

**ALBERT C. OUTLER AND
THE HEART OF THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION**

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In what follows I want to address one of Albert C. Outler's central contributions in rehabilitating the notion of "tradition" for Protestants, a contribution in which his patristic scholarship, his ecumenical involvement, and his work as an interpreter of the Wesleyan tradition all came together. The notion of "tradition" is a common thread that runs from Outler's dissertation work in the 1930s, through his ecumenical involvement in the 1950s and beyond, and then in his reinterpretation of the Wesleyan theological tradition, including the notion of the "Wesleyan Quadrilateral"—where I will suggest that although the notion of "tradition" may have been an alien concept to John Wesley himself, it may be the most creative contribution that Outler made to contemporary Wesleyan and Methodist self-understanding.

It is important to realize as background to this appreciation of Outler's work that the term "tradition" had carried decidedly negative connotations since the time of the Renaissance and the Protestant Reformation. For example, the first Homily of the Church of England urged believers to

search for the well of life in the books of the New and Old Testament, and not run to the stinking puddles of men's traditions, devised by men's imagination, for our justification and salvation.¹

Similarly, K. E. Skydsgaard points out that in Lutheran confessional writings, the singular form of the word "tradition" was not used at all, and when the plural form, "traditions," was used, it denoted *Menschenzatsungen*—"human inventions and rules."²

This pejorative understanding of "tradition" was linked to the typical way in which the Reformation had viewed history in general: early Christianity (especially in the New Testament period) was prized as the exemplar of true faith, the middle ages were deprecated as "dark ages" of corruption and superstition, the Reformation itself was then understood as the heroic return to true faith. In this schema, "tradition" could only denote the corruption of true faith associated especially with the Middle Ages and most particularly with Catholicism. And this was not only a perspective on religious history:

¹ Homily 1; in John Leith, ed., *Creeds of the Churches* 3rd ed. (Atlanta: Knox, 1982), 232.

² K. E. Skydsgaard, "The Flaming Center, or, The Core of Tradition," in John Deschner, LeRoy T. Howe, and Klaus Penzel, eds., *Our Common History as Christians: Essays in Honor of Albert C. Outler* (New York: Oxford UP, 1975), 4.

Western modernity in the form of the Enlightenment took up a similar, negative view of tradition, regarding classical antiquity positively as a time of cultural and scientific accomplishments, seeing the Middle Ages as a period of unscientific superstition, and then understanding modernity as the antidote to the illusions of tradition in the Middle Ages.³ At least until the nineteenth century, this was the notion of “tradition” that had currency with Protestants: “tradition” was associated with ignorance and superstition, “tradition” was what had hindered the world from making progress for centuries, tradition was above all what was to be avoided by modern, progressive people.

It was not in fact until the middle of the nineteenth century that Western Christians came to have some positive valuing of tradition. The Oxford or Tractarian movement in the Church of England, the “New Lutheranism” of German states, and the “Mercersburg Theology” within Reformed churches in the United States all valued tradition in new and positive ways. From the Victorian period, Western Christians began to enjoy such medieval amusements as Christmas carols and in fact more elaborate celebrations of Christmas and the cycle of the Christian liturgical year that up to that point many Protestants had regarded as vestiges of Catholic superstition surely doomed to extinction in the modern world. Even still, this valuing of tradition in the late nineteenth century understood tradition or traditions more as harmless decorations for Christian faith, not as matters that affected the very meaning of Christian faith itself. It was against the background of this degraded understanding of “tradition” that Albert Outler was to make one of his most central contributions.

Outler’s Patristic Studies and the Heart of the Christian Tradition

Outler was trained at Yale University under the influential church historian Robert Lowry Calhoun (1896-1983), Pitkin Professor of Historical Theology at Yale Divinity School from 1923 through 1965. There were some similarities between Calhoun and Outler: both came from rural backgrounds (Calhoun in Minnesota, Outler in Georgia); both of them saw the university, especially classical studies and studies of Christian antiquity, as their own way into the larger world of culture; and both were attracted to theological liberalism early in life.

Calhoun himself had focused strictly on classical studies early in his career, and published very little throughout his career, but his fame rested on his storied lectures in the history of Christian thought, which influenced Outler and a generation of later students, including Justo González and William Babcock. Calhoun’s lectures, which have been carefully preserved and typed out from the notes of his students, stressed the reading of classical Christian theologians in the light of their own cultural backgrounds, especially in the light of the Hellenistic culture of late antiquity.

Outler followed this train of thought in his early career, and a number

³ Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation*, vol. 1: *The Rise of Modern Paganism* (New York: Knopf, 1966), xi, 31-58.

of his early published works reflect this reading of the history of Christian thought in the light of its ancient philosophical and cultural background. He undertook doctoral studies at Yale between 1935 and 1938, and wrote his dissertation on “The Problem of Faith and Reason in Christian Theology as Illustrated in the Theology of Origen.” He had originally intended to focus on Origen and Clement of Alexandria, but—as doctoral students often do—he prudently reduced the scope of the thesis and focused it on Origen.⁴ His early article on “Origen and the *Regula Fidei*” (1939) grew directly out of his thesis. He then he returned to Clement of Alexandria with an article on “The ‘Platonism’ of Clement of Alexandria” (1940).⁵ Both of these articles, in their own ways, reject the common accusation that Origen and Clement were thoroughgoing Platonists: Origen’s fidelity to the *regula fidei*, (the “rule of faith” that was the primitive version of the Christian baptismal creed) shows his commitment to the inherited faith of the Christian community, and Clement’s “Platonism” was Clement’s careful use of Hellenistic culture to prepare the way for, but not to displace, the distinctive Christian Gospel.

In the cases of his dissertation and these two articles from 1939 and 1940, Outler’s intense focus was on the basic meaning of the Christian Gospel as transmitted via the *regula fidei*. In these articles he utilized the term “tradition” (more typically “the tradition”) as a technical term denoting the transmission of the Christian faith in its oral as well as written forms. But the seed of his further development of the idea of Christian tradition was already present in these articles, for here “the tradition” did not denote an addendum or decoration, it denoted the means by which the basic meaning of the Christian faith had been transmitted both orally and in written form to Origen and Clement.

A critical passage that Outler came to know through his studies of Origen was from the very beginning of Origen’s principal theological treatise *De Principiis (Peri Archon)*, “On First Principles,” where Origen gives the content of the Christian message as he himself had received it. Origen refers to this message as a “rule” of faith or belief that encompassed the primitive Christian gospel as the message about salvation through God’s work in Jesus Christ, including the true incarnation of God in Christ and embracing the events of Christ’s life, death, and resurrection.⁶ Outler was aware of similar versions of the “rule of faith” were given by Irenaeus of Lyons (native of Asia Minor who became bishop of Lyons in southern Gaul), Tertullian (writing in Carthage in Roman North Africa), and in the Western or Latin recension of

⁴ Cf. Bob W. Parrott, *Albert C. Outler: The Gifted Dilettante* (Anderson, IN: Bristol House, 1999), 82.

⁵ Outler, “Origen and the *Regulae Fidei*” (*Church History* 8:3 [1939]: 212-221); “The ‘Platonism’ of Clement of Alexandria” (*Journal of Religion* 20:3 [1940]: 217-240); both of these articles are reprinted in a volume that I edited along with the series editor, Bob Parrott, *Albert C. Outler as Historian and Interpreter of the Christian Tradition* (volume 8 in *The Albert C. Outler Library*; Anderson, Indiana: Bristol Books, 2003), 115-123, 125-138.

⁶ Origen, *De Principiis* preface ¶¶ 1-9; in G. W. Butterworth, ed. and tr., *Origen: On First Principles* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966; reprint edition, Gloucester, Massachusetts: Peter Smith, 1973), 1-6.

the document known as *The Apostolic Tradition*, traditionally ascribed to Hippolytus of Rome, though that attribution seems to be seriously in doubt in recent scholarship.⁷ Outler's early study of these crucial passages giving the ancient versions of the "rule of faith" would make his patristic scholarship particularly valuable in ecumenical work.

Outler's Ecumenical Involvement and the Heart of the Christian Tradition

This particular sense of "tradition" as embracing the very heart of the Christian message was to come to great prominence in Outler's ecumenical involvement from the early 1950s, that is to say, from the point at which he came to serve at the Theological School of Southern Methodist University which within a few years was renamed the Perkins School of Theology. Outler came to SMU in 1951 and in the next year he served as a Methodist representative to the third World Conference on Faith and Order held at Lund, Sweden. At the Lund conference, Outler offered a proposal for ecumenical study of "our common history as Christians," and although the term "tradition" was not utilized in the proposal, working groups established in the next year both in Europe and in North America understood that this work was to focus on church-dividing issues of "Tradition and Traditions," that is, the common Christian tradition that churches share in dialogue with denominationally divisive traditions.⁸ Outler chaired the North American working group, and Danish Lutheran theologian K. E. Skydsgaard chaired the European working group. Outler's consistent dialogue partner in the North American group was Professor Georges Florovsky, who represented the distinct understanding of tradition in Eastern Orthodox churches.

⁷ These passages are as follows. (a) Irenaeus, *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*, par. 3; Latin text in Adelin Rousseau, ed., *Irénée de Lyon: Démonstration de la Prédication Apostolique* (Sources Chrétiennes series, no. 406; Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1995), 88; cf. John Behr, ed. and tr., *On the Apostolic Preaching* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1996), 42. Cf. also the version of this passage in Jaroslav Pelikan and Valerie Hotchkiss, eds., *Creeeds and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition* (3 vols. With a collection of source material in original languages on CD ROM; New Haven: Yale UP, 2003; cited hereafter as Pelikan and Hotchkiss, *Creeeds and Confessions*), 1:48. (b) Another version of the rule of faith is given by Irenaeus in *Adversus Haereses* I:10:1 (text in Norbert Brox, ed., *Irenäus von Lyon: Adversus Haereses/Gegen Häresien*; Fontes Christiani series; 5 vols.; Freiburg: Herder, 1993-2001), 1:198-200); English translation in Pelikan and Hotchkiss, *Creeeds and Confessions*, 1:49; cf. trans. John Leith in *Creeeds of the Churches: A Reader in Christian Doctrine from the New Testament to the Present* (Atlanta: Knox, 3rd rev. ed., 1982), 21. (c) Tertullian, *Adversus Praxeas* 2:1-2; Latin text in Hermann-Josef Sieben, ed., *Tertullian: Adversus Praxeas/Gegen Praxeas* (Fontes Christiani series, no. 34; Freiburg: Herder, 2001), 102-104; cf. Leith, *Creeeds of the Churches*, 21-22. Tertullian gives similar instances of the "rule of faith" (this is the term he employs) in *De Praescriptione Haereticorum* 13:1-6 (in Pelikan and Hotchkiss, *Creeeds and Confessions*, 1:56), *Adversus Praxeas* 4:1 (in Pelikan and Hotchkiss, *Creeeds and Confessions*, 1:57), and in *De Virginitate Velandis* (in Pelikan and Hotchkiss, *Creeeds and Confessions*, 1:57). (d) Latin recension of the Apostolic Tradition, in Bernard Botte, ed., Hippolyte de Rome: *La Tradition Apostolique d'après les anciennes Versions* (Sources Chrétiennes series, no. 11; Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1968), 84-86, which collates two Latin versions at this point; cf. Paul F. Bradshaw, Maxwell E. Johnson, and L. Edward Phillips, eds., *The Apostolic Tradition: A Commentary* (Hermeneia commentary series; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 116-118. Although the Botte edition (1968) attributes the work to Hippolytus, the latter commentary (2002) does not.

⁸ John Deschner, "Albert Cook Outler: A Biographical Memoir," in Deschner, Howe, and Penzel, eds., *Our Common History as Christians*, xv-xvi; and Skydsgaard, 3-4.

Ten years of study in these working groups allowed Outler to play a critical role in shaping the ecumenical moment when Protestants came to have a more positive and nuanced understanding of tradition. It was the heart of Outler's contribution to the interpretation of Church history and would be the basis for his own contribution to understanding the Wesleyan tradition. The occasion for this development was the plenary gathering of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches (WCC), which met in Montreal in 1963. At this point, Outler had just been elected President of the American Society of Church History, and he was actively participating as a Protestant observer to the Second Vatican Council, which had been under way since the previous fall. Although the Catholic Church had not yet committed itself to ecumenical dialogue, Catholic observers such as George Tavard were present in Montreal. With the WCC Faith and Order work occurring simultaneously with the reforms of Vatican II, there seems to have been a giddy sense in 1963 that the churches were on the verge of an epoch-making breakthrough that would allow visible unity between them on an unprecedented scale. But ecumenical leaders knew that such a breakthrough depended on their finding a way to deal with the divisive, foundational issue of the relationship between scripture and tradition.

It is this critical issue that was addressed in Montreal in 1963. The report of this conference, entitled "Scripture, Tradition, and traditions," was a landmark ecumenical document and served as the basis for subsequent ecumenical developments. The lower-case "t" in the title is significant, for the crucial breakthrough came in the nuanced way in which the document distinguished different senses of "tradition," especially the first sense given as follows:

"Tradition" or "the Tradition," with an upper-case letter "T," is defined as "the Gospel itself, transmitted from generation to generation in and by the Church, Christ himself present in the life of the Church."

The singular term "tradition," with a lower-case letter "t," is defined as "the traditionary process."

The plural term "traditions" (also lower-case "t") is understood in three senses: a) "the diversity of forms of expression," b) "what we call confessional traditions, for instance the Lutheran tradition or the Reformed tradition," and c) "cultural traditions."⁹

What this document means by "Tradition" or "the Tradition" (the first definition given above) is nothing less than the Gospel, the most basic Christian message, as it had been transmitted from the ancient church through the centuries. This is stated specifically in the document:

Thus we can say that we exist as Christians by the Tradition of the Gospel (the paradosis of the kerygma) testified in Scripture, transmitted in and by the Church

⁹ Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order (Montreal 1963), report on "Scripture, Tradition, and traditions," ¶ 39; in Günther Gassmann, ed., *Documentary History of Faith and Order, 1963-1993*, Faith and Order paper no. 159 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1993), 10.

through the power of the Holy Spirit. Tradition taken in this sense is actualized in the preaching of the Word, in the administration of the Sacraments and worship, in Christian teaching and theology, and in mission and witness to Christ by the lives of the members of the Church We can speak of Tradition (with a capital T), whose content is God's revelation and self-giving in Christ, present in the life of the Church.¹⁰

The recognition of this particular sense of "Tradition" was a breakthrough in the dialogue over the relationship between scripture and tradition. In this document Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant participants all recognized a sense in which tradition precedes the Christian scriptures, that is, in the very particular sense in which Acts, 1 Cor. 15:1-4, and other New Testament texts explicitly referred to the earlier transmission of the good news, the apostolic witness to Christ. In fact, this sense of tradition fit well with Protestant and Catholic New Testament scholarship, which since the 1930s had come to recognize the layers of tradition underlying New Testament texts, and the importance of the pre-pauline kerygma in the evolution of the New Testament literature.¹¹ This development allowed Protestants to value "Tradition" in a new and much more positive way than in the past,¹² and it served as a basis for subsequent ecumenical work, for example, the project of the World Council of Churches Faith and Order Commission projects on "*Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* (1982) and "Towards the Common Expression of the Apostolic Faith Today." It also influenced "The COCU Consensus" (1985), another project with which Outler had been involved in the 1960s.¹³

A number of the works published by Albert Outler after 1963 indicate his developing sense of the richness of "tradition." An early expression of this, just a couple of years after the Montreal conference, was an article entitled

¹⁰ "Scripture, Tradition, and traditions," ¶¶ 45 and 46, in Gassmann, ed. (*Documentary History of Faith and Order, 1963-1993*, 11). Cf. John Leith's explication of this sense of the gospel as the core of Christian tradition in his *Introduction to the Reformed Tradition* (Atlanta: Knox, 1977), 17-24.

¹¹ An earlier example in German scholarship is Martin Dibelius, *From Tradition to Gospel* (London: Ivor Nicholson and Watson, 1934; translation of *Die Formgeschichte des Evangeliums*, 1933, tr. Bertram Lee Wolf). In English-language New Testament scholarship, C. H. Dodd's *The Apostolic Preaching and Its Developments* (New York: Harper, 1964 [*sic*], but the book is apparently a reprint of the original 1956 edition) developed the notion of a primitive kerygma into a broader attempt to see a particular pattern of early Christian preaching in a wide variety of New Testament texts. The conclusions of ecumenical scholarship in regard to the kerygma or gospel proclamation preceding and underlying the New Testament texts do not rely on the broader scheme that Dodd developed. For a later and more refined argument about pre-pauline kerygma, cf. Hans Conzelmann, *An Outline of the Theology of the New Testament* translation by John Bowden from *Grundriss der Theologie des Neuen Testaments* (London: SCM Press, 1969; Munich: Christian Kaiser Verlag, second edition, 1968), where the first full section of the work discusses "The Kerygma of the Primitive Community and the Hellenistic Community," 27-93, esp. "The Content of the Proclamation," 62-71.

¹² Albert C. Outler, "History as an Ecumenical Resource: The Protestant Discovery of 'Tradition,' 1952-1963," presidential Address, American Catholic Historical Association, 28 December 1972; in *Catholic Historical Review* 59:1 (1973): 1-15.

¹³ This paragraph follows the Montreal document in close detail. *Confessing the One Faith: An Ecumenical Explication of the Apostolic Faith as it is Confessed in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (381)* (Faith and Order paper no. 153; Geneva: WCC Publications, 1991), ¶ 7, 2-3. Although the reference to Montreal 1963 is not explicit at this point, the language of this paragraph closely follows that of the Montreal document on "Scripture, Tradition, and traditions." Cf. "The COCU Consensus" V:6; in Burgess and Gros, eds., *Growing Consensus*, 41-42.

“Scripture, Tradition and Ecumenism.”¹⁴ His presidential address to the American Catholic Historical Association, given in December, 1972, also developed this theme quite explicitly. It was entitled “History as Ecumenical Resource: The Protestant Rediscovery of ‘Tradition.’”¹⁵ The *Festschrift* for Outler, published in 1975 by Oxford University Press, recognized this sense of tradition as a (if not *the*) central theme in Outler’s career: the volume is entitled *Our Common History as Christians*.¹⁶

We must acknowledge how very powerful this renewed sense of tradition has been for Protestants. One regularly hears today of “Baptist tradition”; “Pentecostal tradition”; and even “Stone-Campbell Restoration tradition,” which might better be described as an “anti-tradition.” These expressions, I believe, would have seemed very odd in the 1960s and before that time. I am not, of course, suggesting that Outler himself was responsible for the widespread positive adoption of the language of “tradition” that Protestants have taken up since the 1970s, but he influenced the very matrix—the very origin of that powerful shift—and was a principal interpreter of this shift in historical understanding on the part of Protestants.

Outler, Tradition and the “Wesleyan Quadrilateral”

Albert Outler’s deepening understanding of “tradition” can be seen as the key development that enabled his work in the formulation of the so-called “Wesleyan Quadrilateral.” The other elements of the “quadrilateral” had been long present in Protestant theological reflection. “Scripture” reflected the Reformation’s concern that the Bible is the sufficient source for our knowledge of salvation and for the reform of the Church. “Reason” and “Experience” reflected the two key aspects of the Enlightenment’s critique of traditional learning: “reason” suggests the rationalist approach to knowledge favored by such Continental philosophers as Descartes; “experience” suggests the empirical approach to knowledge favored by a long train of British philosophers, including Francis Bacon and John Locke. Protestant theology since the eighteenth century had struggled with the tension between inherited doctrines they believed to be grounded in the scriptures, and the challenges that “reason” (rationalism) and “experience” (empiricism) offered to traditional beliefs.

Outler found that John Wesley valued “Christian antiquity” (the church in the first four or five centuries) very highly,¹⁷ and he also valued the Church of

¹⁴ Originally published in *Scripture and Ecumenism*, ed. Leonard J. Swidler (Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, and Louvain: Editions E. Nauwelaerts, 1965), 9-22; reprinted in Ted Campbell and Robert Parrott, eds., *Albert Outler as Historian and Interpreter of the Christian Tradition*, 67-79.

¹⁵ Presidential Address, American Catholic Historical Association, December 28, 1972; originally published in *Catholic Historical Review* 59:1 [1973]: 1-15; cf. Ted Campbell and Robert Parrott, eds., *Albert Outler as Historian and Interpreter of the Christian Tradition*, 35-42.

¹⁶ See the work edited by Deschner, Howe, and Penzel, referred to above: *Our Common History as Christians: Essays in Honor of Albert C. Outler* (1975).

¹⁷ The subject of my 1984 dissertation on “John Wesley’s Conceptions and Uses of Christian Antiquity.” Outler served as *amicus curiae* (his term) to my dissertation committee. The work was subsequently published as *John Wesley and Christian Antiquity: Religious Vision and Cultural Change* (Nashville: Kingswood, 1991).

England, especially in its formative Elizabethan period.¹⁸ Wesley even gave some evidence of appreciation for Christian faith as it developed in the Middle Ages.¹⁹ It was natural for Outler to see in Wesley's positive appropriation of these moments from Church history as a reflection of "tradition," as Outler had come to understand the term. But part of my own contribution to the discussion of the "Wesleyan Quadrilateral" has been to point out that Wesley himself did not utilize the term "tradition" in the way in which Outler had come to understand it, and the way in which the term is used in the "Wesleyan Quadrilateral."²⁰ I argued in 1987 that Wesley did not have the quadrilateral, as The United Methodist Church has expressed it, because Wesley utilized the term "tradition" in very different ways. The subsequent availability of computer-searchable texts of John Wesley's *Works* has born out my earlier claim that Wesley either used the term "tradition" in the pejorative sense, that is referring to merely human accretions to the Christian faith, or in the more benign sense of "local customs," as in "Scottish traditions."

Lacking this critical term and more importantly, the concept of "tradition" in the sense of the unbroken work of God through the history and experience of the church, I have to argue that the "quadrilateral," then, cannot be "Wesleyan" in the sense of reflecting John Wesley's own terminology or concepts of authority in the Christian faith. Outler disagreed with me rather strongly on this point, and in the last letter that I had from him, he expressed the fear that I had set up an *Auseinandersetzung* against him, and he pointed to Wesley's fondness for both Christian antiquity and for the Church of England as evidence that there was something like a concept of "Christian tradition" in John Wesley.

I have also pointed out that the *Discipline* of The United Methodist Church never ascribed the quadrilateral to John Wesley and did not utilize the expression "Wesleyan Quadrilateral": the term seems to have developed in a kind of Methodist oral tradition after 1972.²¹ Outler himself believed that it was appropriate to utilize the term "tradition" to describe John Wesley's appropriations of church history (not as a term from Wesley's own works), and so defended the appropriateness of the expression and its relevance to a rediscovered Protestant and Methodist approach to Christian tradition.²² With this understanding of Christian "tradition," then, Outler was able to

¹⁸ Adding these two moments of Christian history to scripture, experience and reason gives a five-fold source of religious authority suggested by Scott Jones in *John Wesley's Conception and Use of Scripture* (Nashville: Kingswood, 1995), 169-176, 183.

¹⁹ See my article on "The Image of Christ in the Poor: On the Medieval Roots of the Wesleys' Ministry with the Poor," in Richard P. Heitzenrater, ed., *The Poor and the People Called Methodists* (Nashville: Kingswood Books imprint of the Abingdon Press, 2002), 39-57.

²⁰ See my earlier study of "The 'Wesleyan Quadrilateral': The Story of a Modern Methodist Myth" in (a) *Methodist History* 29:2 (January 1991): 87-95; and in (b) Thomas A. Langford, ed., *Doctrine and Theology in The United Methodist Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press/Kingswood Books, 1991), 154-161.

²¹ Though the term has a grounding in the interim report of the Theological Study Commission on Doctrine and Doctrinal Standards to the special general conference of 1970, 7-8, under the title "The Wesleyan Concept of Authority."

²² Albert C. Outler, "The Wesleyan Quadrilateral—in John Wesley," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 20:1 (Spring, 1985), 16.

enunciate the quadrilateral as guidelines for contemporary United Methodist theological reflection.

One of the most stringent critiques of the quadrilateral maintains that it offers only a methodology for theological reflection, but not a means of affirming the substance of historical doctrinal claims.²³ In a sense this is true because that is what that the quadrilateral itself purports to do. However, it is important to remember the context in which the statement was developed. Albert C. Outler chaired the Theological Study Commission of the newly formed United Methodist Church from 1968, the year of union, through 1972, when the statement including the quadrilateral was adopted by the United Methodist General Conference. The original charge to the Theological Study Commission was to harmonize two doctrinal statements inherited from the parent denominations of The United Methodist Church, namely, the Articles of Religion of the Methodist Church and the Confession of Faith of the Evangelical United Brethren. The Commission decided early on simply to declare that these two historic statements were in essential harmony, and to add to them a new statement relating the historic doctrines of Methodists and Evangelical United Brethren to the impending crises of contemporary culture. If this context is understood, I believe, then we must understand that the statement of the quadrilateral presupposed the ecumenical and Reformation doctrines included in the Articles of Religion and the Confession of Faith. Building on this doctrinal foundation, the quadrilateral offered a means of interpreting the historic Methodist and Evangelical United Brethren faith in their late-twentieth-century context. My own understanding, then, is not that the quadrilateral was meant as a means of replacing central doctrines affirmed by The United Methodist Church, but was rather to function as guidelines for the Church as we faced new issues that had not been dealt with in historic formulations of doctrine. However, Abraham is likely correct in suspecting that at least some United Methodists found the quadrilateral to be far more interesting than traditional doctrines, and they may well have wanted to use it as a methodology that could short-circuit the traditional doctrines affirmed by our Church in our Confession and our Articles.

The quadrilateral has proven to be a fruitful methodology in some areas of theological reflection. Dennis Campbell, for example, utilized it as a framework for the investigation of Christian approaches to professional ethics.²⁴ Wesleyan Evangelical theologian Donald Thorsen has explored the quadrilateral as a resource for Evangelical Christians, especially for those of the Wesleyan-Holiness tradition.²⁵ Stephen Gunter and a group of United Methodist scholars, including myself and Rebekah Miles, have explored the relevance of the quadrilateral for theological renewal in The United Methodist

²³ William Abraham, in an article responding to the question "What Should United Methodists do with the Quadrilateral?" in *Quarterly Review* 22:1 (Spring, 2002), 85-88.

²⁴ Dennis Campbell, *Doctors, Lawyers, Ministers: Christian Ethics in Professional Practice* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1982).

²⁵ Donald Thorsen, *The Wesleyan Quadrilateral: Scripture, Tradition, Reason and Experience as a Model of Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990).

Church.²⁶ The fact that the United Methodist General Conference of 1988 undertook to revise the disciplinary statement about the quadrilateral shows its continuing relevance to Wesley and Methodist theological reflection in our age. It is one of Outler's legacies to the contemporary Christian community.

A point that has seldom been observed about quadrilateral is the way in which it affirms the critical role of Christian tradition, both before and after the composition and canonization of the Christian scriptures. I have an intuition that this was Outler's deep intention in formulating the quadrilateral, and in fact the formulation adopted in 1972 reflected the precise language of the Montreal 1963 Faith and Order statement on "Scripture, Tradition, and traditions" and it made explicit reference to "contemporary Faith and Order discussions of 'Tradition and Traditions.'" The 1972 statement identified three senses of "tradition": tradition as process, tradition as reflecting the diversity (and division) of the churches, and then a "transcendent" sense:

In a third sense, however, "the Christian tradition" may be spoken of transcendently: as the history of that environment of grace in and by which all Christians live, which is the continuance through time and space of God's self-giving love in Jesus Christ. It is in this transcendent sense of *tradition* that Christians, who have been isolated from one another by various barriers of schism, race and rivalries may recognize one another as Christians together.²⁷

This "transcendent" sense of tradition answers to what the Montreal Faith and Order Conference called "Tradition," with a capital "T," although the Montreal statement was bolder, referring to "tradition" in this sense as "the Gospel itself."

But it is also critical to realize that the 1988 revision of the United Methodist statement about "Tradition" in "Our Theological Task" (and this is the statement in our current *Discipline*) deleted the earlier references to the Faith and Order discussions of "Tradition and Traditions," it deleted the paragraph on tradition that I have just quoted, and it focuses on tradition simply as "[t]he story of the church." It does refer to "tradition" as "the history of that environment of grace in and by which all Christians live, God's self-giving love in Jesus Christ" but omits the phrase "the continuance through time and space of God's self-giving love in Jesus Christ."²⁸ I do not know how deliberate this alteration was, but it weakens the sense of "tradition" as the continuity of divine grace through history and as, fundamentally, the Gospel itself as the central message of the church. Lacking this sense of a transcendent meaning of "tradition," the term as it now appears in our

²⁶ Steven Gunter, Scott Jones, Ted Campbell, Rebekah Miles, and Randy Maddox, *Wesley and the Quadrilateral: Renewing the Conversation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997).

²⁷ *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 1972), ¶ 70, 76-77.

²⁸ My emphasis. *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 2000), ¶ 104, 80. I have also referred to this omission in my article on "Scripture and Tradition in the Wesleyan Tradition," in S T Kimbrough, Jr., ed., *Orthodox and Wesleyan Scriptural Understanding and Practice* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary P, 2005), 165-166.

statement on “Our Theological Task” has reverted back to the sense of tradition as an appendage to the Christian faith, without the very strong sense of Montreal 1963 or of the earlier 1972 statement about the “transcendent” meaning of tradition.

To be fair, the preface to the United Methodist doctrinal standards in the 1988 *Book of Discipline* (and subsequent *Disciplines*) does refer to “the apostolic witness to Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, which is the source and measure of all valid Christian teaching.”²⁹ This eloquent statement certainly gets at the transcendent meaning of “tradition” as it had been expressed earlier, because the core meaning of Tradition (capital “T”) was indeed “the apostolic witness to Jesus Christ.” But in this case (i.e., in the preface to the UM doctrinal standards, it is detached from the meaning of “tradition.”

Outler was bitterly disappointed by the 1988 revision of the statement about the quadrilateral in the United Methodist *Discipline*, and many interpreters have pondered the reasons for this disappointment. It would be difficult to imagine, for example, that he would have objected formally to a doctrine of scriptural primacy, which was clarified in the 1988 statement, since that was already present in the Reformation-age Articles of Religion and also in the Confession of Faith. If I am correct in my intuition that Outler saw his central contribution to the quadrilateral as lying in its assertion of this transcendent sense of Christian tradition, then it may be that it was this crucial omission that most concerned him and might have led him to see the revised statement as a reversion to some kind of flat, un-normed biblicism. That is, without Tradition as the Gospel message that is itself the center of Christian scripture and norms the meaning of the whole Christian Bible, Outler feared, we are left with the Bible as a datum without a clear sense of its center and we are left with tradition only in the older and more pejorative sense of unnecessary and uninspired human additions to or expansions upon the sacred text or as decorative material that can illustrate biblical texts but cannot in any sense norm the reading or interpretation of them. I suggest that it was the constriction of the meaning of “tradition” that may have led Outler to his concerns about the revision of the statement on “Our Theological Task” in the *Discipline*.

Conclusions

We now live in a world of post-modern culture in which of traditions of all sorts have become increasingly important—indeed, we live in a time of readily manufactured and heavily marketed “traditions” available for consumer use. Some postmodern philosophers speak as if human beings are so bound by cultural traditions that we cannot deeply understand other human beings “located within” cultural/linguistic traditions that differ radically from our own. Some interpreters like to date the postmodern turn in cultural studies to the publication in 1979 of Jean-François Lyotard’s

²⁹ *Book of Discipline* 1988, ¶ 101, 41-42.

The Postmodern Condition.³⁰ Perhaps Outler had a prescient vision of the eclipse of Modernist culture and the coming of postmodern interpretations of cultures. His researches certainly paved the way for the postmodern recovery of the Wesleyan tradition in the 1980s and beyond.

What enabled Albert Outler to make his contributions to the ecumenical movement and to the interpretation of the Wesleyan tradition was a clear and consistent sense, derived from his earlier studies of Clement and Origen, that the Christian Gospel is itself the principal meaning of “Tradition”—and this is indeed “Tradition” with a capital “T.” It was in this particular sense that Origen, writing from Alexandria in the early third century, claimed to have received the tradition from the apostles, the tradition on which Origen reflected throughout his treatise “On First Principles.”

This, I believe, is the richer meaning of “Tradition” that Outler had discovered in his patristic studies, that he had worked collaboratively to express with other Christians in his ecumenical work, that he had tried to bequeath to his own Methodist family by way of the section on “tradition” in the statement on “Our Theological Task.” It was the great gift of Albert C. Outler to see the heart of the Christian Tradition with great clarity. His patristic studies and ecumenical involvement provided an ideal environment for the cultivation of this vision. And his vision of the heart of the Christian tradition has proven to be renewing in the life of the churches. In the words of Outler’s friend and collaborator K. E. Skydsgaard, the Tradition as the Gospel itself is “The Flaming Center” of Christian faith.³¹

³⁰ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: U Minnesota P, 1984; based on the French edition of 1979).

³¹ Skydsgaard, *op. cit.*