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The once and future church: discipleship and the hope of United Methodism

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GEORGE FOX UNIVERSITY

THE ONCE AND FUTURE CHURCH:
DISCIPLESHIP AND THE HOPE OF UNITED METHODISM

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF GEORGE FOX
EVANGELICAL SEMINARY
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY

WILLIAM H. WATSON

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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

D.Min. Dissertation

This is to certify that the D.Min. Dissertation of

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has been approved by
the Dissertation Committee on March 14, 2012
as fully adequate in scope and quality as a dissertation
for the degree of Doctor of Ministry in Semiotics and Future Studies

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CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	vi
ABSTRACT	vii
PROLOGUE: THE TWO SOWERS: A PARABLE.....	1
CHAPTERS:	
1. DISCIPLESHIP AND THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH	3
Cheap Grace	5
The Cost of Non-Discipleship	7
2. UNITED METHODISM: A CHURCH IN CRISIS	9
The Call to Action	10
Next Steps	14
The Purpose of the Call to Action	15
Evaluating the Call to Action	17
3. SCRIPTURE AND THE CALL TO ACTION	19
Lost in the Crowd.....	19
Jesus and the Crowds	22
The Disciples and the Crowds	27
The Synoptic Vision	29
Echoes in the Fourth Gospel . . .	31
The Call to Action in Light of Scripture .	34

4. TRADITION AND THE CALL TO ACTION	37
Discipleship and the Wesleyan Tradition	37
Wesley, in His Own Words	41
The Significance of Sanctification	46
The Lost Method of Methodism	49
The Call to Action in Light of Tradition	53
5. EXPERIENCE AND THE CALL TO ACTION	55
Understanding the Attractional Church.....	56
Evaluating the Attractional Church	60
Experience in Methodism	62
An Attractive Alternative	63
The Call to Action in Light of Experience	67
6. REASON AND THE CALL TO ACTION	70
The Reality of Postmodernism.....	71
Cartesian Captivity... ..	73
Emerging from Foundationalism	75
The Problem of Pluralism	77
Embracing Postmodernity	80
The Gift of Deconstruction....	82
Emerging Postmodern Faith.. ..	84

The Call to Action in Light of Reason..	88
7. PROPOSALS FOR THE PATH AHEAD	91
Intentional Discipling Communities	92
Looking Forward	93
Count What Matters	93
(Really) Rethink Church	94
Rethink Mission	96
Diversify	97
See the Signs	98
Embrace Hope..	98
Missional Mentality	99
God’s Vision for United Methodism	99
EPILOGUE: SOPHIE’S VOICE	101
WORKS CITED	103

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Billy Watson

April 1, 2012

ABSTRACT

This thesis argues the Call to Action, a plan for the renewal and revitalization of the United Methodist Church, must re-center its theological vision to better align itself with the disciple making mission of the denomination. It offers a critique of the Call to Action which demonstrates this plan's inability to lead to effective disciple making practices and offers proposals for alternative paths forward for the United Methodist Church.

The first chapter relates the crisis of decline in the United Methodist Church to the absence of intentional practices of discipleship, suggesting Albert Outler's Wesleyan Quadrilateral as a tool to critique the Call to Action, a plan aimed at addressing these issues. The second chapter outlines the history and the proposals of the Call to Action. It then suggests the stated purposes of these proposals as the criteria by which the plan should be evaluated. The third chapter outlines the intentionally disciple-centric ministry of Jesus presented in the gospels, contrasting this with the Call to Action's aim to attract crowds, with little attention to the disciple making process. The fourth chapter evaluates the Wesleyan Methodist tradition, contrasting its emphasis on holiness with the relative lack of structures for discipleship in the United Methodist Church and the Call to Action. The fifth chapter looks to the Church's experience of the attractional paradigm which lies at the heart of the Call to Action, exposing its inability to ensure effective disciple making. The sixth chapter evaluates the Call to Action in light of postmodern thought, demonstrating its lack of potential to lead emerging generations into the life of discipleship. The final chapter offers ten proposals for the United Methodist Church's

consideration as it seeks greater effectiveness at making disciples of Jesus Christ in the world today and tomorrow.

PROLOGUE

THE TWO SOWERS: A PARABLE

Two sowers were sowing seed. Some seed fell on the path, where the birds of the air ate it straight away. Other seed fell in shallow, rocky soil, where it sprang up quickly, but having no roots soon burned in the sun. More seed fell among weeds which choked out the plants as they grew. Still more seed fell on fertile ground, where it grew into an abundant crop.

The first sower despaired over his fruitless seed, and he determined to address the obstacles. He first pulled out the weeds, but in the process he uprooted all of the seeds in their midst. As he disturbed the weeds, their seeds were released to the winds. Soon new weeds began to grow, not only where they had been, but also in the fruitful soil where they began to choke out some of the growing plants. As he removed the rocks and cast them aside, some fell into the fertile soil, where they prevented some of the growing plants from spreading their roots. For every rock he removed, two seemed to take its place from below. He had soon crisscrossed the field pulling weeds and digging rocks so much that there were many well-worn paths where there had once been only one. At the end of his labors he realized his field was smaller, and his crops diminished.

The second sower despaired of her fruitless seed as well, but she remembered what she had learned from those who went before: nourish the growing crops. As she could she removed rocks and pulled weeds, but she focused her attention on the seed planted in the fertile soil and it flourished all the more. It soon spread beyond the fertile field, and the heartiness of the plants overcame the weeds, leaving more growing plants

in its wake. The roots ran so deep and spread so far that they soon began to push rocks out of the earth, which the farmer easily removed, once again expanding the area of fertile soil and fruitful seed. The plants grew so strong and hearty, that some even flourished along the edges of the well-worn path. At the end of her labors she realized her field had grown, and her crops had flourished.

And all who had eyes to see were amazed.

CHAPTER ONE

DISCIPLESHIP AND THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Danny was among the first people I met at the new church. Fresh out of seminary and in my first full-time youth ministry position, I soon learned my predecessor had taken great interest in Danny, investing time and energy nurturing his young faith. The dividends of this investment were evident. Danny was among the most active members of the youth group, played the keyboard in the worship band, and was able to articulate his faith in Christ like few teens I had ever met. He remains perhaps the most impressive young man I worked with in ten years of youth ministry.

There was one thing I could not help noticing, however: Danny's father was never around. Initially I assumed Danny's mother was single, but soon learned this was not the case. Then I surmised his father either worked on Sundays or perhaps did not care much for the church, despite the clearly positive impact it was having on his son. Either way I expected I would eventually meet him. In my three years with that church I never met Danny's father. One day Danny explained to me: "I used to beg my dad to come to church, because I know it would make a difference in his life. Then one day he told me, 'Look, I got saved when I was fourteen, so you don't have to worry about me going to hell. Now leave me alone.'"

This was not the first time I had been confronted with this view of the Christian faith. I had encountered it years before, in a friend. An officer in my college fraternity, Jim fairly well personified the stereotypical "frat rat." Laid back and fun-loving, he partied hard and enjoyed spending time with young women. I had been very similar early in my college career, but things changed significantly in my life over the course of my

sophomore year. The summer prior to my junior year was marred by a tragedy which rocked our cloistered campus community. Over that summer another fraternity brother had been brutally murdered in a senseless drive-by shooting. When the following fall semester began, a pall hung over the campus, especially my fraternity. Jim and I had an exchange in the days just before classes began that semester which has haunted me since.

I was standing on the steps of the fraternity house as Jim came down the front walk. As I mentioned previously, much had changed in my life at that time. Among other things I had switched my major to religion the previous semester, started working with Young Life, spent the summer as an intern working with my home church's youth group, and I was beginning to sense a call to ministry. Among my fraternity brothers I had become something of a de facto chaplain in residence. It was likely this that motivated Lane, after we had exchanged incidental pleasantries, to comment on our fallen friend: "I sure hope he got saved before he died." I was instantly struck by the realization that somewhere along the line the message had been communicated to Jim that one's belief need not have any bearing on one's behavior.

Once again, I recognized this understanding of the Christian faith as primarily a pass to heaven after death all too well. Another friend had helped me face it in the mirror just months before. That good friend was named Sophie. Her boyfriend was one of the first people I met my freshman year in college and one of my pledge brothers in the fraternity. Because he and I spent considerable time together, I got to know Sophie fairly well, or so I thought. Near the end of the first semester of our sophomore year, by which time I had known her for well over a year, Sophie and I had a conversation that would forever alter my life.

We had gathered with others at a friend's apartment awaiting the evening's revelries. Sophie and I were talking as others were getting ready. Somehow our conversation took a religious turn at which point Sophie casually commented, "I'm an atheist, so I don't believe in that stuff anyway." While it was not uncommon to hear such proclamations in our small, liberal arts college, I was surprised to hear it from someone I thought I knew. It was embarrassing not to know something so significant about a friend. "How can you say that?" I retorted, to which she calmly replied, "Well, how can you say you do believe?" Our conversation continued in this manner for several minutes. It was not a debate. Neither of us was trying to convert the other. I was simply stunned by my own ignorance of my friend's religious views and could not let it go. Eventually Sophie tired of the subject and brought it to an abrupt end with a simple observation: "You say you're a Christian, and I tell you I don't believe in God. The bottom line is I don't see any difference in the way you live your life and the way I live mine." She was right.

Cheap Grace

Three quarters of a century ago Dietrich Bonhoeffer declared "Cheap grace is the deadly enemy of our Church. We are fighting today for costly grace."¹ Danny's father, Jim, and my sophomore self bear witness to the enduring nature of this struggle. Still today many labor under a reductionist notion of Christianity which views it simply as a matter of believing certain propositions to be true with little to no regard for their implications in the real world. Most who hold this view of the faith see actually living what they believe as admirable but not necessary for Christian identity. Contributing to

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 1st Touchstone ed.(New York: Touchstone, 1995), 42.

this understanding is the absence in many corners of the practice of discipleship, the process by which Christian believers mature in their faith and life in Jesus Christ. It is no accident Bonhoeffer also referred to the Church's great foe as "grace without discipleship."²

Bonhoeffer joins a long tradition of those who have professed "Christianity without discipleship is always Christianity without Christ."³ Nearly two centuries earlier, John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, offered a view of the Christian faith which understood this process of growth and maturity to be the very heart of the Christian life. Christianity without discipleship is at best "almost"⁴ Christianity according to Wesley, and faith which does not lead to discipleship is no "living faith."⁵

Given the vital role afforded the process of discipleship in Wesley's theological outlook, it is shocking when recent surveys conducted across the United Methodist Church, the largest beneficiary and steward of his tradition, reveal "comments on this topic that ranged from a focus on differences in definition and understanding to differences in interpretation and emphasis, including basic disagreement on what the Church's mission of 'making disciples...' is or should be."⁶ In light of this struggle among United Methodist Christians to arrive at consensus on what it means to make disciples or how much emphasis should be given to the process of discipleship, it is hard

² Ibid., 44.

³ Ibid., 61.

⁴ John Wesley, Albert Cook Outler, and Richard P. Heitzenrater, *John Wesley's Sermons : An Anthology*(Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), 62.

⁵ Ibid., 66.

⁶ APEX HG LLC, "The United Methodist Church Operational Assessment Project Executive Summary Presentation," http://www.umc.org/atf/cf/%7Bdb6a45e4-c446-4248-82c8-e131b6424741%7D/CTA_APEXRPTS_127_248.PDF, (accessed April 28, 2011), 30-31.

to imagine fruitfulness in the denomination's stated mission "to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world,"⁷

The Cost of Non-Discipleship

As United Methodists grapple with their understanding of the disciple-making mission of the Church, the denomination finds itself in a moment of crisis. Four decades of membership decline and an aging constituency in the United States of America has denominational leaders calling for sweeping changes in the structures of the denomination, in the preparation and supervision of its clergy, and in the life of its local congregations. Collectively these proposals, along with the measures leading up to and flowing forth from them, have come to be known as the Call to Action. Their aim is to reverse the tide of numerical decline which is threatening the viability of the denomination, thus revitalizing the United Methodist Church and positioning her for present and future effectiveness in ministry.

This work holds there is an intimate relationship between United Methodism's loss of missional focus and her numerical decline. These are not two separate foes facing the denomination. Rather, a loss of common understandings and practices of discipleship have led to the ongoing decline of the United Methodist Church. Any serious proposal for renewal and revitalization of the denomination must help it refocus on the matter of discipleship. The extent to which the Call to Action does this is the extent to which it will lead the United Methodist Church into a fruitful and effective future in ministry.

⁷ United Methodist Church (U.S.), *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church* (Nashville, Tenn.: United Methodist Pub. House, 2008), 87.

The quest for truth among United Methodists has long been “grounded in Scripture, informed by Christian tradition, enlivened in experience, and tested by reason.”⁸ This thesis will utilize Albert Outler’s Wesleyan Quadrilateral as a framework for its critique the United Methodist Call to Action. In the next chapter the content of the Call to Action will be reviewed. In chapter three the Call to Action will be evaluated in light of the witness of Scripture, focusing on the life and ministry of Jesus, as revealed in the synoptic accounts. In chapter four, the lens of Christian tradition, or more precisely the lens of Wesleyan Methodist Christian tradition, will be brought to bear on the Call to Action. Chapter five will look to the present experience of the Church, with special attention to those quarters where proposals similar to those found in the Call to Action have been embraced. In chapter six the test of reason, with special reference to the insights of postmodern thought, will be applied to the Call to Action. In the final chapter, proposals for United Methodism’s way forward drawn from this critique will be offered. Overall, this thesis will argue the Call to Action must recalibrate its theological vision to better align itself with the mission of the United Methodist Church “to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.”⁹

⁸ Ibid., 41.

⁹ Ibid., 87.

CHAPTER TWO

UNITED METHODISM: A CHURCH IN CRISIS

The United Methodist Church is in a state of crisis. Since the denomination was formed by the merger of the former Methodist and Evangelical United Brethren churches in 1968, membership has steadily declined from 10.7 to 7.7 million, while worship attendance has fallen 20 percent.¹ Along with this numerical decline, the membership of the United Methodist Church is aging as well. The most recent data places the average age of United Methodist Christians at 57.² The median age for United Methodist elders is 55, up from 50 in 2000, and 45 in 1973.³ Such graying among laity and clergy has prompted one leading voice to forecast an impending “death tsunami”⁴ for the denomination. Of course, the financial implications of four decades of decline and an aging membership on matters such as the pension plan, infrastructure, hierarchy, and institutions of the denomination loom large as well. One commentator notes ominously, “we are in danger of not being able to support what we already have.”⁵

¹ Sam Hodges, “Council of Bishops pushes hard for major change,” *United Methodist News Service*, November 3, 2011, <http://www.umportal.org/article.asp?id=8334> (Accessed November 22, 2011). For the time frame between 1968 and 2009, the most recent year for which official records are available.

² Ibid.

³ Lewis Center for Leadership, “Clergy Age Trends in the United Methodist Church, 2011 Report,” Lewis Center for Leadership, http://www.churchleadership.com/research/um_clergy_age_trends11.htm (accessed January 9, 2012).

⁴ Lovett H. Weems, Jr., “Update,” Lewis Center for Leadership, May 4, 2011, <http://www.churchleadership.com/Updates/110504Update.asp> (accessed January 9, 2012).

⁵ Sky McCracken, “Commentary: Don’t Give Up on the Call to Action, Vital Congregations,” *United Methodist News Service*, December 5, 2011, <http://www.umportal.org/article.asp?id=8421> (accessed January 9, 2012).

This crisis led the United Methodist Council of Bishops, with endorsement and funding provided by the Connectional Table of the United Methodist Church, to act in January of 2010. Prompted by

the four-decade decline in membership; an aging and predominantly Anglo constituency; declines in worship attendance, professions of faith and baptisms; and other unfavorable trends related to clergy health and job satisfaction, decreases in giving, and concerns about the vitality of our engagement with and service to communities in the United States and Europe,⁶

the council assembled the Call to Action Steering Team, a group consisting of sixteen lay and clergy women and men and charged them “to gather data, including a mandate to seek an objective operational assessment of the Connection that will result in findings and recommendations *leading to* the reordering the life of the Church for greater effectiveness in making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.”⁷

The Call to Action

In order to achieve its task, the Call to Action Steering Team first contracted Towers Watson, “a leading global professional services company that helps organizations improve performance through effective people, risk and financial management,”⁸ who gathered and provided statistical analysis of “massive amounts of data from over 32,000

⁶ Ibid. 10. Due to the constraints of time, the data collection and operational assessment were restricted to the United Methodist Church in the United States.

⁷ Call to Action Steering Team, “Call to Action Steering Team Report,” The United Methodist Church, http://www.umc.org/atf/cf/%7Bdb6a45e4-c446-4248-82c8-e131b6424741%7D/CTA_STEERING%20TEAM_%20RPT_1-44.PDF (accessed April 28, 2011), 6.

⁸ Towers Watson, <http://www.towerswatson.com/about/>, (Accessed November 23, 2011).

congregations”⁹ across the denomination. The team then turned to APEX Health Care Group LLC, a consulting firm which assists “health-care providers, nonprofits, and corporations in resolving critical apex issues that threaten organizational vitality,”¹⁰ to provide an operational assessment of the denomination. On the basis of these data and operational assessment, the Call to Action Steering Team produced a report which was presented to the Council of Bishops in November of 2010.

The thrust of the Call to Action Steering Team’s report is a challenge to the United Methodist Church “to redirect the flow of attention, energy, and resources to an intense concentration on fostering and sustaining an increase in the number of vital congregations effective in making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.”¹¹ The primary focus and commitment of the denomination, according to the report, must be to foster and sustain congregational vitality, a concept informed by the Towers Watson research, in which “approximately 16%” of the congregations surveyed “were identified as highly vital churches”¹² on the basis of factors including numerical growth, programming, and participation of laity in the life of the church. Analysis of these congregations revealed a common set of practices among them which were deemed drivers of their vitality. These drivers form the substance of many of the proposals of the Call to Action.

⁹ Call to Action, 7.

¹⁰ APEX HG LLC, <http://www.apexhgllc.com/>, (Accessed November 23, 2011).

¹¹ Call to Action, 8.

¹² Towers Watson, http://www.umccalltoaction.org/wp-content/uploads/challenge/CTA_TOWERS%20WATSON_RPTS_45-126.pdf, 70.

The drivers of vitality fall into four broad areas in the Call to Action Report. In the arena of pastoral leadership, excellence in skill sets as diverse as preaching, the mentoring of laity, and management of the church, as well as extended appointment length, is consistently associated with congregational vitality. In the programming ministry of the church, a high number of small groups, as well as programs designed specifically for youth and children are indicated. In terms of worship, a mix of both traditional and contemporary services is advised. Finally, among the lay membership of the church, high vital congregations are those with a high percentage of “spiritually engaged” laity who assume roles of leadership.¹³ According to the Call to Action report, these are the elements which work together to yield a highly vital congregation.

With the aim of congregational vitality, and a vision of what drives this, the report of the Call to Action Steering Team goes on to offer five key recommendations: First, at the local church level it is recommended the United Methodist Church utilize the drivers of vitality to focus energies and attention on building effective practices in the four areas of focus outlined above. This measure is commended for a minimum of ten years. With respect to United Methodist clergy, reform is recommended for the system by which candidates are prepared, appointed, evaluated, and held accountable in their ministries. Next, the Call to Action recommends the ongoing collection of statistical data at the local church level, especially in the areas of attendance, growth, and engagement, for the purposes of adjusting ministry approaches for greater effectiveness. Fourth, the report calls the Council of Bishops to establish a new culture of accountability among United Methodists including direct accountability of the bishops for the growth in attendance,

¹³ Ibid. 8. The ambiguous term “spiritually engaged” is not defined by the Call to Action.

baptisms and professions of faith, participation in missions, benevolent giving, and lowering the average age of membership in the churches they oversee. Finally, the report calls for a restructuring of the United Methodist Church at the level of the general boards and agencies, replacing these with smaller, competency-based boards of directors, eliminating redundancy, and redirecting funds and focus to the local church level.¹⁴

The release of the Call to Action report set the United Methodist world on fire. Support for its recommendations of widespread denominational reform was swift and unanimous among the Council of Bishops.¹⁵ The rest of the United Methodist world responded swiftly as well, but with varied degrees of acceptance and acrimony. The blogosphere and social media have seen continuous discussion and debate. Commentaries have been offered through various outlets, including the United Methodist News Service, and an interactive Leadership Summit discussing the report was simulcast online to individuals and discussion groups convened around the globe.¹⁶ United Methodists are clearly engaged in passionate conversation about the future of the denomination, perhaps the greatest gift the Call to Action process has yielded to date.

¹⁴ Ibid. 8-9.

¹⁵ Heather Hahn, "Bishops support church reforms, accountability," *United Methodist News Service*, November 4, 2010, <http://www.umc.org/site/apps/nlnet/content3.aspx?c=1wL4KnN1LtH&b=6152805&ct=8858961¬oc=1> (Accessed November 22, 2011).

¹⁶ For example, Patricia Farris, "Church vitality is not just a matter of numbers," *United Methodist News Service*, November 29, 2010, <http://www.umc.org/site/apps/nlnet/content3.aspx?c=1wL4KnN1LtH&b=5259669&ct=8933913>. See also Twitter hash tag #umclead, <http://johnmeunier.wordpress.com/2011/04/07/good-news-on-call-to-action/>, and http://www.umc.org/site/c.1wL4KnN1LtH/b.6585127/k.1B84/Leadership_Summit__Landing_Page.htm, (All accessed November 22, 2011).

Next Steps

In the midst of the varied reactions to the Call to Action Steering Team report, the United Methodist Council of Bishops and the Connectional Table formed an eight member Call to Action Interim Operations Team.¹⁷ This team was tasked with the responsibility “to guide change management and work with the Council of Bishops, the Connectional Table, the general agencies and many others to develop and implement work plans in stages leading up to and beyond the 2012 General Conference.”¹⁸ Though not a decision making body, the advice and recommendations of the Interim Operations Team has led the Connectional Table to prepare legislative proposals for presentation to the General Conference of the United Methodist Church, which will convene in Tampa, Florida, April 24, through May 4, 2012. These proposals address a realignment of the general agencies of the United Methodist Church, a repeal of guaranteed appointments for United Methodist clergy, a redirection of apportionment funds, a fiscal and structural review of the United Methodist Publishing House and the General Board of Pensions and Health Benefits, and a denomination-wide financial analysis to highlight best practices and uncover cost saving opportunities. In addition to legislative proposals, the Connectional Table affirmed the Interim Operations Team’s recommendations regarding clergy and Episcopal performance, supported the establishment of a bishop free of

¹⁷ United Methodist Communications, “Press release: call to action interim operations team named,” February 28, 2011, http://www.umc.org/site/c.lwL4KnN1LtH/b.6588749/k.B8B0/Press_Release_Call_to_Action_Interim_Operations_Team_Named.htm (Accessed November 23, 2011). The initial team consisted of seven members, but was expanded to include eight members and two ex-officio members to serve as liaisons between the Interim Operations Team and the Council of Bishops and the Connectional Table. These ten people include four bishops, one mega-church pastor, and five laypeople with extensive corporate experience. A final roster is available here: http://www.umc.org/atf/cf/%7Bdb6a45e4-c446-4248-82c8-e131b6424741%7D/IOT%20_ROSTER_REV%209-11.PDF (Accessed November 23, 2011).

¹⁸ Ibid.

residential responsibilities able to focus on the Call to Action implementation process, and called for a review of the role of seminaries in the preparation of United Methodist clergy.¹⁹

A collaboration of United Methodist Communications, the Connectional Table, the General Board of Discipleship, the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, the General Council on Finance and Administration, and the Council of Bishops²⁰ has also produced the vital congregations website to facilitate the proposals of the Call to Action. This site encourages congregations and annual conferences to set goals and track their progress in five key areas: worship attendance, professions of faith, number of small groups, members involved in mission, and dollars given to mission.²¹ Attentiveness to these metrics corresponds to the drivers of congregational vitality put forth in the Call to Action report.

The Purpose of the Call to Action

Given the scope and the impact of the Call to Action, it is worth considering the purposes for which the steering team was formed and the ends to which the proposals of their report and subsequent developments lead. One clear goal of the Call to Action is a matter of metrics: reversing the four decade decline in membership and worship attendance. Additional measures geared to address financial concerns by streamlining the

¹⁹ United Methodist Church, “Connectional Table Recommendations for The United Methodist Church,” <http://umccalltoaction.org/recommendations> (Accessed November 23, 2011).

²⁰ United Methodist Communications “Vital Congregations Website Empowers Churches”, *United Methodist News Services*, July 15, 2011, <http://www.umc.org/site/apps/nlnet/content3.aspx?c=1wL4KnN1LtH&b=2041977&ct=11193293¬oc=1> (Accessed January 9, 2012).

²¹ United Methodist Church, <http://www.umvitalcongregations.org> (Accessed January 9, 2012).

structures and institutions of the denomination are clearly related to these metrics. As a result of this focus on numbers, the Call to Action relies heavily on what Leonard Sweet and others have called an “attractional” ecclesiology.²² The Call to Action is further called upon to be somewhat discriminating in its approach. Lowering the median age of the clergy and lay members of the denomination by reaching younger generations is another significant aim, as well as bringing diversity to the predominantly Anglo constituency of the United Methodist Church is listed among the concerns to be addressed. Reach more people, reach younger people, and reach more diverse people: these are the goals of the Call to Action.

However, it must be remembered the ultimate end of the Call to Action is to reorder the life of the United Methodist Church “for greater effectiveness in making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.”²³ This, after all, is the mission of the Church as declared in United Methodist Book of Discipline,²⁴ and is firmly grounded in Jesus’ Great Commission to his disciples in Matthew 28. In other words, the overarching purpose granted to and claimed by the Call to Action is to reorganize the United Methodist Church that it might more effectively achieve its ultimate mission of making disciples.

Clearly, the proposals of the Call to Action, some of which are already being enacted while others await the approval of the 2012 General Conference will lead to a

²² Leonard I. Sweet, *So Beautiful : Divine Design for Life and the Church : Missional, Relational, Incarnational*, 1st ed.(Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2009), 18.

²³ Call to Action Steering Team, “Call to Action Steering Team Report,” http://www.umc.org/atf/cf/%7Bdb6a45e4-c446-4248-82c8-e131b6424741%7D/CTA_STEERING%20TEAM_%20RPT_1-44.PDF (accessed April 28, 2011), 6.

²⁴ United Methodist Church (U.S.), 87.

reordering of the life of the United Methodist Church. However, the Call to Action must ultimately be judged by its ability to achieve the goals set for and by it. Its proposals must hold promise to enable the United Methodist Church to reach more people, younger people, and more diverse people. Above all else it must enable the denomination to do these things in a manner that leads to greater discipleship and world transformation in the name of Jesus Christ.

Evaluating the Call to Action

United Methodists have at their disposal the means by which to evaluate the Call to Action. In the *Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church* one reads that truth is “revealed in Scripture, illumined by tradition, vivified in personal experience, and confirmed by reason.”²⁵ The Wesleyan Quadrilateral, so dubbed by pre-eminent Wesley scholar Albert Outler, has served the denomination as a guideline for theological discernment for decades. Clearly the Call to Action, as it touches on the nature, form, and function of the Church, is a matter for theological discernment. As such, any evaluation rightly in keeping with the standards United Methodism has set for itself must submit the Call to Action to the combined scrutiny of Scripture, tradition, experience, and reason. Such is the nature of the thesis at hand.

As it stands, the Call to Action seems likely to be the future of United Methodism. If it is believed this will lead to a larger, younger, and more diverse United Methodist Church that produces more disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world, then the Council of Bishops and Connectional Table are well advised to continue on their

²⁵ Ibid., 77.

present course, and delegates to General Conference 2012 should wholeheartedly endorse all relevant legislation brought before them. If however, as the work at hand will argue, the combined voices of Scripture, tradition, experience, and reason call into question the Call to Action's ability to achieve the goals set before it, then the Council of Bishops, Connectional Table, and General Conference must resist the temptation to be swept up in the momentum of the moment. Instead, the Call to Action must be amended in light of these four voices which have faithfully guided United Methodists for so long, or else it must be rejected outright.

CHAPTER THREE

SCRIPTURE AND THE CALL TO ACTION

United Methodists point to Scripture as “the primary source and criterion for Christian doctrine.”¹ Thus, any evaluation of the Call to Action from a United Methodist perspective must begin with the biblical witness. This is the aim of this chapter. As the work at hand proposes to assess the Call to Action in light of the denomination’s stated mission “to make disciples of Jesus for the transformation of the world,”² it is most appropriate to look specifically to the Scriptural source of this mission: the life and ministry of Jesus. Clearly, this statement is drawn from Jesus’ great commission to his followers in the Gospel of Matthew: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you” (28:19-20a). It is therefore to the depiction of Jesus in Matthew and its synoptic counterparts that this study now turns. This chapter will argue the scriptural account of Jesus’ ministry demonstrates a preference for the intentional process of discipleship over the lure of the crowds which contradicts the attractional approach found in the Call to Action.

Lost in the Crowd

With some 128 references, the crowds are ubiquitous to the synoptic narratives. Despite this proliferation, or perhaps because of it, scholars have long been divided on

¹ Ibid., 78.

² Ibid., 87.

the precise nature of the crowds, as well as the purpose they serve in the story.³ The primary reason the crowds have continually “perplexed interpreters”⁴ is likely their equivocal response to the ministry of Jesus.⁵ The crowds ultimately inhabit various, at times conflicting, roles throughout the gospel accounts.⁶ However, the ambiguous nature of the crowds’ response to Jesus does not minimize their significance. They are first introduced in Matthew 4:25 as the objects of Jesus’ public ministry in Galilee,⁷ and “from the beginning to the end they constitute a major objective of his vocation.”⁸

On balance, the crowds play a “highly positive role”⁹ in the synoptic narratives. They are the recipients of Jesus’ proclamation, teaching, healing and feeding throughout.¹⁰ On occasion Jesus calls the crowds to himself¹¹ (i.e., Mark 7:14 and 8:34). And the crowds are depicted as following Jesus¹² (i.e., Matthew 4:25). They often respond with praise for the words and works of Jesus, a response shown to be “not the

³ J. R. C. Cousland, *The Crowds in the Gospel of Matthew*, Supplements to Novum Testamentum V. 102 (Leiden ; Boston: Brill, 2002), 3-27. Cousland offers an excellent review and assessment of the more prominent scholarly voices on the crowds in the Gospel of Matthew in his first chapter.

⁴ Warren Carter, "The Crowds in Matthew's Gospel," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 55, no. 1 (1993): 54.

⁵ Luke Timothy Johnson and Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Luke*, Sacra Pagina Series (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1991), 134. See also Joel B. Green, *The Theology of the Gospel of Luke*, New Testament Theology (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 70.

⁶ Carter: 64.

⁷ Ibid.: 57.

⁸ Paul Sevier Minear, "Disciples and the Crowds in the Gospel of Matthew," *Anglican Theological Review* 3, no. (1974): 30.

⁹ Ibid.: 31.

¹⁰ Cousland, 101.

¹¹ Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, "Disciples/Crowds/Whoever : Markan Characters and Readers," *Novum Testamentum* 28, no. 2 (1986): 105-106.

¹² Ibid.: 107.

mindless response of the masses, but an enlightened one”¹³ (i.e., Luke 7:16). Moreover, it is the crowds, according to Matthew 21:9, who herald Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem, and who serve as protection when he preaches in the Temple (21:46).¹⁴

Of course the crowds’ depiction is not entirely positive. The most immediate negative association is what some have referred to as their “Jekyll and Hyde”¹⁵ complicity in Jesus’ arrest and crucifixion (i.e., Matthew 26:47; 27:24-25). Beyond this, the crowds are depicted as hindering access to Jesus (i.e., Mark 2:4), potentially crushing him (i.e., Mark 3:9), and even making it difficult for him to eat (i.e., Mark 3:20). At times, seemingly positive responses might well be less so upon closer inspection. For example, Warren Carter argues the crowds’ following of Jesus indicates little more than a matter of “physical movement” and should not be construed as an act of faith.¹⁶ Likewise, he points to the crowds’ question of Jesus’ identity as the Son of David in Matthew 12:23, in which the actual phrasing in Greek (prefixing the question with “μήτι”) indicates a question which anticipates a negative reply.¹⁷ Thus, in the crowds one finds a complex and significant figure in the narrative of the synoptic gospels. Further depth into their role is drawn by looking to Jesus’ relationship with them.

¹³ Green, 110.

¹⁴ Paul Sevier Minear, "When Jesus Saw the Crowds," *Expository Times* 116, no. 3 (2004): 77.

¹⁵ Cousland, 8.

¹⁶ Carter: 58.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*: 61.

Jesus and the Crowds

A careful reading of Jesus' reactions to the crowds in the synoptic narratives reveals consistent patterns of behavior which seem to reflect a surprising degree of ambivalence on Jesus' part. The first such pattern of behavior might be referred to as "crowd evasion." Significant in this regard are Jesus' "frequent physical withdrawals"¹⁸ from the crowds. On one occasion, having withdrawn early in the morning for prayer, the disciples find Jesus and report that "everyone" is searching for him. Jesus' response, rather than making himself available to those seeking him, is to move on to the neighboring towns (Mark 1:35-39). Time and again, when confronted by large crowds Jesus seems intent on leaving them behind (i.e., Matthew 5:1; 8:18; 14:13; 15:21). This evasive behavior should not be construed as dismissive or belligerent on Jesus' part. On one occasion when his attempt to withdraw from the crowds is thwarted by them he responds with compassion for their needs (Matthew 14:13-14). Thus, it is inaccurate to say Jesus disliked or did not care for the crowds. It seems rather that drawing large crowds together was not his favored approach to ministry.

Strikingly, "when Jesus withdraws from the crowd it is usually to be with his disciples"¹⁹ (i.e., Mark 3:9, 4:36, 6:31-33, 7:17). His aim is most often "private, more detailed teaching on a topic he has just covered more generally and more openly."²⁰ Thus a key motivation behind this evasive behavior seems to have been Jesus' desire to devote

¹⁸ Cousland, 107.

¹⁹ Malbon: 112.

²⁰ Ibid.: 113.

more time to teaching his disciples. Clearly, Jesus is prioritizing ministry with his disciples to ministry with the crowds.

Another example of Jesus' ambivalence toward the crowd is best described as "crowd avoidance." This is most evident in the frequent commands for secrecy he issued. On multiple occasions Jesus enigmatically instructs recipients of his healing miracles to be quiet about their experience with him (i.e., Mark 1:42). Time and again he commands demonic spirits to be silent when they reveal his true identity (i.e., Mark 1:25). He even charges his disciples to keep certain events and information to themselves (i.e., Mark 9:9). One might deduce from this level of secrecy Jesus wanted to avoid the attention that would be generated by the spread of this information. This explanation is bolstered by the biblical narrative. Early in the Gospel of Mark a healed leper ignores Jesus' command to "say nothing to anyone," resulting in crowds so large "Jesus could no longer go into a town openly" (Mark 1:40-45).

Perhaps Jesus' most startling display of ambivalence to the crowds might be referred to as "crowd confusion." This behavior is best demonstrated by his utilization of parables in his teaching. While it may seem odd to some to speak of Jesus' use of parables as ambivalent or confusing, this is fair reading of both the disciples' reaction to and his own explanation of this practice. After telling the parable of the four soils (Matthew 13:1-9, Mark 4:1-9, Luke 8:4-8), Jesus is approached by his disciples and asked, "Why do you speak to them in parables?" (Matthew 13:10b; cf. Mark 4:10, Luke 8:9). The "them" to whom Jesus has just spoken in parables is indicated twice in the Matthean account as "such great crowds" and "the whole crowd" (13:2, cf. Mark 4:1, Luke 8:4). The implication behind the question is that Jesus' use of parables with the

crowds is both distinct from and less clear than his manner of teaching the disciples.

Jesus' response affirms this:

He answered, "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. For to those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. The reason I speak to them in parables is that 'seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand.'" (Matthew 13:11-13)

While the notion of parables as obscure and enigmatic is "odd and goes against all we know about the function of parables to demonstrate and enlighten,"²¹ this is clearly the "dominant impression"²² of the passage.

Thus, Jesus uses this enigmatic pedagogical approach to sharpen once again the contrast between his disciples and the crowds. This contrast is driven home in Matthew 13:34 (cf. Mark 4:33-34): "Jesus told the crowds all these things in parables; without a parable he told them nothing." The Markan account further elaborates, "...but he explained everything in private to his disciples" (Mark 4:34b). There is therefore a clear connection between Jesus' practice of parabolic teaching of the crowds and his practice of withdrawing from the crowds with his disciples for further instruction.

If Jesus' purpose in teaching the crowds through parables is only to confuse and confound them, it would seem he would avoid them altogether. Such a simplistic reading does not account for the entirety of the gospel witness. At the same time, any attempt to

²¹ Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent : A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2008), Kindle Electronic Edition, Location 3714.

²² Cousland, 252.

minimize the obscure nature of Jesus' parables must account for his own explanation, especially his employ of Isaiah 6:9-10: "And he said, 'Go and say to this people: "Keep listening, but do not comprehend; keep looking, but do not understand." Make the mind of this people dull, and stop their ears, and shut their eyes, so that they may not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and comprehend with their minds, and turn and be healed.'"

Speaking to this difficult passage, both in its original setting in Isaiah's call narrative and in its setting in the gospels, Walter Brueggemann observes:

It is clear in this hard saying, even if much else is not clear here, that the purposes of God are at work in the midst of severe human obduracy. There are no easy healings. There are no ready turnings. The healings are not readily available, and the turnings are too demanding. There is no easy gospel, no cheap grace, no good word that gives assurances to those who drop by hoping for a quick and comfortable deal. And that leaves, in these cases, only obtuseness and its terrible consequences.²³

This would seem to indicate the enigmatic nature of Jesus' parables owes less to the parables themselves than to the stubborn human desire for a quick, easy fix to the problems of life and the resultant refusal of many to hear the deeper truths being communicated.

Even Jesus' reference to the "secret" or "mystery" which the disciples have been given to understand in Matthew 13:11 (cf. Mark 4:11, Luke 8:10) must be understood in light of the context of the First Century Semitic world where it did not refer to that which was hidden, but to that which would be hidden apart from God having revealed it.

²³ Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah*, 1st ed., 2. vols., Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 63.

Ultimately, “the concept of God’s mystery inherently has to do with people’s reception of the message.”²⁴ Thus the secret is not a secret as this notion is typically conceived of today, nor is it a mystery. In the person and ministry of Jesus, God has revealed this “mystery” to all, “for nothing is hidden that will not be disclosed, nor is anything secret that will not become known and come to light” (Luke 8:17, cf. Mark 4:22).

It is no accident Jesus’ description of parables as enigmatic to those who are unreceptive to God’s message occurs in the context of the parable of the four soils. “It is the first substantive parable in all three” synoptic gospels and “is *the* parable about parables.”²⁵ Though Jesus names it “the parable of the sower,” (Matthew 13:18) his interpretation clearly focuses on the condition of the soil receiving the seeds. The repeated command to “Listen!” (Matthew 13:3, 9; Mark 4:3, 9; Luke 8:8) makes clear the relationship between right listening or hearing and what it means to be good, receptive, productive soil for God’s word revealed in Jesus. This proper listening or hearing “is presented as hearing that leads to faith, and faith that leads to behaviors consistent with the word of God.”²⁶

Such hearing is the demarcation between the crowds and the disciples. And while the parable seems to indicate it is easier (three of four scenarios) to fail to listen and hear Jesus correctly, the good news is that “understanding is available to any who choose to hear.”²⁷ In this light, the parables serve as something of an invitation to the crowd to seek

²⁴ Snodgrass, Location 3749.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, Location 3315-3319.

²⁶ Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1997), 329.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

deeper engagement, a call for individuals to step out of the ranks of the crowd and into the community of the disciples. One can almost imagine Jesus waiting after a day of teaching and ministering to the crowds for any who might remain to ask questions about the stories they had heard and the things they had seen, any indication of a hunger for more.

Thus, while Jesus acts in ways that reinforce the boundary between the disciples and the crowd, that division remains porous.²⁸ Jesus does not abandon the crowds for their inability or refusal to listen and hear.²⁹ This is reinforced by the fact that, while Jesus does withdraw from the crowds to teach his disciples, this withdrawal at times is only a short distance away, where the crowds often continue to listen in.³⁰ Thus, the sermon on the mount (Matthew 5-7) is directed to the disciples (5:1) and therefore contains little significant parabolic teaching, yet it ultimately elicits a response from the crowds (7:28).

The Disciples and the Crowds

It has been noted above how Jesus' ambivalence toward the crowds served to accentuate the "significant contrast"³¹ between them and his disciples. His evasiveness was often in order to isolate himself and his disciples from the crowds. His avoidance of the crowds provided opportunity to devote more time to his disciples. And he often clarified for his disciples any confusion left by his teaching among the crowds. Thus the

²⁸ Ibid., 326.

²⁹ Carter: 63.

³⁰ Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 326.

³¹ Carter: 62.

relationship between Jesus and the crowds serves in many ways to distinguish exactly what it means to be a disciple. Disciples are depicted as those who are receptive to the teaching of Jesus in a way that leads them to seek more from him than what can be experienced from the confines of the crowd. This seeking results in an investment of more time and attention from Jesus.

Elizabeth Struthers Malbon points to one other aspect of Jesus' relationship with the crowds which further delineates the discipleship distinction: "Repeatedly, the crowd is said to come to Jesus, the disciples are said to go with him."³² In this regard, the crowd is depicted as primarily beneficiaries of the ministry of Jesus, whereas the disciples are seen primarily as his assistants.³³ To be his assistants in ministry clearly calls for a deeper level of commitment to Jesus from the disciples. To be prepared as his assistants necessitates time with Jesus and the disciples apart from the crowds, teaching, training, and preparing those men and women who had committed fully to the gospel of the kingdom present in Jesus.

It is worth noting once again the crowds are the primary objective of Jesus' ministry throughout.³⁴ His relationship with the disciples does not detract from this, but is a complement to it.³⁵ In fact, it is the manner by which Jesus proposes to ultimately reach the crowds. The disciples will expand and "continue his mission among the crowds."³⁶

³² Malbon: 110.

³³ Ibid.: 113.

³⁴ Minear, "Disciples and the Crowds in the Gospel of Matthew," 30.

³⁵ Malbon. 123-124.

³⁶ Carter: 60.

This design is evident in the Mission of the Twelve (Matthew 10:1-42, Mark 6:7-13, Luke 9:1-6) and the Mission of the Seventy (Luke 10:1-24). Having evaded, avoided, and confused the crowds in order to devote more of his energies and attention to his disciples, Jesus now sends them among the crowds. Jesus' disciple-centric approach thus has exponential impact on the crowds, and far more are ministered to and hear the gospel of the kingdom than would have had Jesus neglected his disciples to accommodate the demands of the crowds on his own. It is in this sense that the disciples of Jesus, through the power of the Holy Spirit may indeed accomplish "greater works" (John 14:12) than Jesus alone.

The Synoptic Vision

Ultimately, a fairly clear vision of the relationship between Jesus and the crowds emerges from the pages of the synoptic accounts. The crowds are a primary objective of Jesus' mission, but his mission is not simply to supply their wants and needs. He does not want them to continue indefinitely as his beneficiaries. As expressed in his Great Commission, as well as his own behaviors, Jesus' ultimate goal is to make disciples, to enlist people from the crowds as his assistants in ministry.

Jesus' approach to ministry clearly signals disciples are not made in the midst of the crowds. Discipleship is an intentional process, requiring relationship, intimate attention, and time. Thus Jesus relates to the crowds as his beneficiaries and teaches them in enigmatic parables, all the while looking for those who will step forward, hungry to initiate the process of discipleship. These are the ones in whom he invests his time and

energy, pulling away from the crowds as much as possible with these growing disciples to train them to assist him and carry on his mission.

One gains deeper understanding into the nature of discipleship in the pages of the synoptic accounts. The most striking insight gained is that discipleship happens as a result of intentionality. Jesus does not leave the work of discipleship to chance, or expect it to be the byproduct of anything else. It is an intentional focus and priority of his ministry, one for which he sacrifices other useful and beneficial activities, including time spent with the crowds. Discipleship is also demonstrated to be a process rather than an instantaneous event. It requires time and development. Discipleship happens in the context of relationship. Jesus and his disciples authentically do life together day to day. Discipleship involves the transfer of knowledge through teaching as well as the empowerment of the disciples to do ministry with and for Jesus. Disciples are less beneficiaries or consumers of the ministry of Jesus than they are partners in ministry with him. This is perhaps the most significant contrast between a ministry with disciples and ministry to the crowds.

The ministry of Jesus in the synoptics is clearly disciple-centric. Jesus is willing to evade, avoid, and confuse the crowds in order to invest more time in his disciples. While his compassion for the crowds does make them beneficiaries of his healing, his teaching is crafted to invite the hungry to a life of discipleship. His ultimate priority is always discipleship. He is more interested in enlisting partners in his ministry than producing consumers of his ministry. In short, Jesus was not intent on drawing a crowd. While crowds did gather to Jesus naturally, he never made this his aim. Any church or

ministry rightly said to be done in the name of Jesus must exhibit this same prioritization of discipleship.

Echoes in the Fourth Gospel

This synoptic image of the disciple-centric ministry of Jesus is not without its correlations in the Johanine account. Without setting aside the social, historical, literary, and other considerations and contributions of higher criticism, the noticeable differences between John and the synoptics may well be a prime example of this. The absence of developed parables in the fourth gospel coincides with the absence of extended accounts of Jesus' public teaching ministry. Perhaps the closest John comes is in chapter ten, where Jesus' utilizes the extended metaphor of the Good Shepherd. While the audience is unclear, their confusion is not: "they did not understand what he was saying to them" (John 10:6b).

In terms of crowd avoidance, John's account finds Jesus' brothers chastising him for acting in secret: "for no one who wants to be widely known acts in secret" (John 7:4a). As if in defiant response to their rebuke Jesus subsequently goes to Jerusalem for the festival "in secret" (John 7:10b). Only his disciples and the servants know of his miracle at Cana of Galilee (John 2:1-11). And when his notoriety spreads in Judea, he leaves, returning to Galilee (John 4:1-3).

The iconic third chapter of John's narrative offers further insight into to the crowd evading, avoiding, and confusing, disciple-centric image of Jesus presented here. Clearly something motivated Nicodemus to arrange his clandestine meeting with Jesus. The text indicates it was related to Jesus' public teaching and compassionate miracles, as

Nicodemus recognizes him as a “teacher who has come from God,” and remarks on the “signs” Jesus had done (John 3:2b). The night visit of Nicodemus might offer insight into one man’s transitional first step across the “porous” line from being part of the crowd to being a disciple of Jesus, the very aim of Jesus’ public ministry as it has been depicted here. This notion is supported later as Nicodemus speaks on behalf of Jesus before the chief priests and his fellow Pharisees (John 7:50) and joins Joseph of Arimathea in burying the crucified body of Jesus (John 19:39).

The sixth chapter of John provides perhaps the most significant insight into Jesus’ relationship with the crowds in the fourth gospel. Four times he relocates to move away from them (John 6:1, 3, 15, and 19), going up and down the mountain and back and forth across the Sea of Galilee. When the crowds track him down for the last time, Jesus enigmatically begins to speak of the need for them to eat of his flesh and drink of his blood (John 6:51-58). Not the crowds only, but even some who had begun the process of discipleship recoiled at this: “Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him” (John 6:66). There can be no clearer indication that Jesus valued some things more than drawing or keeping a crowd.

Closer examination of the miraculous feeding (John 6:1-15) serves to demonstrate the extent to which the Johannine account reinforces the synoptic vision of Jesus’ relationship with the crowds. The passage begins with “a large crowd” (6:2a) persistently following Jesus, though he had gone “to the other side of the Sea of Galilee” (6:1b) expressly to be “with his disciples” (6:3b). Already, Jesus is withdrawing to be with the disciples, only to be thwarted in his efforts by the crowd. Significant here is the purpose for which the crowd is said to doggedly pursue Jesus: “because they saw the signs that he

was doing for the sick” (6:2b). Malbon’s description of the crowds as primarily beneficiaries of the ministry of Jesus is here evident.

Unflappable in his compassion, Jesus responds to the interloping crowd with the concern of a gracious host: “When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, ‘Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?’” (6:5). It is important to note here, as elsewhere, that Jesus’ reception of the crowd cannot be construed as an intentional methodology, as this is flatly contradicted by his crowd averse behaviors. It is better understood as conformity to societal conventions. Gail R. O’Day notes, “Jesus acts because his identity and responsibility as host offers him no choice but to offer hospitality to those who come to him.”³⁷ Thus, while the gospels affirm the attractiveness of Jesus to the crowds, they do not support an intentional attracting of the crowd on his part. For even in his reception of the crowd Jesus’ focus remains on the instruction of his disciples, as indicated by the editorial comment, “He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do” (6:6).

What follows in the miraculous feeding, is the very sign the crowd is seeking, though not specifically “for the sick” (6:2b) as anticipated. John Painter comments, “Whatever the crowd expected, in the wilderness Jesus performed *a sign of deliverance*.”³⁸ It is recognized in the crowd’s reaction: “When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, ‘This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world’” (6:14). This prompts a new expectation of Jesus on the part of the crowd which

³⁷ Gail R. O’Day, “John 6: 1-15,” *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible & Theology* 57, no. 2 (2003): 197.

³⁸ John Painter, “Tradition and Interpretation in John 6,” *New Testament Studies* 35, no. 03 (1989): 427.

once again necessitates his departure from them: “When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself” (6:15). As consumers and beneficiaries, the crowds will have Jesus on their terms. This again distinguishes them from the disciples, who accept Jesus on his terms.

The Call to Action in Light of Scripture

The view of Jesus’ ministry with the crowds and his disciples presented here from the synoptics and John has much to say to the Call to Action. In many ways the motivations driving these proposals for United Methodist renewal and revitalization are reflective of Jesus’ compassion for and desire to effectively reach the crowds. However, this is where the similarities end. The strategy evident in the ministry of Jesus is one of intentionally focusing on developing disciples in order to effectively reach the crowds. The Call to Action, in contrast, evidences an inverse strategy of intentionally reaching the crowds in hopes of producing more disciples.

While it may seem logical that more people attending churches will lead to more disciples, the praxis of Jesus does not support this. Leonard Sweet argues, “The Gospel of Jesus Christ always comes to us in stereo.”³⁹ In other words, one should expect the element of paradox in the ministry and message of Jesus, who never comes at anything with head on logic. Targeting the many to reach the many makes sense. Targeting the few to reach the many requires deeper consideration, and finds great resonance with the practice of Jesus.

³⁹ Conversation with the author.

Very little about the Call to Action exhibits intentionality for making disciples. Rather, it is assumed disciples are the natural byproduct of the targeted vital congregations. Yet the vast majority of indicators and drivers for this vitality, such as charismatic pastoral leadership, sermon style, needs-based programming, worship options, and attendance measures, are associated with a congregation's ability to attract a crowd. Even those measures which might be associated with discipleship are problematic. While many small groups are geared toward facilitating the process of discipleship, many others are affinity or experience-based, and may or may not be so structured. The Call to Action makes no distinction when it calls for more small groups in the life of the local church. Involvement in mission often indicates maturity and discipleship, but it may also be driven by the fact that helping others is a rewarding experience in and of itself. One does not need faith to help his or her neighbor, therefore helping one's neighbor does not necessarily mean one is growing in faith. More professions of faith would seem to indicate more people are making the transition from crowd member to disciple, yet without an intentional process to lead people beyond a profession of faith, discipleship is short-circuited.

This evaluation does not claim the measures of the Call to Action cannot produce disciples. Rather, it argues that the Call to Action goes about doing so in a manner contrary to the method demonstrated in the ministry of Jesus. The Call to Action assumes discipleship as a given in the life of a vital congregation, while Jesus never took this process for granted. In many settings various pastors and congregations will compensate for this lack of intentionality for disciple making. However, insofar as the ministry of Jesus is instructive for the ministry of the United Methodist Church, these contradictions

with it found in the Call to Action leads to the conclusion it will not likely lead to “greater effectiveness in making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world,”⁴⁰ as it claims.

In the final analysis, the Call to Action is a call to reach the crowd, with an anticipated byproduct of thereby producing more disciples. The biblical witness to the ministry of Jesus, on the other hand, is a clarion call to make disciples in order to reach the crowds. This is no small difference, nor is it a matter of semantics. Mike Breen has argued persuasively “If you make disciples, you will always get the church. But if you try to build the church, you will rarely get disciples.”⁴¹ The Call to Action is clearly more focused on building the United Methodist Church than it is on making disciples. While not unrelated, nor contradictory, the former is meant to be the result of the latter, and not the other way around, as it is in the Call to Action. If the United Methodist Church is to remain faithful to the witness of Scripture to the life of Jesus, and more effective in her disciple making mission, this must be addressed. Until it is, the Call to Action must not be the way forward for the United Methodist Church.

⁴⁰ Call to Action Steering Team, “Call to Action Steering Team Report,” United Methodist Church, http://www.umc.org/atf/cf/%7Bdb6a45e4-c446-4248-82c8-e131b6424741%7D/CTA_STEERING%20TEAM_%20RPT_1-44.PDF (accessed April 28, 2011), 6.

⁴¹ Mike Breen, “Why the Missional Movement Will Fail,” Mike Breen, September 12, 2011, <http://mikebreen.wordpress.com/2011/09/12/why-the-missional-movement-will-fail/> (accessed January 9, 2012)

CHAPTER FOUR

TRADITION AND THE CALL TO ACTION

United Methodists “pursue [their] theological task in openness to the richness of both the form and power of tradition.”¹ Here tradition is understood in its “most basic sense” as “the story of the church... the continuing activity of God’s Spirit transforming human life.”² While the United Methodist Church occupies a space within the wider story of the Church universal, it is also the largest benefactor and steward of a particular chapter within that story. The following review of the Call to Action through the lens of tradition will focus on that chapter, rooted in the 18th Century revival led by Anglican clergyman and Oxford don, John Wesley, for his theological outlook forms the “distinctive heritage”³ of United Methodist Christianity. This chapter argues that distinctive heritage, with its focus on the methodical pursuit of holiness and the work of sanctification, stands in stark contrast to the absence of emphasis on intentional practices of discipleship found in the Call to Action.

Discipleship and the Wesleyan Tradition

Because “Wesley embodied ideals and qualities not always easily held together or reconciled,”⁴ this “elusive” figure has been subsequently portrayed as everything from a social activist, to an evangelical revivalist, to a Biblicist, to a pragmatist, and more.

¹ United Methodist Church (U.S.), 80.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 45.

⁴ Richard P. Heitzenrater, *The Elusive Mr. Wesley*, 2nd ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 32.

However, looking to the various aspects of Wesley's life and ministry to define his theological heritage fails to ask the essential question of what fueled the many and varied passions of the man and the movement he inspired. Stephen Seamands echoes many when he argues the identity and mission of Wesley and the early Methodists "revolved around one thing: holiness of heart and life."⁵

The merit of this argument can be demonstrated in Wesley's own words: "By Methodist I mean a people who profess to pursue (in whatsoever measure they have attained) holiness of heart and life, inward and outward conformity in all things to the revealed will of God."⁶ Holiness was, for Wesley, the very essence of Methodism. He understood God's purpose in raising up the Methodist movement, and his own personal mission in life as being "to reform the nation, particularly the Church; and to spread scriptural holiness over the land."⁷ As this was Wesley's mission and the true essence of early Methodism, any consideration of Wesleyan Methodist tradition is hollow aside from an understanding of this vital concept, along with the related ideas of sanctification and Christian perfection.

A Wesleyan understanding of holiness is inextricable from his view of the nature and character of Christian salvation. For many in the Protestant West salvation is typically understood in terms of justification, the moment of one's coming to faith whereby he or she is reconciled to God. Wesley's view saw justification as integral aspect of salvation, but it went much further. Holding primarily to a therapeutic view,

⁵ Stephen A. Seamands, *Holiness of Heart and Life*, Faithful Congregations(Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 13.

⁶ John Wesley, *Works*, Third ed., vol. 8 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1979), 352.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 299.

Wesley understood salvation, though it possessed instantaneous elements and God is always free to work as God chooses to be primarily an ongoing process whereby the image of God, distorted by sin, is restored in the life of the Christian, through the process of sanctification.⁸ Thus, “salvation, in a Wesleyan context, is not simply forgiveness... Rather, it is the complete restoration of who we have been created to be.”⁹ Salvation thus understood leads to real and progressive change in the life of the Christian.

For Wesley, salvation could not be limited to an assent to prescribed principles and propositions. Neither was it simply a matter of going to heaven in the next life. It was a dynamic process whereby one was drawn into relationship with God, reconciled to God through faith in Christ, and matured in this relationship to a fullness of love for God and neighbor, which Wesley termed “perfection.” Wesley adamantly held this entire process to be the free gift of God’s grace through the work of the Holy Spirit, yet he insisted there is a sense in which Christians must cooperate with this work. To do so is the proper response to God’s grace, and it is the true nature and character of saving faith.

Wesley found this dynamic understanding of salvation sorely lacking in the institutional Church of his own day. He therefore worked tirelessly to reform the Church and nation by “encouraging and aiding nominal church members to take more seriously their Christian identity and formation.”¹⁰ His network of societies, classes, and bands

⁸ Scott J. Jones, *United Methodist Doctrine : The Extreme Center*(Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 210.

⁹ Scott Thomas Kisker, *Mainline or Methodist : Rediscovering Our Evangelistic Mission*(Nashville, Tenn.: Discipleship Resources, 2008), 68.

¹⁰ Rand L. Maddux, “Wesley's Prescription for Making Disciples of Jesus Christ: Insights for the 21st Century Church” (Paper presented to United Methodist Council of Bishops’ Task Force on Theological Education and Leadership Formation, 2002) http://pulpitandpew.org/sites/all/themes/pulpitandpew/files/maddox%20paper_9-23-02.pdf, (Last accessed May 1, 2011). 2.

provided a structure designed to help all who would “grow in grace and be encouraged to attain holiness.”¹¹ Here people learned Wesley’s view of the Christian faith. Here they learned the means whereby they might better cooperate with the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives. Here they held one another accountable in love for their growth and maturity in the Christian life.¹² Ultimately, the method of early Methodism was one of highly intentional discipleship.

Wesley is certainly not the only one to have expressed such a dynamic, holistic understanding of the nature of salvation. Neither is he the only to have emphasized holiness, sanctification, and Christian perfection as he did. His is not an entirely unique approach to the Christian faith so much as it is an amalgam of what he perceived to be the best views of many others. However, the far reaching impact of Wesley with regard to these matters on the life of the Church universal has surpassed all others. Thus, in many ways this emphasis on holiness of heart and life, this relentless and passionate pursuit of Christian perfection which Outler deemed Wesley’s “most distinctive doctrine,”¹³ is the unique gift Methodism has to offer the Church and the world. The extent to which the United Methodist Church withholds this gift, it becomes a “lost treasure.”¹⁴

¹¹ Charles Yrigoyen and Ruth A. Daugherty, *John Wesley : Holiness of Heart and Life*(New York (475 Riverside Dr., New York 10115): Mission Education and Cultivation Program Dept. for the Women's Division, General Board of Global Ministries, United Methodist Church, 1996). 17.

¹² Kisker, 75-76.

¹³ Wesley, Outler, and Heitzenrater, *John Wesley's Sermons : An Anthology*, 23.

¹⁴ Seamands, 15.

Wesley, in His Own Words

It is instructive to hear in his own words Wesley's views on the nature and significance of the life of discipleship. On July 25, 1741, Wesley's turn as university preacher came around. The Methodist revival was in full swing, and already Wesley had many critics among the Anglican establishment at Oxford. He would not win their affection with his message entitled, "The Almost Christian." In it he argues against the notion that ethical behavior and active Church life are true indicators of genuine Christian faith, as they can merely be an indication that one is "almost" a Christian:

It is necessarily implied that a man have a sincere view of pleasing God in all things: in all his conversation, in all his actions; in all he does or leaves undone. This design, if any man be 'almost a Christian', runs through the whole tenor of his life. This is the moving principle both in his doing good, his abstaining from evil, and his using the ordinances of God.¹⁵

Wesley goes on to ask his Oxford peers, "Are not many of you conscious that you never came thus far?"¹⁶ Wesley then enumerates three things lacking in the "almost Christian" life. For the first two he points to the Great Commandment that all followers of Jesus should love God and love their neighbor. He continues from these two, "There is yet one thing more that may be separately considered, though it cannot actually be separate from the preceding, which is implied in the being 'altogether a Christian', and that is the ground of all, even faith."¹⁷ Here can be seen the primary significance of faith in

¹⁵ Wesley, Outler, and Heitzenrater, *John Wesley's Sermons : An Anthology*, 64.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 67.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 65-66.

Wesley's theology, as that which distinguishes from an outward form of the Christian life and the true inward power of it.

Wesley hastens to caution, however, "But here let no man deceive his own soul. It is diligently to be noted, the 'faith which bringeth not forth repentance' and love, and all good works, is not that 'right living faith' which is here spoken of, 'but a dead and devilish one.'"¹⁸ Thus, for Wesley, it is never a matter of faith or works, but always a matter of faith working itself out in love, the true definition of holiness. "Whosoever has this faith, thus 'working by love', is not *almost* only, but *altogether* a Christian."¹⁹

In 1787, a more mature Wesley would allow, in his sermon "The More Excellent Way," that perhaps there are two orders of Christians. Without negating the necessity of faith and love, Wesley notes,

It is the observation of an ancient writer that there have been from the beginning two orders of Christians. The one lived an innocent life, conforming in all things not sinful to the customs and fashions of the world, doing many good works, abstaining from gross evils, and attending the ordinances of God. They endeavoured in general to have a conscience void of offence in their outward behaviour, but did not aim at any particular strictness, being in most things like their neighbours. The other sort of Christians not only abstained from all appearance of evil, were zealous of good works in every kind, and attended all the ordinances of God; but likewise used all diligence to attain the whole mind that was in Christ, and laboured to walk in every point as their beloved Master.²⁰

Everyone who comes to faith in Christ, who thereby experiences justification, Wesley argues, has the choice between these two paths. He hastens to add, however, "I

¹⁸ Ibid., 66.

¹⁹ Ibid., 67.

²⁰ Ibid., 513.

would be far from... discouraging those that serve God in a low degree. But I would not wish them to stop there: I would encourage them to come up higher.”²¹ In describing this higher, more excellent way, Wesley writes,

They took up their cross daily. The strove, they agonized without intermission, to enter in at the straight gate. This one thing they did; they spared no pains to arrive at the summit of Christian holiness: ‘leaving the first principles of the doctrine of Christ, to go on to perfection’; ‘to know that love of God which passeth all knowledge, and to be filled with all the fullness of God’.²²

Thus, Wesley’s aim is never distracted from the call to a life of holiness, a life of sanctification and perfection, a life of discipleship.

“The Scripture Way of Salvation,” written in 1765 is, according to Outler, “The most successful summary of the Wesleyan vision of the ‘way of salvation’ in the entire sermon corpus.”²³ No review of the Wesleyan Methodist tradition is complete without it. “Nothing can be more intricate, complex, and hard to be understood,” writes Wesley, “than religion as it has been often described.” He goes on to decry, “Yet how easy to be understood, how plain and simple a thing, is the genuine religion of Jesus Christ!... How observable is this both with regard to the end it proposes and the means to attain that end! The end is, in one word, salvation: the means to attain it, faith.”²⁴ He proceeds then to outline the nature of salvation, the nature of faith, and the means whereby faith affects salvation.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., 371.

²⁴ Ibid., 372.

As to the nature of salvation, Wesley declares first that it “is not what is frequently understood by that word, the going to heaven, eternal happiness.”²⁵ Rather, the salvation of which the Scriptures speak, Wesley says, “consists of two general parts, justification and sanctification.” Wesley continues to describe justification as “another word for pardon... the forgiveness of all our sins, and... our acceptance with God.”²⁶ Sanctification begins at the moment of justification: “From the time of our being ‘born again’ the gradual work of sanctification takes place. We are enabled ‘by the Spirit’ to ‘mortify the deeds of the body’, of our evil nature. And as we are more and more dead to sin we are more and more alive to God.”²⁷ In this way, abstaining from evil, doing good, and attending to the ordinances of God, “we wait for entire sanctification, for a full salvation from all our sins... Or, as the Apostle expresses it, ‘Go on to perfection.’”²⁸

As to the nature of faith, Wesley holds this, generally speaking, “implies both a supernatural *evidence* of God and of the things of God, a kind of spiritual *light* exhibited to the soul and a supernatural *sight* or perception thereof.”²⁹ It is therefore a twofold work of the Holy Spirit whereby the “eyes of the soul” are “both *opened* and *enlightened*.” Having the eyes of one’s soul thus opened and enlightened, “in a more particular sense, faith is a divine evidence and conviction, not only that ‘God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself’, but also that Christ ‘loved *me*, and gave himself for *me*’. It is by

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., 373.

²⁷ Ibid., 374.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

this faith... that we ‘receive Christ.’”³⁰ From this personal experience of faith flows both an assurance and confidence for living the Christian life.

As to how faith works, Wesley first affirms faith as the only necessary condition for salvation, both justification and sanctification. Proceeding from this faith, however, “It is incumbent on all that are justified to be zealous of good works. And these are so necessary that if a man willingly neglect them, he cannot reasonably expect that he shall ever be sanctified.”³¹ Thus, if it does not lead to repentance and good works, both of piety and mercy, Wesley reasons, it cannot rightly be called faith. Even as he argues these works are necessary to sanctification, or more precisely they are “the way wherein God hath appointed his children to wait for complete sanctification,” Wesley is quick to affirm, “But he cannot be sanctified without faith.”³²

Written in 1790, the last year of his life, Wesley’s sermon “On the Wedding Garment,” demonstrates his consistent emphasis on the role of sanctification and holiness in salvation to the very end. Written as a polemic against antinomianism, he first refutes the notion that orthodoxy, or right belief, is sufficient for salvation apart from holiness: “We know indeed that wrong opinions in religion naturally lead to wrong tempers, or wrong practices; and that consequently it is our bounden duty to pray that we may have the right judgment in all things. But still a man may judge as accurately as the devil, and yet be just as wicked as he.”³³ He then goes on to ask,

³⁰ Ibid., 374-375.

³¹ Ibid., 377.

³² Ibid., 378.

³³ Ibid., 563.

What then is that holiness which is the true wedding garment, the only qualification for glory? ‘In Christ Jesus... neither circumcision availeth anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation,’ the renewal of the soul ‘in the image of God wherein it was created’. In ‘Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth anything nor uncircumcision’, but ‘faith which worketh by love’. It first, through the energy of God, worketh love to God and all mankind; and by this love every holy and heavenly temper. In particular, lowliness, meekness, gentleness, temperance, and long-suffering. ‘It is neither circumcision’, the attending on all the Christian ordinances, ‘nor uncircumcision’, the fulfilling of all heathen morality, but ‘the keeping of the commandments of God’; particularly those, ‘Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all they heart, and thy neighbor as thyself.’ In a word, holiness is the having ‘the mind that was in Christ’, and the ‘walking as Christ walked’.³⁴

This is the message which Wesley preached consistently and to which his methods were directed.

The Significance of Sanctification

It is crucial to the task at hand to see clearly the significance of sanctification in Wesley’s soteriology. As demonstrated above in his own words from “The Scripture Way of Salvation,” Wesley deemed sanctification one of two general, constitutive elements, or “fundamental doctrines”³⁵ of salvation, along with justification. It is the delineation and interrelation of justification and sanctification, as well as the emphasis given to and the understanding of the latter that in many ways distinguishes Wesley’s view from much of the Reformed tradition.³⁶

³⁴ Ibid., 564.

³⁵ Harald Gustaf Åke Lindström, *Wesley and Sanctification : A Study in the Doctrine of Salvation*(Nappanee, Ind.: Francis Asbury Press, 1996), 15.

³⁶ Ibid., 92-93.

In distinguishing between Wesley's views of justification and sanctification it is most helpful to think in objective and subjective terms. Justification is rooted in the objective reality of the atoning death of Christ on the cross. Sanctification, by contrast, is rooted in the work of the Holy Spirit in one's life. Thomas Oden explains, "If justification is God's action *for us in the Son*, new birth is the inauguration of God's action *in us through the Spirit*."³⁷ The difference here is not temporal, as the new birth, which initiates sanctification, happens simultaneously with justification. However, being born again and experiencing sanctification is "logically distinct from justification because it is something God does in us rather than something that God does for us."³⁸ Thus, the distinction drawn in Wesley's theological understanding between justification and sanctification can be understood as the difference between what God has done *for us* and what God does *in and through us*, respectively.

This distinction can perhaps be "seen most clearly if we say that justification involves a relative, and sanctification, a real change."³⁹ Justification entails a change in one's outward relation to God, making enemies of God now his children. Through it one is restored to the favor of God. Sanctification, on the other hand, involves a real change in one's nature and character, making saints of sinners. Through it the image of God is restored in one's life. Whereas justification removes the guilt of one's sin, sanctification removes its power in one's life.

³⁷ Thomas C. Oden, *John Wesley's Scriptural Christianity : A Plain Exposition of His Teaching on Christian Doctrine*(Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1994), 306.

³⁸ Jones, 202.

³⁹ Lindström, 84.

One can distinguish further between justification and sanctification with reference to the manner in which each is experienced. Justification is an instantaneous reality. One's experience of pardon through faith occurs at a particular moment, though that moment comes as the culmination of one's ongoing experience of God's prevenient grace. Sanctification, however, is better understood as a process. Though it may have instantaneous elements such as the experiences of new birth and entire sanctification, it is primarily seen in gradual terms of growth and maturation. Through the ongoing process of sanctification "a person should grow steadily in grace and holiness."⁴⁰ Ultimately, "justification is an instantaneous change in status, sanctification is a process that goes on for the rest of the person's life."⁴¹ Wesley's teaching places an emphasis on this process: "the idea of gradual development is a most prominent element in his conception of salvation, and indeed in his thought generally."⁴² Steve Harper goes so far as to say, "It is not inappropriate to say that Wesley's theology can always be summarized in the exhortation to 'Go on!'"⁴³

Here it is important to consider the manner in which one experiences the process of sanctification. It has already been noted that Wesley held sanctification, like justification, to be a work of God's grace attained through faith. But attention must also be given to the synergistic nature of sanctification in Wesley's thought. For when one

⁴⁰ Thomas A. Langford, *Practical Divinity : Theology in the Wesleyan Tradition*(Nashville: Abingdon, 1983), 46.

⁴¹ Jones, 196.

⁴² Lindström, 105.

⁴³ Steve Harper, *The Way to Heaven : The Gospel According to John Wesley*, 2nd ed.(Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2003), 60.

receives God's gift of sanctification through faith, "this sets up a cooperation between the Holy Spirit's work in her and her use of that grace which transforms her over time. Wesley describes it as action and re-action."⁴⁴ In this light, sanctification can be understood as more than an emphasis in Wesley's theology. Rather, it is better understood as essential to it. For apart from obedient cooperation with the process of sanctification, one "cannot grow in grace, he cannot even retain the grace already accorded to him. Thus obedience is necessary to the development of the Christian life. If the new life is to persist and grow, activity on God's part must always be accompanied by activity on man's part."⁴⁵

Thus, from a Wesleyan perspective, there is no salvation apart from the ongoing experience of sanctification and growth in holiness. The Methodist societies, classes, and bands were designed to provide people with the means to attend to this. All preachers in the connection were urged to teach sanctification and holiness and all class leaders exhorted to be attentive to this process among their members.⁴⁶ This devotion to the process of sanctification and holiness is what is meant by discipleship in the work at hand. In this light, one finds attention to discipleship at the heart of the Wesleyan theological tradition.

The Lost Method of Methodism

With such clarity and focus within the Wesleyan tradition, one would expect the United Methodist Church, as the largest beneficiary and steward of the tradition, to

⁴⁴ Jones, 199.

⁴⁵ Lindström, 117.

⁴⁶ Oden, 311.

reflect a similar emphasis on intentional methods of discipleship. The United Methodist Church affirms “the mission of the Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.”⁴⁷ It holds the standard sermons of Wesley, which includes “The Scripture Way of Salvation,” among its doctrinal standards. United Methodists affirm Article XI of the confession of faith of the former Evangelical United Brethren Church, a precise summation of Wesley’s teaching on the matter:

Article XI—Sanctification and Christian Perfection

We believe sanctification is the work of God’s grace through the Word and the Spirit, by which those who have been born again are cleansed from sin in their thoughts, words and acts, and are enabled to live in accordance with God’s will, and to strive for holiness *without which no one will see the Lord*.

Entire sanctification is a state of perfect love, righteousness and true holiness which every regenerate believer may obtain by being delivered from the power of sin, by loving God with all the heart, soul, mind and strength, and by loving one’s neighbor as one’s self. Through faith in Jesus Christ this gracious gift may be received in this life both gradually and instantaneously, and *should be sought earnestly by every child of God*.

We believe this experience does not deliver us from the infirmities, ignorance, and mistakes common to man, nor from the possibilities of further sin. The Christian must continue on guard against spiritual pride and seek to gain victory over every temptation to sin. He must respond wholly to the will of God so that sin will lose its power over him; and the world, the flesh, and the devil are put under his feet. Thus he rules over these enemies with watchfulness through the power of the Holy Spirit.⁴⁸

Likewise included in United Methodist doctrinal standards are the nature, design, and General Rules which governed Wesley’s Methodist societies.

⁴⁷ United Methodist Church (U.S.), 87.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 69-70. (Italics mine)

Despite all of this talk about holiness and sanctification, however, there is no common practice of discipleship in the United Methodist Church today. As Scott Kisker puts it, “there is nothing in our current structure that brings people face to face with the expectations of a Christ-shaped life.”⁴⁹ Membership in local United Methodist congregations is largely a matter of “local whim,”⁵⁰ as are all forms of Christian education. It is as if the United Methodist Church expects discipleship to happen naturally.

Steven Manskar, Director of Wesleyan Leadership at the General Board of Discipleship of the United Methodist Church, notes, “I have yet to find a congregation that is intentionally living as a community of discipleship found in the *Book of Discipline* and the *Baptismal Covenant*.”⁵¹ As a result, Stephen Seamands argues, “United Methodists today have little or no awareness of our original purpose and mission.”⁵² It should come as little surprise extensive surveys across the denomination reveal “comments on this topic that ranged from a focus on differences in definition and understanding to differences in interpretation and emphasis, including basic disagreement on what the Church’s mission of ‘making disciples...’ is or should be.”⁵³

⁴⁹ Kisker, 119.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 74.

⁵¹ Steve Manskar, “The Meaning of Membership in the United Methodist Church,” Wesleyan Leadership, January 6, 2012, <http://wesleyanleadership.wordpress.com/2012/01/06/the-meaning-of-membership-in-the-united-methodist-church/> (accessed January 7, 2012).

⁵² Seamands, 15.

⁵³ APEX HG LLC, “The United Methodist Church Operational Assessment Project Executive Summary Presentation,” http://www.umc.org/atf/cf/%7Bdb6a45e4-c446-4248-82c8-e131b6424741%7D/CTA_APEXRPTS_127_248.PDF, (accessed April 28, 2011), 30-31.

This is no recent development. Seamands recalls these words from an address delivered by Albert Outler in 1974:

The doctrine of holiness of heart and life that had been the keystone in the arch of Wesley's doctrine, by the turn of this century had become a pebble in the shoe of standard bred Methodists. And presently they took off the shoe, threw out the pebble, put the shoe back on and kept walking, with the same labels but without the same equipment. And this has been an uncomprehended and immense tragedy for all who claim John Wesley as their father in God.⁵⁴

Scott Kisker posits much of what once distinguished Methodism within the Body of Christ was sacrificed in the rush to mainline respectability. Long before people stopped wanting to be identified as Methodists, anything that might have given that label meaning was laid aside. The unique characteristics of Methodism were replaced by "bland, acceptable, almost civil religion, barely distinguishable from other traditions also now known as 'mainline.'"⁵⁵ For all the talk of denominations not mattering to people anymore, the reality might just be they do not matter because they have no meaning. Rather than continuing on this path because people do not seem to be interested in denominational labels, perhaps the United Methodist Church should make that label distinctive once more by reclaiming its Wesleyan heritage of intentional, methodical disciple making, a focus not found in the Call to Action.

Regardless the reasons, United Methodists have long lost anything that might be recognizable as Methodism from the standpoint of the Wesleyan tradition, none the least of which is an emphasis on intentional disciple making. This leads one observer to

⁵⁴ Quoted in Seamands, 15.

⁵⁵ Kisker.

wonder if the decline of the denomination might not be “due in major part to having lost the preaching and practice of, in Mr. Wesley’s words, this ‘grand depositum of entire sanctification.’”⁵⁶ The time has come to put the method back in Methodism.

The Call to Action in Light of Tradition

In light of this understanding both of the Wesleyan Methodist tradition and the current state of the United Methodist Church, there can be little hope for the Call to Action to lead the denomination into “greater effectiveness in making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.”⁵⁷ There simply is nothing in the plan designed to do so. It is assumed the vital congregations at the heart of the Call to Action will result in a renewed emphasis on discipleship, because United Methodists claim “local churches provide the most significant arena through which disciple-making occurs.”⁵⁸ Wesleyan Methodist tradition does not support this assumption.

Wesley’s counsel in “The Almost Christian” can be taken as a clear warning against looking to active Church participation, which the majority of the metrics called for in the Call to Action measure, as an indicator of true discipleship. One can have all outward signs of holiness without the inward experience of faith. Without some way to discern the motivation behind participation in the life of the Church, some way of interpreting the meaning behind the numbers, all the metrics in the world are meaningless

⁵⁶ James B. Scott and Molly Davis Scott, *Restoring Methodism : 10 Decisions for United Methodist Churches in America*(Dallas [Tex.]: Provident Publishing, 2006), 117.

⁵⁷ Call to Action Steering Team, “Call to Action Steering Team Report,” http://www.umc.org/atf/cf/%7Bdb6a45e4-c446-4248-82c8-e131b6424741%7D/CTA_STEERING%20TEAM_%20RPT_1-44.PDF (accessed April 28, 2011), 6.

⁵⁸ United Methodist Church (U.S.), 87.

from a Wesleyan perspective. Further, it is worth noting Methodism was born out of Wesley's conviction that the institutional church of his day did a poor job of discipling people. The parallels in this arena between the 18th Century Church of England and the United Methodist Church today are startling. Wesley deemed the best avenue for his structures of discipleship lay outside and alongside the institutional church, not within it. Traditional Methodism was a parachurch movement.

United Methodists affirm the authority of tradition as a means to discern truth. If anything is to be learned from the Wesleyan Methodist tradition, it is the absolute necessity of discipleship to a full experience of salvation and the Christian faith. Apart from this, Wesleyan tradition holds that United Methodists are offering a stunted version of the Christian faith, a lower and less excellent way of almost Christianity. The path to the more excellent way of an altogether Christian faith and full experience of salvation lies through intentional practices of discipleship. This will not happen by accident, and must not be taken for granted. This is the tradition of Methodism. Any path to renewal and revitalization which does not blaze a trail through the heart of intentional disciple making is no path for United Methodists. Such is the nature of the Call to Action. Tradition is calling the United Methodist Church to remember what it means to be Methodist once more. The Call to Action offers nothing to this end.

CHAPTER FIVE

EXPERIENCE AND THE CALL TO ACTION

In this chapter the element of experience is brought to bear on the assessment of the Call to Action. United Methodists affirm, “In our theological task, we follow Wesley’s practice of examining experience, both individual and corporate, for confirmations of the realities of God’s grace attested in Scripture.”¹ As the Call to Action has yet to be fully enacted, this work proposes the best means of experiential evaluation is found in looking to examples of the methods proposed in practice elsewhere in the Church. It can thereby be determined to what extent this approach holds promise to provide growth, youth, and diversity, and to lead the United Methodist Church to greater effectiveness in achieving its mission “to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world,”² as it has been tasked. This chapter argues the ability of the ecclesiastical paradigm underlying the Call to Action to provide sustained growth, growth among emerging generations, and growth among diverse constituencies, and more significantly its effectiveness for disciple making is doubtful in light of the experience of the wider Church.

As it was brought into being in response to the United Methodist Church’s four decades of numerical decline, with all of its contributing factors and implications, the Call to Action naturally revolves around issues of numbers and statistics. Vitality is defined and measured with reference to statistical information, with worship attendance

¹ Ibid., 81.

² Ibid., 87.

and program participation topping the list. Accountability is tied to this numerical data. Ultimately, the Call to Action is aimed at helping the congregations of the United Methodist Church attract more members. Its practical applications revolve around measures intended to draw people into the life of the local church, which United Methodists view to be “the most significant arena through which disciple-making occurs.”³ As such, it is closely aligned with an ecclesiology which Leonard Sweet and others have dubbed the “attractional church.”⁴

Understanding the Attractional Church

The primary mode of Church in the West for some 1700 years,⁵ the attractional church model reached its pinnacle in the latter decades of the 20th Century in the interrelated seeker-sensitive, church growth, and megachurch movements.⁶ The effectiveness of this model at achieving its stated purpose, namely attracting more people into the life of the local church, is undeniable. The number of churches in the United States with an average weekly worship attendance of 2,000 or more has grown four-fold over the past two decades.⁷ The 100 fastest growing congregations saw an average

³ Ibid., 105.

⁴ Sweet, 18.

⁵ Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways : Reactivating the Missional Church*(Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos Press, 2006), 65.

⁶ Ibid., 45.

⁷ Hartford Institute for Religious Research, “Megachurch Definition,” Hartford Seminary. <http://hirr.hartsem.edu/megachurch/definition.html> (accessed January 5, 2012).

increase in attendance of more than 750 in 2010.⁸ Further, the abundance of articles, books, conferences, and seminars aimed at helping congregations “get more members,”⁹ together with the celebrity status conferred on many large churches and their leaders attest to the preeminence of this model in the West. While these highest expressions of attractional church have made significant inroads into mainline denominations through individual pastors and congregations, the Call to Action may well represent the first institutional embrace of the zenith expressions of this ecclesiological paradigm. Given the results it generates, this move is understandable.

Rooted in an evangelical impulse to reach the masses with the gospel of Jesus Christ, the attractional church aims to remove the barriers and excuses that keep people away from church. The “attractional imagination,” as it has been called by Alan Roxburgh and Scott Boren, holds the primary task of the church is “to get people to attend”¹⁰ the events and programs of the church. Thus everything about the life of the congregation is designed with the wants and needs of potential future members in mind. Leonard Sweet explains: “The attractional church thinks that if they build it, and build it hip and cool, people will come.”¹¹ It thinks that if the pastor has enough charisma, if the programs have enough pizzazz, and if the worship service has enough polish, more

⁸ Outreach Magazine, “Largest and Fastest-Growing Churches in America,” Outreach Magazine. <http://www.outreachmagazine.com/features/3769-Largest-and-Fastest-Growing-Churches-America.html> (accessed January 5, 2012).

⁹ The Texas Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church, “Growing Your Church Community,” The Texas Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church. <http://www.txcumc.org/news/detail/1826> (accessed January 14, 2011).

¹⁰ Alan J. Roxburgh, M. Scott Boren, and Mark Priddy, *Introducing the Missional Church : What It Is, Why It Matters, How to Become One*(Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2009), 18.

¹¹ Sweet, 18.

people will be drawn in. Alan Hirsch calls this approach “outreach and in-drag.”¹² It might be called the *Field of Dreams* (i.e., “If you build it, they will come.”) approach to church life.

The attractional church paradigm embraces the principles and practices of corporate leadership gurus and marketing strategists as it appeals to the consumer culture of the Western world. The local church operates primarily as “a vendor of religious goods and services,”¹³ with a goal to provide a better, more appealing, more attractive product than consumers (i.e., potential church members) can find elsewhere (i.e., the church down the street). This inherently creates an atmosphere of competition between congregations as they jockey for market share (i.e., attendance and participation). In an effort to appeal to potential church goers, programming is geared toward the felt and expressed needs of target demographics, and adoption of best practices from other attractional churches is commonplace. In describing the “ministry mix” of attractional, church-growth practitioners, Alan Hirsch eerily echoes statements from the Call to Action:

- Expand the building to allow for growth...
- Ensure excellent preaching in contemporary style dealing with subjects that relate to the life of the hearers.
- Develop an inspiring worship experience... by having an excellent band and positive worship leaders.
- Make certain you have excellent parking facilities, with car park attendants, to ensure minimum inconvenience...
- Ensure excellent programs in the critical area of children’s and youth ministry. Do so and people will put up with less elsewhere in the mix.
- Develop a good program of cell groups built around a Christian education model to ensure pastoral care and a sense of community.

¹² Hirsch, 34.

¹³ Ibid., 110. *see also* Reggie McNeal and Leadership Network (Dallas Tex.), *Missional Renaissance : Changing the Scorecard for the Church*, 1st ed.(San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2009), 23.

- Make sure that next week is better than last week, to keep the people coming.¹⁴

Clearly, all that the local church does should be done with excellence and to the best of its abilities. Few would disagree congregations should be attractive to the world beyond their doors. The true mark of an attractional church is who derives the most benefit from this excellence and attraction. In the attractional church paradigm decisions are ultimately made on the basis of the benefit the church derives from them in one or more of three areas: the visibility it provides the church in the local community, the new members it brings into the life of the church, or the amount of money it generates for the church budget. Like the business owner who wants to do everything he or she can to attract customers, but does so in a way that ultimately increases the bottom line, so all the programs, events, and facilities of the attractional church are calculated, often with scientific precision aided by demographic studies, cost-benefit analysis, and marketing research, to maximize their benefit to the church. Seasoned attractional church veterans can even quote, down to the penny, the budgetary value of each space in the church parking lot.¹⁵

Practitioners of the attractional church model should not be viewed as manipulative or self-serving. They believe their churches bring benefit to the lives of those who join and participate in their programs, the ultimate benefit being a salvific experience of abundant life in Jesus Christ. Potential church members make decisions on the basis of which church they deem most beneficial to their lives. Thus, what is

¹⁴ Hirsch, 45.

¹⁵ Personal experience of the author with a church consultant.

beneficial to the church is deemed beneficial to those outside. The attractional church aims to maximize the benefit for the church and thereby maximize the church's impact on the world.

Evaluating the Attractional Church

The ability of the attractional church model to grow a local church cannot be questioned. As stated above, the numbers speak for themselves. However, as “the mission of the Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world,”¹⁶ the attractional church paradigm cannot be judged solely on its ability to grow congregations. It must be judged primarily on its ability to grow disciples. In other words, the extent to which people being drawn to the programs and events of attractional churches are maturing in their Christian faith is the extent to which this approach can be deemed an effective ecclesiology.

Events in recent years ranging from mega-church bankruptcies,¹⁷ to mea culpas,¹⁸ to abrupt departures of high profile pastors¹⁹ have added to a mounting dis-ease among many with the attractional church model. Some critics point out, despite the apparent success the attractional approach seems to bring to many congregations, “that four decades of church growth principles and practice has not halted the decline of the church

¹⁶ United Methodist Church (U.S.), 87.

¹⁷ Amy Taxin, “Crystal Cathedral Bankruptcy: Megachurch Files for Chapter 11,” The Huffington Post, October 18, 2010, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/10/18/crystal-cathedral-bankrup_n_767219.html (accessed January 5, 2012).

¹⁸ Url Scaramanga (pseud.), “Willow Creek Repents?,” Out of Ur Blog, entry posted October 18, 2007, http://www.outofur.com/archives/2007/10/willow_creek_re.html (accessed January 5, 2012).

¹⁹ Eric Marrapodi, “‘Christian Famous’ Pastor Quits His Church, Moves to Asia,” CNN Belief Blog, entry posted December 22, 2010, <http://religion.blogs.cnn.com/2010/12/22/%E2%80%9Cchristian-famous%E2%80%9D-pastor-quits-his-church-moves-to-asia/?hpt=C2> (accessed January 5, 2012).

in Western contexts.”²⁰ While some individual congregations are growing, the overall Church is losing ground. Most telling in light of the question of discipleship are the countless surveys revealing little discernible difference in terms of lifestyle indicators between Christians and non-Christians in the West, where the highest expressions of attractional church have burgeoned over the past decades. One prominent megachurch pastor notes succinctly, “Something’s not right.”²¹

Bill Hybels, the seeker-sensitive, church growth pioneering pastor of Willow Creek shocked the attractional church world when the results of a multiyear qualitative analysis of Willow Creek’s effectiveness in helping people develop and grow spiritually led him to confess, “We were wrong.”²² For years Willow Creek looked to church involvement as a measure of spiritual maturity and discipleship. However, what the data revealed, according to executive pastor Greg Hawkins is, “Increasing levels of participation... does NOT predict whether someone's becoming more of a disciple of Christ. It does NOT predict whether they love God more or they love people more.”²³

Willow Creek’s revelation ought to give the entire Church pause with regards to an attractional ecclesiology. Few if any have mastered the science so well. Yet when Willow Creek took the time and effort to survey the fruit of their ministry, for which Bill Hybels and his staff are to be commended, the results were unmistakable: the attractional church is not very effective at making disciples. It can produce large churches when done

²⁰ Hirsch, 45.

²¹ Dave Gibbons, *The Monkey and the Fish : Liquid Leadership for a Third-Culture Church*, The Leadership Network Innovation Series(Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2009), 58.

²² Url Scaramanga (pseud.), “Willow Creek Repents?,” Out of Ur Blog, entry posted October 18, 2007, http://www.outofur.com/archives/2007/10/willow_creek_re.html (Accessed January 5, 2012).

²³ Ibid.

well. It can yield savvy consumers of religious goods and services with great efficiency. It can pool together amazing resources and provide unparalleled programs and opportunities to its members and the community. Yet it struggles to produce disciples of Jesus on a significant and reliable basis. If it does not work well for Willow Creek, it is well worth considering whether it will work well for anyone.

Experience in Methodism

The United Methodist Church is not without its own attractional church aficionados. For decades, Ginghamburg United Methodist Church was a prime example of this paradigm in practice in a United Methodist setting. Under the leadership of Mike Slaughter this once small, rural congregation grew into a multisite megachurch. Slaughter explains the reasons for this success:

I cut my ministry teeth influenced by the church growth movement. I went to all the seminars, breaking the 200 barrier, the 400 barrier, and so on. We mastered seeker-sensitive worship and practiced innovation in worship arts. We were one of the early pioneers in media ministry. We bought 130 acres to build what we facetiously called the “Disney World” campus.²⁴

Then something changed. Plans to build the new three thousand seat sanctuary were abandoned. But it was not because the economy collapsed and the funding ran dry. Again, Slaughter explains:

²⁴ Michael Slaughter, *Change the World : Recovering the Message and Mission of Jesus*(Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2010), xv.

As I enthusiastically challenged our people forward, I experienced a discomfort in my spirit and began to question my former measures of success. We had achieved getting behinds in the seats, but I realized that all we had really done was accumulate crowds of spectators who were not moving toward deeper faith and service.²⁵

Just like Willow Creek, this growing United Methodist congregation was not growing disciples.

Since Slaughter began questioning the attractional church paradigm employed at Ginghamburg, he has completely changed his approach to ministry:

Since that “conversion”... I have longed to spend the second half of my ministry being and doing the things that matter most to God... I wanted to become Christ’s advocate... Since 2005, Ginghamburg Church... has built more than 150 schools, trained more than 200 teachers, and created a sustainable agriculture program that is feeding close to 80,000 people and building water yards that will serve more than 200,000 people and their livestock in Darfur... There is a better Way, and it is Jesus’ way!²⁶

Ginghamburg is changing the world and calling others to join them in the great work of God. It is not without irony that just as the denomination was releasing the Call to Action proposals it was also touting the transformation at Ginghamburg.

An Attractive Alternative

Slaughter and Ginghamburg have left the attractional church model behind in favor of a new way of doing and being church that Reggie McNeal and others have called

²⁵ Ibid., xv-xvi.

²⁶ Ibid., xvi.

the “missional church.”²⁷ This ecclesiology calls into question the notion that the main function of church is to get people in the community to come to the programs and events of the church. Rather, it turns this concept on its head as it proclaims the primary function of the church is to send members out into the community, serving others *where they are* in the name of Jesus. This approach questions the distinctions of sacred and secular, arguing that God inhabits all space and time. There is no need to come to a designated place for a specified program to experience God. There is only need for the people of God to join him in mission in the world to help others recognize his presence in their midst.

“Missional church,” says McNeal,

is not about “doing church” better—at least, not the way we’ve “done church” in North America. It is not church growth in a new dress... It is not about church renewal, which generally means trying to find some new way to revitalize the troops to do church better with the hope of poofing up the numbers as the end result... The missional renaissance is altering both the character and the expression of the church in the world.²⁸

McNeal identifies three shifts which help move churches from attractional to missional expressions. The first shift is “from an internal to an external focus.”²⁹ Rather than thinking about what programs might bring more people from the community into the church, the missional church thinks about what God is doing in the community and beyond and how the church can join God there. It thinks about where the places of need

²⁷ McNeal and Leadership Network (Dallas Tex.), 1.

²⁸ Ibid., 16-17.

²⁹ Ibid., 41.

are and how the church can be God's redemptive presence in those places. This is what Alan Roxburgh calls a "missional imagination."³⁰ Alan Hirsch calls it the "incarnational impulse," which "essentially means taking the church to the people, rather than bringing the people to the church."³¹ Ultimately this shift finds the church living out the incarnational presence of Jesus (c.f. John 1:14) as it takes seriously his call to, "*Go... and make disciples*" (Matthew 28:18, italics mine). If the mantra of the attractional church is "If you build it, they will come," then the mantra of the missional church is, "If you go, they will see."

Along with the shift from an internal to external focus, the journey to missional church involves a shift "from program development to people development."³² The attractional church's focus on programs appeals to the consumer culture and promotes the "concept of church as a vendor of religious goods and services."³³ This is among the primary reasons the attractional church is ineffective at making disciples: it creates more church customers than disciples of Jesus, and as Hirsch notes, "Consumption is detrimental to discipleship."³⁴ At the heart of this consumerist approach, best intentions notwithstanding, is a deceptive, manipulative bait and switch technique. It is hard for congregations bent on convincing people the church has a lot to offer them to then communicate to those same people the self sacrificial, cruciform life of discipleship.

³⁰ Roxburgh, Boren, and Priddy, 20.

³¹ Hirsch, 135.

³² Roxburgh, Boren, and Priddy, 89.

³³ McNeal and Leadership Network (Dallas Tex.), 92.

³⁴ Hirsch, 45.

This shift toward people development recognizes each individual is precious to God and should be precious to the church. It further understands real, meaningful life change comes through relationships, not programs. Leonard Sweet calls this aspect of missional church “relational life.”³⁵ God exists in the unity of the relationship between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. At the core of God’s being is a relationship. Therefore relationships must be vital to those whom God has made in his image. Ultimately discipleship is a relational process.

The third shift identified by McNeal on the journey to missional church is the shift “from church-based to kingdom-based leadership.”³⁶ This shift represents a move from a concern for the institution that is the church to the reality the people of God are called to be. This shift calls the institutional church to care less about her own interests and her own preservation and more for the interests of God. It dares to believe God might be up to something bigger than the church. This mindset was voiced clearly in a recent church committee meeting when a church member asked, “What if we just did something for the community and didn’t care if we got anything out of it?”³⁷

Ultimately success in the missional church looks very different than success in the attractional church. In the latter, vitality is measured by worship attendance and participation in church programs, as well as the addition of newer and larger buildings to accommodate crowds and facilitate activities. The missional church demands a “new

³⁵ Sweet, 93.

³⁶ McNeal and Leadership Network (Dallas Tex.), 129.

³⁷ Gerda David, statement made at Russell Memorial United Methodist Church’s Church Council meeting, Wills Point, Texas, December 18, 2011, witnessed by the author.

scorecard,”³⁸ which measures the amount of money the congregation spends outside of its own four walls. It looks at lives impacted, families strengthened, and relationships forged across social barriers. It counts time spent serving people outside the church, the number of those being served, and the number of those serving, and it values relationships nurtured between the two. It takes into account stands taken against evil and injustice, as well as efforts to be good stewards of God’s creation. It enjoys creativity with gathering spaces, shared spaces, and public spaces, that funds might be diverted to mission rather than mortar. These are the metrics of missionality, and serve as far greater indicators of discipleship than participation in any church program. Any church scoring high in these metrics is truly vital, and it is effectively making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

The Call to Action in Light of Experience

In the final analysis, it should be conceded the Call to Action does hold some promise to counteract the statistical decline of the United Methodist Church, just as it is designed to do. However, there is reason to believe even this “success” will be short-lived. Already, research indicates at best “in America, the current ‘market appeal’ of the church growth model *might* be up to 35 percent,” and “it is decreasing.”³⁹ Thus, statistics indicate the attractional church actually alienates nearly twice as many people as it attracts, and its appeal is on the decline.

³⁸ McNeal and Leadership Network (Dallas Tex.), 16.

³⁹ Hirsch, 36.

The reason this appeal is decreasing, argues Hirsch, is because the attractional church was the dominant ecclesiological mode throughout the era of Christendom, in which the Church functioned as a central and centralizing institution of the culture.⁴⁰ The attractional approach depends somewhat on societies that reinforce church attendance. With this given, the only thing left for a congregation is to convince people theirs is the best among many options. This is not the current reality in which the Church finds itself. Culture no longer reinforces church attendance, as people generally do not keep tabs on their neighbors' whereabouts on Sunday mornings. Discussions about the value of this reality as an escape from the Constantinian compromise and Kierkegaardian attacks upon Christendom aside, the simple fact is the world has changed, and the effectiveness of the attractional church paradigm, on which the Call to Action relies, is consequently on the wane.

This is not to say the day of the megachurch is at an end. Culture is currently in a liminal stage, somewhere between paradigms. Thus, the attractional approach will continue to bear fruit for now. As time goes by, however, fewer and fewer people will recall a time when church attendance was a given in society. As a result, the appeal of the attractional paradigm is waning most significantly among emerging generations. This casts significant doubt on the Call to Action's strategic ability to help the United Methodist Church reach younger people.

Further, it is worth noting that the greatest continuing impact of the attractional approach is found among middle-class, suburban populations.⁴¹ This calls into question

⁴⁰ Ibid., 63-65.

⁴¹ Ibid., 34-35.

the Call to Action's ability to help the United Methodist Church reach a more diverse segment of the population. Ultimately, then, experience indicates that, while the Call to Action may lead to numerical growth in the United Methodist Church for a season, the preponderance of evidence suggests it will struggle to help the denomination reach either a younger, or a more diverse constituency, as it has been called on, and as it proposes to do.

Most significantly in light of this analysis of the experience of the attractional church paradigm, as long as the Call to Action is built on the foundation of this model, its promise to lead the United Methodist Church into "greater effectiveness in making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world"⁴² rings hollow. This is not to say disciples are not made in attractional churches. Clearly they are and have been throughout the age of the attractional church paradigm. Some attractional churches manage to do this better than others. The Holy Spirit often works in spite of the obstacles raised by the Church. However, the path to "greater effectiveness" is found when the Church facilitates the work of the Holy Spirit rather than working against it.. Experience therefore indicates the Call to Action, such as it is, is not the way forward for the United Methodist Church.

⁴² Call to Action Steering Team, "Call to Action Steering Team Report," http://www.umc.org/atf/cf/%7Bdb6a45e4-c446-4248-82c8-e131b6424741%7D/CTA_STEERING%20TEAM_%20RPT_1-44.PDF (accessed February 9, 2012), 6.

CHAPTER SIX

REASON AND THE CALL TO ACTION

United Methodists “believe that any disciplined theological work calls for the careful use of reason.”¹ This is the source to which this chapter turns in its review of the Call to Action. Because that which might be perfectly reasonable in a given place and time might not be so in another, reason is the element of the Quadrilateral most bound by time and culture. Jan-Olav Henriksen remarks,

Theology is—whether we like it or not—always required to explicate the content of the gospel by means of the cultural resources available in the society in which it exists. Also, and what is more important in this setting: postmodern theory and thinking give us a grasp of the society and the culture in which we live, and that is important for theology to learn from and try to appropriate.²

If the Call to Action is to provide a way forward for the United Methodist Church today, a way which counters the current aging trend of the denomination by reaching younger generations, it must make sense from their perspective. It must be reasonable to the mind of the postmodern world. This chapter argues the Call to Action’s heavy investment in the foundational paradigms of modernity prevents it from engaging the postmodern critique of reason, seriously compromising its effectiveness for renewal and revitalization of the United Methodist Church in the postmodern world.

¹ United Methodist Church (U.S.), 82.

²Jan-Olav Henriksen, "Creation and Construction: On the Theological Appropriation of Postmodern Theory," *Modern Theology* 18, no. 2 (2002): 153.

The Reality of Postmodernism

The term “postmodernism” is a lightning rod for criticism. Many are tempted to dismiss it as irrelevant because it possess a multiplicity of meanings from one context to another.³ Others prefer to speak of hyper- or ultramodernity, arguing “that postmodernity is not a departure from modernity but a development within it.”⁴ While postmodernism carries varied implications in fields as diverse as architecture, art, linguistics, and philosophy, there remains an overriding sense in which it refers to a “way of looking at things, a ... general perspective on life”⁵ at work in the world today, especially among emerging generations. And whether postmodernity is actually a departure from modernity or more accurately understood as a development within it, it nonetheless represents a new and different way of looking at the world. As Heath White notes, “Postmodernism, in one sense, is not good or bad; it is just the way it is. The culture has changed.”⁶

Postmodernism understood as that which depicts “certain cultural and intellectual trends in the development of a given society,”⁷ is a reality which cannot be ignored. The cost of doing so has created what some have described as an “image problem”⁸ for

³ Merold Westphal, "Blind Spots Christianity and Postmodern Philosophy," *Christian Century* 120, no. 12 (2003): 32.

⁴ Leonard I. Sweet and Andy Crouch, *The Church in Emerging Culture : Five Perspectives / Leonard Sweet, General Editor ; Andy Crouch ... [Et Al.]*(El Cajon, CA: Youth Specialties, 2003), 71.

⁵ Heath White. “Postmodernism 101 with Heath White: Hombrewed Christianity ep. 24.” Hombrewed Christianity Website, mp3 file, 11:06. <http://homebrewedchristianity.com/2008/09/19/postmodernism-101-with-heath-white-homebrewed-christianity-ep-24/> [accessed February 9, 2012].

⁶ *Ibid.*, 26:19.

⁷ Henriksen: 154.

⁸ David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *Unchristian : What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity-- and Why It Matters*(Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2007), 11.

Christianity among emerging generations. In chronicling his experience among disenchanted young adults, Dan Kimball notes their attitudes toward the Church and the Christian faith “shouldn’t surprise us, since we’re living in a post-Christian culture. To them, Christianity isn’t normal.”⁹ This post-Christian reality is one aspect of the larger cultural and philosophical outlook of postmodernism.

Perhaps the best way to approach an understanding of postmodernism is to contrast it with modernity, for it is “a phenomenon dependent upon the ideals of Enlightenment modernity”¹⁰ from which it springs and which it critiques. In assessing modernity Merold Westphal states,

One of the most important assumptions of philosophical modernity, sometimes called ‘the Enlightenment project,’ is the autonomy of the human knower: I am a law unto myself in the sense that I am equipped to apprehend universally valid truth once I have freed myself from the authority of any dominant texts or traditions ... Absent ambiguity and incomplete vision, I can grasp reality just as it is.¹¹

For modernity reason is “the final arbiter of all truth forced into propositional form.”¹²

One consequence of this idealization of reason is a certain utopian view within modernity regarding the progression of history. “In the modern era you have a great deal of confidence in humanity ... in human goodness, human reason. History is seen as

⁹ Dan Kimball, *They Like Jesus but Not the Church : Insights from Emerging Generations*(Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2007), 29.

¹⁰ Henriksen: 156.

¹¹ Westphal: 33.

¹²Slavoj Zizek, John Milbank, and Creston Davis, *The Monstrosity of Christ : Paradox or Dialectic?*, Short Circuits(Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2009), 8.

progress.”¹³ John Caputo explains, “One way to think about modernism is to think about it as utopianism. That is, it has a grand schema for things, a great overarching rationale, whether it’s materialist or idealist, Hegel or Marx, right wing or left wing, it’s a grand schema.”¹⁴

Cartesian Captivity

This utopian view of the power and authority of human reason finds its roots in the 17th Century mind of René Descartes. The French philosopher subscribed to a view of knowledge known as foundationalism, which is the theory that human knowing is undergirded by unassailable facts, a foundation which is “indubitable and requires no external justification.”¹⁵ For centuries most in Europe had assumed this foundation could be found in God (more specifically, the God of the Judeo-Christian tradition), and was granted to humanity by means of God’s revealing it through the medium of God’s own choosing.¹⁶ But Descartes faced a dilemma: He lived in a world disillusioned by the aftermath of the Reformation and the resultant Thirty Years War. Consequently, many were questioning the foundations of what is now called the pre-modern world.

In the midst of this crisis Descartes was consumed with the quest to provide a solid, unassailable foundation for knowledge free of direct reference to God or religion

¹³ White, 17:55.

¹⁴ John D. Caputo and Richard Kearney. “Session 2 – 2007 Theological, Philosophical Conversation.” Emergent Village Podcast Website, mp3 file, 31:10, <http://www.emergentvillage.com/podcast/session-2-2007-theological-philosophical-conversation> [accessed December 14, 2009].

¹⁵ Tony Jones, *The New Christians : Dispatches from the Emergent Frontier*, 1st ed. (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2008), 19.

¹⁶ D. A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church : Understanding a Movement and Its Implications* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2005), 88.

which might avoid the pitfalls of the pre-modern view. To this end he scrutinized all his beliefs and assumptions.¹⁷ Through this critique of belief Descartes ultimately determined the only thing he could not doubt was the fact that he doubted. That is, all he could say with certainty was that he was employing his reason in search of a foundation for truth: Thus his famous dictum, “*Cogito, ergo sum*” (I think; therefore I am). “In this manner, Descartes claimed to have established the foundations of knowledge by appeal to the mind’s own certainty.”¹⁸ Descartes’ foundationalism became the fundamental epistemic commitment for what has come to be known as the modern era.¹⁹

Foundationalism views knowledge as comprised of three aspects: “the basic or immediate beliefs (or first principles), which form the bedrock undergirding everything else we are justified in believing; the mediate or non-basic beliefs we derive from these; and the basing relation, that is, the connection between our basic beliefs (or first principles) and our nonbasic beliefs.”²⁰ The task of philosophy in this light is to discern which beliefs are first principles, and to evaluate the validity of mediate beliefs on the basis of the strength of the ties made between them and the basic foundations of knowledge. In describing the difference between first and mediate principles in foundationalist systems, Leslie Newbigin points to the common sense difference between

¹⁷ Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge : Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 269.

¹⁸ Stanley J. Grenz, “Beyond Foundationalism: Is a Nonfoundationalist Evangelical Theology Possible?” (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Christian Theological Research Fellowship, Orlando, FL, 1998. Available online at http://www2.luthersem.edu/ctrf/Papers/1998_grenz.pdf. accessed February 9, 2012). 6.

¹⁹ Carson, 93.

²⁰ Grenz. 5.

between facts and values, between what we know and what we believe.²¹ This is often expressed as the difference between objective and subjective truth.

In the estimation of most foundationalists, religion is a non-basic belief.²² Desiring to move faith from the realm of subjective belief to the realm of objective fact (i.e., to “prove” the Christian faith as objectively true) many in the Church throughout the modern era have sought a foundation on which to construct theology. Some have located this foundation in the authority of Scripture, Christian tradition, or the hierarchy of the church. Others have appealed to universal religious experience, not necessarily seen as uniquely Christian, as the best foundation.²³ Adherents to these two approaches, under banners such as “conservative” or “orthodox” and “liberal” or “progressive” have polarized the Christian community throughout the modern era.²⁴

Emerging from Foundationalism

Ironically, even if one approach were to win the debate it would still fail to address the mind of the postmodern world, for the postmodern turn entails a “rejection of the foundationalism that characterized Enlightenment epistemology.”²⁵ If Descartes’ method of questioning every assumption in search of foundational knowledge gave birth to modernity, then postmodernity has been birthed by the next, logical step. Namely,

²¹ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*(Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 1989), 16-21.

²² *Ibid.*, 5.

²³ Grenz. 9.

²⁴ Peter Rollins, *How (Not) to Speak of God*(Brewster, Mass.: Paraclete Press, 2006), 1-2.

²⁵ Grenz. 3.

postmodernism questions the one assumption not questioned by Descartes: the notion he could gain access to ultimate truth. Postmodernism rejects foundationalism because it does not believe objective truth is attainable.²⁶

Postmodernity counters the status accorded human reason in the modernist outlook, along with its implications, with “the finitude of the human knower,”²⁷ arguing that human beings “will always occupy a finite location and cannot gain absolute knowledge.”²⁸ All human knowledge, postmodernism says, is “contextually based,”²⁹ and any attempt at articulating knowledge is likewise “contingent, and could have been made otherwise.”³⁰ As there are practically no limits to the contexts in which, by which, and through which one might obtain any given information, and there are just as many contingencies one might face in receiving and relaying that information, there is considerable question whether one can ever lay claim to possessing knowledge in any absolute, universal, unambiguous sense. In short, postmodernism proclaims “objective knowledge of reality is not possible.”³¹

If reason is limited and one cannot objectively grasp all of reality, then it follows there cannot be an overarching, comprehensive system in which to place everything and by which to judge all. Therefore the grand schemas, or metanarratives, offered by modernity are viewed by postmodernists as misguided at best and manipulative at worst.

²⁶ Carson, 97.

²⁷ Westphal: 35.

²⁸ Ibid.: 34.

²⁹ Henriksen: 155.

³⁰ Ibid.: 155-156.

³¹ Westphal: 34.

For some this observation is the essence of postmodernity, thus “Lyotard’s oft-cited definition of the postmodern condition as one of ‘incredulity toward metanarratives.’”³² With no overarching story, or at least none accessible to finite human reason, plurality becomes “the key issue in postmodernism.”³³ For Caputo, the postmodern condition is understood as “the condition of irreducible plurality ... Where we once might have spoken of ‘wisdom’ and the ‘good life,’ today we leave as much space as possible for multiple wisdoms and goods, all in the plural.”³⁴

The Problem of Pluralism

For many the plurality of postmodern thought, especially with regard to the nature of truth, yields it incompatible with the Christian faith. In his assessment of postmodernism, D. A. Carson points to four major weaknesses, all “bound up with truth claims.”³⁵ He first lists the perspectival nature of postmodern thought. In Carson’s estimation, because postmodernism rejects the idea ultimate objective truth can be known it creates a hopeless situation in which every perspective on truth must be given equal footing. This leaves no objective means of adjudicating which truth is “really” true. Thus far his assessment explains why pluralism is so prevalent in the postmodern world.

Carson queries,

³² Ibid.: 35.

³³ Henriksen: 155.

³⁴ John D. Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct? : The Good News of Postmodernism for the Church*, The Church and Postmodern Culture(Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2007), 42.

³⁵ Carson, 104-115.

May there not be legitimate ways of talking about *finite* beings actually knowing something objective? In other words, as measured by the standard of omniscience, certainly all human knowing is perspectival. Yet does it follow that the intrinsic limitations of being finite rule out any possibility of knowing something truly? Can one move from admitted perspectivalism to true knowledge of what is objective?³⁶

If Carson aims to refute the postmodern critique here he seems to equivocate, for he admits “certainly all human knowing is perspectival.” In this he embraces a basic element of the postmodern critique. Regardless if one is measured relative to the omniscience of God, as Carson suggests, or to some other standard, relative is relative.

This aside, the proposal he extends is not precluded by postfoundationalism. Perhaps there are extreme cases in which one might argue for an unlimited view of perspectivalism (i.e., “anything goes”), but this is not logically defensible. Clearly, even in a postmodern world some answers are deemed better than others, and some perspectives render a more accurate picture of reality. The move away from foundationalism is not a move away from all foundations. It allows for criteria by which statements may be considered more or less truthful. Carson admits as much when goes on to differentiate between “*hard or strong*” and “*soft or weak*” postmodernism.³⁷ The point of postfoundationalism is that one cannot know truth with absolute certainty. The perspectival objection does not refute this. It only laments it.

Carson’s next objection, again found “especially among strong postmoderns,”³⁸ is the issue of constructivism. Here he points to the concept of some postmodern thinkers

³⁶ Ibid., 105.

³⁷ Ibid., 105-106.

³⁸ Ibid., 106.

which holds that, because we cannot obtain knowledge to a degree of absolute certainty, and therefore all truth claims are less than absolute, then we are left to construct our understanding of truth on the basis of what we do have access to. Having just objected to postmodernism's inability to adjudicate between truth claims he now objects to the means by which some elements of postmodernism adjudicate between truth claims.

Carson's third objection, once again targeting "the strongest postmoderns"³⁹ is his belief that a postfoundational understanding of truth leads to a poor handling of moral issues. In effect, he argues that ethics are not possible for those holding a postmodern outlook. To illustrate, he says, "Thus the literature abounds with people who argue that even something as ghastly as the Holocaust can be thought of as evil only from a certain perspective."⁴⁰ Yet he provides no example of this literature, no basis for this hyperbolic claim. Moreover, he seems to support a postfoundationalist stance once more when he says, "even in the moral realm it is possible to know some things truly, even if nothing omnisciently—or better put, perhaps, it is possible to know some true things even if we do not and cannot know everything about them or grasp them in all their detail and proportion."⁴¹

Carson's final objection of postfoundational epistemology, yet again reserved for "strong postmoderns," is that it contradicts itself. He deems the system absurd "because the more it insists that all theoretical stances are social constructions and that no theoretical construction bears any necessary relation to objective truth, the more it

³⁹ Ibid., 112.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid., 114.

undermines the truthfulness of its own construction.”⁴² Carson then charges postmodern thinkers with arrogance in their refusal to modify their position in spite of this absurdity.

In the end it is noteworthy that each of Carson’s objections to postfoundational epistemology is aimed at “strong” postmodernism. His concern is primarily for where postmodern thought *may* lead the Church. However, this slippery slope argument would have the Church deny the reality of the world today in spite of itself. While it may be conceded that postmodernism’s postfoundational move represents a double edged sword, full of great promise and potential dangers, a step which must be taken with care, it must likewise be conceded that failure to step into this brave new world will render the Church powerless to be the incarnational presence of Jesus in it.

Embracing Postmodernity

It is helpful to note postmodernism is not monolithic, as one might expect given its commitment to plurality. Henriksen identifies two nodes of postmodern thought: one he describes as “playful,” while the other “affirms that we are exposed to our own creative powers and nothing else when it comes to how we construct our world.”⁴³ Pointing to thinkers like Foucault, Rorty, and Nietzsche as examples of the latter he concludes this branch of postmodern thought has little to offer the Church. For examples of playful postmodern thought, he names Ricouer, Levinas, Derrida, and Lyotard. While their thought exhibits an awareness of the liberating element bound up in the rejection of

⁴² Ibid., 114-115.

⁴³ Henriksen: 161.

foundationalism, “they also call into consideration issues related to justice.”⁴⁴ Richard Kearney refers to this stream as “good postmodernism.”⁴⁵ Caputo, mirroring Derrida himself, goes so far as to deem it prophetic.⁴⁶ Unlike the nihilistic flow of postmodernism this counter stream contains “a moral concern that is related to an understanding of the individual as part of, and related to society.”⁴⁷ It affirms we are not free to do as we please, but are bound by obligation to one another. From this postmodern perspective “otherness plays a constitutive and important role in ... what it means to be human.”⁴⁸

Consideration of the roots of the postmodern critique sheds insight into this ethical, prophetic stream. Kearney observes,

I think someone like Lyotard, when he defines the postmodern condition ... it’s trying to think what it means to be human, to be in the world after Auschwitz, the Gulags, and Hiroshima, because he saw that as the end of three great modern Enlightenment dreams which had wonderfully promising things about them, but it meant we had to go back to the grindstone, and with a new modesty and a new realism.⁴⁹

Caputo adds,

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Caputo and Kearney, 29:19.

⁴⁶ John D. Caputo, *The Weakness of God : A Theology of the Event*, Indiana Series in the Philosophy of Religion (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 30-32.

⁴⁷ Henriksen: 161.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Caputo and Kearney, 30:02.

What happened after 1968 in France, and what gave birth to contemporary postmodern philosophy was ... the crash of the schemas on the right, and then finally the crash of the schemas on the left. And so the first version of postmodern thinking that you saw in France in the late sixties and early seventies was very anti-utopian, and rightly so because the great ideologies were great utopias and they turned out to be greatly dangerous ... The mistake was to think that in being anti-utopian it was nihilistic.⁵⁰

Caputo points to a turn over roughly the last twenty years in postmodern thinking: “A vision has emerged ... It’s profoundly affirmative ... It isn’t anti-utopian; it’s better to call it post-utopian ... It has started to talk about ethics, and politics, and—glory be!—religion.”⁵¹ He locates the beginning of this turn with Derrida’s introduction and subsequent development of the notion of the “undeconstructible” in a 1989 essay titled “The Force of Law.” “This essay is the best place to start with the more overtly religion-friendly accenting of deconstruction in Derrida’s writings.”⁵²

The Gift of Deconstruction

Having embraced this stream of postmodern thought, the turn can be made to postmodern methodology. Derrida’s deconstruction is one process whereby the postmodern critique occurs. Deconstruction is the process by which the inadequacies of modernity’s conceptions of the truth are revealed. Caputo explains, “A deconstruction is good news, because it delivers the shock of the other to the forces of the same, the shock of the good (the “ought”) to the forces of being (“what is”), which is also why I think it

⁵⁰ Caputo and Kearney, 31:32.

⁵¹ Caputo and Kearney, 33:17.

⁵² Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct? : The Good News of Postmodernism for the Church*, 63.

bears good news to the Church.”⁵³ Here the same is “the familiar, the customary, the business-as-usual.”⁵⁴ The other is that which disturbs the same, the shock to the system that forces a reevaluation of perceived truths. That which confronts the way things are with the way they should be.

This process of deconstruction is “always risky,”⁵⁵ because by definition the other lies beyond the realm of control. “To recognize otherness is to recognize the Other, and not to try to make him or her into the same, the already known, the controllable that we can make use of and manipulate.”⁵⁶ In other words, for deconstruction to occur, the same must lose control as a result of the incoming of the other.

Caputo looks to Charles Sheldon’s 1896 book *In His Steps* for an illustrative example of deconstruction. In the book, based on a sermon series Sheldon delivered to his Topeka, Kansas congregation, a disheveled homeless man (later revealed to be Jesus) shows up one Sunday at First Church Raymond. In the wake of this visitation everything changes. “Things get deconstructed by the *event of the truth* that they harbor, an event that sets off unforeseeable and disruptive consequences.”⁵⁷ It must be reiterated again that deconstruction can be a messy business, dangerous, uncontrollable, but one demanded by the postmodern world.

⁵³ Ibid., 26-27.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 26.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 64.

⁵⁶ Henriksen: 164.

⁵⁷ Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct? : The Good News of Postmodernism for the Church*, 27.

Understood this way, postmodernism is ultimately an orientation to truth, rather than a rejection of it. Its postfoundational approach is from the apophatic, seeking to reveal that which is not truthful. Its methodology is deconstructive, always challenging the way things are with the way things should be. Its trajectory is asymptotic, ever approaching though never reaching objective truth. As a phenomenology, postmodernism traffics only in what can be directly experienced, reserving final judgment on the metaphysical. Thus Westphal observes, “Though the postmodern philosophers are mainly atheists, or as Derrida puts it, ‘rightly pass’ for atheists, their arguments actually show not that God does not exist, but that we are not God.”⁵⁸

The gift of postmodernism to the Church is the gift of deconstruction, the gift of always reforming. But this is a dangerous gift, one that cannot be controlled. Her prayer is, “From the cowardice that dares not face new truth, from the laziness that is contented with half-truth, from the arrogance that thinks it knows all truth, Good Lord, deliver me. Amen.”⁵⁹

Emerging Postmodern Faith

A movement to which one might look for examples of what it means to engage the task of formulating a postfoundational, deconstructed Christian understanding is what has been called the emerging church. Far from a monolithic movement,⁶⁰ in its most general sense the emerging church has been called “the global reshaping of how to ‘do

⁵⁸ Westphal: 33.

⁵⁹ *The United Methodist Hymnal : Book of United Methodist Worship*, (Nashville, Tenn.: United Methodist Pub. House, 1989), 597.

⁶⁰ Joshua M. Moritz, "Beyond Strategy, Towards the Kingdom of God: The Post-Critical Reconstructionist Mission of the Emerging Church," *Dialog* 47, no. 1 (2008). 30.

church' in postmodern culture."⁶¹ Emerging Christians share a common conviction that "something isn't working in the way we're doing Christianity anymore."⁶² They are united by their shared concern to constructively engage postmodernity in an attempt to address this feeling of angst. The very name of the movement might be seen as denoting an emergence "from modernity to postmodernity,"⁶³ which necessarily entails grappling with the issue of foundationalism.⁶⁴ What follows will illustrate a few characteristics of the emerging church that demonstrate its postmodern orientation.

One characteristic bearing on the emerging critique of modernity is the distrust of approaches to truth which express it in terms of objective universal principles or propositions to which one must subscribe. To this end many emerging Christians are suspicious of systematic theologies and the sense of completeness or finality they seek to encapsulate and convey, placing value instead in ongoing theological dialogue and discussion.⁶⁵ Rather than issuing statements or prescribing answers, they prefer raising questions to inspire conversation.⁶⁶ Emerging Christians approach the Bible as the "community library" of the church as opposed to its "constitution."⁶⁷ They value the role

61 Scot McKnight, "Five Streams of the Emerging Church : Key Elements of the Most Controversial and Misunderstood Movement in the Church Today," *Christianity Today* Feb 2007 (2007). 36.

62 Brian D. McLaren, *A New Kind of Christianity : Ten Questions That Are Transforming the Faith*, 1st ed.(New York: HarperOne). 9.

63 Scot McKnight, "The Ironic Faith of Emergents : McLaren Shows Us Not Only Where 'Post-Evangelicals' Are Going, but Also How They Get There," *Christianity Today* Sep 2008 (2008). 62.

64 Carson. 27.

65 McKnight. 38.

66 McLaren. 18.

67 *Ibid.* 78.

of experience in understanding, as seen in approaches that utilize “wordless preaching in a world which bases truth on experience,”⁶⁸ shifting from logical presentation of truth to the crafting of experiences which facilitate encounters with truth.

The move away from the epistemological certainty of foundationalism likewise leads many emerging Christians to exuberantly embrace the apophatic tradition, which celebrates mystery and the unknowable character of God.⁶⁹ This approach is based on a humility rooted in an acknowledgement both of the finitude of human reason, and the infinite nature of God. Consider these words from Tony Jones: “Few human beings would be so arrogant as to presume to have the ability to definitively sum up God. God’s too big. We can’t get our arms around God, so to speak. Indeed, to claim that we can fully sum up God is idolatry, if not outright blasphemy.”⁷⁰ By the same logic some extend the charge of idolatry to the goal of foundationalism itself, namely the objectification of truth. In this sense, modernity’s quest for objective truth can be seen as idolatrous.⁷¹

These two aspects point to another outgrowth of emerging Christianity’s postfoundational orientation: emphasis on community.⁷² An awareness of one’s own limitations with respect to theological understanding leads emerging Christians to desire community with others on the same journey. And those who approach truth and knowing

⁶⁸ Dan Kimball, *The Emerging Church : Vintage Christianity for New Generations*(Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2003). 186.

⁶⁹ Rollins. 26.

⁷⁰ Jones, *The New Christians : Dispatches from the Emergent Frontier*. 152.

⁷¹ Rollins. 11-12.

⁷² Moritz. 30.

through dialogue and discussion rather than propositions will naturally desire and value more partners in conversation.⁷³ As one implication, emerging churches extend belonging prior to belief, as opposed to more traditional approaches which have made belonging to the community contingent on embracing the community's shared beliefs.⁷⁴ Holding belief secondary to belonging fosters conversation by creating safe space for questions and uncertainty.

As a final illustration of the impact postfoundationalism has on the emerging church movement, one can consider its concern for orthopraxy.⁷⁵ No simple dismissal of orthodoxy, because they view belief and truth through postfoundational lenses many emerging Christians subscribe to more holistic view of orthodoxy as believing the right way rather than simply believing the right things.⁷⁶ Thus even at the point of belief the emphasis is on praxis. This has produced within the movement a strong missional approach to ways of doing and being the church, and leads many emerging Christians to draw heavily on the theological insights from the field of missiology.⁷⁷ Emerging Christians embrace Leslie Newbigin's assertion that "missions are the test of our faith that the gospel is true."⁷⁸

⁷³ Jones, *The New Christians : Dispatches from the Emergent Frontier*. 234-235.

⁷⁴ Joseph R. Myers, *The Search to Belong : Rethinking Intimacy, Community, and Small Groups*(Grand Rapids, Mich.: Youth Specialties, 2003). 19-20.

⁷⁵ McKnight. 37.

⁷⁶ Rollins. 2-3.

⁷⁷ Brian D. McLaren, "Conversations: Brian McLaren," *Missiology* 33, no. 3 (2005). 341.

⁷⁸ Newbigin. 127.

The Call to Action in Light of Reason

In assessing the Call to Action in light of postmodern thought, several key issues arise. Primary among them is the fact the Call to Action seems to be offering *a* solution to the problems of United Methodism. In a world of irreducible pluralism, the notion that there is any one solution to so great an issue can expect to be greeted with great skepticism. Certainly, the measures of the Call to Action will be implemented slightly differently from one setting to another, and room is allowed for this. Yet ultimately it presents one ecclesiastical model, with such features as a charismatic pastor who is also a great administrator, varied worship formats, and an expanding menu of programs for all ages as the definition of church vitality in all contexts. The plethora of new faith communities arising in the postmodern world – from new monasticism, to cooperative communities, to house churches, to simple churches, to coffee shop and pub churches (the list goes on) – do not fit the mold created by this model.

The Call to Action has avoided the unpredictable and uncontrollable work of deconstructing standard church practice within the United Methodist Church, opting instead to compile a list of best practices from those congregations deemed vital to commend to the rest of the denomination. Along with this standard definition of vitality, the Call to Action posits a notion of accountability which is problematic from a postmodern point of view. It evidences no appreciation for the perspective of those closest at hand to each ministry setting. There is no relational element by which congregations or pastors are asked to speak to what effective ministry in their context might look like. Rather, individuals are told by an external authority what measures of

success they will be held accountable to. Such accountability bereft of relationship or appreciation of perspective is utterly antagonistic to postmodern sensibilities.

The Call to Action's restructuring of the denomination is also called into question by the postmodern critique. Downsizing and streamlining the denominational bureaucracy is to be applauded. Yet suggesting this be done in a way that concentrates existing power, influence, and funds in the hands of fewer people on smaller boards has already drawn the ire of many who fear disenfranchisement, especially of minority voices.⁷⁹ The postmodern world, with its skepticism toward grand schemas, is likely to view such a concentration of power with distrust. Divesting the denominational hierarchy and infrastructure of some of its authority and funding along with its downsizing might be more prudent from a postmodern perspective.

Institutions like the United Methodist Church have a difficult road ahead of them in the postmodern world. Postmodernity's incredulity of meta-narratives engenders a distrust of institutions. Emerging generations are desperate for signs of personalization, or at least some openness to deinstitutionalized expressions on the part of the Church. For these reasons more organic, relational, indigenous expressions of Christian community appeal highly to postmodern sensibilities. Rather than looking to these approaches, the Call to Action offers the United Methodist Church a standardized model of church vitality with a depersonalized means of accountability to a hierarchy with a more centralized concentration of power. As a result, this plan is sure to leave much of the postmodern world scratching its head in confusion. Ultimately the Call to Action fails the

⁷⁹ See, for example, <http://www.umportal.com/main/article.asp?id=8386>, and <http://www.umportal.com/main/article.asp?id=8198>, (both accessed February 9, 2012).

test of reason in the postmodern world, and cannot be the way forward for United Methodism.

CHAPTER SEVEN

PROPOSALS FOR THE PATH AHEAD

This work has sought to bring the acknowledged tools of discernment of the United Methodist Church to bear on the Call to Action. The flaws in this plan for the future of the denomination have been demonstrated through the lenses of Scripture, tradition, experience, and reason. The Call to Action's promise to help United Methodism reach more people, reach younger people, and reach more diverse people is suspect. Its potential to do so in ways that lead to greater effectiveness in world changing disciple making is even more so. But it is not sufficient simply to demonstrate deficiencies in the proposed path forward for the denomination. The United Methodist Church is, as has been shown, a church in crisis. What is needed is a way, or more precisely many ways, toward a brighter future for the denomination.

What follows are ten proposals for how United Methodism, the once and future Church, might proceed. This list does not pretend to be comprehensive, nor does it represent a turnkey, step-by-step solution to the crisis United Methodism finds itself in. The days of such approaches are long gone. Rather, these are signposts pointing the denomination to where the Holy Spirit might be leading. These are the conversations United Methodists must prayerfully engage in, in light of the realities of the day. These are the considerations the United Methodist Church must bring together as it seeks to discern what it means to be truly vital, to bring more people, young people, and diverse people into the world changing reality of the life of discipleship.

Intentional Discipling Communities

This critique's primary concern with the Call to Action is related to the issue of discipleship. Nothing in the plan demonstrates intentionality in this arena. It is assumed that the vital congregations to which it points will effectively produce disciples, though no justification is provided for this assumption. It points to metrics which may be associated with a life of discipleship but are not necessarily so. Research contributing to the Call to Action revealed both confusion about the nature and meaning of the Church's mission to make disciples and a lack of trust, a key element in the relational process of disciple making, throughout the denomination. Yet nothing in the proposals addresses these critical issues.

The witness of Scripture, the voice of Wesleyan Methodist tradition, the current experience of the Church, and the counsel of postmodern reason echo in chorus on this matter: Discipleship does not happen by accident. It can never be assumed or taken for granted. It is the result of intentional effort. This is not to say that the United Methodist Church needs a turnkey program for discipleship. The intentionality called for here is one of priority and focus. Those along the path must be provided the tools and the knowledge necessary to grow in the faith and life of Jesus. Those further along the path must encourage and equip those who come behind to follow where Christ has led. The United Methodist Church must facilitate this process in whatever way it can. There was a day and time when Methodism was synonymous with intentional disciple making. The time has come to reclaim that identity.

Look Forward

Second only to its lack of focus on intentional disciple making, perhaps the most striking shortfall of the Call to Action is how little it calls the United Methodist Church to look forward. By its very nature, being built on analysis of existing data and pointing to practices which have and perhaps still are working in some contexts today, it calls the denomination to do more of what has seemed to work in the past. It is an orientation to the past which offers absolutely nothing new, only a perfected form of what has already been. It amounts to little more than a call for congregations to keep doing what they are doing, only better, with a few examples of what that might look like. At most such an approach can only hope to provide limited benefit for a short time to come.

The Call to Action does not concern itself with the future, with how culture is changing, with what might be expected to work in the emerging realities United Methodists will be facing for some time to come. It offers little hope of reaching emerging generations because it does nothing to anticipate how they might be reached. The denomination can ill afford to be so short sighted in this moment of crisis. The voice of reason begs the United Methodist Church to better account for the increasingly postmodern, post-Christian world in which it finds itself.

Count What Matters

Much of the debate over the Call to Action has centered on the issue of numbers. The denomination has polarized over the meaning of metrics and the means of accountability. Numbers do matter as an indicator of what is happening in the life of a congregation. And numbers matter in that behind each one is a person created in the

image of God for whom Christ died to redeem. But numbers must also matter enough to be worth the time and effort to discern what lies behind them.

The metrics to which the United Methodist Church must look are those which give a true indication people are on the path of discipleship: lives changed, growth in holiness, people engaged in intentional means of discipleship, people beyond the church helped, relationships established free of any agenda other than the desire to be the incarnational presence of Christ in the world. These must be the metrics. Numbers like these will not be easy to measure. They will require time invested in learning people's stories. This will require focusing on relationships more than reports. But if United Methodists truly believe in the mission of discipling people into the life of Jesus, if they truly believe Christianity apart from discipleship is not altogether there, then these are the numbers that count, and therefore the metrics which must be measured.

(Really) Rethink Church

In recent years United Methodists have been asking the world to rethink Church. This marketing strategy has been aimed at doing away with preconceived notions that keep people away from United Methodist congregations, and at helping United Methodist congregations prepare to welcome those who might be encouraged to give them another chance. The time has come for the United Methodist Church to take its own advice and seriously reexamine its own preconceived notions about what it means to be the Church, as it seeks to deconstruct all that distracts from its reason for being.

This deconstruction must take place on many levels. First, United Methodism must reconsider what constitutes "Church." It is time United Methodists reconsidered the

notion that this necessarily requires people gathering together in a big room to sing songs, say prayers, and listen to a lecture. The postmodern imagination calls for experiential involvement and interaction. It is time to reconsider the calendar of the local church. In truth, much of the programming and events in the life of a congregation have little to no bearing on discipleship, but serve more to attract people to the church, or to provide “Christianized” alternatives of recreational activities for church members.

It may be time for United Methodists to reconsider denominational structures with more than cash flow and efficiency in mind. The role of clergy, from local pastors, to ordained deacons and elders, to district superintendants, to bishops, should be reconsidered, as hierarchical structures like the United Methodist Church are suspect in the world today. Measures to control and direct the connection among United Methodists, while well intentioned, may actually serve to stifle connectionalism. Letting go of power, control, and funding may yield great dividends.

It is time for the United Methodist Church to deinstitutionalize insofar as it can, or at least make room for deinstitutionalized expressions. Methodism's genesis was, after all, as a parachurch movement. Appropriating the message and method of Wesley and the early Methodists for the postmodern context would certainly recenter the United Methodist Church on discipleship in unique ways. All of these considerations, this deconstruction, must take place with a heart and mind to what is most important, making disciples of Jesus who bear his incarnational presence in the world. Everything else should be negotiable.

Rethink Mission

The time has come for the United Methodist Church to reconsider its mission in the world. This critique has demonstrated clearly the gap between the stated doctrinal standards and the actual practice of the denomination. Integrity and authenticity, a prized commodity in the postmodern world, demands this be addressed, bringing United Methodist practice in line with these standards, or vice-versa.

More than anything, however, the United Methodist Church must have a clear understanding of its place in the Church universal. It is often stated, and has been stated in this work, that the United Methodist Church has a mission statement. This is technically inaccurate, as the statement often alluded to actually applies to “the Church,” and not specifically to the United Methodist Church. This language is to be commended, as making disciples of Jesus is the mission of the Church universal. What the denomination must grapple with is what it means to go about doing this in uniquely United Methodist ways.

Wesley and the early Methodists had a clear sense of who they were and why they existed. The passionate pursuit of Scriptural holiness fueled all they did. The work at hand can think of no better mission for the United Methodist Church today. While the language of Scriptural holiness may be awkward, the concept of calling people deeper into the abundant life of Jesus is not. United Methodists must seek such clarity about who they are and why they exist.

Diversify

It has been argued here the Call to Action relies on the attractional church model. Even if it is conceded this model, with an added intentional emphasis on disciple making, will be effective among some, it simply cannot be the only model the United Methodist Church relies on going forward. The pluralistic postmodern world, along with the challenge to reach more diverse people, demands openness to other approaches.

At a time when new expressions of Christian community, from house, to organic, to emerging, to alt, to virtual, to pub, to missional, to new monastic, and more, are burgeoning everywhere, it is inconceivable the way forward for United Methodism could be homogeneous. The United Methodist Church must wrestle with how these expressions fit within the existing framework of the denomination, and how the existing framework needs to change to accommodate new expressions. The way forward for United Methodists will be a multivalent one, one that recognizes the determinant power of context for ecclesiology.

In addition, United Methodism must look to the global church, to see how the Holy Spirit is moving around the world. The fact that the Call to Action is based solely on data gathered in the United States, yet carries implications for global United Methodism, is scandalous. The urgency of the current numerical crisis United Methodism faces in the United States of America must not provide license to inflict measures on streams of United Methodism that are flowing strong in other corners of the world.

See the Signs

Thankfully the United Methodist Church is not left to simply grope about in the dark as it considers new pathways forward. The missional church movement is casting a vision and putting into practice new modes of being and doing Church. The emerging church conversation has been deeply wrestling with the issue of faithfulness to Jesus in the postmodern milieu for several years. Voices within Methodism, such as Leonard Sweet, have been prophetically envisioning the future of the church for decades. Examples within Methodism of ways forward, from Mike Slaughter and Ginghamburg United Methodist Church to Elaine Heath and the New Day missional monastic community, abound. Steve Manskar and Taylor Watson Burton-Edwards of the General Board of Discipleship are providing examples of what Wesleyan discipleship practices might look like in the United Methodist Church today. The voice of Donald Haynes is calling the denomination to remember its Wesleyan roots from the pages of the *United Methodist Reporter*. Global Methodism is witnessing powerful movements of the Holy Spirit. These are just a few of the signs and voices pointing to new ways forward. The United Methodist Church must pray for eyes to see and ears to hear the new things the Holy Spirit is up to in the world and among United Methodists.

Embrace Hope

Fear is the dominant motivating factor underlying the Call to Action: fear of decline, fear of cultural irrelevancy, fear of failing to fund the pension plan, fear of budget deficits, and more. These concerns are real. They are legitimate. But fear will not lead the way forward for the United Methodist Church, “for God did not give us a spirit

of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline” (2 Timothy 1:7). It is time United Methodists embraced a hopeful posture, certain God is up to something good in the world today, and that the United Methodist Church can be part of that. It is time to trust the work of the Holy Spirit, and be faithful to what United Methodists have been called to, regardless of projected outcomes.

Missional Mentality

Ultimately, the ways forward for United Methodism will require a missional mentality. This implies an outward focus, a concern for the world beyond the doors of the Church. This outward focus will be distinct from that found in the attractional paradigm and therefore demonstrated by the Call to Action. The United Methodist Church’s concern for the world outside its doors cannot revolve around how to attract that world inside. Rather, the denomination must care for the world beyond its doors simply because it is the world God created and for which Christ died. It is the world in which God is at work, and where God is calling the United Methodist Church to join him.

God’s Vision for United Methodism

“What is God’s vision for the United Methodist Church?”¹ This question submitted by United Methodists from the Congo, and the silence which ensued, was perhaps the most profound moment of the Leadership Summit, a worldwide, web-based conversation around the Call to Action held on April 6, 2011. This is a crucial question

¹ Details about this event can be found at http://www.umc.org/site/c.lwL4KnN1LtH/b.6585127/k.1B84/Leadership_Summit__Landing_Page.htm, archived video is reached via the “watch video” tab, and the question is posed beginning at 22:19/57:00 of video 2 of 2 (accessed February 9, 2012).

the United Methodist Church must answer. It may well be God wants to see decades of decline reversed and more United Methodist congregations revitalized through the means laid out in the Call to Action. It may well be God desires the United Methodist Church to reach more people, reach younger people, and reach more diverse people. What can be asserted most confidently is God wants the United Methodist Church, along with all other bodies bearing the name of Jesus Christ, to be effective at making disciples in the way of Jesus Christ. It is for this reason God called Methodism into being. If United Methodists must choose one goal, it must be intentional, passionate, discipleship. The rest may be left in God's hands. May God grant the United Methodist Church such vision, as it looks boldly into the future. Amen.

EPILOGUE

SOPHIE'S VOICE

It has been just over two decades since my conversation with Sophie forced me to reconsider my understanding of what it means to be a Christian. The immediate impact of that revelation was to send my life into a tailspin. I found myself desperately searching for answers, certain there must be more, but not sure what that might mean. As my sophomore year drew to a close, I found myself turning to my home church, the First United Methodist Church of Brandon, Mississippi.

One Sunday, mid-May, I introduced myself to Jim Beise, the new youth director. I informed him I was interested in helping with the youth group that summer. He invited me to come by his office the following morning. I spent most of the summer working alongside Jim. We prayed together. We read Scripture together. We talked about life, faith, and ministry, as we tried to minister to a few dozen teenagers together. I spent time with Jim at church with the youth, and at home with his family. I watched closely as he lived out in my presence the life of a disciple. While Jim did not employ any particular program to do so, he introduced me to the life of discipleship that summer, a path I have been stumbling along for two decades now.

I was initiated into discipleship in the United Methodist Church, but not because of the United Methodist Church. Perhaps the only real difference between my story and Lane's or Danny's father's is Jim. I give thanks to God every day for bringing our paths together. I remain committed to the notion one's experience of discipleship should not be left to providential encounters with people like Jim. This thesis is dedicated to the idea

the Church bears a tremendous responsibility to confront people with the call to a life of discipleship. I believe my tribe, the United Methodist Church, has been invested with a rich heritage of what this looks like and how it can be done, as well as a profound understanding of the urgent nature of this responsibility. The United Methodist Church knows the way. My prayer is that we will remember.

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