucial task of Christian traditioning in the literal sense of I Corinthians 11:23.

Now it was not quite coincidentally, these ecumenical explorations led me to the brothers Wesley, not as Methodists, but as "evangelical catholics." Salvaged from their Methodist stereotypes by choice and in method, the Wesleys appeared to some of us as effectual Christian traditionists, one through singable poetry, one through preachable prose. They were pietists, but they were not scholastics. They abhorred innovation except in the representation of the faith already traditioned to the saints, by the saints, for the saints. And saints here means the New Testament saints, namely all of us.

Now this discovery, if that's what it turns out to be ever, led me then into an absorbing indoor sport, the aim of which was to find that *ephapax pistis*. (I've been saying it all my life and one of the things about old age is that you forget the things you've always known and can't remember the things you don't want to learn.) Now the prize of all this for me has been a rich banquet for head and heart, however inadequately I may have served it up to others. Moreover, the United Methodist quadrennium of '68 to '72 was contextualized in the turmoil of the still uncomprehended upheavals in the spheres of American religion and secular culture. You can see this now in the retrospectives of things like *The Unraveling of America* by Allen Matuso or *Coming Apart* by Bill McNeil or *The Destructive Generation*, which is a good book and a bad book by Collier and Horowitz, *The Present Age* by Robert Nesbitt and on and on. Someone spoke of the cottage industry that has sprung up in this regard. Those two decades were exciting and soul-searching in ways now hard to explain or reenact. For some of us, however, it was the beginning of a downward tilt in the overall human gradient, in the esprit and morale in both American churches and American secular institutions and that tilt continues despite some ups and downs to this moment.

In 1968 and '72, however, it looked for all the world like a veritable *kairos*. A world in turmoil and demoralization with every index of social wellbeing pointing downward into an abyss, but here for "the facing of this hour," to coin a phrase, was a new United Methodist Church, big, brawny, muscular, sentimental, self-confident, eager for the living of these days. No matter that the structures of this new church had been juryrigged by corporate lawyers and church bureaucrats concerned mostly with optimum power flowing through the organizational plumbing. No matter that the *Discipline* was cross-eyed in which the responsibility for planning the temporal and spiritual interests for the entire church is mandated to The Council of Bishops and the doing of these plans left to the United Methodist curia.

Everybody has always understood that the real center of gravity in the *Discipline* is not in Part I, but in Part IV, and specifically in Chapter 5. I have known three presidents of The Council of Secretaries well enough to count them friends and to vouch for their dedication, probity and personal modesty and I have heard each one of them speak openly of their conviction that the presidency of their curial council was, and was designed to be, co-equal with the presidency of the Council of Bishops. The wonder then is not that a polity with such radical anomalies wired into it has not worked well, but rather that it is still working as well as it does, which is not very well.

Now what mattered most for me, however, was that the new church was to have an unprecedeted thing, a Statement on Doctrine and Doctrinal Standards together with a revised statement of Social Principles. This will seem merely a personal crotchet unless you remember what it was like in 1968 and on when these projects seemed not only desirable, but possible. That year, 1968, marked a sort of highwater mark of ecumenical progress in Rome, in Geneva, in COCU, and The United Methodist Church. Among the United Methodists John Wesley seemed to be regaining theological stature, less the eponymous patriarch and more a conduit back to Methodist origins and back further into the far richer resources of the larger Christian tradition itself. The notion of our common history as Christians which was hooted at in Lund in 1952 was being increasingly received as meaningful in 1968. The illusive data of "The Christian Tradition" over against the plural "Traditions of Men," the Reformation phrase, our getting past the Reformation notions, was helping us to get beyond the old dichotomy between scripture and traditions and was helping us to understand the old Protestant ways of mistrusting human traditions even while engaged in witnessing to "The Christian Tradition." United Methodists were becoming less WASPish, less chauvinist, less bourgeois, less nationalistic. Not much less, but enough less so that everybody could be optimistic.

We had declared ourselves an inclusive church regardless of the rude reality, and room had to be made in that kind of a church for the plurality

of partisan groups who still called and professed themselves United Methodists. We were not then or now actually inclusive, nor any of all those other good things that come under the rubic of "united," but we were "groaning so to be," to coin another phrase and yesterday afternoon we came to understand what that "groaning so to be" really means.

Now time would fail me to encapsulate the history of our dreamings. It would also be nugatory since the '72 Statement has now been relegated to the very special limbo prepared for recent events. There may be some historical relevance and a few retrospective comments on what we thought we were doing in 1968 and '72. The drafters of the Plan of Union headed by Charles Parlin had agreed early on not to touch any of the doctrinal questions raised by the union with a ten-foot pole, save only to certify that The Methodist Articles and Rules and The EUB Confession were to be deemed congruent, if not identical, in their doctrinal perspective and not in conflict . "Congruent, if not identical" was a valid statement and that was as far as I was willing to go, but Mr. Parlin insisted on adding the last phrase, "and not in conflict" which is not literally true. Then came the first surprise for me, the generality of the delegates in Dallas seemed to take it for granted that what the new church really needed was a new creed or at least a new confession of faith. They seemed to assume that United Methodism was another confessional tradition like the Lutheran, Reformed, and Baptist Christians, despite Wesley's own pointed rejection of confessionalism in any of its conventional meanings. He spoke of saving faith, of fiduciary faith, of assurance, of what the scholastics had spoken of as the *fides qua creditur*, "I believe." And you do not need an accusative object to be spelled out in literal words, *fides qua creditur*, the faith that saves rather than the faith that clarifies the mind. Sooner or later you have to get them both together and *fides quae*, but that's an eschatological prospect. Wesley has many summaries of the soteriological heart of the gospel, but always in language varied enough to avoid even the appearance of set doctrinal formula, which is to say an invariant form of words requiring mental assent. He was overemphatic in his denigrations of orthodoxy. For days in Dallas, and even after, one heard the phrase, "the new Creedal Commission." It took a bit of doing even to keep open the issue of a traditional or conciliatory community such as the early church had been and such as some of us believe Wesley had had in mind. But this was managed and we emerged as The Commission on Doctrine and Doctrinal Standards (CDDS). There was, however, enough of a divided mind in the Commission itself that we experimented with creed-making and confession-formulating in our first four sessions before a Wesleyan consensus, or what we thought was a Wesleyan consensus, about Jude 3 began to emerge. Now the least that this still means is that the Statement of '72 was not meant to be a confession and that The UMC was not meant to be a confessional church in the classical 16th century sense. It was provided as an aid to the traditional process that served

the Wesleys and other Anglicans before them and that helped in the undivided church before the 11th century.

What we intended was appointed to the common core of biblical faith which is nowhere formalized in the Bible and to set this common core into a revisable context of theological opinions plus methodological comments along the way. All but the core was deliberately left open to an ongoing process of dialogue, revision, and unfolding development. And even with respect to the core, the way was left open to more light yet to be shed by the Holy Spirit from God's Holy Word. We deliberately took Wesley's motto about thinking and letting think in the way we thought he meant it with respect to opinions including orthodox opinions. That is to say, with respect to all opinions that do not strike at the root of Christianity, we think and let think. Wesley deplored dependence upon bare assent to all doctrinal statements including orthodox doctrinal statements. Faith is faith, yes. Faith *qua creditur*, but even more urgently faith in faith energized by love. We were hoping to help guide a new church on its pilgrim way toward a convergence in authentic community with all God's people in God's unfolding future and blooming parousia.

Now this was, as I realize now, a quixotic venture and of course foredoomed in an ecclesiastical enterprise modeled after corporate conglomerates. We failed to articulate and communicate this vision. The venture foundered in shallow seas where winds of doctrine shift and blow in more ways than one. The Methodists in '64 to '68 were sensitive to the anomaly of having two formal doctrinal statements and two Restrictive Rules about doctrine. There was a push to drop The Methodist Articles and to keep the EUB Confession as more ample. In the special session of '67 a motion to this effect was narrowly defeated. In the debate the Articles were roundly criticized as inadequate and anti-ecumenical. One delegate observed that John Wesley had rested more of his own doctrinal weight on the Edwardian Homilies than ever on The Thirty-nine Articles. His conclusion was that given the Wesley Sermons and Notes we could dispense with the Articles with no great loss.

Later in the early stages of the CDDS project after we had broken several lances on a couple of new creeds and new confessions a special subcommittee co-chaired by L. Harold DeWolf and Bruce Behney brought in a special report on the Articles and on the basis of a sizeable bill of particulars proposed that the Articles of Religion be dropped and the Confession, Sermons, Notes, and Rules stand as our official acknowledged foundation documents. Everybody understood that this would trigger the First Restrictive Rule, but the committee argued that the gains would be worth the loss and they actually believed that the General Conference might buy it. These arguments persuaded a sizeable majority of the Commission and a recommendation to delete was entered in our minutes.

The chair was horrified despite his long-held judgment that The Thirty-nine Articles were the least edifying of all the major 16th century

formularies and that Wesley's *ad hoc* abridgment of them was one of his least astute editorial ventures. But we assumed that, even without The Articles, United Methodists would still have the Sermons and Notes and everything else we needed despite the fact that we knew then about the Ward motion and had examined the arguments that have since been brought forward. What did not cross our mind was that one established historical conjecture backed by a consistent continuity of interpretation from Stevens to Oden to Cushman could be supplanted by another historical conjecture based on what some believe is a forced exegesis of the data without sufficient traditional support.

The DeWolf/Behney proposal was later reconsidered and thus the way was opened to our present new situation in which the question of the historical referent of the first Rule is now densely ambiguous, more densely ambiguous than it was before. A footnote: in the special General Conference of 1970 in its debate on our interim report Harold Bosley asked, as if between us friends, if the Commission had ever dared to contemplate dropping the Articles altogether. They are, said he, excess baggage and we really don't need to take them into the future. I mentioned this less to reopen the question than to stress the drastic veer in what happened in the case of the hermeneutical consensus.

There we were stuck with the Articles and we had to do something with their anti-ecumenical tone and temper, especially after the cordial reception the World Methodists had received in Rome at the Vatican Council. What happened was an attempted recontextualization of the offending Articles and an ecumenical reformulation of the current United Methodist self-understanding of the Articles and of Methodism and Rome. And this was drafted as an address from The United Methodist Church "as church" to The Roman Catholic Church "as church" seeking a more truly mutual understanding between Roman Catholics and United Methodists. The General Conference of 1970 accepted this with what I took to be some enthusiasm. Then there was a ceremony in the Vatican and then there were some ticklish discussions and the upshot was a directive from Pope Paul VI to Cardinal Villot to respond favorably to The United Methodist Church "as church." Bishop James Malone came to Atlanta in '72 to present Rome's friendly message to The Untied Methodist Church and some of us thought of this as an historic moment. The generality of the General Conference preoccupied with restructure and then current social action issues sat on their hands. The matter was then explained by one of the most obscure footnotes in a *Discipline* full of obscure footnotes. The Romans concluded that they had been gulled by a good idea that was, however, a non-starter.

Meanwhile the CDDS had plunged into another quixotism and this also was more my fault than anybody else's. All my professional life I had lived with a curious history of Anglican/Roman, Anglican/Protestant dialogues about *essentia* and *adiaphora*, about what really matters

and what you can argue about. The Anglicans were a traditionalist tradition, not a confessional one, and John Wesley had been, as he thought, a faithful “Church of England man.” Thus the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilaterals were important milestones in our ecumenical history, I thought. The analogue between the phrase Lambeth Quadrilateral and Wesleyan Quadrilateral seemed natural enough to me, but it was dumb not to realize how many literal-minded people there were who would construe this thing in geometrical terms and so draw the unfounded inference that we had downgraded the primacy of Scripture. And I was dumber, too, in my failure to imagine professional colleagues confounding pluralism and indifferentism and then trying to make something sinister out of it. If it was a fault, it was a grievous fault and grievously have I suffered from it.

Three major issues confronted the first regular General Conference of the new church in 1972; 1) the restructure of the original juryrigging of '68; 2) a new statement of Christian social principles; and 3) the first official Statement about Doctrine and Doctrinal Standards in American Methodist Church history to be proposed to a General Conference and submitted for a signed ballot. If you stop to remember, American society and the world around us were coming unglued, but the burning issue for us in Atlanta was polity, not ecclesiology mind you, but administrative order. Charles Parlin's plan of '68 was discarded and a new one crafted by another corporation lawyer, Leonard Slutz, set in its place. It was even worse conceived than Parlin's and I'm on record as having said so at that General Conference so that this is not 20/20 hindsight. It may not even be true, but I think it is. The General Conference thought it could not tarry for something better and the Social Principles statement was dealt with with similar exigency. The original report, predictably left-leaning, especially in the areas of human sexuality and politics, was at real risk of outright rejection. It was rewritten on the spot by the Legislative Committee under dire pressure with results that can be defended only as being better than they might have been and I could spend the rest of the morning with historical vignettes of that weekend.

By contrast, the Doctrinal Statement circulated in printed form in advance was presented late one morning with lunch as a deterrent to extended debate. The debate was concluded in seventeen minutes and the report approved by 925 signed “ayes” and 17 “nays,” one of these was Mr. Slutz's, another from a Filipino delegate, another by the Good News delegate, and still a fourth by the delegate from British Methodism. It was a great moment, just the same, and many of us were swept up into a flood of false euphoria. The Commission had urged the Conference to provide some sort of meaningful follow-up and I could go on about this, but you know that nothing much happened. In '76 Professor Cushman petitioned the General Conference to revert to the older form of uninterpreted text of Foundation Documents with all historical and theological

excursus omitted. That would have shattered the dream of the new church in quest of cumulative doctrinal consensus. Now with that dream faded, one can see the exasperated wisdom embedded in Dean Cushman's proposal.

One of our concerns with what Professor Wainwright now speaks of snidely as "the glorification of pluralism" in which the 1972 Statement indulged itself was to make room for United Methodist evangelicals. However explained, the fact is that evangelicals had been distanced both from our power cells and our seminary faculties. For example, in the early '60's the Perkins faculty vetoed its Dean's nomination of Timothy Smith as Assistant Professor of American church History. For his consolation Professor Smith had to go on to a tenured post at the University of Minnesota and thereafter to Hopkins. He is currently President of The American Society of Church History. All of this compounded the irony that it was a group of evangelicals who promptly pounced on the term "pluralism" and helped damn both the term and its positive connotations. Other evangelicals, however, and I'm happy to record this very gratefully, joined in the general cause of a Wesley renaissance in imaginative and generous ways. Thus, no one takes more satisfaction than I in the fact that a Wesley fellow of The Foundation for Theological Education has just been granted tenure at Yale, of all places.

The '72 Statement was designed quite deliberately for further development. We also proposed that the Council of Bishops take up most vigorously that traditional responsibility as teachers in the church to complement their role as personnel managers. This was utterly crucial to the process of real reception in the new church. Its promulgation had been so hearty that I had been blinded to the reality of its decisive non-reception. So the old Quixote was taken aback at Baltimore when the General Conference celebrating our Bicentennial moved to mandate not a revised doctrinal statement, but a brand new one. And then, as if to emphasize their yen for innovation, rejected a supporting motion to place the project under the guidance and supervision of The Council of Bishops. It was a portentous development, the end of which we have not yet foreseen. The image that sticks in my mind is of a tall ship with large sails unfurled to doctrinal winds listing from side to side for want of ballast. What seemed a *kairos* had now become another incident in a meandering story.

I am unqualified to make any critical evaluations of the new statement, but I am *amicus curiae* and would like to make four half-descriptive, half-evaluative comments. First, the new statement has many real merits of its own and needs very much to be studied and worked over and revised. Second, the original text was worked over to its own advantage in the Legislative Committee at St. Louis and this could be a model for what could be done from here on out. Third, its public reception in its first year has been relatively quiet, but with plans in motion for a constructive follow-up and this will be where you come in and where all other United

Methodists had better come in or things will be even worse than they're going to be anyhow. Of the six written evaluations that I myself have seen, four (all from Duke, incidentally) find for the new statement. The other two, one from the United Methodist left and the other from United Methodism's ecumenical vanguard, intone their requiems for the old statement in very different keys. No non-Methodist, to my knowledge, has yet weighed in on either side of the new statement. My fourth comment, and the crucial one, has to do with how new the new statement really is for all its unacknowledged borrowings from the old, and this in two ways. In the first place it commits The United Methodist Church to a basic shift from its older traditionary stance and to the stance of a confessional church despite its admiring view of Wesley. And this is the second point, in spite of that view, it formally uncouples the traditional pairing of the Articles and Sermons and Notes as equally normative. This leaves the exegesis of the second clause of the First Restrictive Rule still radically ambiguous. Now wherever any of us may stand in this *Auseinandersetzung*, we have to start with the fact that the highest human authority in The United Methodist Church has voted for two diametrically opposed interpretations of its First Restrictive Rule within the span of sixteen years.

What is the canonical state of doctrinal norms in The United Methodist Church at the present time? I frankly do not know despite several readings of the *Discipline* and the *DCA* and personal correspondence and visits with dear friends, but literally it would seem that our only constitutionally protected doctrinal statements are the Articles of Religion, Confession of Faith, and the General Rules. Sermons and Notes and other documents are stipulated as exemplary "models of exposition." The force of contrary agreements implied in the plan of '68 had expired with the automatic deletion of Article VII in Section III of the 1968 Constitution. This is now irrelevant, but what is relevant is the consequent uncertainty as to the legal referent of the First Restrictive Rule. On some days I find this worrisome, but the grace of constructive remembrance prompts the rueful thought that it may yet be another instance of much ado about not very much. We may now have the form of a confessional church with not one, but two confessions, not identical and not yet in open conflict. Compared to the really great evangelical confessions (and you can look them up in Schaff's Volume III) the United Methodists Articles are a patently deficient recital of normative Christian teaching (e.g., Christology, pneumatology, symbolics, you name it). The Articles plus the Sermons and Notes had a certain kind of complementation. Now for the time being we are stuck with sola articula, overbalanced by a set of United Methodist opinions that allow for the same degree of diversity that we had before, but now without the forbidden "P" word.

But as they say in Australia, "not to worry." The United Methodist Church is a traditionary church whatever any current *Discipline* may say

and the Sermons and Notes will continue to exercise as much or as little influence on United Methodist doctrinal self-understanding as if we knew what the First Restrictive Rule really means. The earthly remains of the last United Methodist theologian who was decisively influenced by official stipulations in the *Discipline* against his or her convictions based otherwise lie somewhere in an unmarked grave. Our current doctrinal confusions do not arise from latitudinarian statements. They come from the breakdown in the effectual traditioning process of the living classical Christian faith in the Methodist teaching ministry over the past century, the same traditioning process that worked so wonderfully well during the first Methodist century. A revivified United Methodist Church will depend then, in large part, on a renovated process of traditioning the biblical faith, faith as trust, lived faith, faith from those who have it to those who seek it, faith given by the Holy Spirit as the divine giver of every gift and fruit of faith. We know now that Wesley was actually wrong with all those sniffs of his about orthodoxy, that is to say true teachings proposed for mental assent. Methodism has experimented with orthodoxy with heterodoxy, and with outright heresy, and orthodoxy is still better than the others. Methodism knows that orthodox faith is inefficacious by itself. No one has ever been saved by mere assent, but some have missed salvation by faith in outright error. Thus salvation by grace through faith is a better doctrine than salvation by moral rectitude in whatever rhetorical guise. The experience of faith in Christ's righteousness and not our own is more valid than the experience of self-righteousness in whatever kind of exemplarism you may have in mind. The Scripture way of salvation is more valid and more interesting than self-realization by whatever formula. Scriptural holiness is more radicalism than pietism on the one hand or moralism on the other and editorials, whatever their viewpoints, are not sermons even when delivered from pulpits and decked out with biblical quotations and occasional texts. A trinitarian doctrine of the Holy Spirit would do us all more good than the pneumatological smog we have to breathe these days, both in charismatic and in liberal congregations. Last Pentecost Sunday in a lively United Methodist Church we were invited to pray collectively to "Almighty God who shares your loving kindness through the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit that we may experience the blessings of your divine nature and live within the boundaries of your providence." What is more, the people I asked about so startling a form of words have emphasized that their attention had been on the pious intent and not on the words themselves which is a good thing.

We know how hard it is nowadays to get through a service of worship without being asked to reflect upon God's gender and temperament as if Article I or the *shema* of Deuteronomy 6:4 had never been written. There was a healthy debate in St. Louis about the primacy of Scripture, but not yet a healthy consensus in The United Methodist Church about

the primacy of Scripture or its general tenor and that will be crucial for the future. There is a rising consciousness among us of being a church in crisis. Bishops sound the tocsin; bureaucrats ratchet up their rationalizations; the statisticians explain their statistics. Bishop Wilke follows one alarming book, *And Are We Yet Alive?*, with a hopeful one about *Signs and Wonders*. And there are a thousand points of light and thank God for every one. There are even said to be diminishments of confidence in the seminaries. But as the Pelagian rhetoric of our moralism goes up, our membership figures ease down, by a little, year after year. The Wyoming Conference this year reports a net gain of forty-two, it first increase in twenty-five years. Tennessee, on the other hand, reports a net loss of 1,532 which was the smallest loss in twenty-four years. It is I know a mite tiresome to keep citing that old chestnut of Wesley's about Methodist prospects as of the year 1786, "I am not afraid," said he, "that the people called Methodist should ever cease to exist either in Europe or America, but I am afraid lest they only exist as a dead sect having the form of religion without the power." Now the rest of that four-page note goes downhill from there and we've all read prescriptions about what should be put in its place. But it is, and I'm loathe to add another one, but here it goes, it is the case that Methodism survived Wesley and his far lesser epigons even if not as well as we have been told by our triumphalists. And United Methodism is likely to survive the pallor state into which it seems now to be miring like a dinosaur in a Cretaceous swamp. For despair is not a Christian option and providential history can be counted on to serve God's gracious purposes and human responses that are consonant with them, but not our own scenarios. St. Paul told us about this long ago, about being hard-pressed on every side, but not hemmed in. Therefore, we never lose confidence. The wisest historian I ever knew well taught me to look for the paradoxes in church history between the providential power of the Spirit in history and the actual human confusions.

Father Florovsky had been an eye-witness to the tragic and savage end of Tsarist Russia, the savagery of Leninism. He did not live to see the new ambivalence in a new world where neither Communism nor capitalism is serving the cause of humanity very well, but he never did a wit less than what he could in the face of adverse prospects and never a wit more when things brightened up. Christians do not work to bring in the kingdom, but to be alert to God's preveniences in human history. The human prospect was not reassuring when Wesley lay dying in that little room in the house on City Road in early March of 1791. The prospects for the people called Methodist were even less assured. His had been a strange life, incredible achievements laced with nagging frustrations. What remained clear to the end, however, was his deepest motive, "I'll praise my maker while I've breath and when my eyes are closed in death praise shall employ my nobler powers" and his steadfast conviction, his most steadfast conviction, "The best of all is: God is with us!"

As for you who are engaged in the continued perplexities of church historians who have to balance off realism and so behold whether in wider or more local spheres, you must resist the temptations and seductions of despair or triumph. You might even take heart and courage from the hard-won serenity that I first learned from Herbert Butterfield and put in a paraphrase form: 'Hold fast to Christ, and as for the rest, hang loose, while doing all you can to honour His name and the Christian cause!'