

THE UNFINISHED BUSINESS OF AN UNFINISHED CHURCH: DALLAS REVISITED

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I am honored to be asked to speak at this banquet of the Historical Society of the United Methodist Church, as we gather to celebrate our denomination's Silver Jubilee. There are two things you should know about me as I stand before you tonight. One is that I was a member of the committee that planned the service of worship at which the Evangelical United Brethren and Methodist churches united exactly twenty-five years ago today, but I was unable to be in attendance. So, I am very happy to be here, even if it is a quarter-century too late!

The other fact is that in the spirit of that very significant event in church union, I come to you tonight under the influence of two men who were very much a part of the service of worship that officially launched the United Methodist Church. Although they are no longer with us, the memory of their words and actions casts a long and respected shadow over us tonight. They are Albert Outler, at that time professor of historical theology at Perkins School of Theology, and Paul Washburn, who then had just completed four years of service as the executive director of the Evangelical United Brethren Commission on Church Union and who had just the day before been elected a bishop of the United Methodist Church by the former EUB General Conference. Any wisdom I share with you tonight will come distilled through the thought of these two persons, both of whom I still hold in very high regard.

Paul Washburn entitled his 1984 publication *An Unfinished Church: A Brief History of the Union of the Evangelical United Brethren Church and the Methodist Church*. Taking a cue from Outler's sentence, "Obviously, no part of our venture in unity is really finished as yet," Washburn contended that while the Perkins professor's sermon at the uniting service of worship was entitled, "Visions and Dreams," it "had a second theme with more poignancy in it. It was 'the Unfinished Business of an Unfinished church.'"¹

Albert Outler, renowned scholar and ecumenist, reflected the ecumenical spirit of the times in applying to the new denomination the Consultation on Church Union's motto, "We seek to be a church truly catholic, truly evangelical, truly reformed."

¹Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984, 32.

Tonight I would like to enunciate Paul Washburn's observation that in 1968 when we united, and in 1984 when he published (and in 1993 as we gather here), that we were and we are "an unfinished church with an unfinished business." I wish further to evaluate this suggestion by using some of Outler's insights expressed on that historic day.

Surely no one would want to call us a 'finished church'—with our numerical decline and our increasing need to divert money and energy from mission in order to shore up our institutions. Surely no one would claim that our task is done here on earth, when human sinfulness manifests itself in numberless horrors and miseries on a global scale today.

Yet, in the face of these monumental problems we as a church are not being called upon so much to *do*, as to *be*. With Nazi and fascist and communist oppression threatening world peace in 1937, the Universal Council on Life and Work met at Oxford, England, and after debating for days the church's relationship to the social, economic, and political orders, concluded, "The first duty of the church and its greatest service to the world, is that it be, in very deed, the church."²

The C.O.C.U. motto that Outler used was: "We seek to be a church truly catholic, truly evangelical, truly reformed." How do these ecclesiological adjectives apply to our church today?

1. TRULY CATHOLIC

Professor Outler said that the word "catholic" means "whole," "universal," "open," "inclusive," a community in which all the members belong equally, with boundaries set by the bare Christian essentials.³

Jaroslav Pelikan in his book, *The Riddle of Roman Catholicism*, contends that "Catholic Christianity = identity plus universality." Pelikan defines "identity" as that which distinguishes the church from the world—its message, uniqueness, and particularity. By "universality" he meant that which causes the church to embrace nothing less than all humankind in its vision and appeal.⁴ Perhaps this is no better illustrated than at St. Peter's in Rome, the largest church building in the world. Housing the supposed graves of Peter and Paul, as well as the modern papacy, and serving as the capital of the world's largest Christian denomination, St. Peter's represents Roman Catholic identity in its fullness. Yet St. Peter's Square, with its half circle of columns on either side (the marvelous creation of Bernini in the seventeenth century), is said to represent "Holy Mother

²Quoted in Ruth Rouse and Stephen Neill, *A History of the Ecumenical Movement, 1517-1948* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1954), 591.

³Emerson D. Bragg, J. Wesley Cole, and Charles D. White, eds., *Journal of the Last Session of the General Conference of the Evangelical United Brethren Church, Last Session of the General Conference of the Methodist Church and the Unit General Conferencing of the United Methodist Church*, Vol. II, 998-999.

⁴New York and Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1959, 21-22.

Church" reaching out to embrace the world. Architecturally, Roman Catholic identity and universality are vividly portrayed there at the Vatican.

Well, what about our church? Are we "truly catholic"? Structurally, we can give ourselves high marks in this regard. We work hard at inclusiveness. The terms of union in 1968 assured the former Evangelical United Brethren that for three quadrennia they could enjoy favorably disproportionate representation at the jurisdictional and general conferences of the new church. The abolition of the Central Jurisdiction and the creation of the Commissions on Religion and Race and on the Status and Role of Women were done to assure that the voice and rights of ethnic minorities and women would be guaranteed in the new church. We are currently making our church properties accessible to people with handicapping conditions.

Theologically, however, I sometimes feel that we gravitate more toward universality than toward identity, to use Pelikan's terms. In this we are not alone. The March 21 *Chicago Tribune* carried an article about a congregation in Chicago connected with the late Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre's schismatic Roman Catholic Church, that says mass in Latin and rejects the reforms of Vatican II. A layman of that conservative congregation declares of the Roman Catholic Church, which he has left behind, "The Church is not Catholic anymore. It is Protestant." John P. Burgess, in a recent *Christian Century* article he entitled "Conversation, Conviction, and the Presbyterian Identity Crisis," laments that too few Presbyterian pastors think of themselves as theologians in rehearsing and nurturing Christian identity. He describes a real tension in the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. between liberals (who long for inclusivity and, therefore, prefer conversation as a way of doing theology, saying "Let's just keep talking. Nobody is wrong!") and conservatives (who prefer to talk theology on the basis of conviction and want theological agreement).⁵ I suppose we can take "cold comfort" in knowing that sister denominations today are beset with problems similar to ours.

To be truly catholic requires that a person or a church keep both faith and love in balance. In many respects faith is what Pelikan labeled "identity" and love is what he called "universality." Our father in Christ, John Wesley, is a classic example of one who held faith and love together. In his sermon "Catholic Spirit," Wesley used the II Kings 10 passage for his text where Jehu, that hard-driving and blood-spilling warrior, met Jehonadab and asked him:

Is your heart true to mine, as mine is to yours? Jehonadab answered, "It is." Jehu said, "If it is, give me your hand."

⁵February 24, 1993, Vol. 110, No. 6, 204-206.

Wesley was essentially saying that if we love God in Christ together, then disagreements on various secondary opinions within Christianity are really not that important. We ought to clasp hands.

Yet listen to the qualifiers Wesley put on Catholic spirit. He said that,

A catholic spirit is not speculative latitudinarianism. It is not indifference to all opinions: This is the spawn of hell, not the offspring of heaven. This unsettledness of thought, this being "driven to and fro and tossed about with every wind of doctrine" is a great curse, not a blessing; an irreconcilable enemy, not a true friend, to true catholicism.

John Wesley also stated that a person of catholic spirit is "fixed as the sun in his judgment concerning the main branches of Christian doctrine."

Wesley's second point was that a person of catholic spirit does not yield to "practical latitudinarianism," to indifference as to how worship is done and to which denomination one belongs.⁶ One must make choices; one cannot accept everything.

Here is Wesley's wise appeal for identity (the centrality of the faith). We need to heed it yet today. In 1985 Mrs. Stein and I heard Dr. Keith de Berry, an Anglican evangelical priest, give some lectures at Lee Abbey in England. He talked about visiting Salt Lake City. At the Mormon visitors' center, as he saw the beautiful Old Testament and New Testament pictures and Mormonism's obvious belief in Christ's resurrection, he said to the guide, "There is nothing here with which I disagree." The guide, smiling, said, "Wait until you have seen the third floor." Later, on the third floor, things were different and de Berry asked, "Do you believe that Christ is of one substance with the Father?" "Oh no," said the guide, "we do not believe that." There was a different christological premise at work. A true catholic spirit was impossible.

Yet despite that, the call is to love people—even transcending theological differences. John Wesley wrote to Dr. Conyers Middleton:

A Christian is full of love to his neighbor, of universal love; not confined to one sect or party; not restrained to those who agree with him in opinions, in outward modes of worship; or to those who are allied to him by blood or recommended by nearness of place. Neither does he love those only who love him or are endeared to him by intimacy of acquaintance. But his love resembles that of Him, whose mercy is over all his work. It soars above all these scanty bounds, embracing neighbors and strangers, friends and enemies.⁷

It would appear that to be truly catholic, we must have a strong sense of our own identity—and yet reach out to all others (agreement or no agreement) in love and concern. A catholic spirit consists essentially of love grounded in faith.

⁶Edward H. Sugden, ed., *The Standard Sermons of John Wesley* (London: The Epworth Press, 1921), II, 142-144.

⁷Quoted in Francis Gerald Ensley, *John Wesley Evangelist* (Nashville, TN: Methodist Evangelistic Materials, 1958), 33.

2. TRULY EVANGELICAL

So spoke Albert Outler twenty-five years ago today:

But catholicity by itself is not enough. The church is called to mission, and her mission is both her message *and* the demonstration of that message in her corporate life. Her message is not *herself* either—it is her witness to the *Christian Evangel*: to the scandal and folly of Christ incarnate, Christ crucified, Christ resurrected, Christ transforming human life and culture, Christ in the world, Christ for the world, Christ in us, the hope of our glory. Thus, the church we are called to be must be “truly evangelical,” a church ablaze with a passion that God’s Gospel shall be preached and heard and responded to in faith and hope and love by all who can be reached and instructed and gathered into the fellowship of God’s covenanted people.⁸

Included here is a stout affirmation that the very core of the church’s gospel is salvation in Jesus Christ. Outler provided at this juncture what conservative Christians have long called “The full Gospel” — an emphasis not only upon our Lord’s teaching, but also upon his work; a representation not only of Christ as example, but also Christ as savior.

What about our church today? Are we “truly evangelical”? It is more difficult to answer that question. In our past we surely have placed a profound emphasis on God’s salvation in Jesus Christ. I sometimes get the impression, however, that nowadays we more readily embrace the teachings of Jesus than we do the person of Jesus; that we center more in what Jesus taught and wants done than who Jesus is in relationship both to God and ourselves. I may be wrong in this. If I am not, then we must heed George Forell’s warning that “classical Protestantism has always emphasized that the Christ and his Gospel are inseparable” and that “it is as futile to say ‘yes’ to the Christ and ‘no’ to his Gospel, as it is to say ‘yes’ to his Gospel and ‘no’ to the Christ.”⁹

Strange as it may seem to you, since we have just passed through Lent and celebrated Easter, I would like to plead that we United Methodists lay greater stress in our preaching and teaching regarding the uniqueness of Jesus Christ—who he is, why he came to earth, what he taught, and what his death and resurrection mean to us today—especially the cross and resurrection.

After the World Methodist Conference in Singapore in 1991 my wife and I were part of a group that spent a week in China. In Beijing our guide took us to the Temple of Heaven, built in the early fifteenth century, where the emperor would come twice a year to pray for a good harvest. Near this three-roofed, blue-tiled temple a bull would be sacrificed each time, but the emperor would always kill the bull by hitting it between the eyes with a hammer. That way, no blood would be shed. The guide said, “You see, blood for us Chinese is unlucky.” I thought immediately of the contrast between this and the Judaeo-Christian tradition

⁸*Op. cit.*, 999.

⁹*The Protestant Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1960), 168.

where the shedding of blood is considered to be cleansing and salvific and of the Hebrews 9:22b insistence that “without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sins.”

The cross reminds us of the supreme sacrifice made by our Lord on our behalf — to release us from bondage to sin, eternal death, and hell; to reconcile God to us and us to God; to reveal the exemplary extent to which a loving God would go to restore us to daughtership and sonship.

Albert Outler in his book *The Christian Tradition and the Unity We Seek* told the wonderful story of a church he visited at Ystad, in the south of Sweden. Built by the Franciscans in the fourteenth century, it was not damaged by the Protestant Reformation and has a rather conventional altar with a crucifix and choir. The pulpit is attached to a pillar down in the nave. But directly across from the pulpit on the opposite pillar, no more than 30 feet away, hangs another crucifix, lifesized and vividly lifelike, with human hair matted under the crown of actual thorns.

Outler visited the church in 1952 and was struck by this second crucifix. Upon asking about it, he was told that in 1716 on a Sunday the great warrior hero king, Charles XII, made an unexpected visit to this Maria-kyrchen. The pastor was so overwhelmed by this sudden burst of glory that he put aside his sermon and substituted an ardent eulogy of the king and the royal family. A few months later, this church received a gift from King Charles. It was this second, lifesized crucifix, with these instructions:

This is to hang on the pillar opposite the pulpit, so that all who shall stand there will be reminded of their proper subject.¹⁰

Or, we need to hear the testimony of the wise old black preacher, who in discussing his sermons, said, “I always like to go home by way of the cross.” No matter what he preached about on a given Sunday, he always concluded with a word of grace about what God has done for us, preeminently in our Lord’s death on the cross and his subsequent resurrection. Maybe that was why the Consultation on Church Union Report of 1966 maintained that “a church that is truly evangelical joyfully confesses justification by grace through faith. . . .”¹¹

The issue, dear colleagues, is not are we evangelistically motivated by a desire to forestall our membership loss, to taking in more members in order to help pay the bills, to enfolding new people within our congregation’s rich fellowship. The issue is, do we have the Evangel — the good news about Jesus Christ, Son of God and Son of Man, who came, taught, healed, suffered, died, and was raised again for our redemption?

This has been the traditional stance of our forefathers and foremothers in the faith. They firmly believed that Christ made the essential difference

¹⁰New York: Oxford University Press, 1957, 141.

¹¹Cincinnati, OH: Forward Movement Publications, 1966, 70.

in people's lives. Philip William Otterbein, co-founder with Martin Boehm of the Church of the United Brethren in Christ, lamented in a 1763 sermon that the fall of Adam and Eve has corrupted us and that

we are children of wrath by nature without God and without hope. Hence, Christ and his death do not profit us unless Christ comes inside us and destroys the kingdom of sin, penetrating us spirit, soul, and body with his light and life.¹²

It is a well-known fact that, as he set them aside as elders in 1784 and sent them off to the new United States of America, John Wesley told Richard Whatcoat and Thomas Vasey, "Offer them Christ." Bishops Asbury and Coke, in their marvelous commentary in the *1798 Discipline* in their rules for preachers, included this: "You have nothing to do but to save souls. Therefore, spend and be spent in this work."¹³

John Seybert, that great bishop of the Evangelical Association in the nineteenth century probably in reference to some church gathering he had just attended, appropriately made this last entry in his journal just before his death in 1860: "*Eine Seele gerettet*" (One soul saved).¹⁴

Nor was it only men who preached Christ, persuading people to accept his salvation. About the same time that the bishops of the Methodist Episcopal California conference had refused to consider Maggie Van Cott for ordination, an excerpt from her journal notes that, over a twelve-month period 1871-72, she

had seen 3,085 seeking at the altar the Savior's love, who have professed to have been blessed. Of this number I have been privileged to extend the right hand of love and welcome on probation in the Methodist Episcopal Church to 1,113 souls.¹⁵

Lay women, as well as lay men, were likewise involved in evangelism. I well recall that late autumn afternoon in about 1940 when Bertha Sott, a neighborhood housewife, spent several hours in the kitchen of our farm home, Bible in hand, but without hype or high pressure, witnessing to my parents about making a decision for Christ in connection with the revival meetings going on at Trinity Evangelical Church in Cavalier, North Dakota.

We have this evangelical tradition, and in many parts of our connection, congregations and pastors, likely not using the old language but with

¹²Arthur Core, *Philip William Otterbein: Pastor Ecumenist* (Dayton, OH: The Board of Publication of the Evangelical United Brethren Church, 1968), 87.

¹³*The Methodist Discipline of 1798*, Facsimile Edition. Edited by Frederick A. Norwood. Published under the sponsorship of the Institute for the Study of Methodism and Related Movements, Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, Evanston, Illinois (Rutland, VT: Academy Books, 1979), 59.

¹⁴Quoted in Robert Tuttle, *On Giant Shoulders* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1984), 83.

¹⁵Janet S. Everhart, "Maggie Newton Van Cott," in Rosemary Skinner Keller, Louise Queen, and Hilah Thomas, eds., *Women in New Worlds: Historical Perspectives on the Wesleyan Tradition* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1982), II, 315.

the same caring, are boldly intent upon sharing the crucified and resurrected Christ as the solution to this world's problems of sin and alienation. To be "truly evangelical" is also to have love for people, grounded in faith in Christ.

3. TRULY REFORMED

Albert Outler admitted in his address that

even the best conceptions of "catholicity" and "evangelical zeal" sag out of shape as history moves the church along through time and change. . . . And so the church, even as she seeks to be truly catholic and truly evangelical, must also be truly reformed . . . the church reformed lives by the Scriptures for they alone provide a decisive appeal to the constitutive tradition of Christ . . . the Scriptures alone provide for radical mandated change without the gusts and shadows of human ingenuity.¹⁶

In the early 1960s Paul Washburn was pastor of First EUB Church (now Community United Methodist) in Naperville, Illinois. He repeatedly challenged his congregation, of which we were pleased to be a part, to "have the biblical mind." By this he meant identifying with the faithful people of God found in Scripture, believing the promises of God, and living obediently according to the revealed will of God found in Holy Writ.

For Outler and Washburn to be truly reformed was to live under the message and mandate of Scripture. We do not reform the church. God reforms the church as we pay heed to the divine message contained for us in the Bible. That is how the Protestant Reformation started. Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli, and John Calvin rediscovered the word of God contained in Scripture and judged the church of their day on that basis. They placed the authority of Scripture above the teachings of the church. Luther said, "The church is the daughter of the Word, not its mother."¹⁷ When they were expelled or voluntarily left Roman Catholicism, it was after they sadly conceded that the church they loved was no longer believing and living according to the Scriptures. Calvin said, "It behooved us to withdraw from them that we might come to Christ."¹⁸ John Wesley said something similar in a letter to William Dodd:

But I try every doctrine by the Bible. This is the word by which we are judged in that day.¹⁹

Biblical authority for the sake of being reformed. Do we have it in the church in 1993? This is also difficult to assess. One can be encouraged by

¹⁶*Op. cit.*, 1001.

¹⁷Quoted in Erwin Mülhaupt, "Die Bedeutung Luthers Für Den Pietisten" in Paul Althaus and Walter von Loewenich, eds., *Zeitschrift der Luther-Gesellschaft*, Erlangen, 37 Jahrgang, Heft 1, 24.

¹⁸*Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), IV, 2, 6.

¹⁹Quoted in Colin Williams, *John Wesley's Theology Today* (New York and Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1960), 29.

the current stress on lectionary preaching that forces pastors to wrestle with biblical texts, many of them not of their own choosing, and that enable them to avoid the pitfalls found in topical preaching. The Bible has been given a greater position of authority in our church thanks to the revised theological statement adopted by the 1988 General Conference. We can rejoice that 6,000 of our congregations are currently using the Disciple Bible Studies.

Still, Leander Keck's article in the April *Circuit Rider* supports one of my deeply-held convictions. He bemoaned the fact that the mainline churches, "despite their ample theological heritage, are no longer seriously teaching the theological substance of the Christian faith." They have abandoned opportunities to ground people more deeply in the faith; they have "inherited enough theological wealth sufficient to serve substantial theological fare, but all too often they offer little more than potato skins to those who hunger for a real meal." One of his striking sentences summarizes the issue. He contends, "Even the pastor's best opportunity to teach the faith to the rising generation — confirmation — appears to be more dreaded than welcomed."²⁰

This is the general impression I have about the lack of adequate teaching of our confirmands in our congregations. One needs to be grateful for the Sunday Schools and vacation Bible schools, but all United Methodist clergy should take seriously the question of bishops Asbury and Coke in the *1798 Discipline*: "Will you diligently instruct the children in each place?"²¹

During Lent we heard Martin Marty discuss living the spiritual life in a secular world. He recounted how, once, he and J. Irwin Miller, then president of the National Council of Churches, were talking about the German musical explosion several centuries ago. Marty asked why this was. Miller said it happened because every little kid in Germany had a fiddle! This probably wasn't exactly the case, but Marty extrapolated from this that "each congregation should teach its young." My concern is that each pastor, as the congregation's resident theologian, be directly involved in such instruction.

Bishop Mack Stokes in his book, *Major United Methodist Beliefs*, commented about an Arab leader who, when he was asked why he couldn't trust the communist leaders of Russia, replied: "Because they have no sacred book."²² We have a sacred Book — and the better we make it known to our people in an in-depth manner, the more truly reformed we shall be. The Evangelical Association General Conference of 1915, pleading for a universal catechetical practice, insisted that: "The church, to be

²⁰"Wanted: Theological Renewal and Reform," *Circuit Rider* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1993), Vol. 17, No. 3, April 1993, 4.

²¹*The Methodist Discipline of 1798*, 60.

²²Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1971, 32.

truly evangelical, must be educational.”²³ Our church can best be reformed and renewed as we all, pastors and laity, get more deeply acquainted with our biblical heritage.

As we celebrate tonight the union that has made United Methodists of us, let us do so gratefully, seeing that our unfinished business is for us to become “truly catholic, truly evangelical, and truly reformed,” by the grace of God.

Mrs. Stein and I visited Israel this past January. One of the sites we saw provoked in me an unexpected reaction. It is at Tabgha, a valley not mentioned in the Bible. It lies on the northwestern shore of the Sea of Galilee, halfway between Tiberias and Capernaum. The event that happened there is recorded in John 21:4-17. The Franciscans have built the modern church that stands over the rocks upon which Jesus made his third postresurrection appearance to the apostles. Here he had breakfast ready for the seven apostles when they had fished all night and caught nothing. The rocks inside the nave of the church are called *Mensa Christi* (Christ’s table). Here our Lord restored Peter to primacy, as head of the apostolic band. A modern monument outside shows Peter kneeling before Christ.

Without forcing the text to say something it may not have intended, I believe I can find within it the three “trulys” of which Albert Outler spoke twenty-five years ago.

Jesus said, “Peter, do you love me?” The threefold question, matching Peter’s threefold denial, focuses on Christ, the heart of the Evangel, the Good News. Only as we believe in, love, and commit ourselves exclusively to Christ, are we “truly evangelical.”

Jesus said, “Peter, feed my sheep.” Care for the flock of God. Build it up; teach it its identity; face it out toward the world; enable it to welcome people of all races and life situations. Only as we do this are we “truly catholic.”

Peter turned around and saw John, the Beloved apostle, following them. He asked: “Lord, what about this man?” Jesus said to Peter, “Peter, if it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? Follow me!”

Here was the word of rebuke and reform right from our Lord’s mouth, spoken even to the person entrusted with earthly leadership in the church. Only as we heed the word of redemptive judgment driven into our hearts from the pages of Holy Scripture by the Holy Spirit will we ever be “truly reformed.”

We are an unfinished church with an unfinished business. But the grace of God beckons and empowers us to go on into another quarter-century, another century, another millennium of faith discipleship together.

²³*Proceedings of the Twenty-Sixth General Conference of the Evangelical Association* (Cleveland, OH: The Publishing House of the Evangelical Association, 1915), 52.