

UNITED METHODIST DOCTRINE: THE EXTREME CENTER

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MANUFACTURED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

TO RICHARD HEITZENRATER AND TO THE MEMORIES OF
JAMESON JONES, ALBERT OUTLER, JOHN DESCHNER, AND
JOHN WESLEY, THE TEACHERS AND THEOLOGICAL FRIENDS
WHO HAVE MOST INFLUENCED MY THOUGHT

the world and to give leadership in the quest for Christian unity and interreligious relationships."¹⁹

Bishops, as United Methodist elders, are expected to "preach and maintain" United Methodist doctrines. But paragraphs 414.3 and 427.2 give them added responsibilities of guarding and transmitting that doctrine and speaking to the Church and from the Church to the world. In addition, as a corporate body of leaders in the church, they have opportunities for fulfilling these functions in ways not open to anyone else.

There is a clear tension between the teaching roles of the General Conference and the office of bishop.²⁰ Francis Asbury had a teaching role in the early days of the Methodist Episcopal Church through his itinerant preaching and his editing of the Discipline. In 1812 the General Conference gave to the bishops control over the course of study followed by candidates for the ministry. Jim Kirby says, "This was a first in the history of the church and a new responsibility for the bishops. They were now established officially in the traditional episcopal function of being the teachers of the church."²¹ Over time their leadership has diminished in favor of the power of the General Conference. Now the Discipline formally acknowledges the teaching role that the bishops have played in Methodism from the beginning. They exercise their role corporately by issuing statements from time to time. In 1986 they issued "In Defense of Creation," and in 1990 they issued "Vital Congregations, Faithful Disciples," and in 1996 they published "Children and Poverty: An Episcopal Initiative." However, the authoritative status of these documents is clear. They are teachings of the bishops of the United Methodist Church, but not teachings of the denomination. Kirby says:

Richey is correct in regarding these pronouncements as representing the attempt of the bishops "in a united fashion" to give "theological leadership to the Church." But they carry nothing like the historic weight of pronouncements from the bishop of Rome to the Catholic Church. At most, these comments of United Methodist bishops have only the force that respect for their opinions and the power of their arguments may have among their constituents. There is little evidence that they have influence outside of Methodism. Finding the most effective way to exercise the teaching office remains a challenge for the Council of Bishops as the church enters the next century.²²

Other parts of the United Methodist Church engage in this sort of teaching from time to time. For over one hundred years Methodism published official catechisms intended to instruct children and youth about correct doctrine.²³ Annual Conferences and local congregations publish resolutions. Some general agencies, such as the General Board of Church and Society, are given the responsibility of engaging in witness and addressing the Church and the world.²⁴ The General Board of Discipleship publishes tracts and books bearing the denomination's name, which would lead some to believe that they are part of the Church's official teaching. The United Methodist Publishing House publishes curricula that is official Church teaching, as overseen by the denomination's Curriculum Resources Committee. In the first part of the new millennium, television is the most powerful medium of communication. It is not the deepest or most well-argued approach. It clearly reaches the most people and has great impact. Thus, in designing television advertisements bearing the name of the Church, United Methodist Communications may exercise the most influential official teaching activity in the whole connection.

In sum, all of these other activities are teaching by official bodies acting in their various areas of ministry. However, they are not authoritative teaching because in each of these cases, including the pronouncements of the bishops both individually and as a Council, the content of such teaching is to be measured finally against what the General Conference of the Church teaches.

THE FORMAL SHAPE OF UNITED METHODIST DOCTRINE

An answer to the question *What is authoritative United Methodist doctrine?* must begin with the question, *What are the documents that embody the doctrine and how do they relate to one another?* The authoritative doctrine of the United Methodist Church is determined by the General Conference. This body of lay and clergy representatives elected by the annual conferences has been given "full legislative power over all matters distinctively connective."²⁵ A later paragraph interprets this to mean that "no person, no paper, no organization, has the authority to speak officially for The United

Methodist Church, this right having been reserved exclusively to the General Conference under the Constitution."²⁶

Thus, what is sometimes called the magisterium of the Church is located, for the United Methodist Church, in its General Conference. This view of how teaching authority is located is deeply rooted in the history of the Church and its predecessor denominations. In 1744 John Wesley met with some of those who were in connection with him to discuss the state of the revival. They began by considering three issues, "1. What to teach; 2. How to teach; and, 3. What to do; that is, how to regulate our doctrine, discipline, and practice."²⁷ When Methodism became independent in the United States, its conference of preachers was the supreme authority in all matters, including the election of bishops. As time went on, the conference of all the preachers or the General Conference was held every four years largely as a matter of convenience. In 1808 the decision was made to create a delegated General Conference to allow for more balanced representation among the different regions of the country. However, restrictions were placed upon what the General Conference could do without seeking the consent of all the preachers. These Restrictive Rules have changed slightly over the years, but still limit the power of the General Conference to make major changes without approval of the members of annual conferences. These rules restricting the freedom of the General Conference to change the most basic features of United Methodist doctrine and polity are an expression of the basic nature of the Church's polity, that the annual conference is the fundamental body of the Church.²⁸ Similar patterns developed in the Evangelical Association and the United Brethren. In all these denominations decisions were made to add laypersons as members of the conferences in equal proportion to the clergy members.²⁹

The claim that the source of authoritative teaching in the United Methodist Church is located in the General Conference can be challenged on several grounds. First, there is the claim that functionally there is a great deal of teaching going on and that, particularly, bishops have a teaching role that they have always fulfilled in the life of the Church. This argument does not dispute that authoritative teaching exists, but argues that the focus should be placed on doctrine construed in a broader fashion. Indeed, it must be ad-

mitted that the vast bulk of what Charles Wood calls "active teaching" is not authoritative. Persons do not typically read Wesley's Sermons or the Confession of Faith on a regular basis. Rather, teaching happens in a great variety of ways, ranging from Sunday school curricula to the sermons given in United Methodist pulpits. Jaroslav Pelikan's definition of doctrine as "what the church of Jesus Christ believes, teaches and confesses on the basis of the word of God"³⁰ seems much better suited to a holistic investigation.

While Pelikan's definition is admirably suited to an investigation of the history of Christian doctrine, it does not describe the status of authoritative doctrine today. In particular, when candidates for ordination are asked, "Have you studied our doctrines?" they are not being asked, "Do you have a grasp of the range of different ideas being taught in our congregations?" Rather, they are being asked if they have studied the teachings that are essential to the identity and well-being of the community into which they are being ordained as leaders.

Second, one might argue that no Protestant church can even have a magisterium. One might argue that Article V and Confession IV³¹ mean that only Scripture is authoritative and that any one person's judgment about its interpretation is just as authoritative as the pronouncements of the General Conference. If *sola Scriptura* is the watchword of Protestantism, and United Methodism is a Protestant denomination, then any attempt to claim authority is a usurpation of the individual's rights to read and interpret Scripture for him or herself.

The confusion in this argument rests with the meaning of the word "authority." The General Conference has the authority to define the doctrine of the United Methodist Church. Individuals who disagree with its teachings can choose either to seek to change the Church's teaching or leave the denomination. That United Methodist doctrine is binding on or authoritative for all human beings is well beyond the meaning of "authority." The General Conference is the appropriate body to define what it means to be a United Methodist, including in that definition the body of beliefs that the Church holds.

Third, one might argue that the basic tenets of Christianity are such that United Methodism cannot alter them. Such a claim is

absurd because of the great variety in Christian teachings among the many denominations, which all claim to belong to the same faith. However, two more subtle forms of this third claim might be put forward. First, one might define "basic" narrowly enough to suggest that something like the Nicene Creed and the Chalcedonian Definition must determine the faith. On this view, United Methodism cannot alter its teaching that "the Son, who is the Word of the Father, the very and eternal God, of one substance with the Father, took man's nature in the womb of the blessed Virgin."³² Whatever the Discipline says about altering the constitutional standards, some of them are unalterable because they are basic to the faith. A second version of this argument is to treat the claim as having analytic status, leading to the proposition that a necessary condition of being Christian is confessing truths contained in the Nicene Creed. To alter the conviction that the Son is of one substance with the Father is to cease to be Christian by the simple definition of the term "Christian."

This third argument in both of its subtle forms has much to commend it. Yet, two problems diminish its force. First, the definition of "basic" is vague. Even identifying the Nicene Creed and Chalcedonian Definition as the sole content of "basic" would exclude a number of persons and denominations one might otherwise wish to see included. Second, the point made by McGrath about faithfulness to the intent of the formulation is significant. How can one confess the faith of the Nicene Creed in words that are intelligible and meaningful today? Also, has not the Holy Spirit over time revealed to the church deeper meanings in the gospel, so that some interpretations have improved over time? The Christian witness against slavery in the last three hundred years is deeply biblical and faithful despite those New Testament passages that seem to permit it.

Fourth, one might argue that the General Conference is not capable of carrying out its duties well. People who have attended the General Conference have observed that it is not well suited for careful theological deliberation, dialogue, and the writing of precisely worded doctrinal texts. Few of the delegates are specialists, and there is a shortage of time in which to do high-quality work.

Such an argument does not touch the claim that, for better or worse, the United Methodist Church has chosen to place its doctri-

nal authority in the General Conference. Whatever truth there is in the argument really points either to revising the way in which the General Conference does its business (for example, by lengthening the sessions) or to adopting a different magisterial structure. Consideration of how bishops hold this authority in the Roman Catholic Church or how congregations hold it in Baptist churches would lead to helpful comparisons. That United Methodists teach authoritatively through the General Conference is clear. Whether this is the best way for Christians to teach is debatable; dialogue about how United Methodists might teach better is urgently needed.

Given that the General Conference makes these doctrinal statements, how should one read them? One might begin with a presumption of wholeness—that in publishing these texts as its teaching, the United Methodist Church believes that it is offering a coherent body of teaching that also aims at consistency. The latter is more difficult to achieve than the former, because over time inconsistencies are very likely to occur as new ideas are added and old ones are not adjusted. However, maintaining coherence is possible if there is a general tenor that binds all of the texts together to function in the same way. Discerning the wholeness of the body of material, however, requires finding that general tenor that holds it all together.

Yet, conflicts do appear and differing points of emphasis do show up among the texts. How does one adjudicate among them? Are some of the texts more central to the Church's teaching than others? If so, which texts take precedence? These questions are answered in two ways. Formally, the pronouncements themselves give clues about those which are more important and which are less so. Materially, the general tenor of the texts gives a key for interpreting all of them in accordance with their main theme and purpose.

TEN TEXTS IN THREE LEVELS

Formally, the key to the relative significance of the texts lies in the relative difficulty in altering them. While the General Conference is the only voice of the Church that can teach

normatively, there are six rules that restrict its activities. The First, Second, and Fifth Restrictive Rules prevent it from changing the doctrinal standards of the Church without a three-fourths approving vote of the aggregate number of annual conference members.³³ The Constitution and the General Rules cannot be changed without a two-thirds approving vote of the annual conference members. In the traditions stemming from the Methodist Episcopal Church, which first instituted these rules in 1808, there has never been a vote to override them. Thus, in any conceivable conflict between the constitutionally protected doctrinal standards, and any text passed by a General Conference, the standards would have to prevail. Hence, the Constitution, the doctrinal standards, and the General Rules occupy the highest level of authority. To treat them as a group we shall use the term "constitutional standards." In many ways these texts are different from each other and treating them as one group must not be taken as suggesting they are all alike. They do, however, share this level of authority as the most permanent expression of United Methodist teaching.

Within the doctrinal statements of the General Conference, the intent of the Conference is the other criterion used to evaluate relative authority of the texts. The question becomes, to what extent did the General Conference intend each of these documents to be teaching the Christian faith?

The structure of the *Book of Discipline* is of first importance here. The Discipline has five major divisions called "Parts." After the Constitution come Parts II, III, and IV, labeled "Doctrinal Standards and Our Theological Task," "The Ministry of All Christians," and "Social Principles," respectively. They, along with the *Book of Resolutions*, are clearly intended to be doctrinal statements. Most of the relevant material will be found there. However, the General Conference is often not very consistent about where it places doctrinal statements. There are also explicitly doctrinal statements embedded in various places in Part V of the Discipline titled "Organization and Administration." All together they are treated as contemporary doctrinal statements of the Church. Their secondary level of authority is constituted by the fact that a majority vote of any General Conference can alter what was said previously.

Resolutions are valid for only eight years unless they are explicitly readopted.³⁴ One could argue that they are of lesser authority

than the Social Principles and other statements in the Discipline because the General Conference intends for them to lose their status after a period of time. However, several resolutions bearing on the Church's doctrine have been continually renewed since their first passage.³⁵

However, a curious phrase in the preface to the Social Principles raises questions about the authority of this text in relation to other statements. It says:

The Social Principles are a prayerful and thoughtful effort on the part of the General Conference to speak to the human issues in the contemporary world from a sound biblical and theological foundation as historically demonstrated in United Methodist traditions. They are intended to be instructive and persuasive in the best of the prophetic spirit. The Social Principles are a call to all members of The United Methodist Church to a prayerful, studied dialogue of faith and practice. (See ¶ 509.)³⁶

Does this paragraph mean they are not binding on United Methodists in the same way as our understanding of the four sources and criteria of theology is binding? Does the intention to be "instructive and persuasive" mean that the church is not teaching authoritatively? Does the Principles' character as a "call" to "prayerful, studied dialogue" mean they are simply an agenda for conversation and not a body of teaching to be received? Finally, what does the parenthetical reference to ¶509 mean?

Three arguments seem decisive in interpreting the Social Principles as having the same authority as other statements of the General Conference. First, the parenthetical comment refers to the right of the General Conference to speak for the church. Second, another parenthetical comment at the end of the Social Principles recommends that they be "continually available to United Methodist Christians" and "emphasized regularly in every congregation."³⁷ Third, many of the resolutions contained in the BOR refer to the Social Principles as an authority.³⁸ It would be odd to attribute to the Social Principles a lower level of authority than exists for the Resolutions. Yet, the ambiguity in the preface to the document is disturbing.

The lowest level of authoritative doctrine is liturgy, including the church's hymnody, which is contained in the *United Methodist*

Hymnal and *Book of Worship*. While the authoritative status of these texts is lower than the constitutional standards and contemporary statements of doctrine, their power to shape the life of the functional church is usually much higher. There are clearly doctrinal implications to both of these texts. When the General Conference authorizes a liturgy such as the ones for Holy Communion, ordination, and baptism, statements of faith with clear doctrinal implications are being made. Further, when it approves hymns for congregational singing the texts carry theological messages. The table of contents of the UMH carries headings that could serve as an outline of the Church's doctrine. While it is possible to pray and sing these words as praise to God, in United Methodism they can be used to teach the faith as a form of active doctrine. At the very least they are implicitly doctrinal, and often they are used to instruct people in the faith. They are thus doctrinal statements. However, it is not clear that the General Conference regards these as binding in the same way as it does the texts on the other two levels of authority.³⁹

There are still other ways of construing the relationships among these various texts. There are those who wish to discount the constitutional standards as historical texts with no authority for today. One might take the reverse chronological order as signifying the greatest authority—the most recent statements are most authoritative and the oldest have the least authority. However, a careful reading of the Church's constitution prevents such a misunderstanding. It is the constitutional standards that take precedence. The General Conference can teach for the Church so long as it does not violate the Restrictive Rules. Any doctrinal statement that violates those standards would be invalid. The analogy between these texts and the relationship between the Constitution and the laws of the United States is clear. In both cases the more recent does not take precedence. Rather, the constitutional standards take precedence over even the most recently approved law or statement.

There are those who wish to discount all expressions of the General Conference as competing with the standards of doctrine and thus violating the Restrictive Rules. In particular, the existence of sections 1, 2, and 4 of Part II of the Discipline are sometimes viewed as unconstitutional because they were passed by the General Conference without following the procedures for amending the Constitution. However, the first Restrictive Rule does not

prohibit the General Conference from adding to the denomination's doctrinal standards. It says, "The General Conference shall not revoke, alter, or change our Articles of Religion or establish any new standards or rules of doctrine contrary to our present existing and established standards of doctrine."⁴⁰ Thus, the General Conference has deemed that its contemporary doctrinal statements are not contrary to its constitutional standards.

There are those who wish to argue that the best judgment of contemporary scholarship should be followed in doctrinal matters, whether it is the interpretation of the Restrictive Rules or language used in reference to God or contemporary versions of the doctrine of Christian perfection. The relationship between the United Methodist Church's leadership—bishops, General Conference, general boards and agencies, and others—and its scholars deserves significant attention. There have been scholars who have held leadership roles in the shaping of United Methodist doctrine.⁴¹ However, it is not the task of scholarship to determine the church's teaching. Rather, it is the task of the Church's authorized leaders to make those determinations, and of both scholars and leaders to develop the kind of working relationships that will foster the best possible results.

In summary, the shape of United Methodist doctrine is that of ten texts occupying three different levels of authority:

1. Constitutional standards: Constitution, Articles of Religion, Confession of Faith, Standard Sermons, *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament*, and General Rules.
2. Contemporary statements: *Book of Discipline* (nonconstitutional sections) and *Book of Resolutions*.
3. Liturgy: *The United Methodist Hymnal* and *United Methodist Book of Worship*.

Constitutional Standards

First, there are doctrinal texts protected by the Restrictive Rules and other provisions of the Constitution. The most obvious of these is the Constitution itself, which makes a number of doctrinal claims that should not be overlooked. Three texts—the Articles of Religion, the Confession of Faith, and the General Rules—are mentioned specifically. The first Restrictive Rule also refers to "our

present existing and established standards of doctrine," the interpretation of which is disputed. It will be argued that it covers Wesley's Standard Sermons and his *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament*.

The Articles of Religion have remained substantially unchanged (with one interesting exception) since the Christmas Conference of 1784, which founded the Methodist Episcopal Church. When John Wesley revised the Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England he deleted fifteen articles completely.⁴² He altered the text of nine articles, usually by deletion and sometimes with great significance.⁴³ One was changed by the Methodist Episcopal Church prior to 1808.⁴⁴ Fourteen are identical in wording.⁴⁵ One article was added by the 1784 Conference.

The reasons for Wesley's editing are not easily ascertained. In his publishing activity he abridged many different texts and frequently did so for one of three reasons. On some occasions, he did not agree with the author's views and excised statements that he did not want to reprint. In other cases, he regarded the content as important but thought it could be said more cogently. In still other cases, he regarded the material as superfluous and thought it did not need to be reprinted for the intended audience, even though he did not object to it. Thus, for example, Wesley's removal of the article "Of the Three Creeds" could indicate any of these three reasons. Without clear evidence, it is impossible to say why he removed the articles he did or made the changes he made.

One of the changes made to the Articles after Wesley's editing came in the Discipline of 1788. In the Thirty-nine Articles the first article, "Of Faith in the Holy Trinity," says that God does not have "body, parts or passions."⁴⁶ The American version of the article deletes the word "passions" and says, "There is but one living and true God, everlasting, without body or parts, of infinite power, wisdom, and goodness; the maker and preserver of all things, both visible and invisible."⁴⁷ There is no evidence to show who made this change, on what basis (if any) they were authorized to do so, or why the change was made. Possible reasons include editorial mistake, a judgment that the word was more confusing than helpful, and deep theological convictions about the nature of God's interactions with the world. Lacking more historical evidence, it is impossible to draw a valid conclusion.

An additional Article, which was numbered XXIII, concerned the rulers of the United States of America. It made clear that this new Church recognized the independence of the United States. Further, it aligned the denomination with the new political philosophy that governments are "delegates of the people." Given the difficulties facing Methodist preachers during the War of Independence because of their British connections and allegiances, as well as Mr. Wesley's pamphlet condemning the revolution, this article made clear they were loyal Americans.

The Confession of Faith was composed by the board of Bishops of the Evangelical United Brethren Church. For sixteen years the EUB Discipline carried in it both the Articles of Religion of the Evangelical Association (last substantively revised in 1839) and the Confession of Faith of the United Brethren in Christ (approved in 1889).⁴⁸ Steven O'Malley describes the various influences leading up to the new Confession in his article "The Distinctive Witness of the Evangelical United Brethren Confession of Faith in Comparison with the Methodist Articles of Religion." In it he makes an important point about the general tone of the 1814 version of the Confession in comparison with the Articles. He says:

Whereas this early CF [Confession of Faith] of the United Brethren was terse, less technical, and earthy in its expressions, the AR [Articles of Religion] was formal, more reflective of the technical language of the ecumenical creeds, and less capable of being understood by the lay folk who would constitute the heart of the M.E. Church. The CF was appropriate for a movement of awakening that did not at first aspire to attain a full-blown ecclesiastical status. The AR, as abridged by John Wesley from the 39 Anglican Articles of Religion, was intended for a movement that was about to become a church, and an "Episcopal" one at that! In addition, the CF was written in the first person plural, indicating that it was a normative statement, commanding personal loyalty at the heart of their faith. The AR, written in the more impersonal third person, was intended to define the outer perimeters within which faith and order and life and work could proceed.⁴⁹

O'Malley gives an interesting and well-documented history of the steps that led to the 1962 Confession of Faith. In his discussion of the origins of the Evangelical Association's "Articles of Faith," he notes that its author, George Miller, adapted the Methodist Articles

of Religion, reducing them from twenty-five to nineteen articles, with some changes in terminology.⁵⁰ In these predecessor documents O'Malley finds traces of the irenic Reformed theology of the *Heidelberg Catechism*, the special interests of Reformed Pietism, Anabaptist theology, the ethos of German-American revivalism, the Anglican Thirty-nine Articles, and Wesley's theology.

In 1958 the Evangelical United Brethren General Conference asked the Board of Bishops to combine the two statements.

O'Malley says:

It was on this basis [the authority of the General Conference to determine doctrine] that the 1958 General Conference authorized the Board of Bishops "to conduct a study of the respective confession of faith of the two former communions, with a view to combining both statements into a unified creedal statement of belief." This action was predicated on the assumption that the former communions "were American born with their origins in a rebirth of spirit and not in a theological revolt" and that "In all the basic and enduring elements of faith and ecclesiastical organization they are alike." The authors of the revised CF [Confession of Faith] were charged not to alter the content of either of the preceding doctrinal standards. They were to represent its content in an integrated manner, restated in contemporary language. It was further decided to continue the first person plural, confessional format of the United Brethren CF.⁵¹

O'Malley suggests that United Methodists have overlooked the EUB Confession of Faith in discussion of doctrinal standards and that this has been shortsighted with the result that "it has not enabled them to recognize the broader (i.e., continental Reformation and Pietist) traditions in which United Methodism was shaped."⁵² Without seeking further to review the complicated processes that led to their current formulation, we will explore in later chapters the different nuances of perspective that the Articles and Confession bring to the discussion of the relevant topics of United Methodist doctrine.

The General Rules were written by Wesley after he expelled sixty-four persons from the Newcastle society in February of 1743. Joining the society required only that persons have "a desire to flee from the wrath to come, and to be saved from their sins."⁵³ Continuing in the society meant exhibiting behavior that showed

one's desire was sincere. The three rules were simple: do no harm, do good, and attend upon all the ordinances of God. Richard Heitzenrater says,

Although Wesley had often said that these three prerequisites were not the whole of true religion, they now became the minimum expectations for a person to manifest the sincerity of his or her desire for salvation. They represented the antithesis to antinomianism, which represented one of the biggest threats to the Wesleyan program at this point.⁵⁴

The Discipline notes that these rules were "a way of discipleship."⁵⁵ The General Rules have largely been unaltered through the years. At various points in early American history the rule prohibiting slaveholding and the buying and selling of slaves was not printed in Methodist Episcopal Disciplines.

The other texts that are included in the first level of church teaching are placed there by a less direct claim. Wesley's *Sermons* and *Notes* are included on the basis of a vague phrase in the first Restrictive Rule. The correct interpretation of "our present existing and established standards of doctrine" has been the subject of heated debate, with Richard Heitzenrater and Tom Oden being two of the key protagonists.⁵⁶ However, only the General Conference can authoritatively interpret this phrase, and it has done so. While the interpretation is not as clear as one would expect, it points to their inclusion. In the section "Doctrinal Standards in American Methodism" the Discipline adopts Heitzenrater's argument by saying:

The Articles of Religion, however, did not guarantee adequate Methodist preaching; they lacked several Wesleyan emphases, such as assurance and Christian perfection. Wesley's *Sermons* and *Notes*, therefore, continued to function as the traditional standard exposition of distinctive Methodist teaching.

The General Conference of 1808, which provided the first Constitution of The Methodist Episcopal Church, established the Articles of Religion as the Church's explicit doctrinal standards. The first Restrictive Rule of the Constitution prohibited any change, alteration, or addition to the Articles themselves, and it stipulated that no new standards or rules of doctrine could be adopted that were contrary to the "present existing and established standards of doctrine."

Within the Wesleyan tradition, then as now, the *Sermons* and *Notes* furnished models of doctrinal exposition. Other documents have also served American Methodism as vital expressions of Methodist teaching and preaching. Lists of recommended doctrinal resources vary from generation to generation but generally acknowledge the importance of the hymnbook, the ecumenical creeds, and the General Rules. Lists of such writings in the early nineteenth century usually included John Fletcher's *Checks Against Antinomianism* and Richard Watson's *Theological Institutes*.

The doctrinal emphases of these statements were carried forward by the weight of tradition rather than the force of law. They became part of the heritage of American Methodism to the degree that they remained useful to continuing generations.⁵⁷

This narrative suggests that the phrase "present existing and established standards of doctrine" should be interpreted to cover the Articles of Religion. Heitzenrater has persuasively argued that this was the intention of the 1808 General Conference. The other texts mentioned have the same status as Wesley's *Sermons* and *Notes*, carrying the "weight of tradition." This historical analysis is important, but not decisive for the current interpretation of the phrase.

The decisive indicator of the current position of The United Methodist Church is in the Discipline under the heading "Doctrinal Standards in the United Methodist Church":

In the Plan of Union for The United Methodist Church, the preference to the Methodist Articles of Religion and the Evangelical United Brethren Confession of Faith explains that both were accepted as doctrinal standards for the new Church. Additionally, it stated that although the language of the first Restrictive Rule never has been formally defined, Wesley's *Sermons* and *Notes* were understood specifically to be included in our present existing and established standards of doctrine.⁵⁸

Immediately following the Confession of Faith are bibliographical notes dealing with "The Standard Sermons of Wesley," "The Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament," and "The General Rules of the Methodist Church."

The historical argument between Heitzenrater, Oden, Ogletree, and others is important, primarily because it underlies the final text in the Discipline. It is the text approved by the General

Conference that is decisive, because only that body has the authority to interpret the ambiguous phrase. As noted above, the Judicial Council has consistently refused to make doctrinal interpretations, arguing that the General Conference is competent to make such decisions. While the relevant passages from the Discipline are not entirely clear, they do indicate that Wesley's *Sermons* and *Notes* are covered under the ambiguous phrase in the first Restrictive Rule.

Once it is agreed that Wesley's *Sermons* are part of the authoritative doctrine of the Church, a further complication arises. Which sermons are included in *Sermons*? No clear answer is given in the Discipline. "Our Doctrinal History" notes the origin of using sermons as doctrinal standards in the Model Deed of 1763, which referred to "four volumes of Sermons." The American Conference before independence accepted the British standards of Minutes, *Sermons* and *Notes*. Under the Heading "The Standard Sermons of Wesley" is a bibliographical note referring the reader to the Bicentennial Edition of *The Works of John Wesley* for the critical edition of the sermons. Within Wesley's lifetime, his *Sermons on Several Occasions* were published in three editions. The first four volumes included forty-three, fifty-three, and forty-four sermons respectively. The British Methodist Conference has determined that the standards are forty-four in number.⁵⁹

Two arguments would suggest that fifty-three is the appropriate number to use. First, when the Methodists in the United States became independent, the four volumes most recently printed in England had fifty-three sermons in them. Originally the sermons had been published as separate volumes in 1746, 1748, 1750, and 1760.⁶⁰ Together these had forty-three sermons. However, a second edition of volume three has an extra sermon added for a total of forty-four. Hence, when the Model Deed was issued in 1763, one could assume that forty-four sermons were meant.

In 1771 Wesley issued his *Works*. The first four volumes of this set, sometimes called the Pine edition because of its printer, were the sermons. They had all forty-four of the previously published sermons from the four volumes of *Sermons on Several Occasions* but also included nine additional sermons. These additional ones are "The Witness of the Spirit, II," "Sin in Believers," "Repentance of

Believers," "The Great Assize," "The Lord Our Righteousness," "The Scripture Way of Salvation," "The Good Steward," "The Reformation of Manners," and "On the Death of Mr. Whitefield." In 1783, an American edition of the four volumes of sermons was published in Philadelphia. Based on the Pine edition, it had fifty-three sermons. Another complication arises from the 1788 edition of his sermons, where the four volumes include forty-four sermons.⁶¹ However, if one is concerned with the status in 1784, the later editions are not relevant. In the edition of Wesley's works most current at the time of the formation of the Methodist Episcopal Church as a separate body in the United States, the phrase "four volumes of sermons" most obviously refers to fifty-three sermons.

If there is a tradition of understanding the phrase "present existing established standards of doctrine" to include *Sermons*, one might argue that the time of separation from England is the time at which to fix the meaning of the phrase. However, one might equally well argue that 1808 is the time when the phrase was first used in this context, and some other edition of Wesley's sermons might have been the best referent.

The second argument is much less legalistic and perhaps of less influence. One might seek to interpret the phrase in the first Restrictive Rule as broadly as possible in order to include as much of Wesley's work as possible. If historical considerations suggest no more than fifty-three sermons, then a concern for the content of these "extra" nine sermons would encourage as broad an interpretation as possible. "The Use of Money" is one of those additional sermons whose content is important to include. Tom Oden agrees with this count while others have come to different conclusions.⁶² However, given that the General Conference is the only authorized interpreter of these matters and that the Discipline is silent on the subject, a number of different, reasonable choices regarding how many of Wesley's sermons are "standard" is possible. Indeed, on the "broadest possible interpretation" argument, one might treat all of Wesley's sermons as authoritative. Such an approach completely cuts off the meaning of the phrase "four volumes of *Sermons*," and yet it includes some of Wesley's most interesting sermons. When the Model Deed was drawn up, there were only four volumes of sermons. Was Wesley's editorial work in later editions

explicitly done with regard to which of his sermons were to be standards of doctrine? Was the failure to alter the terms of the Model Deed due to legal considerations or oversight? It seems clear that many of Wesley's sermons not included in the fifty-three are among his most speculative and therefore theologically interesting. But for that very reason one might suppose that they do not belong in a collection of doctrinal standards. At the same time, using all of the sermons would result in the inclusion of the sermon "Free Grace," which he published separately in the heat of controversy with George Whitefield, but never subsequently included in his collected works.

Whatever the answers to these intriguing historical questions, the General Conference has left the matter unclear. Based on the status of the "four volumes of sermons" in 1784, this study will rely on the first fifty-three in the Bicentennial Edition of the *Works*.

Contemporary Statements

The second level of doctrine is composed of those statements of the General Conference intended to be doctrinal in nature but which are not covered by the Restrictive Rules. Thus, they can be changed by a majority vote at any General Conference session. Primarily, these are sections 1, 2, and 4 of Part II of the Discipline, labeled "Our Doctrinal Heritage," "Our Doctrinal History," and "Our Theological Task" respectively; Part III, "The Ministry of All Christians"; Part IV "Social Principles"; and the *Book of Resolutions*.

However, there are doctrinal statements embedded in many places in the Discipline. For example, there is teaching about the nature of the church placed at significant points throughout Part V. There is a relatively long discussion of connectionalism and mission at the beginning of chapter 5, "Administrative Order."⁶³ Paragraph 1301 makes a statement about the mission of the church.⁶⁴ Each of these doctrinal statements, regardless of its placement in the Discipline, should be treated with the same regard as those statements in Parts II through IV that are not constitutionally protected.

Liturgy

The third level is composed of those officially sanctioned documents that are not explicitly intended to be doctrine but that clearly

have doctrinal functions: *The United Methodist Book of Worship* and *The United Methodist Hymnal*. Many scholars distinguish between first-order religious speech and second-order speech. They often relegate doctrinal pronouncements to the latter category as a kind of grammar for guiding first-order speech. However, such a distinction does not inhere in the texts themselves as much as in how the texts are used. For United Methodists, hymnody and liturgy have been used to teach the faith, and so function as both first-order and second-order speech.⁶⁵

The shape of United Methodist doctrine provides for a number of problems as well as possibilities. The presence of so many different types of texts, from articles to narrative to sermons to notes to hymns, means that a variety of interpretations are possible. But the ranking of different levels of authority provides an order to the ways in which different views are reconciled within the variety of sources that have a claim to being authoritative United Methodist doctrine.

QUESTIONS ARISING FROM THE FORMAL SHAPE OF UNITED METHODIST DOCTRINE

What does it mean that United Methodism counts sermons, exegetical notes, and rules of behavior as parts of its fundamental doctrinal statements? One answer lies in the distinction between causative and normative authority discussed below. While all of the different literary forms can serve in either capacity, these forms are better adapted to convincing persons about the truth of a position than setting a legally enforceable standard. Propositions such as those contained in the Articles and Confession better serve that latter purpose. Their presence makes The United Methodist Church a confessional Church. But the other texts show the practical side of the Church's doctrine because their form is more readily suited to the transformation of individuals than are traditional creeds and confessions. On such an understanding, it is appropriate to create doctrinal standards that are in sermonic form. If sermons, exegeses, and rules are among the chief ways in which the word of God is applied to the contemporary lives of persons,

then putting doctrinal matters in these forms emphasizes the practical end of the doctrinal activity.

What function do the General Rules play in doctrine? They illustrate the way in which Christian teaching is transformative and builds character. Seen in the light of the teachings about establishing the law, Christian perfection, salvation by grace through faith, and the means of grace, these rules provide a practical framework by which individuals could work out their own salvation. The General Rules are transformative and thus practical. The Discipline says that they are a way of discipleship and that Wesley "rejected undue reliance upon these rules."⁶⁶ However, "undue reliance" did not mean one was allowed to break them. Instead, one was to rely on God's grace and see the ways in which grace was working through them. They were not church law before 1784, but they were the law of the Methodist societies. These rules were a means of grace by which people who feared God and sought salvation could find it.

What does it mean that United Methodism is unclear and vague about important points in its doctrinal standards? Two answers can be given here. First, the denomination ought to give more attention to the clarity of its teaching. There is a sense in which such unanswered questions are problematic if the Church really does believe its doctrine is important. Thus, clarifying the status of the *Sermons* and *Notes* and which sermons are included would be helpful. Students are now required to take courses in United Methodist doctrine, and they should know precisely what it is they are studying. In a larger context, as the United States becomes more culturally diverse and different religious groups become more direct competitors for the hearts and minds of the people, many persons will ask what it is the United Methodist Church believes. Giving the best possible answer empowers the Church's witness. Filling these holes would improve the denomination's proclamation.

The second answer qualifies the urgency of the first. United Methodist doctrine is practical, and its vagueness at some points is simply another sign of this. Unless and until these problematic points actually affect the preaching, teaching, and serving in local congregations, there will be little incentive for United Methodists to fix them. United Methodists tend to do ministry first and reflect

17. Of Predestination and Election
18. Of obtaining eternal salvation, only by the name of Christ
20. Of the Authority of the Church
21. Of the Authority of General Councils
23. Of ministering in the Congregation
26. Of the unworthiness of the ministers, which hinder not the effect of the Sacraments
29. Of the Wicked, which do not eat the Body of Christ in the use of the Lord's Supper
33. Of excommunicate persons, how they are to be avoided
35. Of homilies
36. Of consecration of bishops and ministers
37. Of civil magistrates
43. Using the numbering of the MEC Articles of Religion, the following articles were altered by Wesley from the wording of corresponding Church of England articles: 2, 5, 7, 12, 13, 16, 17, 21, and 22.
44. Article I had the word "passions" deleted.
45. Using the number of the present Articles of Religion, the following articles are substantially the same as their corresponding Church of England articles: 3, 4, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11, 14, 15, 18, 19, 20, 24, and 25.
46. *Book of Common Prayer*.
47. Discipline, 59.
48. See "Doctrinal Traditions in The Evangelical Church and The United Brethren Church," Discipline, 55-58.
49. O'Malley 1999, 60. See also Behney and Eller, 358.
50. O'Malley 1999, 69.
51. O'Malley 1999, 73-74.
52. O'Malley 1999, 76.
53. Discipline, 72.
54. Heitzenrater 1995, 139.
55. Discipline, 48.
56. See Heitzenrater 1991a, Oden 1991, and Oden 1988. Wheeler, 26 refers to "the fifty-three sermons which are among the standards of doctrine in Methodism." A historical study of how the Restrictive Rule has been construed in the history of Methodism would perhaps be helpful to a General Conference seeking to revise its present interpretation. However, this is not relevant to the current question of what does the Discipline currently say. Frank, 130-33, and Yrigoyen reach the same conclusion as I have about the status of the *Sermons* and *Notes*. Oden 1988 affirms the inclusion of the sermons without taking a clear position on the question of how many. He acknowledges the "general agreement that at least forty-four are indisputably doctrinal standards" (94). Then he notes that British Methodists usually say forty-four while Americans are more likely to say fifty-two. He then proceeds to give titles and summaries of fifty-three sermons (97).
57. Discipline, 53-54.
58. Discipline, 58. However, Ogletree, D&L, 174 notes that this part of the Plan of Union was for information only and not constitutionally binding on the new

- denomination. He says, "In short, the Plan of Union can be said to have stipulated that the *Sermons* and *Notes* are covered by the First Restrictive Rule only in the sense that the General Conference of the two uniting churches accepted a particular historical judgment about what might have been the original reference of the First Restrictive Rule. Like any critical reconstruction of past events, this judgment remains open to historical review. Further, the action which included this stipulation in the Plan of Union had the status only of General Conference legislation. It simply cannot be described as a constitutional matter." My claim is precisely this, that the General Conference of 1968 (and subsequent sessions that have left the relevant words unchanged) has authoritatively interpreted the Restrictive Rule to include the *Sermons* and *Notes*. A future General Conference could change the interpretation by majority vote.
59. For an accounting of the decision made by the British Conference, see Sugden 2:331-40.
 60. Outler, "Introduction," *Works* 1:38-49.
 61. The attorney's opinion, which was accepted as the proper interpretation by the British Conference, was that the Model Deed applies to this edition, and thus they count forty-four sermons as standard. See Sugden, 2:340.
 62. Oden 1988, 93-94, 97.
 63. Discipline, 426.
 64. Discipline, 524.
 65. Ted Campbell 1999.
 66. Discipline, 48.
 67. See *In Search of Unity*.
 68. A petition creating such a committee was passed by the 1996 General Conference without funding and so was never created.
 69. Wood 1996, 190. He is using his own translation of Hollaz as quoted in Heinrich Schmid, *Die Dogmatik der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche dargestellt und aus den Quellen belegt*, 10th ed., ed. Horst Georg Pöhlmann (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Gerd Mohn, 1983), p. 48. A published English translation of this book is *The Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, 3rd ed., trans. Charles A. Hay and Henry E. Jacobs (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1961), p. 104.
 70. Wood 1996, 199.
 71. Wood 1996, 203.
 72. Wood 1996, 204.
 73. I am indebted to Charles Wood for this insight.
 74. Kelsey 1975, 100-106.
 75. Discipline, 45.
 76. Meadows, 84. Meadows unfortunately regards the Wesleyan Quadrilateral as a chief culprit in blocking this kind of practical doctrine. Like Abraham in *Waking from Doctrinal Amnesia*, he argues against the way the Quadrilateral has been misused rather than considering arguments for how it might properly be used. For another helpful discussion on the issue of practical doctrine, see Knight and Saliers.
 77. Yrigoyen 2001.
 78. *Notes* Rev. 17:10.