

DOCTRINE AND THEOLOGY
IN THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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Contents

Preface	7
Introduction: A Wesleyan/Methodist Theological Tradition	9
Thomas A. Langford	
I. The 1972 Disciplinary Statement	
Introduction	19
1. Introduction to the Report of the 1968-72 Theological Study Commission	20
Albert C. Outler	
2. United Methodism in Agony	26
Frederick Herzog	
3. Doctrinal Standards in The United Methodist Church	39
Schubert M. Ogden	
4. United Methodism in Search of Theology	52
Leroy T. Howe	
5. Church Doctrinal Standards Today	64
Robert E. Cushman	
6. The Wesleyan Quadrilateral—In John Wesley	75
Albert C. Outler	
II. The 1988 Disciplinary Statement	
Introduction	91
7. In Search of Continuity and Consensus: The Road to the 1988 Doctrinal Statement	93
Richard P. Heitzenrater	
8. At Full Liberty: Doctrinal Standards in Early American Methodism	109
Richard P. Heitzenrater	

The task of defining "the scope of our Wesleyan tradition in the context of our contemporary world" includes much more than defining or redefining legal standards of doctrine, although that is also involved. Minimal legal standards of orthodoxy have never been the measure of an adequate witness to the tradition, be it Christian or United Methodist. The heart of our task is to discover how seriously we take our distinctive doctrinal heritage and how creatively we appropriate the fullness of that heritage in the life and mission of the church today.

Chapter 9

WHAT ARE "ESTABLISHED STANDARDS OF DOCTRINE"? A RESPONSE TO RICHARD HEITZENRAITER

Thomas C. Oden¹

"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" (Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church, 1984, ¶ 16). The same sentence, known as the First Restrictive Rule, is in every Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church and its predecessors from 1808 to the present. To what standards does this sentence refer?

The most commonly accepted interpretation is found in the 1972-84 Disciplines: "The Discipline seems to assume that for the determination of otherwise irreconcilable doctrinal disputes, the Annual and General Conferences are the appropriate courts of appeal, under the guidance of the first two Restrictive Rules (which is to say, the Articles and Confession, the *Sermons* and the *Notes*)" (1984 Discipline, ¶ 67). But is this interpretation historically correct and accurate in its textual specification of what the rules protect? That is what the current debate is about.

The thesis of this essay: John Wesley's *Sermons* and *Notes* have had an uninterrupted consensual history of being received as established standards of doctrine in The United Methodist Church and its predecessors. It sets forth reasons for retention of current language of the Discipline that specifies the *Sermons* and *Notes* as constitutionally protected doctrinal standards (1984 Discipline, ¶ 67). It sets forth a resumé of evidence for doctrinal standards from 1763 to the present, especially the disputed period of 1784-1808, showing that the *Sermons* and *Notes* were not rejected by the deeds of settlement, and that the conference of 1808 referred to them in the second clause of the First Restrictive Rule as "our present existing and established standards of doctrine." The undebated, nonconsensual view that the Articles only are protected by the constitution should not enter prematurely into the language of church law.

In 1749 Wesley drew up a "model deed," published in 1763, for all Methodist preaching houses, which restricted the use of the chapels to those who "preach no other doctrine than is contained in Mr. Wesley's Notes upon the New Testament, and four volumes of sermons."² The "four volumes of sermons" were the *Sermons on Several Occasions*, which since the 1840s have been generally referred to as the "Standard Sermons."³

The 1972-84 Disciplines specifically hold that there is a dual norm operative in the standards of doctrine referred to in the First Restrictive Rule: "The original distinction between the intended functions of the Articles on the one hand, and of the *Sermons* and *Notes* on the other, may be inferred from the double reference to them in the First Restrictive Rule (adopted in 1808 and unchanged ever since)" (1984 Discipline, ¶ 67). Here the Discipline clearly endorses the "two-clause theory" of the First Rule: "On the one hand, it [the constitution] forbids any further *alterations* of the Articles and, on the other, any further contrary *additions* 'to our present existing, and established standards of doctrine' (i.e., the Minutes, *Sermons*, and *Notes*)" (1984 Discipline, ¶ 67). The two-clause reading of the First Rule emphasizes the difference and complementarity between the two sources—Articles and other "established standards."

All Disciplines since 1972 affirm as an accepted view the theory that the 1784 Conference affirmed Wesley's *Sermons* and *Notes* as established sources of doctrine:

From their beginnings, the Methodists in America understood themselves as the dutiful heirs of Wesley and the Wesleyan tradition. In 1773, they affirmed their allegiance to the principles of the "Model Deed" and ratified this again in 1784, when they stipulated that "The London Minutes," including the doctrinal minutes of the early Conferences and the Model Deed, were accepted as their own doctrinal guidelines. In this way they established a threefold agency—the *Conference*, the *Sermons*, and the *Notes*—as their guides in matters of doctrine. (1984 Discipline, ¶ 67).

There is no doubt that the 1984 Discipline regards the *Sermons* and *Notes* as constitutionally protected doctrinal standards. It is generally agreed that during the period from 1855 (Bishop Osmond Baker's *Guide-book*) to the present, the leading experts on American Methodist constitutional history (from Bishops Baker and Holland McVeyre to Albert Outler and Bishop Nolan Harmon) have included the *Sermons* and *Notes* along with the Articles as constitutionally protected doctrinal standards. Happily there is very little disagreement over the period from the inception of American Methodism to the Christmas Conference of 1784, during which time the *Sermons* and *Notes* were repeatedly stated in the Minutes

(and incorporated legally into the deeds of Methodist preaching places) as doctrinal standards. That leaves at issue only a single disputed period—from 1784 to 1855, that is, between the Christmas Conference and the publication of Baker's *Guide-book*.

It has been argued by Richard Heitzenrater in this journal that during this period the *Sermons* and *Notes* were not regarded as legally binding doctrinal standards, and that only after that time did Baker's interpretation emerge as normative, whereby the *Sermons* and *Notes* were belatedly (and wrongly!) reinstated as binding doctrinal standards after a seventy-one year interruption.⁴ Our purpose is to present evidence to the contrary, so as to provide a reliable historical basis for concluding that the *Sermons* and *Notes* have remained established doctrinal standards steadily and without interruption from the inception of American Methodism to the present Book of Discipline.

The first "query proposed to every preacher" of the American Conference of 1773 was: "Ought not the authority of Mr. Wesley and that Conference to extend to the preachers and people in America, as well as in Great Britain and Ireland?" "Yes." Second question: "Ought not the doctrine and discipline of the Methodists, as contained in the [British] minutes to be the sole rule of our conduct, who labor in the connection with Mr. Wesley in America?" "Yes."⁵ These two questions established from the outset three key principles that would enter deeply into the spirit of American Methodism: (1) Wesley would exercise authority within the connection as long as he would live, and the distance to America did not weaken or diminish that, so that Wesley or his authorized representatives would govern personally as Wesley did in Britain and Ireland. (2) The doctrine taught in Europe and America was the same—hence there was not thought to be a Methodist doctrine taught in one country distinguishable from that in another. (3) More importantly, the doctrine taught had a specifically defined textual basis and reference—that contained in the British *Minutes* which included a "model deed" requiring that preachers preach "no other doctrine than is contained in" Wesley's *Sermons* and *Notes*.

The American Conference of 1780 established the pivotal principle that all deeds of American Methodist Church properties "shall be drawn in substance after that in the printed [British] *Minutes*," and thus would incorporate the restriction concerning the *Sermons* and *Notes*.⁶ At the ninth conference of 1781 these same textual grounds were spelled out explicitly: "Ques. 1. What preachers are now determined, after mature consideration, close observation, and earnest prayer, to preach the old Methodist doctrine, and strictly enforce the discipline as contained in the Notes, Sermons, and Minutes published by Mr. Wesley...?"⁷ This

was thought sufficiently important to require formal subscription: "The thirty-nine preachers assembled in the Conference subscribed their names to an affirmative answer."⁸

On five occasions between 1773 and 1784, supported by unambiguous documentation, the established standards of doctrine were clearly and textually defined as *Sermons* and *Notes*: (1) in the conference of 1773, (2) the conference of 1780, (3) the conference of 1781, (4) in Wesley's letter to the conference of 1783, and (5) the conference of May 8, 1784. All of these documents, criteria, and actions were well-known to American preachers when they met at the Christmas Conference in 1784. If there had been some rescinding or amendment of these standards in the period 1784-1808, one would expect that there would be some record of it. There is no record of it whatever, either in conference records or private memoirs, and furthermore, no hint of debate that these established standards were under challenge or even being questioned. This was the conference whose record shows that preachers were specifically urged to "be active in dispensing Mr. Wesley's Books."⁹ This minute was retained in numerous subsequent issues of the Discipline in the disputed period from 1784 to 1808.

We will summarize Heitzenrater's case point-by-point and reply to each point. Heitzenrater has asserted that the omission of the "model deed" in the *Minutes* of 1785 constituted an implied rejection of Wesley's *Sermons* and *Notes* as binding standards: "The section which contained the 'model deed' was omitted. The new Discipline therefore specified no doctrinal standards."¹⁰ This argument hinges on a curious assertion: that whatever ideas are omitted or not repeated annually from the previous minutes of a deliberative body constitutes an implied rejection of those ideas. If one should take this premise seriously, it must be applied and tested with other ideas besides the elimination of the *Sermons* and *Notes* as doctrinal standards. Taking this premise rigorously, here are several of the ideas that one must also consider as having been *rejected* by the Discipline of 1785 since they were *omitted* (or better, simply not repeated): that faith is a "divine conviction of things not seen" ("Large Minutes"); that the "Office of a Christian Minister" is to "watch over souls, as he that must give account"; that the labor of private instruction is absolutely necessary; that one should inquire into the state of the soul of the unconverted.¹¹ All of these points were in the British "Large Minutes," but not in the American Discipline of 1785. By this reasoning, anything not included must be considered "consciously dropped" and deleted "as legally binding."¹² Only if one answers that the above items were intended to be consciously rejected, can one also answer that the *omission*

of the "model deed" indicated a specific rejection of its doctrinal standards.

The more transparent reason we know that the *Sermons* and *Notes* were not rejected in 1784 is that the American Discipline of 1785 itself makes numerous references commending Mr. Wesley's *Sermons* and *Notes*: "We advise you . . . from five to six in the Evening, to meditate, pray, and read, partly the Scripture with Mr. Wesley's *Notes*, partly the closely practical Parts of what he has published." Among the 1785 instructions for preaching: "Frequently read and enlarge upon a portion of the *Notes*." "Searching the Scripture, by (1) Reading: *constantly*, some Part of every day; *regularly*, all the Bible in order: *carefully*, with Mr. Wesley's *Notes* . . ." A document that affirms these things could not at the same time be deliberately rejecting Wesley's *Notes* as established doctrinal standards. Further, there are numerous references to key themes dealt with in more detail in Wesley's *Sermons*: "go on to Perfection," "gradual and instantaneous change"; "holiness comes by faith," etc.¹³ None of these themes are dealt with in the Articles, which would be the only binding standards of doctrine remaining if it is imagined that the conference had just eliminated the *Sermons* and *Notes* as binding doctrinal standards.¹⁴

The 1788 conference vigorously disavowed that it had changed any doctrinal standards. It specifically declared that it had taken actions "such as affect not in any degree the essentials of our doctrines."¹⁵ Surely "our doctrines" could not be the Articles of Religion alone, since the amendments made at this conference had no reference whatever to any point covered by the Articles. The next Discipline of the disputed period, that of 1789, did not hesitate to acknowledge John Wesley as one who, "under God, has been the father of the great revival of religion now extending over the earth by the means of the Methodists" (1789 Discipline, p. 3), language that would be repeated in the Disciplines of 1790 and 1791. In the "Notes" written by Coke and Asbury for the Discipline of 1798, as prepared on request of the General Conference of 1796 and reconfirmed by the General Conference of 1800, the encomium toward Wesley would accelerate. There he was regarded as "the most respectable divine since the primitive ages, if not since the time of the apostles" (p. 7). This does not sound like the language of those who had just devalued Wesley's established standards of doctrine. Had there been any serious proposal that the *Sermons* and *Notes* be denoted from binding status, surely such a great issue would have been rigorously debated and prominently reflected in the *Minutes* of some conference between 1784 and 1808. No such evidence has been forthcoming.

The most crucial turn in Heitzenrater's theory hinges conspicuously upon an argument from silence—the simple nonmention of Wesleyan standards—so as to allege broadly that the conference was “consciously deleting their force as legally binding standards of doctrine.”¹⁶ It is unconvincing to argue from silence that the simple absence of the Wesleyan standards in the deed of settlement constitutes a direct negation of, or withholding of approval from, them as standards for preaching. To the contrary, it is evident that the early Methodist preachers thought that they were holding fast to the “old Methodist doctrine.”¹⁷ Had changes been proposed, would not such an important matter have been widely debated by the preachers? Would not there have been a significant documentary residue of that debate? None exists. The more plausible hypothesis is that the American *Minutes* and the *Disciplines* following 1784 affirmed the existing standards of doctrine derived from the “model deed” so obviously as to require no further specification, definition, or extensive debate. It is *non sequitur* to conclude that since the “model deed” was *not repeated* in the American *Minutes*, its standards were implicitly being discarded.¹⁸ For the *Sermons* and *Notes* were so familiarly known by Methodist preachers who had been solemnly bound by the “model deed,” the Circular Letter, the “binding minute,” and numerous conference actions, that they required no repetitious further specification in American *Minutes* that stood in such obvious continuity with the previous tradition of *Minutes*. The contention that the British “Large Minutes” were “superseded and no longer had any binding effect”¹⁹ in American Methodism fails to take sufficiently into account the fact that Wesley's Circular Letter, to which Asbury assented, required that the American conference “cheerfully conform to the Minutes both of the English and American Conferences.”²⁰ This does not imply that the American conferences after 1784 remained bound in perpetuity to the British *Minutes*, but rather the doctrinal continuity between them was affirmed even while disciplinary refinements were being contextually adapted to the American situation.

There was a succession of similar deeds that eventuated in the “deed of settlement” enacted by the General Conference in 1796. They were: (1) Wesley's “model deed” of 1763; (2) the virtually identical deed that appeared in the “Large Minutes” of 1776 and following; (3) the deeds written in America after 1780 that were to be drawn up in accord with the “model deed” printed in the “Large Minutes”; (4) the English Deed of Declaration to provide for succession of property rights after Wesley's death, enrolled in chancery in 1784; (5) the anomalous absence of any printed deed in the revised Discipline of 1785, which Heitzenrater questionably takes to be an outright rejection of the previous deed; (6) with

the decease of Wesley in 1791, the “deed of declaration,” making the British conference a self-governing body, conveying to the conference powers that had been vested under law to Wesley during his lifetime; and (7) the “deed of settlement” that appears in the *Journal of the 1796 General Conference*. In this entire succession of deeds, there is no evidence of debate that doctrinal standards were being formally revised, amended, re-evaluated, or even debated.²¹

Heitzenrater has argued that after 1784 a new doctrinal standard prevailed in American Methodism, that the standards of the earlier *Minutes* were “thus superseded and no longer had any binding effect on the American Methodists after January, 1785.”²² But seven years later, in the record of the General Conference of 1796, we find that its first action was to reassure all American Methodists that *no doctrinal changes* had been made, and that, however the disciplinary language had been prudently restated for the American situation, its intent was not to alter doctrine. The second major action taken, after specifying the boundaries of the annual conferences, was to provide a plan for “a deed of settlement.” This was the standardized, legal, post-Revolutionary American version of the “model deed.” It was a legal instrument enabling properties to be set aside for a particular use: Methodist preaching. The purpose of the deed was to allow to be built a “place of worship, for the use of the members of the Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States of America, according to the rules and discipline” (italics added),²³ rules which since 1773 had legally required trustees to allow preaching of “no other doctrine than is contained in” Wesley's *Sermons* and *Notes*. There is nothing in the deed of settlement that suggests that the Articles of Religion had displaced the *Sermons* and *Notes* as the only binding criteria for preaching in Methodist meeting houses. Had that been the conference's extraordinary intent, one would reasonably expect that there would have been some note on it, or evidence of debates. None exists. The “rules and discipline” to which the deed of settlement referred had long before provided that no preacher could join the connection without agreeing to “abide by the Methodist doctrine and discipline published in the four volumes of sermons and the notes.”²⁴ It is in this way that the same doctrinal standards continued after 1796 to impinge upon the use of church property.

Heitzenrater has argued that, in the procedure for trial of ministers, the reference to “a breach of the articles and discipline of the church” (1789 Discipline, Q. 2, ¶ XXXIII) must be a reference limited exclusively to the Articles of Religion. Following the language of the Discipline of 1792 he concludes “that the only official measure or test of doctrinal orthodoxy within the Methodist Episcopal Church at that time was the

Articles of Religion." He thinks that the American Articles superseded the earlier British Methodist standards, Wesley's *Notes and Sermons*.²⁵ Yet these procedures for trial do not anywhere specifically prohibit other standards of doctrine from applying. The question rather is, simply: "What shall be done with those ministers or preachers, who hold and preach doctrines which are contrary to our articles of religion?" (1792 Discipline, Q. 3, continuing through 1804 Discipline, Q. 3, p. 41). Upon this thread Heitzenrater hangs the theory that the Articles *only* have binding relevance as doctrinal standards. Pertinent to this issue are the notes written by Coke and Asbury for the Discipline of 1798, especially as they apply to trial. They specified that one of the legitimate reasons for trial of a preacher would be if the preacher should "oppose the doctrines of holiness" (1798 Discipline, p. 113). These doctrines are not specifically to be found in the Articles of Religion, but are prominently addressed in Wesley's *Sermons and Notes*. Hence the Articles could not have been considered by Coke and Asbury in 1798 to be the only standards and doctrines, even in the case of trial.

There are in fact two very different contexts in which doctrinal standards may apply: (1) the recurrent and primary task of preaching; and (2) the rare and exceptional situation of the trial of a minister, where a much more concise, specific, definition is needed than is applicable to preaching. The conferences may have decided that they did not want to encumber the difficult situation of trial with the details of all four volumes of *Sermons* and the extensive *Notes*. It could have been thought prudent to narrow, for trial purposes alone, the criteria of culpable offenses. Keep in mind that the designation of the *Sermons* and *Notes* as doctrinal standards for preaching occurred long before (1763) the designation of the Articles as standards that may have had special applicability to trial (1792).

The Discipline that the conference of 1808 had in hand when it wrote the Constitution and Restrictive Rules was the Discipline of 1804. When the members of the conference constitutionally prevented subsequent General Conferences from altering "our present existing and established standards of doctrine," they surely must have assumed that the Discipline of 1804 was consistent with those standards. If the standards were "present and existing," it is difficult to see how they could not be existing in the 1804 Discipline. That Wesley's *Notes* were assumed as normative in the 1804 Discipline is evident in the section on the duty of preachers, who are required to read the notes carefully, "seriously" and "with prayer," "every day" (1804 Discipline, Sect. 12, Q. 2). "From four to five in the morning and from five to six in the evening, to meditate, pray, and read the scriptures with notes, and the closely practical parts of what Mr.

Wesley has published" (1804 Discipline, p. 38). The *Sermons* and *Notes* were widely distributed already, and obviously did not need (and could not have allowed) quadrennial updating, as did the rules of discipline. This is the simple and transparent reason why they were not bound with the Discipline—not because they were rejected. Since the Articles were much shorter, they could easily and conveniently be bound with the Discipline, but that does not imply that they were distinctly preferred or had higher constitutional status.²⁶

The preamble of the 1808 conference began on a rigorously conserving tone: "It is of greatest importance that the doctrines, form of government, and general rules of the United societies in America be preserved sacred and inviolable," and it was precisely for this purpose that the constitution was written.²⁷ This preamble shows that matters of doctrine were not being debated at this time, but were generally understood and viewed in a settled way as being "established standards of doctrine." Such a consensus could not have occurred quickly. Consensual reception does not develop or become "established" in a single month or year, but only over decades, and this had in fact occurred during the years between 1773 and 1808. What other understanding of "doctrine" could have been assumed than that which had been consensually shared for thirty-five years in the case of the *Sermons* and *Notes* and twenty-four years in the case of the Articles?

The language of the First Rule contained two clauses: (1) the first clause specified the "articles of religion" received from Wesley, as distinguished from the older criteria, (2) the "standards of doctrine," which by long consensual tradition had been textually specified as the *Sermons* and *Notes*. These two clauses conceptually distinguished the two norms of classical Methodist doctrine: the tightly constructed twenty-five Articles of Religion, as distinguished from the much longer four volumes of *Sermons* and extensive *Notes on the New Testament*. Leading constitutional historians (McIvey, Tigert, Neely, and Buckley) have subsequently read the rule as indicating this "duplex norm"²⁸—first clause: "The General Conference shall not revoke, alter, or change our articles of religion"; second clause: "nor establish any new standards or rules of doctrine, contrary to our present and existing and established standards of doctrine."

Heitzenrater has argued that the entire Restrictive Rule refers only to the Articles of Religion. Yet if the intent of the 1808 conference had been to specify a single document, the Articles of Religion, as the only norm, it would not have required two clauses, but one. Under Heitzenrater's hypothesis, the second clause becomes redundant, and one is left with the curiosity of why the constitution writers not only

added it, but rigorously required that it not be changed. The major clue is the fact that the second clause is not stated in the singular (so as to imply a single document) but in the plural (implying more than one document of doctrinal standards). If one hypothesizes that "standards of doctrine" refers to the Articles of Religion alone, one is left with the dubious alternative that the plural—"standards"—refers to each separate article of the Articles of Religion. To the contrary, the rule required two clauses to convey the two dimensions of Methodist doctrinal accountability: first, to the teachings of the Reformation (Articles) and secondly, to the more specific Methodist teachings (Wesley's *Sermons and Notes*). It is precisely these doctrinal norms that the 1808 conference was determined to protect and ensure that they could not be casually revoked.

The two clauses can be compared and contrasted as follows:

ARTICLES OF RELIGION	SERMONS AND NOTES
Confessional form	Homiletical-exegetical form
The ecumenical consensus	The Methodist emphasis
Anglican theology	Wesleyan themes
Concise	Five volumes
Criterion for trial	Criteria for preaching
Shorter history (as amended in 1784) of consensual reception	Longer history (since 1763) of consensual reception
Textually specified by the constitution	Implied by the constitution by "plain historical inference"

The vast majority of leading American Methodist constitutional historians have affirmed the two-clause interpretation of the First Rule. Buckley stated the principal reason why: "The Articles of Religion, so far as they go, contain only the faiths of universal Protestant and evangelical Christendom, and the other existing and established Standards contain, in addition, those Methodist teachings which in substance or mode of statement are not universal among Protestant evangelical Churches."²⁹

Why did the question of doctrinal standards not recur in each subsequent General Conference? Because once settled in 1808, having entered unalterably in the constitution of American Methodism, there was no need (and indeed no way) to return to it, unless one wished to try to amend the constitution. If one takes the odd view that the *lack of mention* of the *Sermons and Notes* in General Conference *Minutes* constitutes deliberate dissent from them, then the same criteria must be applied to other ideas acted upon once in the General Conference minutes and then not mentioned again.

Heitzenrater has argued that "at every point where the Methodist Episcopal Church had an opportunity to reiterate and reaffirm its allegiance to Wesley's *Sermons and Notes* specifically as doctrinal standards after 1785, it either consciously deleted the references, failed to mention them, or voted to the contrary."³⁰ Yet this claim assumes that the *Sermons and Notes* are not already embedded in the First Restrictive Rule, an assumption as yet insufficiently debated. Heitzenrater stands almost alone among major American Methodist constitutional interpreters of the last hundred years in this assumption. The alternative hypothesis is more plausible: that the very purpose of the First Restrictive Rule was to guarantee that these established standards (*Sermons, Notes*, and more recently *Articles*) not be amended. Hence, once acted upon, as it was so definitively in 1808, the matter of doctrinal standards needed no further mention or definition because this matter was decided as absolutely and irrevocably as any constitution-making body could possibly act—i.e., by strictly limiting the ability of the legislative process to amend these "established standards of doctrine."

Heitzenrater has argued that the 1816 General conference's reference to "established articles of faith" was a reference to the Articles of Religion alone, and not the *Sermons* or *Notes*.³¹ But that could not be the case, because of the very nature of the issues to which they were attending, which focused specifically upon the defense of distinctively Wesleyan doctrines not even mentioned in the Articles of Religion. Among these doctrines "as defended by Wesley," the following were cited by the General Conference Committee of Safety: the doctrines of "the direct witness of the Holy Spirit, and of holiness of heart and life, or gospel sanctification."³² Hence, when the General Conference approved the resolution of the Committee of Safety, it could not have been limiting its view of "established articles of faith" strictly to the Articles of Religion.

Since more than sixty editions of Wesley's *Sermons on Several Occasions* were published in the years 1784-1860 (the years in which some have argued that Wesley was decreasing in influence and virtually ignored in American Methodism, when these sermons presumably were not regarded as binding doctrinal standards), why were so many editions required? Why was Wesley so avidly read? Why were most of these editions published under the official direction and with the standard publishing houses of the Methodist Episcopal Church? Would General Conferences that had denigrated or demoted the sermons to secondary status continue to issue, finance, and distribute so many editions?

Similarly, Wesley's *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament* were republished frequently in the American connection, specifically in the following years: 1791, 1806, 1812, 1818, 1837, 1839, 1841, 1844, 1845, 1846,

1847, 1850, 1853, 1854, 1856, and 1856-60.³³ These editions were largely published under the direction of the General Conference and issued by the same presses that printed the *Sermons* and Discipline. Other editions of the *Notes* were available during this period through other presses in Canada, England, and Ireland. The *Notes* were republished in the United States during this period as frequently as they were in Britain, where no one doubts that the *Sermons* and *Notes* were doctrinal standards for the Wesleyan connections.

Heitzenrater has argued that after 1784 American Methodists thought their constitutive documents, inclusive of doctrinal statements, were "significantly different in content from the British counterparts."³⁴ Resolutions from the General Conferences of 1820 and 1824 indicate the opposite: that "Wesleyan Methodism is one everywhere—one in its doctrine, its disciplines, its usages."³⁵ The affinity of American, Canadian, and British Methodist doctrinal standards was repeatedly reaffirmed and publicly stated by actions of American General Conferences. In 1820 the conference affirmed its doctrinal affinity with British and Canadian Methodists: "The British and American connections have now mutually recognized each other as one body of Christians, sprung from a common stock, *holding the same doctrines*"³⁶ (italics added). If American and British Methodists had viewed themselves as possessing two different standards (as Heitzenrater argues), then these official actions would have been wholly inappropriate. If there was *only one recognized international standard*, as it appears from these quotations, then the *Sermons* and *Notes* must have continued as American doctrinal standards during this disputed period.

Heitzenrater rests much of his case upon one curious incident: the defeat of Francis Ward's motion during the General Conference of 1808. He regards this as "conclusive evidence that the General Conference did not understand its standards of doctrine to include Wesley's *Sermons* and *Notes*."³⁷ Francis Ward, it should be noted, was the assistant secretary of the conference, and could have been himself writing down the minutes that we now have in manuscript. On Tuesday, May 24th, 1808, at 3:00 p.m., it was "moved by Francis Ward and seconded by Lewis Myers, that it shall be considered as the sentiment of this Conference, that Mr. Wesley's *Notes* on the New Testament, his four first Volumes of *Sermons*, and Mr. Fletcher's *Checks*, in their general tenor, contain the principal doctrines of Methodism, and a good explanation of our articles of religion, and that this sentiment be recorded on our Journal without being incorporated in the Discipline." We do not know whether or how the motion was debated, or what particular reasons led to its defeat. In the original manuscript of the Minutes of the conference at the United

Methodist Archives at Drew University, however, it is noted as "lost," and there is a note in the margin in the same hand: "NB: It was voted that this motion be struck out of the Journal."³⁸ The motion has a single large "X" through it. That is all we know, with no further explanation.

The fact that it was not included in the printed proceedings of the conference does not, as Heitzenrater assumes, imply outright hostility to the tenor of the motion. It is clear that the conference did not accept the motion, but it is not clear why.

For what possible reasons could the conference have preferred not to accept this motion at this time in this form? Heitzenrater concludes: "The General Conference was not willing to go on record defining its standards of doctrine in terms of documents other than the Articles...."³⁹ Is this the only possible or self-evident conclusion? If the conference members had meant their defeat of the Ward motion to be a publicly declared positive rejection of its entire substance and intent, they would have been much more likely to have left it in the record as *acted upon*, as Albert Outler has suggested. The X-ing suggests that there was a consensus that preferred the whole affair expunged, left in limbo, or to be returned to later after more study and reflection.

There are at least seven possible alternative reasons for the deletion of this motion other than the Heitzenrater hypothesis. We do not know which one or combination of these hypotheses might be correct, because we do not have enough written evidence, but there are numerous plausible possibilities, of which the first and last are the most credible:

(1) Ward's motion was quite likely rejected because the conference did not wish to get into a highly controversial debate about Fletcher. The motion asked for an enormous *innovation* never before suggested, to my knowledge, in the previous literature on Methodist doctrinal standards: that Fletcher be inserted into the well-known list of traditionally received standards provided by the deeds and conference minutes since 1773. This would have been a controversial proposal at any time, but at this delicate time, it was quite impossible. The motion asked that the constitution protect against any future amendment not only those doctrines contained in Wesley's *Sermons* and *Notes* but also those in "Fletcher's Checks"! The Fletcher issue alone could have been enough to defeat it. For it constituted an intrusive innovation totally inconsistent with the rigorously conserving spirit evident elsewhere in the conference.

There are other potential reasons that a motion of this sort might be defeated:

(2) It could be that the motion was rejected not because it was too strong, but too weak; or (3) not because it was too decisively Wesleyan,

but not decisive enough; or (4) because it was proposed as a mere "sentiment of the conference," only to be recorded as such, and hence could be taken frivolously; (5) It could be that it was simply thought to be unnecessary, and so obvious as not to require formal action; or (6) it could have been regarded as poorly worded, or inappropriately formulated.

The more likely explanation, however, in addition to the Fletcher issue, is (7) that it was exquisitely ill-timed. The conference was not ready at that time to act on such a broadly stated and potentially controversial, innovative motion made without due consideration, referral, and deliberate study. At this critical stage of constitution-building, where many votes had been extremely close, alliances fragile, and many issues yet to come up, the deliberative body understandably may have felt (without any demeaning of theological debate) that it was more prudent not even to enter this hazardous territory and try to settle upon delicate language at this stage. Plenty was on its plate yet to be debated.

The conference had convened on May 6, and this motion did not come up until very late, May 24th, 1808, the nineteenth day. During those days many motions had been moved, debated, and defeated. Numerous amendments were made and lost. A motion to determine whether Coke would continue in Europe till called by the annual conferences lost by 54 to 67.⁴⁰ Numerous motions were made and then withdrawn. Many motions were made with no action reported in the minutes. Soule's motion for electing presiding elders was defeated 53 to 61.⁴¹ On May 24, the Restrictive Rules were at length debated, and the hapless Ward the motion came up in the afternoon session after the language of the Restrictive Rules had been settled upon. All of this is reported in order to show that the Ward motion for a *change* in doctrinal standards (to include Fletcher) was too much to handle under these sensitive circumstances. It was defeated and stricken, I believe, because it innovatively and abruptly required that Fletcher be added to the received texts of doctrinal standards, and because it was very poorly timed, *but not for the reason that Heitzenrater gives*—that the conference was deliberately rejecting Wesley's *Sermons* and *Notes* as binding doctrinal standards. Had that been the case, there surely would have been some residue of debate.

Many times a motion is tabled or defeated without any implication that every clause or aspect of that motion is rejected. If such reasoning were consistently applied (that loss of a motion implies rejection of each particular clause of that motion), then a deliberative body could be immobilized because it would know that its rejection of a single clause of a motion might be interpreted as implying the rejection of all other

clauses. Sometimes ambiguous or nonconsensual wording in a single clause may cause a deliberative body to defeat a proposal at hand, in order to make a new start, especially if it seems inappropriate to wrangle about it under those circumstances. Heitzenrater argues that the defeat of Ward's motion implied a rejection of each clause of that motion, instead of its single most troublesome clause—that on Fletcher.

Heitzenrater's historical speculation focuses primarily on why the conference struck the Ward motion from the record. Could it have been struck precisely for the reason of avoiding the kind of speculation that has been advanced? Heitzenrater bases much of his historical argument upon a motion that was stricken intentionally from the record quite probably to circumvent precisely this sort of uninhibited conjecture as to its meaning. Therefore is it not rudely transgressing upon the "intent" of the American Methodist founders to bring this stricken motion again to the center stage of awareness, let alone to make it a linchpin of a new hypothesis with far-reaching ramifications?

Since there is no record of the discussion surrounding this issue, and since it was stricken from the record (the only instance of such action in the whole volume of the manuscript *Journal*), would it not be more prudent and respectful of the delegates' intent if we would also avoid such speculation? And particularly not to base a major reversal of a long-held constitutional interpretation on such a speculation?

Asbury later wrote that the conference of 1808 had perpetuated in constitutional form and language "the good old Methodist doctrine and discipline."⁴² How could the "old Methodist doctrine" have been perpetuated if the conference, according to this conjecture, was avidly resisting or circumventing Wesley's *Sermons* and *Notes*? What could Asbury have meant *if* the conference had been "reticent" to specify Wesley's writings as doctrinal standards?

Heitzenrater's attempt to reconstruct the intent of the constitution writers leaves out exactly half of the duplex norm of the First Rule. It provides a dubious conjectural basis upon which the *Sermons* and *Notes* might quietly be revoked as doctrinal standards 179 years later. No matter how diligently the General Conference of 1808 and 1832 tried to protect the First Restrictive Rule, it is now ironically in danger of being subtly reinterpreted in a way that the writers would have found inconceivable, and in a way that the central tradition of constitutional interpretation has repeatedly rejected. Heitzenrater speculates on "the main intention" (p. 16) of the 1808 General Conference as if it were to *block any legally binding use* of Wesley's *Sermons* and *Notes*—at best a conjectural, at worst a projective hypothesis that stands contrary to virtually everything else known about the constitution writers.

Heitzenrater has argued that the case against the *Sermons* and *Notes* appears to be an objective, historical argument characterized by "careful consideration" of evidence.⁴³ On closer inspection, it appears to espouse a hermeneutical predisposition which guides the selection of data to be investigated. The historical case is weakened by three deficits: (1) Its most important conclusions are based upon *an argument from silence*. (2) Its reasoning is focused speculatively upon discerning the *intent* of founders in constitutional documents when documentary evidence for that is lacking. (3) The argument concentrates attention upon highly *selective* portions of the written record. It is hardly by accident that the argument concludes by conjecturally interpreting the intent of the language of early General Conference actions in a way that tends toward the limitation of binding doctrinal standards to their slenderest documentary ground.

Suppose one were to ask Asbury or Bangs or Timothy Merritt or Jesse Peck (all of whom wrote during the "disputed period") whether Wesley's *Sermons* and *Notes* were standards of doctrine among Methodists of the early nineteenth century; could one imagine them answering with Heitzenrater: They were "clearly never considered to be standards of doctrine" after 1784?⁴⁴ If this assertion applies only to trials, that should be clarified. But if more than that, it strains the imagination, forcing one to hypothesize that some other expression of interest predisposes this hermeneutical bent. The underlying hermeneutic possibly may be explained by reference to the contemporary situation of ecclesial pluralism, and the tendency toward theological indifferentism (which Heitzenrater strongly denies concerning his own view and intent, but which exists among those to whom he is apparently willing to accommodate, who wish to reduce the formal force of traditional Wesleyan influence within United Methodism).

Heitzenrater argues for a sharp distinction between "legal standards of doctrine" and "the traditionally accepted doctrinal writings." The former he thinks should include only the Articles of Religion, "the standards of doctrine." The latter he expands broadly to include not only Wesley's *Sermons* and *Notes* but "the broad range of Wesley's works" and "the writings of Fletcher," but all of these function merely "in a supplemental and illustrative role," serving not as "doctrinal standards" but "as exemplary illustrations of the Methodist doctrinal heritage."⁴⁵ There are five principal objections to this distinction: (1) The proposed distinction is an invention of Heitzenrater that has little precedent in the previous 179 years of constitutional interpretation. (2) It needlessly adds to the corpus of "traditionally accepted doctrinal standards" the "writings of Fletcher" which have never gained sufficient consent to be given

equal categorical status with Wesley's *Sermons* and *Notes*. (3) It takes away from the *Sermons* and *Notes* the long-accepted status of "Standard Sermons" or "established doctrinal standards" and reduces them to "statements."⁴⁶ (4) It neglects to distinguish the special place of the *Sermons* and *Notes* as doctrinal guides within the larger Wesleyan corpus. (5) Having invented this questionable distinction, he then projects it back upon the history of constitutional interpretation, and regards virtually all major previous interpreters of constitutional Methodism as "confused" and in error.⁴⁷ The twofold distinction is insufficiently discriminating and descriptive.

To avert these problems, a threefold definition is more in accord with the facts of the received tradition, which would show that there are two types of doctrinal standards protected by the constitution: (1) the concise standard that stands alone and separable only in the case of the trial of preachers (the Articles of Religion), and (2) the broader standard that applies to preaching and interpretation ("our present, existing and established standards of doctrine," the *Sermons* and *Notes*). In addition to these constitutionally protected standards of doctrine, there is (3) a third category of other writings of doctrinal instruction received by wide usage, that includes the Six Tracts printed at various times in the Disciplines of 1784-1808, the remainder of Wesley's Works, the Wesleyan hymns, the doctrine contained in the "Large Minutes," and the catechism.

All Disciplines from 1972 to 1984, since the Plan of Union, have contained a paragraph that cannot easily be circumvented by subsequent General Conference action—a statement of fact concerning what the Plan of Union decided:

In the Plan of Union for The United Methodist Church, the Preface to the Methodist Articles of Religion and the Evangelical United Brethren Confession of Faith explains that both had been accepted as doctrinal standards for the new church. It was declared that "they are thus deemed congruent if not identical in their doctrinal perspectives, and not in conflict." Additionally, it was stipulated that although the language of the First Restrictive Rule has never been formally defined, Wesley's *Sermons* and *Notes* were specifically included in our present existing and established standards of doctrine by plain historical inference. (1984 Discipline, ¶ 67)

This paragraph is a simple, factual report describing accurately the premise of the Plan of Union and its reasoning about doctrinal standards. The Plan of Union cannot now be legislatively refashioned by a subsequent commission of a General Conference, for the Plan of Union brought together the constitutions of two bodies so as to form a new church. Even if the phrase is omitted by a later General Conference, that

does not revise the terms of union. If a General Conference should attempt substantively to redo the Plan of Union (which is highly unlikely), that would eventuate, doubtless, in a complex series of judicial challenges.

With few exceptions, the only portions of the Discipline of 1808 that have been retained without change are those protected by the Restrictive Rules. Almost everything else has been repeatedly tinkered with, often every four years. The constitution writers of 1808 grasped an early version of Murphy's Law, that "anything that can be amended will be amended." We can be grateful that they had sufficient sagacity to prevent our doctrinal experimentation and superficial "improvements" for 179 years. But now a new situation has emerged. The Rule may be able to be circumvented, not by amendment, but by an imaginative reinterpretation of history.

Chapter 10

RESPONSE TO THE REVISED STATEMENT ON "DOCTRINAL STANDARDS AND OUR THEOLOGICAL TASK"

Robert Huston, Jeanne Audrey Powers, Bruce Robbins¹

Introduction

A comparison of the present 1984 Book of Discipline with the proposed draft document, "Doctrinal Standards and Our Theological Task" (herein called the *Study*) reveals striking shifts in The United Methodist Church's perception of doctrine and theology. In this response we will highlight what seems to us to be the critical issues, especially as seen through ecumenical and interreligious perspectives. We will begin by making several general comments and then look specifically at the text in certain sections. We hope these will lead to some further reworking of the draft, for there is much which we find problematic in the material.

First, The United Methodist Church has not been traditionally a confessional or a doctrinal church. By that we mean that our tradition has, through its history, been accepting of a diversity of theological opinion—yet firmly rooted in the same apostolic faith. The *Study* drafters do recognize our heritage of diversity for they have chosen to retain what the Discipline calls the "ecumenical watchword": "In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; and in all things, charity." Yet, that fundamental affirmation of variety and diversity in The United Methodist Church is retained without keeping the support and praise of "theological pluralism" which has also been at the heart of The United Methodist Church. The *Study* moves us in the direction of narrower, more specific doctrines while, at the same time, changing the place of doctrine within The United Methodist Church. For instance, *disciplinary* statements indicating that the Articles and the Confession are not "positive, juridical norms for doctrine" are eliminated by the *Study* in favor of a statement emphasizing the historic role of the Articles "as the basis for testing correct doctrine" (14) in the church.

Chapter 9

1. Thomas C. Oden is Henry Anson Butts Professor of Theology and Ethics at the Theological School, Drew University. This article appeared in *Quarterly Review* 7 (Spring 1987):42-62, and is used with permission.
2. For the full text of the deed, see Robert Emory, *History of the Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (New York: Lane & Sanford, 1844), pp. 70, 71.
3. Although technically disputed as to number according to various editions, whether forty-three, forty-four, fifty-two, or fifty-three, at least forty-three are undisputed.
4. "A Full Liberty: Doctrinal Standards in Early American Methodism," *Quarterly Review* 5 (Fall, 1985):6-27 (hereafter Heitzenrater; see above, chapter 8).
5. *Minutes of the Annual Conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church for the Years 1773-1828* (New York: Mason & Lane, 1840), vol. 1, Qns. 1, 2, p. 5. Hereafter this source is referred to as MAC.
6. 1780 Journal of the General Conference, Qn. 7. Compare analyses by J. Tigert, *Constitutional History of American Episcopal Methodism*, 4th ed. (Nashville: Publishing House of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1904), p. 113; and J. M. Buckley, *Constitutional and Parliamentary History of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (New York: Eaton and Mains, 1912), pp. 162, 163.
7. MAC, p. 13.
8. Buckley, p. 163.
9. *Minutes of Several Conversations . . . Composing a Form of Discipline, 1784* (Philadelphia: Charles Cist, 1785), Qn. 73, p. 27.
10. Heitzenrater, p. 11.
11. Tigert, pp. 544, 548, 540, and 545, resp.
12. Heitzenrater, p. 12.
13. 1785 Discipline, full text in Tigert, pp. 562, 567, 576, 585, and 535, resp.
14. Heitzenrater, pp. 10 ff.
15. *Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church 1792* (Philadelphia: Perry Hall, 1792), preface, p. iv.
16. Heitzenrater, p. 12.
17. See *Journal of General Conference, 1792. Reconstructed by T. B. Neely* (New York: Eaton and Mains, 1899), pp. 40, 41.
18. Heitzenrater, pp. 9-12.
19. Heitzenrater, p. 10.
20. Jesse Lee, *History of the Methodists* (Baltimore: Magill and Cline, 1810), p. 86.
21. Tigert, pp. 142 ff.
22. Heitzenrater, p. 10.
23. 1796 *Journal of the General Conference*, p. 13.
24. Letter from John Wesley, received by the conference of 1783; text in Lee, *History*, p. 85.
25. Heitzenrater, pp. 12, 13.
26. Heitzenrater, p. 12.
27. Buckley, pp. 105, 106.
28. The phrase "duplex norm" comes from Albert Outler's 1958 *Handbook of Selected Creeds and Confessions*, a mimeographed document used in classes at Perkins School of Theology, Dallas, Tex., pl. 4, p. 6.
29. Buckley, p. 168.
30. Heitzenrater, p. 21.
31. Heitzenrater, p. 19. The phrase "established articles of faith" comes from the Committee of Saley, 1816 *Journal of the General Conference*, p. 155.
32. 1816 *Journal of the General Conference*, p. 156.

33. See *A Union Catalogue for the Publications of John and Charles Wesley*, ed. Frank Baker (Durham, NC: Duke Divinity School, 1966).
34. Heitzenrater, p. 11.

35. 1824 *Journal of the General Conference*, Address to the General Conference, in *Journal of the General Conference, 1796-1836* (New York: Carlton & Phillips, 1855); for further references see Nathan Bangs, *History of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, 4 vols. (New York: Mason & Lane, 1840), 3:115 ff., 259 ff.

36. Bangs, 3:131.
37. Heitzenrater, p. 18.
38. Manuscript of the 1808 General Conference Journal, p. 68.
39. Heitzenrater, p. 17.
40. *Journal of the General Conference*, p. 75.
41. *Journal of the General Conference*, May 17, 1808, p. 83.
42. Letter to Tho. Roberts of May 27, 1808, in Francis Asbury, *Journals and Letters* (London: Epworth, 1958), 3:391, 392.
43. Heitzenrater, p. 7.
44. Heitzenrater, p. 13.
45. The quotations come from Heitzenrater, pp. 20, 21.
46. Heitzenrater, p. 21.
47. Heitzenrater, pp. 21-23. The interpreters I have in mind are Baker, McTyeire, Neely, Buckley, and Outler, as well as the writers of the Plan of Union and the 1972-84 *Disciplines*.

Chapter 10

1. At the October 1986 meeting of the General Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns (GCCUC), it was determined that the work of the Committee on Our Theological Task would prove to be of crucial importance to the shaping of The United Methodist Church of the future. Therefore, in March 1987, two staff persons of GCCUC, Jeanne Audy Powers and Bruce Robbins, presented reports to the Commission analyzing the study committee's draft and comparing it with the material in Part II of the 1984 Book of Discipline. After plenary and small group discussion and feedback from GCCUC members, this report was drafted by the previous authors under the direction of Robert Huston, General Secretary, reviewed once again by GCCUC members, and was formally submitted in August 1987 to the Committee on Our Theological Task by GCCUC for their consideration.
2. *Sensus*, p. 30
3. *Ibid.*

Chapter 11

1. Ted A. Campbell is Assistant Professor of Church History at The Divinity School, Duke University. This paper was presented as the Stover Lecture at St. Paul School of Theology, Kansas City, Mo., on September 23, 1987, and has been revised for this volume.
2. *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church, 1972* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 1972, hereafter cited as "1972 Discipline"), ¶70, p. 75-79.
3. An example of the fourfold pattern used as a tool for theological and ethical analysis is found in Dennis M. Campbell, *Doctors, Lawyers, Ministers: Christian Ethics in Professional Practice* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1982). United Methodist confirmation materials have also stressed the "quadrilateral."
4. *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church, 1988* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 1988, hereafter cited as "1988 Discipline"), ¶69, p. 80-86.